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SINCE THE KILLINGS IN TIANANMEN Square last June, we've gotten used to young Chinese people around the world hiding their identities "for reasons of security." In tv interviews they're off-screen voices. In photos they wear

Risky Art from Beijing to the Bowery



those black bars over their eyes. The Chinese government has made small overtures, like releasing some of the people jailed for participating in the demonstrations. But by all accounts the repressive activity and human rights abuses inside China are, if anything, more severe than they were a year ago. Chinese student leaders in this country claim that thousands of people have been jailed during the year, and some of them tortured. Dissidents' families and supporters have been harassed in various ways. Who wouldn't hide their identity?

It's not surprising, then, that the 15 paintings on exhibit at the Asian American Arts Centre through June 29 wear their own version of those black bars. The artist's signature has been painted over with a pseudonym, "Deng." The work couldn't be shown any other way. Deng saw

13▶



SEEING AND KNOWING EVIL
A detail from the "Witnesses" brochure.

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

By JOHN STRAUSBAUGH

<<< FROM PAGE ONE

and painted the events in Tiananmen Square from the start in April to the crack-down on June 4. He claims to have been beaten there by soldiers. Both he and his paintings were smuggled out of China by Western friends. Boldly gestural and garishly bright, the paintings depict clockwork soldiers shooting protestors and caricature portraits of Deng Xiao Ping's moon-face glowing a ghastly green in a dark sky. Who wouldn't be living in secrecy?

The exhibit, called "Witnesses: China June 4, 1989," brackets Deng's paintings with documentary work by two photographers, one Swiss and one from NYU. The show is one of three events the Centre has organized around the first anniversary of the June 4 events. At P.S.1 there's a mammoth installation of works by almost 300 artists of many ethnicities and nationalities, including stars like Nam June Paik, Kenneth Noland, Barbara Kruger and Donald Lipski. This Saturday, the Centre is throwing a marathon music and dance program at the Triplex Theater 2, with stuff ranging from Lenny Kaye's music to the first NYC performance by ZUNI Icosahedron, an avant-garde dance theater company from Hong Kong. All of it is happening in the context of the International Memorial Arts Festival, a conceptually linked set of events held this May and June in Los Angeles, Hong Kong, and D.C. as well as here.

Bob Lee, who co-directs the Centre with his wife Eleanor Yung (the founder), says that the international and multi-ethnic scope of the events has both a symbolic and a pragmatic explanation. Symboli-

cally, it's "meant to show a united, worldwide response" to what happened in China last year. The memorial events are "concerned not so much with the politics in China," he explains, "as with basic, very fundamental concepts of human dignity and freedom." The international focus is to remind viewers that government repression "is a problem in many countries. It just happened to be expressed in China in a very dramatic way."

But even had they wanted to show exclusively Chinese work, Lee and Yung say, it might have been difficult to find enough artists. Artists who are Chinese nationals or have family in China are naturally reluctant to do work that's critical of the Chinese government. Compounding any current threats, Lee says, is China's "thousand year tradition where

Risky Art from Beijing to the Bowery

you do not involve art in politics." Traditionally, any social or political content in Chinese art is extremely subtle and suggestive. Since the time of the emperors, Chinese officials have always been suspicious of art and trained

to scrutinize it very closely for subversive messages. "Some things that would be very, very subtle for us, people could get arrested for there," Lee says. And the shows the Centre has organized are anything but subtle.

Lee doesn't think the Centre has any reason to fear the Chinese government, though he adds, "I certainly do not intend to travel back to China" after mounting these exhibits. But the shows have made problems for the Centre closer to home. Lee says he was unable to get any of the expected corporate or foundation funding for these exhibits. "They're either doing business with or would like to be doing business with China," he says of these sources. (This spring, corporations doing business in China have actively lobbied Washington for the controversial extension of China's favored nation trading status. Official estimates value current trade with China at \$12 billion.)

