

A Little Untoward History:
On Chinatown's Recent Influx of Art and its Potential

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his essay was originally billed as "First Draft: Toward a History of the Chinatown Art Scene." I have to thank John Welchman for inviting me to attempt it, and for titling it, when I failed, in time, to achieve the lucidity necessary for a title. "First Draft" is a great disclaimer, if indeed either a need or expectation exists for a complete chronology of what has been happening, art-wise, in LA's Chinatown since the late 1990s. With some trepidation, I begin by saying mine is not a paper that pushes steadily "toward a history," but instead, a personal account that may stutter in the "toward," if not becoming altogether untoward. I should remind you that I am not an historian, but a glass-is-half-empty artist. What makes matters worse is that I have been utterly dogged by the feeling that whatever I write is sure to leave any number of Chinatown insiders disappointed or annoyed. So, first, my apologies to all the galleries who have been seriously and consistently mounting exhibitions: Acuna Hanson, Black Dragon Society, Mary Goldman Gallery, Happy Lion, Daniel Hug, David Kordansky Gallery, Sister, Peres Projects, 4F, and sorry to all of the alternative venues like 100 Times Better, Electronic Orphanage, PruessPress, The Barber Shop, c-level, and Mandarin, whose combined energy and enthusiasm have produced more than I could ever begin to assess in these few pages; and then of course sorry to all the many

artists, architects, and entrepreneurs I don't mention, who are just as embedded in Chinatown as I am.

I couldn't play the role of a spokesperson if I tried, and I don't intend to assume the role of a narrator either. My discussion evolves primarily out of my relationship to China Art Objects Galleries, as their project has engendered questions and problems that have both inspired and plagued me over the past half decade. In the interest of full disclosure I should say I married into China Art Objects, in fact I was literally married in that gallery to Steve Hanson, one of its founders.

Beginning in 1999, newspapers and magazines repeatedly spotlighted Chinatown's gallery phenomenon, and the *LA Weekly* has taken the pulse of the Chinatown gallery scene a few times over the spread of about three years, but all that reporting does not exactly send the message that a movement is afoot, or a profound change is happening in art that shouldn't be missed. Rather, it seemed to boil down to pointing out a hotspot, a neighborhood on the verge of gentrification, dispatching the tip, don't-miss-it-while-it's-still-charming-and-cheap. This goes for the artworks as well as the property values. Everyone knows artists "fertilize" real estate, even *The Wall Street Journal* pointed out Chinatown on the gentrification radar in September 1999; and they struck a tone that seemed to mock the artists, making them appear paradoxically childish and elitist, punctuating their article with the quote, "I would be very bummed if a Starbucks moved in." It's as if they were saying get ready to be bummed, irrelevant losers. There's still no Starbucks, and as much as people like to point the finger at tousle-haired, stuck up, whitey and charge "gentrification," it is pretty clear that any increase in Chinatown property value is a drop in the bucket compared to many other of Los Angeles' east side neighborhoods where prices have escalated tremendously.

Gallery Row

Because of all this "potential," Chinatown breeds busybodies who want to know who is doing what and with whom and why; they want to know how they are being perceived, and how much this building costs, and what that landlord did.

They want to know if things are going to change and if that change is going to affect them. Will my rent go up? Will I be kicked out? Is there another building I should buy? Was I misrepresented in that article? Is that newcomer going to ruin my vibe with their disagreeable taste? Six years of this type of chatter and anxiety has muddled my perspective. Surely this is not unique to Chinatown; I guess it's the downside of being on the inside. I've let my bad attitude off the leash a bit, because I was hoping some of these issues, petty as they sound, could broaden my own understanding of what it means to be an artist in LA today, which is actually really rewarding, and maybe even made sweeter on account of LA, the actual city, being so hostile toward contemporary art. Let me give you an example. You know those blue and white signs around LA with the city seal, the ones that say Silver Lake, Atwater Village, Miracle Mile etc.? A new one was recently unveiled—"Gallery Row"—only a stone's throw from The Artists' District and Skid Row, though I'm not sure if Skid Row has a sign or not. If you want to know the exact point at which the history of Gallery Row begins, that's easy, because on the Gallery Row web site it states very clearly that on June whatever, I forget the date, of last year, so and so and so and so, I forget their names, submitted their proposal; the point being that the history was precisely located at the exact moment these three people submitted their idea as a proposal. Gallery Row, they say, seeks to "encourage the growth of creative businesses, create a year-round art market, and give creative people another reason to relocate to Downtown Los Angeles."

