Everything is Relevant

Lum, Ken, Scott, Kitty

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Seven Moments in the Life of a Chinese Canadian Artist

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Seven moments in the life of a Chinese Canadian artist

by Ken Lum

1) Cahors, France. Following the opening of an exhibition, I was invited to dinner in this southern French city famous for its ancient bridge and robust red wines. At the restaurant I met for the first time some of the other, mostly European artists in the exhibition. As introductions were being made, one artist, all smiles and looking surprised, exclaimed to me: "Why I did not know you were Asian. Your work looks like it could have been made by a non-oriental."

2) Oxford, England. I am discussing my work with an English art critic who has some problems with the fact that I stage my pictures, rather than simply go the route of documentation. His problem has something to do with the difference between constructed realism and what he believes to be a "truer" realism which would favor standard Brechtian devices. Towards the end of our meeting, he says to me: "It is a shame because I understand why you so often deal with identity and language issues, you being Chinese and all."

3) Paris, France. Living in Paris, I would occasionally pick up an International Herald Tribune, mostly to find out the American view of things happening in Europe. This time there appeared a large article about the Spanish artist Juan Munoz and a large sculptural installation he did involving realistic sculptures of identically, laughing Chinese men. There was a photograph of the work and I must add that I felt offended by the photograph, the effect of which seem premised on a classic racial stereotype. In all seriousness and
without the slightest hint of irony, the writer of this article ended his commentary on this work by Munoz by admiring the work's "inscrutability."

4) Vancouver, Canada. This is a story recounted to me by several friends. There is a protest rally on the steps of the Vancouver Art Gallery, the city's major contemporary art venue. An artists' coalition is demanding that the exhibition programming reflect more minority voices, particularly visible minority artists. The curator bravely (or foolishly) confronted the gathering and cited then recent exhibitions by Stan Douglas, an African-Caribbean-Canadian artist, and myself. Although I was embarrassed to hear that I was used as an example in such a context, what was recounted to me next shocked me. Several voices from the gathering shouted that they no longer considered Stan Douglas and myself artists of colour.

5) Fort St. James, Canada. A close friend and I are travelling to this northern community in British Columbia to visit one of Canada's outstanding artists, who is also native. To reach Fort St. James, we had to fly two hours north from Vancouver to Prince George. From there, we rented a car and drove another two hours. Fort St. James is a tiny village and it seemed clear that there existed some palpable tension between the native and white populations. As we head off for late lunch, we find out that here are only two cafes, (really burger joints) in the village. They sit directly opposite of one another on each side of the main street. Lawrence points us to the one on the left, the one full of native teenagers hanging about the entry. He says the cafe across the street is for the whites. The server comes to take our orders. She is chinese. A bit later, I notice a chinese man in the kitchen and he is looking at me. At that moment,
I look out the window and scan across the street at the cafe opposite. Lawrence says to me that that one is run by another chinese family.

6) Fort de France, Martinique. I am teaching at the l'Ecole d'Art Plastique. The makeup of the island's population is extraordinary rich and touching. Nearly everyone is a mixture of black, white, brown, yellow and red. I felt very much at home in Martinique although the forty degree weather took some getting used to. For lunch, I go with students and teachers to the local canteen. Everyone orders either fish or chicken but the accompaniment in every case was white rice. In fact, everyone eats white rice in Martinique as part of the regular diet. Later that day, I find myself in the school library and I come across a book about the many men from south china and the indian subcontinent that were brought into Martinique in the last century to toil as coolie workers.

7) Montreal, Canada. I am in the company of several chinese artists, which is a rare experience for me. I simply do not know many chinese artists. My speaking knowledge of Cantonese is so poor that I dare not even attempt to use it. I do understand it somewhat when I hear it. During the course of dinner, I hear someone say in cantonese how great it is to have so many chinese artists on one table. One of the artists, not knowing that I could understand what he was saying, replies in effect: "Well, Ken Lum cannot even read chinese."