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In Chinatown, Trading Heirlooms for Fine Art

Restaurants Serve a Cultural Exchange

By KELLY CROW

A new exhibit has turned Chinatown into an artistic scavenger hunt.

For its latest show, "Chinese Take Out," the nonprofit group Art in General has embedded pieces by such contemporary artists as Martin Basher and Lucas Blalock inside seven Chinese restaurants across the neighborhood. At the same time, the group is displaying some of those eateries' decorative objects—from Buddha figurines to a jade dragon boat—in its white-box gallery on Walker Street nearby.



Art in General

At Excellent Pork Chop House on Doyers Street, artist Vincent Como has installed a trio of minimalist wooden cubes inside a wall-mounted light box lined with Buddha figurines and kitsch dolls.

The swap aims to allow art lovers, armed with maps, to burrow deeper into a neighborhood that is culturally rich yet seemingly insular, said artist Jason Bailer Losh, who conceived the project four years ago.

Mr. Losh said he asked each of the participating Chinatown restaurateurs to lend him an object that symbolized their cultural identity or offered a glimpse into the lives they're leading in New York. He asked the same of his 10 participating artists, and the results are revealing.

Chen Wei, who owns Old Shanghai Deluxe on Mott Street, handed over a bucolic landscape depicting mountains beside a seaside port bobbing with dragon boats. In its place now hangs Mr. Blalock's color photograph of a suburban yard in California. The photographer is planning to move to that state shortly.

88 Palace, an East Broadway dining hall, gave over a toaster-sized porcelain figure of Buddha as well as one of its light-box landscapes of Hong Kong. In exchange, artist Ted Riederer, whose work has been exhibited at MoMA P.S.1, gathered a group of Chinatown musicians and recorded a group performance that now plays on a Victrola near the restaurant's entry.

New Zealand-born Mr. Basher, who has exhibited in galleries like New York's Exit Art, tackled 88 Palace's light box by creating a transparency-style image that splices together photographs of everyday images like a sunset, a cocktail glass and a luxury watch.

One of the most poignant pieces pops up at Excellent Pork Chop House on Doyers Street, where artist Vincent Como has installed a trio of minimalist wooden cubes on a shelf lined with Buddha figurines and kitsch dolls. Mr. Losh said the cubes symbolize how "out of place" Mr. Como felt growing up in rural Pennsylvania.

Mr. Losh added that it took some time to convince some of the restaurant owners to display the edgier pieces, but he added that most of the participants were curious to see how the pairings matched up between owner and artist.

A Brooklyn resident who has studied in Beijing, Mr. Losh is known for creating art that explores his own cultural heritage. In his native Iowa, he once took a series of photographs of houses that his carpenter father had built over 50 years, many located in small towns that have since been largely abandoned or fallen into decay. Three years ago in Long Island City's Socrates Sculpture Park, he slathered gold paint on a Pontiac Trans Am, his boyhood car crush, and placed it atop a towering pedestal, like a sports trophy.

Eddie Chen, a senior advisor at the Lin Sing Association, a local community center, said Mr. Losh's work also resonates in Chinatown, where people similarly grapple with notions of identity and home. After meeting the artist a few months ago, Mr. Chen said he even encouraged several restaurant owners to join in. "In this community, people don't often work with outsiders, but we can all learn a thing or two about art."

The "Chinatown Take Out" project is up through July 2.

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