A sense of dutiful open-mindedness and curiosity drove me to the opening-day festivals, but I had to stifle my cries of disbelief when I actually saw the sign there in a rather desolate stretch of Spring Street. I guess I've gotten used to thinking of the layout of LA in terms of these signs, call it naiveté, city pride, what have you. LA has been a city of boosterism for so long, so it should have come as no surprise that Los Angeles would officially pretend to care about art in the service of real estate. Bureaucracy and its bogus, bullet-point-able goals in the name of progress could never make sense of the thriving galleries of Chinatown; the fact is you can't understand that market and its value system in civic terms. This clash of understandings—whether it be through daily interactions with shop keepers about their utter consternation with regard to our curious work habits, or through the Business Improvement District's

attempt to piggy back on the “cultural” events of the galleries—has persistently played into my reading of Chinatown, posing more social or class questions, more questions about the role and status of artists than the actual work they do.

Two vaguely acquainted employees of Pasadena’s Art Center College of Design library, both artists—on what seemed like a permanent hiatus from art making—ran into each other at a moon tribe desert rave and bonded. Together they traveled to more desert raves and there, in the sage brush, at dawn under a full moon they eventually hatched the ecstasy-fueled idea to open a gallery called Expressions. Was that name supposed to be silly and ironic or were they flirting with an attempt to harness an overflowing utopian audacity? In late 1997, when Steve Hanson and the late Giovanni Intra told me they wanted to open a gallery, they didn’t even mention the potentially embarrassing “Expressions” and still I expressed doubt as to whether or not they were really up for the practical duties required to do such a thing. I questioned whether they wanted to spend their days sorting through unsolicited slides or making uncomfortable phone calls, but they weren’t thinking about running a business, and my practicality-obsessed nay-saying fueled them. In the spring of 1998 they took me to 933 Chung King Road and showed me the space they were signing a lease for. Then and there I changed my tune and instantly set about finding a studio to rent in the neighborhood.

Expressions, it seems, was too idealistic to become a reality. Steve and Giovanni eventually had to bring three other people on board in order to finance their project: Amy Yao, a walking alternative-music encyclopedia and Art Center undergraduate student; Peter Kim, another Art Center undergraduate who was frenetically utopian but also served as the link to the oh-so-necessary money man, his landlord at the time, an accountant in the entertainment industry, the affable non-art-world-based Mark Heffernan. This was an instant community by necessity that would begin fracturing within a year. Being an artist, I was sort of a community of one; I rented my little storefront, cleaned it up, and began my work, alone. And here I want to try to tease out the meaning behind making the distinction between my solitary practice and their decidedly socially inclusive efforts. What I think put China Art Objects on the map, which in turn put Chinatown on the map, was their uncanny ability to couple artistic personae together in a way that produced inadvertent



Chinatown postcard with Black Flag Graffiti

collaborations that cut a path into the past as well as the future. I believe this was possible by way of an almost unlikely collaboration between Giovanni Intra and Steve Hanson.

