



**Chinese American
Arts Council**

Gallery 456

For Immediate Release

20 April 2009

HOW CHINESE:

Expanding the Discourse on Chinese Contemporary Art

Lishan Chang

Shen Chen

Eric Jiaju Lee

Tenzin Phuntsog

Lisa Ross

Yuh-Shioh Wong

May 1 - June 5, 2009

Opening reception: Fri, May 1, 6 - 9pm

Panel discussion & reception: Fri, May 15, 5:30 - 7:30pm

Gallery 456

Chinese American Arts Council

456 Broadway, 3rd Floor, New York, NY 10013

Tel: 212.431.9740

www.caacarts.org

Gallery hours: M – F, 12-5pm and by appointment

Gallery 456/Chinese American Arts Council is pleased to present HOW CHINESE: Expanding the Discourse on Chinese Contemporary Art, a group exhibition which is also participating in Asian Contemporary Art Week with a panel discussion and reception. Conceived jointly by art historian Aileen June Wang and artist Eric Jiaju Lee, the exhibition seeks to revise the mainstream definition of contemporary Chinese art. This category is often associated with artists who are based in mainland China, work in a figurative style, and address the Cultural Revolution and its legacy, or life in Communist China today. These artists, however, represent but a portion of the global Chinese population. Approximately thirty-five million Chinese reside elsewhere, and there are over fifty-five ethnic minorities in the country. The experiences of these groups differ from those in the mainland and the mainstream, with other cultures often having a significant influence on them as well. HOW CHINESE draws on artists representing a spectrum of the Chinese diaspora, as well as non-ethnic Chinese. Their works offer a complex and nuanced perspective about the way China and its culture has, or has not, influenced their consciousness and creativity. Some question the relevance of ethnic ancestry and cultural memory in the formation of an identity and artistic style. In contrast to the representational style of popular contemporary Chinese art, the works in this show are predominantly non-representational. They challenge the conventional notion of what “Chinese” art should be and what being Chinese means. The title of the exhibition operates simultaneously as a statement and a question. It was inspired by a query posed innocently to artist Eric Jiaju Lee by his grandfather-in-law: “How Chinese are you?”



Featured artists:

Lishan Chang was born and raised in Taiwan and currently works in New York City. Issues related to transplantation have been a central theme in his works. Often, he expresses his ideas in an intensely corporeal manner, putting his body through physically challenging performances. In this exhibition, Chang shows 2 video pieces that are part of a larger series titled *TRANSITION 1997-2005*. They record the work that he did for a moving company that he started. For example, in *Bridge – by Truck*, Chang projects onto his own sweat-stained shirts, which he had worn while performing the tasks and had saved as mementos. These episodes highlight how the moving process poignantly reduces a person's entire life and definition of self into a finite set of material possessions. In other works, Chang examines the re-calibration of identity resulting from relocation, often by using objects from his adopted culture in a context derived from his native one. For instance, in another project, he baked innumerable pieces of French bread and arranged them into forms reminiscent of brushstrokes in Chinese ink painting or calligraphy.

Eric Jiaju Lee, an ABC (American Born Chinese) grew up very much as an all-American boy. However, he retained a strong sense of his Chinese heritage instilled by his immigrant parents through his upbringing. In 1989, a trip to Taiwan generated an even deeper awareness and affinity for his Chinese heritage, especially with regards to the traditional arts. In addition to being based in New York, Lee maintains a studio in Beijing, where he works part of the year, and is active in the city's artist community. His abstract paintings explore the confluence of his Chinese and American roots. He favors the long horizontal, vertical, circular, and fan-shaped formats of classical Chinese paintings. Many of his works are executed on silk, but the fabric is stretched onto supports like Western canvas paintings, instead of being mounted as a traditional scroll. On the one hand, Lee's compositions reveal the philosophical approach to nature and the organizational principles of Chinese landscape paintings. On the other, they are decidedly abstract and reveal an affinity to the principles of modern art in the West. His use of bold colors is inspired by aesthetic elements found in the sub-cultures of graffiti and comic arts. Lee drips or pours acrylic paint onto the painting's surface, then manipulates the flow by physically moving the work, in a process akin to a choreographed dance or a set of martial-arts moves.