In light of the ongoing Mapplethorpe controversy, Lee checked with the Centre's

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BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

<<< public funders—the City, NYSCA and NEA—to make sure that the shows' political content wouldn't jeopardize their support as well. He says he received reassurances from all of them. He stresses that the Centre is an independent, non-profit art organization that has "no ties with any political party or agenda." He insists that he's speaking on a strictly personal level when he criticizes the Bush administration's "lack of leadership" on the China question. He concedes the U.S. posture "may be prudent, but it forfeits the American people's conviction" and "leave[s] the American people hanging." Rather than "trading off political and economic gains by continuing a soft line on China," he'd like to see the U.S. "use the tools of economic and political influence to bolster

the moderates" in China's government.

The Centre ended up paying for the exhibits on its own, in collaboration with P.S.1. Lee says it's unfortunate that they didn't have a budget for printing a catalog or touring the shows, which he felt would have helped expand the impact. The exhibits have generated a small amount of private donations, including a packet of *ren men bi*, the paper currency printed by the Chinese government for use by foreign visitors. Like Soviet rubles, it's useless outside China, but Lee figures the Centre's benefactor "didn't know that."

The exhibits at the Centre and at P.S.1 both use a lot of images for a cumulative effect. At the Centre's third floor gallery at 26 Bowery, it's best to start with the documentary photos by eyewitnesses Alan Chan, a student at NYU, and Swiss photographer Stefan Umaerus. Written accounts

are mounted under the visuals. Umaerus' large color photos have the informality of blown-up snapshots, which, as you read his accompanying journal entries, develops a kind of chillingly casual atmosphere. Under photos of Beijing University's drab campus, he writes about the official segregation of Chinese students from foreigners, and of males from females. (As a foreign visitor to a Chinese students' dorm, he had to sign a declaration declaring "I will not go here again.") Still, he notes, the fashion rage among Chinese students is *Xifu*—Western clothes, especially t-shirts. Donald Duck, Pepsi and Made In The USA are faves.

Next to a photo of an empty classroom, we see where all the students are—outside demonstrating. This was last May. It's sunny, the students are in shirt sleeves, it looks like a spring festival. Lots of smiles,

young couples snacking out of paper cups, lots of brightly-colored banners. "Around the square the crowds were hectic," Umaerus records in late May. "...lorries at full speed with streaming banners...units of demonstrators marched...lightweight motorcycles roared in procession...leaflets thrown like confetti..." Umaerus missed the actual crackdown on June 4, when the tanks and troops of the Peoples Liberation Army finally opened fire, clearing the square with abrupt dispatch. But his last photo, shot soon after, is eloquent. A large portrait of Mao on the red wall of the Forbidden City gazes down on a clean, swept, empty Tiananmen Square. Like nothing has happened.

Alan Chan's black and white photos look more like news footage, gritty and ominously dark. One from June 1 shows grinning students camped out in a tunnel connecting the square to the Forbidden City. Three days later, he reports, soldiers trapped and killed them there. Like Umaerus, he photographed the square shortly after it was cleared. In his shot, a single young man sits on a battered piece of luggage, looking across the rain-puddled square at a huge phalanx of armed and riot-gearred soldiers. They look like killer robots. A barrier carries a sign translated as "Martial Law Zone—Do Not Enter."

Deng's paintings are remarkable first because there's nothing "Chinese" about the way they look or what they intend. They're bold, garish, neo-primitive oils, kind of Fauvist, kind of Expressionist. Childlike stick people and monster masks dashed in big, fevered strokes of reds and yellows and peach and pink. Vibrant and energetic, they violate every stereotype of the serenely contemplative Chinese artist. It's closer to Goya or George Grosz. Some are comic and satirical. There's that portrait of Deng Xiao Ping as a leering moon-mask. "Directing Disorder" shows a clownish traffic cop saluting the student demonstrators, still doing his job while all around him, Deng writes, "Beijing was in chaos."