In 1991, at opposite sides of the Art Center library circulation desk, Steve Hanson, an Art Center drop out, and I, an MFA student, had one of our first bonding moments over a mutual respect for the punk band Black Flag. It was Steve's involvement with the punk scene between 1979 and 1981 that acquainted him with LA's Chinatown. Being only 12 years old at the time, I missed out on it, but I wish I could have been there. This kind of wishing implies the scene harbored a movement worth belonging to. I didn't get into punk until 1981, in San Francisco, which means I missed the Chinatown boat. Nevertheless, the punk movement totally affected my life, it gave me an education, a vocabulary of criticality, introduced me to art; it inspired me and gave me something to believe in; so I've given a lot of credence to the punk rock roots of Steve's efforts in Chinatown. Misplaced or not, it makes me wonder why the differences between 1979 and 1981, punk-wise, are tremendous shifts in styles, while the differences between 1999 and 2001 art-wise, are simply tremendous shifts in prices. Forgive my nostalgia and cynicism, but I have had to unearth the punk connection, as it seems to be a paradigm I'm still operating under. I have a picture, obviously printed in a high-school photo class, of Steve and his sister running down Chung King Road, circa 1979, presumably on their way to see Black Flag, X, or The Urinals. The Chinatown shopkeepers have occasionally mentioned the time of the "punk rockers," the punk rock invasion that had as its epicenter The Hong Kong Cafe on Gin Ling Street. It sprouted just as the 1940s Chinatown began to decline, as a substantial wave of Chinese immigration in the 1970s accompanied a subsequent population shift to cities like Monterey Park and Alhambra. In a certain mood, I might even say that Black Flag's performance on the *Decline of Western Civilization* (1981) soundtrack, some of which was recorded at the Hong Kong Cafe, is much more intense, urgent, and paradigm shifting (if you will), than anything you can find in a gallery on Chung King Road today.

This is a song Steve and I have listened to many times lately, a song I listened to a lot when I was a sophomore in high school. I really wanted it to serve as the opening quote to this text, but I thought that was a bit premature.

Reject yourself, reject yourself
and your family of ideals
—the muddle in your head—
You're playing with the reality of the dead
Reject yourself, reject yourself
Built up from scratch
ideas jerry-rigged skeletal tear them down
throw them on the pyre
light it, burn it
rip out your heart, place it on the top
rip out your heart, place it on the top
and
move
to
Antarctica
—100 Flowers (formerly The Urinals, circa 1981)

Back then I didn't know that 100 Flowers used to be The Urinals and that they were coming out of the dorms at UCLA, even though I was corresponding with a friend, Kevin Sullivan, in the art department at UCLA at the time, whose frequent letter writing was busily catching me up on other things like Duchamp, Marxism, how the band The Gang of Four got their name, and stuff about the band Savage Republic. The distance between the style of The Urinals, "arty" but still fast punk, and Savage Republic, "arty" but rhythmic and industrial, is a distance one fluent in the music of the time would gauge as chronological: after punk one would then proceed to a more sophisticated experimentation, along the lines of Johnny Rotten's switch from Sex Pistol's lead vocalist to Public Image Ltd. lead vocalist/idea ranter John Lydon. And this was all done in the space of one or two years. By the way, I should point out that the name 100 Flowers is taken from a saying from the Maoist Cultural Revolution, "Let 100 flowers bloom and 100 schools of thought contend." (Given China's current world-shifting spasm of capitalism I'd say it's okay to indulge yourself; go ahead and wax nostalgic about communism.)

Another lingering notion from the punk era is the term "poseur." As a punk rocker one was automatically posing, stylistically declaring certain allegiances. Think of Poly Styrene's line "I am a poseur and I don't