Shen Chen himself would admit that his works are judged by traditionalists as not Chinese enough, yet his goal is to remain faithful to the core principles of classical Chinese painting and calligraphy. Trained in both Western and Chinese artistic modes, he creates monumental, seemingly monochromatic panels that slowly reveal grid-like patterns and infinite variations of a single color. Shen's painting process reflects his practice of Zen meditation. He creates subtle patterns through the repeated execution of a single stroke across the painting's surface, transforming painting into meditation. Living in America inspired him to step further beyond the conventions of classical painting and calligraphy by using Western materials, such as canvas and acrylic paints. As a result, his works display a singular character that does not appear Chinese in the conventional sense. Shen has been based in the U.S. since 1988 and works part of the year in Shanghai.

The works of **Tenzin Phuntsog**, who was born in India and grew up in the U.S., develop possibilities in visual narrative. His filmmaking expertise is on full display in his video inspired by the cult science-fiction movie *The Matrix*. He diffused the violence of a duel by transforming all the fired bullets into expanding Bladewheels, an esoteric symbol visualized in Tantric meditation practices.



The Bladewheels obscure the original scenes, shifting the visual focus onto the empty space between figures and buildings. The result is a new story that touches upon the philosophical notion of emptiness, which is further explored in the accompanying painting. The black void of the canvas grows in substantiality with closer examination, revealing colors and movement created by the sweep of the brush. Phuntsog's investigation of spiritual and philosophical themes in his work spotlights his distinctive practice of self-realization.

Lisa Ross found a creative and spiritual connection to the landscape and culture of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwest China seven years ago. The Uyghur, of Turkic Muslim origin, are considered a Chinese minority by the government. Since that first trip, Ross has traveled to the region annually. Collaborating with Uyghur friends, she has deepened her understanding of their lives, culture, and religion. The holy sites of Muslim saints venerated by the Uyghurs, and the surrounding burial markers of the local villagers, have become symbols of her personal pilgrimages. The photographs of these sites in the desert project her intimate relationship with this area, even though she has no ancestral link to China or Xinjiang.

Yuh-Shioh Wong creates images representing nature from a fantastical and whimsical perspective. Her painted landscapes explore the potential of unprimed canvas to function simultaneously as surface, space, and time fabric. The triptych in the exhibition offers the viewer a journey through a forest, wherein visible and invisible elements are experienced at different moments. Shifting perspectives engender changes in the perception of scale. Wong's conception shows a degree of affinity to the philosophical basis of classical Chinese landscapes, in which shifting perspectives are used to facilitate the viewer's spiritual journey in nature. *Manhattan Skyline from Greenpoint Rooftop*, on the other hand, blurs the distinction between two- and three-dimensional arts. The photograph is mounted on a styrofoam block, and the image itself shows styrofoam mountains arranged in front of an actual cityscape. The sculptures were destroyed after the photograph was taken. Strokes of yellow paint on the surface of the photograph destroy the illusion of spatial depth and three-dimensionality.

Featured critic:

Jonathan Goodman studied literature at Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania. He has followed the development of Chinese contemporary art since its inception, and his extensive body of work demonstrates his firsthand knowledge and deep understanding. Goodman currently teaches at Pratt Institute and the Parsons School of Design, focusing on art criticism and contemporary culture.



HOW CHINESE is participating in Asian Contemporary Art Week with a panel discussion and reception on Friday, May 15th from 5:30 to 7:30pm with the artists, curators and distinguished guest, art critic Jonathan Goodman. www.acaw.net



**Chinese American
Arts Council**

Gallery 456

SPECIAL THANKS TO:



This exhibition is funded in part by our sole corporate sponsor,
China Springboard, Inc. www.chinaspringboard.com

PEARL RIVER MART

Refreshments for both Opening and Panel Discussion receptions were generously provided by Pearl River Mart, 477 Broadway, between Grand St. and Broome St., New York, NY 10013.

www.pearlriver.com

Alan Chow, Executive Director, and **Vivian Huang**, Director of the Chinese American Arts Council/Gallery 456 for their tremendous logistical, administrative, intellectual, and spiritual support; **HunChe Mlnarik** for his inspiring and tireless effort in helping with the many stages of preparing the exhibition; **Harshal Shah** and **Greg Montanez** for their generous assistance in exhibition preparation as well as their service for our receptions; **Claudia Beauchesne** and **Janet Lee** for their assistance in our opening and panel discussion receptions.

The programs of Chinese American Arts Council/Gallery 456 are supported in part by public funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, New York State Office of Park, Recreation and Historic Preservation, The City of New York Department of Cultural Affairs, and friends of CAAC. Special thanks to Assemblyman Sheldon Silver.

