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Chinatown

by Natalie Hegert

Chinese Take Out Group Exhibition Art in General

79 Walker Street, New York, NY 10013
May 20, 2011 - July 2, 2011



Chinatown harbors many hidden secrets. In our literature, films and fantasies, it's the perfect place for a hideout; it's the location of an underground deal, a secret underworld, a land of counterfeits, a dark mystery. Culturally impenetrable, Chinatown can be intimidating for the outsider—unintelligible signage, curious customs, the closeness of bodies, cars, bicycles, the shops overflowing into the street with their cheap wares, the denseness of the air, the unfamiliar miasma of fish oil and overripe fruits. Chinatown is a place to disappear, to retreat to the opium dens of lore, to withdraw into a haze of dope.

Is there any better place to locate some art? Maybe at the airport or deep within “a bum’s asshole” as comedian David Cross might suggest. But artist Jason Bailer Losh, for the New Commissions series at Art in General, has created a project that embeds artwork into some unlikely places, forming a challenging art scavenger hunt of sorts by conducting an exchange with seven Chinese restaurants located in some of the off-beat areas of Chinatown—a piece of their restaurant’s art or decoration in exchange for a commissioned piece of contemporary art. The items from the Chinese restaurants—Buddha figurines, Chinese landscapes, promotional posters—are on view at Art In General’s storefront gallery, while the newly commissioned artworks take their places in the context of the Chinese restaurants.



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Losh doesn't make it easy on the viewer/scavenger hunter; with a somewhat imperfect map and only Xeroxed reproductions of the artworks I was supposed to find, it really was a challenge to find any of them without help from the restaurant staff. The two sound installations by Ted Riederer and Sarah Chacich weren't playing, and I completely missed some of the photographs not to mention couldn't find one of the locations at all. Wandering around enclosed Chinese malls and markets, seeking out restaurants at around 4pm when most restaurant workers were partaking of their family meals (in the restaurant biz, this is the meal provided by the establishment for their workers) before the dinner shift began, it soon became clear, wasn't the best way to go about it. This isn't an exhibit you're meant to gobble up in one go.

The criteria for Losh while choosing the restaurants he hoped would participate were primarily whether or not they had good food. The restaurants are meant to be dined at, to take in the full ambience and flavor, to discover the artwork over the course of a meal. It's not a pop-in-and-then-check-it-off-your-list kind of affair. So the next time you're going out for dim sum, pop by Art in General first to pick up a map and then go explore. I can vouch for the food at Old Shanghai Deluxe, where Lucas Blalock's photograph of a bush standing out from its suburban California background stands out on the wall. The food was good (double cooked pork) and the lunch prices welcomingly cheap (\$4.75 with rice and soup).



But perhaps one of the most compelling effects of the exhibition is what happens to the objects lent by the Chinese restaurants once they've entered the gallery. Unavoidably, these items—paintings, sculptures, graphic designs, video slideshows—are cast as aesthetic objects, as art. You notice the delicate craftsmanship of the jade boat, the natural harmony of palette between wooden frame and landscape painting, and the striation of faded colors and the heat damage pulling apart the image at the bottom of the large light box photograph of the Hong Kong skyline. Restaurant art is meant to be inconspicuous, to recede into an overall design or ambience; the first time I'd ever really taken notice of art in a restaurant was when it was somehow out of place (like [this](#) mysterious painting of a Middle-Eastern kebab grill sticking out like a sore thumb in a Mexican taqueria). The brilliance of Losh's project is its simple reversal: wrench the restaurant art out of its context and into the white box, and let the contemporary art recede, withdraw, and disappear into Chinatown.

--Natalie Hegert

(Images: Vincent Como. *Objects of Unknown Power and/or Origin*, 2011. Unknown, possibly pigmented wood believed to have become manifest around 2011, 3 × 3 × 3 each. Jason Bailer Losh. *Chinese Take Out*, 2011. Installation view. Images courtesy of Art in General.)

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