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Nirvana of a Tea Life

CHAJI / 茶寂 – Beauty Within Silence

At Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden until January 10, 2020

CHAJI / 茶寂 – Beauty Within Silence, is a Tea and Zen Buddhism inspired exhibition curated by Vancouver artist (and current artist-in-residence) Lam Wong at Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden in Vancouver. This group exhibition features six artists, including Lam himself, whose diverse practices all draw from Eastern Philosophies and the arts of tea. It is with great Respect, which is one of the four tea philosophy tradition developed by Japanese tea master Sen no Rikyū, Lam brings together works from Arther Cheng, Bryan Mulvihill, Chick Rice, Don Wong, John Cage to explore the impermanent and empty quality imbued with them (“CHAJI / 茶寂”). Coming from a city where tea is one of the most essential cultural elements and the backbone of local economy in the history of China, this exhibition carries a special personal sentiment to me, although the tranquil and humble viewing experience in a peaceful garden might also be what every city dweller needs.

Entering the main exhibition space, Hall of One Hundred Rivers, the didactic text on the wall writes:

Cha(茶)in Chinese is Tea. Ji (寂) is a more complex word to translate:solitude; a deep appreciation for beauty, subjected to impermanence or the empty nature of time; tranquility with its hints of sadness, presence and awareness.

It goes on explaining in length what Ji is and represents in both the state of mind and tea culture. The deliberate emphasis on one of the two words of the title makes me intuitively want to look for traces of the essence of Ji throughout out the exhibition.



Image: Lam Wong with *Four Harmony* (2015) by Bryan Mulvihill. Four 22" X 22.5" mineral glazed porcelain panels made in Lao Yu Tan Studio, Jingdezhen, China. Installation view. Photo credit: Rebecca Wang.

Knowing that this exhibition is also an homage Lam pays to the late American experimental composer John Cage, I am particularly intrigued to see his *Silence (in 3 parts)* (2011). Named respectively, *Movement I: Prepared Piano*, *Movement II: Laughter 2.04*, and *Movement III: Apartment*. These are three small landscape orientated oil paintings with Cage's invention "Prepared Piano" and the view from Cage's New York City's apartment window on the sides, and a portrait of Cage laughing in the middle. There is also an instruction asking the viewer to look at the paintings for four minutes thirty-three seconds. Lam wants to experiment with how the visual representation of sound in paintings, in this case the piano, laughter, and traffic, affects the commonly silent viewing experience (Wong). While Cage's famous "silent" 4'33'' opens itself to the noise in the performance space, *Silence (in 3 parts)* invites the viewer to spend this time instead of the average 30 second with the art works that they come to see (Foster 430, Kaplan). It initiates an inward-looking observation on the viewer themselves, in solitude, which coincides with the methodology to both achieving acute awareness of the present moment in Zen Buddhism and understanding purity and tranquility of the tea philosophy by Japanese tea master Sen no Rikyū (Wong).



Image: Lam Wong,
Silence (in 3 parts):
Movement I: Prepared
Piano, Movement II:
Laughter 2.04,
Movement III:
Apartment (2011). Oil
 on wood panels. 16"
 x 20" each.
 Installation view.
 Photo credit: Rebecca

Chance, noncomposition, and Zen Buddhism are among the main philosophies behind John Cage's practice, which are also present in Lam Wong's *Empty Nature of Five Aggregates* (2019) and *Double Moon* (2019) (Foster 430-433). *Empty Nature of Five Aggregates* draws a reference on the *Heart Sūtra*, the famous teaching of Mahāyāna Buddhism (Wong). Five custom made identical cedar boxes are placed on top of a large piece of Chinese Calligraphy on an elevated surface with some of the words blocked out by the boxes. The calligraphy is a quote about "the five aggregates," or how the outer world is perceived by humans, from the *Heart Sūtra* (Wong). There is one unique

looking clay figure on top of each box, with the middle one covered by a pile of charcoal, which is an essential material of the ancient tea brewing method. However, there are many faint charcoal marks on the blank space of the calligraphy by unexpected "collaborators," i.e. the exhibition or garden visitors who take the initiative to doodle alongside Lam's calligraphy. This unanticipated outcome eloquently illustrates traces of chance and noncomposition. Lam later disclosed to me that he deployed one secret artwork in each of these sealed boxes, and his usual choice is talismanic sacred messages.



Image: Lam Wong, *Empty Nature of Five Aggregates* (2019). Yellow cedar, mirror, charcoal, Chinese Calligraphy, clay. 68" x 36" x 43", dimension varies. Installation view. Photo credit: Rebecca Wang.

Situated in the most serene and core part of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Garden, *Double Moon* is an outdoor installation sitting on the hand-laid pebble ground in the centre of the Scholar's Courtyard ("Refreshment for the Heart"). It is comprised of two large circular panels, one with white background and Chinese Calligraphy of the words "water moon," one being a round mirror with the character Ji (寂) laid out in charcoal. According to Lam, *Double Moon* is inspired by a master piece of Wabi-sabi, the ZEN Rock Garden in Ryōan-ji, Japan, and Wabi-sabi's notion of beauty: impermanent, imperfect and incomplete, which is derived from a Buddhist teaching. Moreover, the contrasting white panel and black charcoal, and the two stone seal chops on the mirror panel and corresponding stamp marks on the white panel, both hint to complement the garden's aesthetic reference of Ying and Yang from Taoism("Refreshment for the Heart").

"Nirvana of a tea life," as Lam puts it, is the final stage of how one appreciates tea, and the enlightenments coming through the experience. May it be solitude, impermanence, awareness of the present moment, or Ji (寂), which refers to all former three, Lam introduces his life philosophy through his own unique art practice and a curation of tea and Zen Buddhism inspired artworks at CHAJI / 茶寂.



Image: Lam Wong, *Double Moon* (2019). Wood, mirror, charcoal, Chinese Calligraphy, stone seal chops. 100" x 40", dimension varies. Installation view. Photo credit: Rebecca Wang.

Works Cited

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