

NEW ART examiner



BYRON KIM, "The very, very, small number of people," mixed media, 1989. Photo by Bruce Checefsky.

with red Chinese medical notations is poised in a wire bird cage surrounded by a belt of 54 test tubes, each containing a sample of the artist's blood. This work was also counted as objectionable by the Senate Committee because it called to mind voodoo. Since blood is a highly personal and corporeal element, the reality it represents is often difficult to deal with. However, "China: June 4, 1989" was about truth and about blood. A moving exhibition of political art, it transcended the usual considerations of both politics and art to indict a brutal moment of recent history. There is not ennobling drama inherent in injury or human suffering, nor any "larger picture" that can justify it, and this is the point that "China: June 4, 1989" makes. As the text on one door states, "There is no overview." The grief and anger in each work are offered as personal gifts to inspire the living as well as to commemorate the dead.

Not for sale.

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OHIO

China: June 4, 1989

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During the summer of 1989, New York's Asian American Arts Center and its director, Robert Lee, kept a close watch on the student pro-democracy movement in China. Soon after the tanks rolled into Beijing's Tiananmen Square on June 4, Lee sent out an open call to artists, envisioning a people's show of protest. By October of that year when the show opened at BlumHelman Warehouse in New York, it included photographs, sculptures, and conceptual pieces as well as a large-scale take-off on Picasso's *Guernica* by Asian-American artist Ling Ling. The centerpiece of the show was a series of doors joined together and worked upon both sides. Many were painted, others were inscribed with poems or inlaid and encrusted with everything from photographs to fortune cookies. A conglomeration by artists from many countries, the piece represented a new, international "Great Wall of China"—a wall of protest and sorrow. Eventually some 200 doors were on view in an ongoing memorial effort that has been compared to the Names Project, the quilt

commemorating people with AIDS who have died.

As the project has grown, its sharp focus on the human realities of the Tiananmen Square atrocities depicts a political heart of darkness with uncomfortable accuracy. In June of 1990, works from "China..." were slated to appear with various other pieces of political art in the Senate Rotunda of the Russell Building in Washington, D.C. Sponsored by the Congressional Human Rights Foundation (CHRF) and Senator Edward Kennedy, all was cordial until shortly before the event, when Lee was told by the CHRF director David Phillips that two paintings were considered improper by the Senate's Ethics and Rules Committees and had to be removed. Lee says he didn't want to embroil the National Endowment for the Arts (one of the project's funders) in more controversy at that time, nor could he self-censor an exhibit fundamentally concerned with freedom of speech. Seeing himself in a no-win position, he chose to withdraw all the "China..." works scheduled for exhibition.

Surviving this peculiar First Amendment assault, "China: June 4, 1989" currently carries an added dimension, documenting not only the repressive violence of China's Zhao Ziyang and Li Peng, but also tacitly commenting on some ramifications of the conservative anti-arts agenda.

"China: June 4, 1989" is an intimate exhibition. Each work comes forward to bear witness on its own terms. Despite the presence of such art-world luminaries as Leon Golub, Vito Acconci, Barbara Kruger, Luis Camnitzer, and others, it is an exhibition that seems homemade. The 38 doors brought to Cleveland by Cleveland Institute of Art director Bruce Checefsky feel improvisational, their impact rough and direct. They uncoil on their hinges like a wounded dragon, linking expressions of shock and anger in a stoic demonstration of emotional solidarity. These threshold obstructions yield not only to a very specific moment of frustrated heroism and military murder, suggesting the difficulty of passage to a better world, but they also speak of the continuity of resistance to China's repressive regime.

One of the more subtly gut-wrenching works is *The very, very small number of people*, an idiosyncratic sculpture by Byron Kim. A white figurine marked