care I like to make people stare." At the same time "poseur" was also a word used to gauge authenticity. There was a critical eye involved, assessing the cumulative stylistic decisions of a person and determining if that person is authentic. Are there significant consequences for lacking authenticity? Now either I have a lot of nerve going here in an academic symposium, or I forgot everything I learned in art school or both, but this internalized judging mechanism warrants attention. What are the standards by which we can gauge authenticity? The vocabulary of artistic style, of aesthetics, seems to have dwindled; if we all share one we don't put it to use much. Is that because it isn't useful? Sometimes I am full of shame for not practicing rigorous verbal specificity. I remember once at a panel discussion that had to do with the crisis of theory in LA's MFA programs, a lengthy round of pontificating on the meta-theory-deprived-situation from the panelists prompted Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe to brilliantly and sadly burst the bubble by saying, in effect, that nobody had actually referred to a single "art theory" all evening. Was that comic, or tragic? There certainly aren't any publications or critics that have rallied behind even one single gallery in Chinatown. Aside from being disappointing this can also be liberating, perhaps a little too liberating, in that it generates a sense of great responsibility to declare the reasons for taking oneself and one's work and the work of one's peers so seriously. This is a responsibility easily shirked, though, and there's always the market to gauge whether or not what you're doing matters to people.

I met Giovanni in 1997 when he was writing a review for *Flash Art* about an exhibition I was in with two young and prominent artists at the time, Laura Owens and Sharon Lockhart. I mention this because the premise of the show was somehow driven by a desire to see if our interconnectedness as peers and close friends could become perceivable, readable, and relevant; like, could we be linked together under one term, say, the fill-in-the-blank-ists? We collaborated and struggled, trying to get closer to that. The project that resulted interested Giovanni greatly as a critic, and through our discussion of it we became friends. He wrote that our "cryptic show" did not seek a miraculous cohesion, and that our experiment "was an investigation of friendship and location in Los Angeles, thereby turning the celebrity model of collaboration on its head." I had almost forgotten he wrote that until I pinpointed when we met, but it's a nice coincidence because I wanted

to mention a few of the early China Art Objects Galleries' somewhat upside down celebrity collaborations. About a year or so into the opening of China Arts, Paul Schimmel's exhibition, *Public Offerings* at MOCA, defined an era of art in terms of career trajectories. The exhibition title says it all, of course, with the stock market buzzword (IPO), and "going public," and its inherent reference to an artist's monetary value, or investment potential.

Around half of the LA artists represented in MOCA's *Public Offerings* exhibit did collaborative shows at China Art Objects in the gallery's first year. The commercial galleries that represented these big ticket artists were happy to oblige, and didn't necessarily see China Art as their competition—and it wasn't a problem, because they didn't manage to sell much of that work anyway. In fact they only become marginally solvent once they began selling things at very low prices by extremely prolific younger artists like Jon Pylypchuk and David Korty. China Arts hosted the first party in their space, timed to coincide with a Christopher Wool opening at MOCA, and Motionsick, a club organized by the artist Kevin Hanley at Chinatown's Grand Star. It was a showcase of sorts, held amidst a freshly shed ten-foot pile of rubble. It would take about five more months before they would open the gallery with their first "real" exhibition.

This inaugural show consisted of a single collaborative work by Pae White and Steve Hanson who had been friends from the aforementioned punk rock period. Pae designed the space, and the gallery realized her design, and then exhibited a fish tank Steve and Pae made that was the gallery in miniature, showing its three levels and its distinctive colors and lighting features, complete with underwater inhabitants that turned out to be mortal enemies. The aquarium showcased their space and underscored their decisiveness about making the gallery look a certain way. I think you can even read it in terms of gentrification. For six months the space was slowly polished until it was no longer rough. The rental property was rehabilitated at no cost to the owner with labor performed and paid for out of a sheer desire to see something look exactly right. A following show paired the well-established Sharon Lockhart with the much lesser known photographs of George Porcari, another Art Center librarian, who was one of Sharon's teachers, and who was very influential in terms of his interests in cinema.

