

Outrage over Tiananmen Square massacre expressed in exhibit at Buckham

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In 1989, a group of Chinese artists expressed outrage over the Tiananmen Square massacre — the brutal suppression of a student-led pro-democracy movement by Chinese army troops.

Under the leadership of Robert Lee, director and curator of the Asian American Arts Centre in New York City, they spoke out against the horror through paintings, sculpture,



'Liberty Mourning The Death of Her Sister, Beijing,' by Martin Wong.

videotapes, FAX photographs and written material.

Now, those works by 80 artists are traveling to Flint in a special exhibit titled "China June 4, 1989 An Art Exhibit," Friday through Nov. 25 at Buckham Gallery, 134 W. Second St.

While organizing the exhibit, Lee invited artists as well as children and adults with no artistic expertise to submit works and written statements.

He staged successful shows at the Asian American Art Centre, the Blum Helman Warehouse in Soho and P.S. 1, a former school building used by artists in New York.

Ironically, Lee ran into a major roadblock when he was asked to participate in a show in Washington, D.C. — at the Russell Rotunda on Capitol Hill in the summer of 1990. Lee curated the American

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JOURNAL PHOTOS/JANE HALE

This photograph by Cuon Tran (Han Khiang Hei) is part of the 'China June 4, 1989' exhibit at the Buckham Gallery.

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Lee curated the American portion of the exhibit, which was sponsored by the private, non-profit Congressional Human Rights Foundation and the office of Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass.

Lee said he received a call from David Phillips, director of the foundation, who said the Senate Select Committee on Ethics objected to three of the works and wanted them removed from the exhibit.

One is Hongtu Zhang's "Last Banquet," a painting portraying the Last Supper in which all of the faces are Mao Tse-tung's.

"A legislative assistant to Sen. Kennedy said they couldn't put anything in the Senate office building that a little girl from Iowa might find offensive," Lee said. Because "Last Banquet" is a religious parody, they thought it might appear sacrilegious, he said.

Another, Hung Kwong-chak's painting, "The Wall," depicts a dead man, woman and child. "The legislative assistant said somebody might look at this and say it was commenting on the policy of abortion in China."

And a third, a sculptural installation by Byron Kim titled "The very, very small number of people," shows a figure, illustrating the acupuncture points on a human body, in a bird cage surrounded by 64 vials of blood. "The legislative assistant said someone might interpret this as having something to do with voodoo."

Instead of removing the three works, Lee withdrew the entire American portion of the show a week before the scheduled opening.

"The issue of censorship was current at that time. Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., had already been attacking the National Endowment for the Arts.

"To accept that these artists would be censored would be in opposition to all that we had stood for throughout the art community," Lee said.

"One of the artists was from China. To find himself censored in the U.S. Senate was too ironic. I could not let that happen under my auspices."

The issue was made public in the fall of 1990, but Phillips and Kennedy's office denied the works were censored, Lee said.

The exhibit was not censored in other locations. It also was shown in the Mexic-Arte Gallery in Austin, Texas, Cleveland Art Institute and the Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions gallery. Some pieces also were shown in Hong Kong.

Lee, a New Jersey native of Chinese descent, said he and his colleagues at the Asian American Art Centre had carried on political discussions about events in China prior to the Tiananmen Square massacre.

When the massacre occurred, he felt compelled to act.

"I didn't feel any differently from people all over the world," Lee said. "There was a tremendous outrage and horror over the incident in every country and among all people.

"The students at Tiananmen Square represented youth, freedom, an effort to create a new world."

Most of the artists who spoke out against the events are American. However, there are some from Czechoslovakia, Japan and China.

When it was shown at P.S. 1 in New York, 271 people entered, including many non-artists. "Some people from China sent us money as support (even though the Chinese currency had no value outside of China)," Lee said.

Lee pared down the show for the road. Some of the artists — such as Vito Acconci, Nam June Paik and Barbara Kruger, Donald Lipski — are well-known in the New York art world.

Several artists expressed their creativity on a series of 39 doors. In addition, local schools will make projects on doors in conjunction with the exhibit.

They include classes at the Genesee Area Skill Center, Valley School, Kearsley High School, Genesee High School, Flint Institute of Arts, Goodrich High School, University of Michigan-Flint, Mott Community College and Michigan State University. Artists Gerry Craig of Detroit, Laura Cloud of East Lansing and John Dempsey of Vassar also are participating.

"There are many metaphorical connotations," Lee said. "A door is something to open, but when you link them together, you create a wall. It's also the idea of standing together arm in arm at the barricades in opposition to tyranny."