

BEN BROWN FINE ARTS



Disneyland, CA (Castle and Balloons), silver gelatin print, 36 x 36 inches, 91.4 x 91.4 cm (left);
Lake Ninevah, Vermont, silver gelatin print, 36 x 36 inches, 91.4 x 91.4 cm (right)
Photographs by Tseng Kwong Chi © 1979, 1985 Muna Tseng Dance Projects, Inc. New York.

TSENG KWONG CHI

Self Portraits: 1979-1989

15th April – 31st May, 2008

Private view, Monday 14th April, 6-8 PM

Ben Brown Fine Arts is pleased to announce an upcoming exhibition of photographs by Tseng Kwong Chi (1950-1990). A comprehensive survey of Tseng's pioneering series of self-portraits, this exhibition will feature over 90 large-scale, black-and-white photographs, some of which will be on view for the first time.

The son of exiled Chinese nationalists, Tseng Kwong Chi was part of an intimate circle of artists, Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, and Cindy Sherman among them, who took the center stage of the New York art world during the nineteen-eighties. As a Hong-Kong born, Paris-trained artist, Tseng viewed himself as a citizen of the world and eschewed labeling himself or his art as "Chinese." However, his ironic self-portraits posed in a Mao suit in front of American landmarks found their way to Communist China and were profoundly influential for China's avant-garde, including conceptual artists Song Dong and Zhang Huan, who were exposed to Tseng's images through western magazines smuggled into the country in the 1980's. Tseng's photographs not only satirized relations between the United States and its emerging rival, China, but also broadcasted his freedom of movement - a privilege denied most Chinese artists at the time.

Tseng originally conceived the idea for the series shortly after Nixon's historic trip to China in 1972. Responding to the unfulfilled promise of greater openness between the two nations, Tseng dressed in a Mao suit he bought in a thrift shop and donned reflective sunglasses to become an 'ambiguous ambassador.' Cast in his new persona, Tseng inserted himself into the American

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landscape, touring the nation's most popular travel destinations, from California's Disneyland to Washington, DC's Lincoln Memorial. Alternating between a rigid vertical stance and relaxed, activated poses, Tseng related his body to the surrounding environs and created an artistic dialogue, one that pitted the architectonic tailoring of the Mao suit and the chiseled, yet anonymous, features of the Chinese face against the architectural iconography of the American landscape. The photographs both parody and indulge in the genuinely American appetite for imitation and kitsch and presage critical interest in architecture as an art object as well as appropriationist concerns with imitation and authenticity. Many of the photographs resemble and playfully parody the typical souvenir snapshot. But for each composition, Tseng combined light, location, and even the stray tourist to produce dramatic, crystalline, silver-gelatin prints.

As Tseng continued to follow his expeditionary impulses, the series expanded to include photographs of Tseng with iconic figures, such as Mickey Mouse, as well as at tourist destinations in more distant places in Europe, South America, and Asia. As he began to explore the American and Canadian West in great detail, in the tradition of the Hudson River School of painting and the landscapes of Ansel Adams, his photographs reveal a growing interest in the sublime. Thematically, the series shifted; from playful satire to a more spiritualized, interior vision of North America. These developments brought Tseng psychologically and artistically closer to his Chinese heritage. *Lake Ninevah, Vermont*, a pivotal work, depicts Tseng floating alone in a small boat on a misty lake. The profoundly contemplative mood and subtle tones clearly reflect his reconnection to his earliest artistic experiences as a child prodigy in Chinese brush-and-ink technique. Tseng continued to wear his Mao suit to maintain consistency; nevertheless, the series began to take on a life of its own. As Tseng embedded himself more deeply into the evocative topography, the photographs express Tseng's individuality and, ultimately, his isolation. Renowned curator Dan Cameron's elegiac observations of Tseng's oeuvre capture the artist's magnificent accomplishments. Cameron writes, "Tseng Kwong Chi neither entered the world nor left the world by himself, but the photographs he made while he was amongst us remain a powerful embodiment of the philosophical paradox within the designation of the self as a lone individual in the midst of an increasingly crowded, public world."

With growing global interest in Chinese contemporary art and China poised to dominate the world's attention with the advent of the 2008 summer Olympics in Beijing, the photographs of this Chinese artist who never set foot in his family's native land, seem more incisive and prescient today than ever before.

The work of Tseng Kwong Chi is in numerous public collections, including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Walker Museum of Art, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Tseng's photographs were shown publicly in China for the first time at the 2004 Shanghai Biennale.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully-illustrated catalogue.
For additional information, please contact Ruth Warner, ruth@benbrownfinearts.com

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