There was also a posthumous collaboration between Bob Weber and Jorge Pardo. This exhibition had Pardo literally highlighting a major unknown influence. Bob Weber, who died of AIDS in 1994, was a close friend of Pardo's. They lived in a loft downtown in the late 1980s and Bob shared his wood shop with Jorge and introduced him to furniture making. In conjunction with the event the gallery also put on a "celebrity" roast, with Pardo in the hot seat, and Steve Hanson as a very Johnny Carson-like MC. The spirit of comedy and entertainment from an era when it was cool to be an old person—a bit seasoned and bawdy—poked fun at Jorge's art world celebrity (he had just finished building a house as part of a MOCA exhibition) with twists on old standards like "when Jorge sits around his house/sculpture he really sits around his house/sculpture." I even had the opportunity to deliver a few tasteless jokes needling Jorge about his recent break-up with the artist Laura Owens, another *Public Offerings* star who mounted a collaborative exhibition at China Art. In this exhibition, the by now well-established young painter, Owens, collaborated with her studio assistant and good friend Scott Reeder, one of the many transplants from Chicago that Laura helped to establish in Los Angeles. Here they divided the gallery into heaven and hell. Their two major paintings were built to just fit into the spaces and one depicted an Edenic bird-inhabited tree; and in the dark basement a subterranean scene, showing moles and other burrowing animals and insects in a maze of dirt, illuminated by candle light. In "hell" they set up a poker table they had constructed to accommodate at least one full night of heavy drinking and gambling. The collaboration amplified the awkward humor that was already at work, but perhaps purposefully ignored, in Laura's already incredibly popular oeuvre. By allowing for the more boyish and directly comedic and cartoonish strategies of Reeder to seep into the market-induced sanctity of her picture plane, Laura had managed to foreground an economy of influence. And by bringing her assistant's signature to a hand that was already at work in the first place, collectors who had been fighting over access to a Laura Owens, a lot of which contained paint applied by Scott Reeder, no doubt now found themselves backing away nervously from something that bore his signature. The invitation to gamble speaks for itself.

Another posthumous collaboration of sorts was between father and son, the late sculptor David Von Schlegell and his son Mark Von Schlegell.

This is a show I wish Giovanni had written about. He has written about several contemporary sculptors, like Liz Larner, John McCracken, Evan Holloway, Isa Genzken, and Andy Alexander, and this particular show was contemporaneous with the somewhat scene-defining sculpture show at the Santa Monica Museum curated by Bruce Hainley. David Von Schlegell was an incredibly prolific sculptor from the late 1950s until his death in the early 1990s. He also headed the Sculpture department at Yale. The exhibition was organized and mounted by his son, Mark, who had recently relocated from New York to Los Angeles, with his then-wife, fellow writer Veronica Gonzalez, now married to Jorge Pardo, and former girlfriend of Steve Hanson. In the main gallery were small wall works in wood and metal that were of significantly smaller scale than everything from David Von Schlegell's entire career, made after he had become sick with cancer, thus cushioning the enormity of what one was about to encounter by way of a group of elegantly ambiguous pieces. In the kitchen of the gallery hung a poster for the artist from Pace gallery, a bizarre anachronism that forced one to reconsider a different era of heavy metal. Pardon the corniness there, but Steve has often joked that the upsurge of ambition among students pouring out of the thriving grad programs the late 1990s were in some ways like the 1980s flood of hair bands on sunset strip, with so many people feeling the climate was ripe for success, creating a huge influx of hopefuls. Downstairs, mounds of career ephemera were carefully but casually displayed, mostly black and white photographs showing massive urban projects like giant plaza installations in collaboration with I.M. Pei. One couldn't help but wonder what the hell happened to all that steel? And how does it, exactly, bow out of fashion?

And so that is just the tip of the iceberg as far as China Art Objects is concerned. The phrase "Chinatown art scene"—this essay's impetus, no less—has consistently diverted me from dutifully adopting comprehensive objectivity. I have, perhaps unconsciously, confused the word scene with the word movement. If there is a movement, it certainly isn't clear to me what the movement is other than the culmination of movements of a growing population of people trying to eke out an existence in any number of vaguely defined layers of a so-called art world. It was unlikely I could pull all of Chinatown's different art spaces under one historical umbrella, let alone even deal with one single gallery's full output, unless I were to construct a one-to-one scale history.

Supposedly, a detailed history of Chinatown's art scene has already been compiled by Joel Mesler. Here's what I wrote about Joel in an article on Chinatown I was invited to contribute to *Index* magazine, in 2002:

Today there are at least seven galleries and two clothing boutiques on Chung King Road. The quick development has made different people uneasy at different stages. I personally got anxious early on, when rumors circulated that a very young artist was poised to purchase the building that housed the Chinese shop "As You Wish." Ironically Steve and I now rent an apartment above the former store, which has become the Diane Pruess gallery. Its young proprietor, Joel Mesler, whom I avoided meeting for over a year, is now my friend and "landlord." (He hates it when I call him that.) He's also turned out to be the reigning Chinatown diplomat. He seems to know and care about almost everyone in Chinatown, and has managed to bring together a lot of disparate personalities via his irresistible enthusiasm, which he emits with an intoxicating (and/or intoxicated) giggle, excited hand gestures, and mad scientist finger wiggling.

Joel Mesler is no longer my landlord, because he sold the building. I guess that's the sort of thing I was anxious about before ever meeting him. One night Joel was tending bar at Hop Louie's and Steve was listening to some guy going on about the rising property values of Chinatown and the guy wanted in and asked Steve if he knew where he could get a hold of a building, he was willing to pay around 500,000, and Steve sent the guy to Joel, as a joke, since Joel is always complaining about Chinatown wannabes. Before long, Joel was offering the guy his building (which housed our apartment), which he had purchased for somewhere around 250,000 only two years prior. The eager buyer wanted to turn our apartment into an art loft, so as part of the purchasing contract Joel had to ensure we would vacate the property immediately. We thought it was a bit ironic that the person buying the building wanted to live the Chinatown fantasy of being an artist but was so adamant about dislocating us without haste. Now originally I shied away from mentioning this because I didn't want to drown you in a sea of anecdotes, and of

course I'm leaving a lot out, but there's something about this particular set of circumstances that warrants a bit of uncomfortable directness on my part. As tenants in the Diane Pruess gallery building, the amount of money Steve and I paid for our rent pretty much covered Mesler's mortgage, making him able to live in and run the gallery space below us with no overhead, no pun intended. This meant that I was acutely aware of my contribution to the scene—which in order to keep the money flowing, meant I had to be a party pooper when it came to the Chinatown pipe dreaming about schools and general stores and soup and sandwich speakeasies. I often felt that the kind of quotidian pressures of my art career were somehow in direct conflict with this art party happening at my front door. So we assumed the expense of a hasty relocation with infant in tow, and he pretty much doubled his money on Chinatown real estate. I think the real issue here, for me, has to do with the crisis of legitimacy and that is too long and hard a discussion to undergo, but should, perhaps, be re-considered in terms of Giovanni's assessment of my exhibition with Laura and Sharon, and Lane Relyea's assessment of that assessment in the *Public Offerings* catalogue: either the trivial glue that holds people together isn't necessarily worthy of critical judgment, or it is precisely the political in the personal and cannot be avoided. The nostalgia for a time when criticism reigned and had a decisive authoritative role that laces that essay is a bit contagious, and not unlike my nostalgia for The Urinals, Black Flag, or Gang of Four which seems to be at odds with the historical self-consciousness that hungers for a certain resolution in the moment. Relyea's text showed a certain contempt for the exhibition that it sought to discuss, and said, in a way, "I'm out of place" or even, as I felt out of place in an academic symposium delivering this text, not because I lack any academic training, though it may appear that way. I feel out of place because I basically decided to talk about what it feels like to be "fertilizer" for real estate, which not surprisingly, is shitty.