An early painting depicts students marching down the streets, cheered by everyone "including old women, popsicle vendors, housekeepers and children." Dark figures loom on the rooftops under an ugly sky. Another painting shows tiny students running away from a flying wedge of huge, skull-faced riot police. There's a grim portrait of a soldier, a black and yellow death's head under the green dome of his helmet with its blood-red star. A toy helicopter lands in the background, an implied threat. "A soldier will always be a soldier," Deng says. "They are machines."

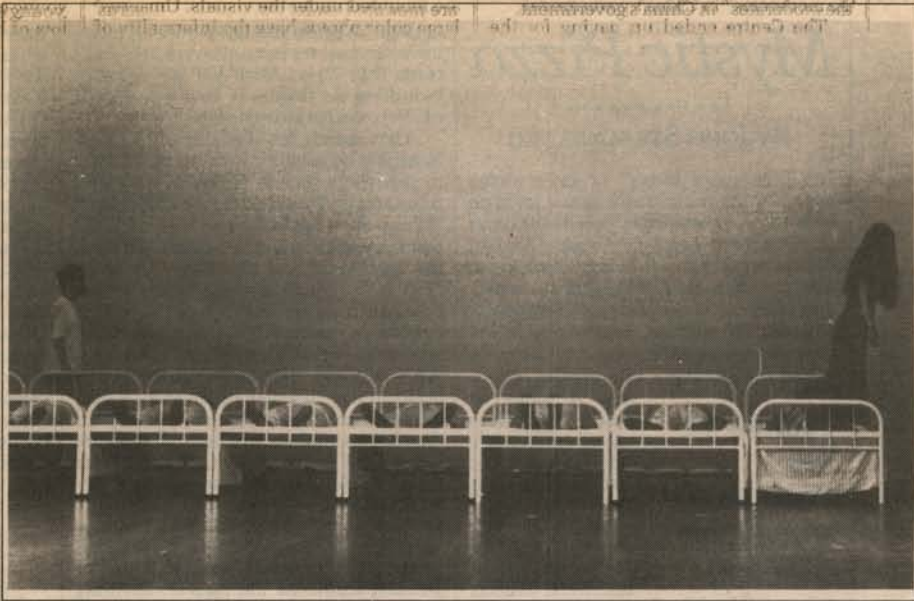
Deng was in the square when the PLA opened fire. His painting "June 4 Massacre" is a child's eye view of the melee. Tanks like big toys rumbling around a corner, a line of toy soldiers shooting, stick figures strewn on the ground. There's a sort of brutal innocence in it that reminds you of those Native American drawings of Little Big Horn. Deng says that soldiers surrounded him, "stabbed [him] with AK47's," and broke his hand. When he woke up in the hospital, the nurses warned him to get out quick, because security forces were arresting the wounded. In the following days he painted two versions of "Self-Portrait in the Hospital." The first is maybe the most powerful painting in the exhibit. It's the night of June 4, the dark ward is filled with the injured and dying, and he's standing by the bed in a waking nightmare, holding out a hand swollen and red as a torch of burning fingers—a broken caricature of the student's makeshift Miss Liberty. In the second, he's sitting dejectedly on his bed in an empty expanse of hospital white. "After June 4, a lot of people were thinking—they were broken and they didn't want to think about it anymore..."

"China, June 4," at P.S.1 in Long Island City through June 17, is a massive installation. The centerpiece is a sort of Great Wall of 174 wooden doors linked in a large double spiral, with art on both sides of each door. Some of the artists make direct, posterish political statements. "Today Snow, Tomorrow China," one forecasts. Barbara Kruger constructed a question mark of barbed wire and the slogan "You have nothing to fear but fear itself." Others are more impressionistic. Bing Lee's door has many knobs and knockers that don't let you in or out. Sharon Garbe festooned hers with padlocks. Zhang Hongfu turns a door into a satiric acupuncture chart of Mao's body, with points labelled "Class Struggle," "Peaceful Evolution," "Atom Bomb" and so on. Zhang also painted 12 Maos into a sarcastic Last Supper.

Bing Lee, program director at the Centre, says that the doors exhibit is an infinitely expandable concept. The Centre first showed 74 doors last summer, and it grows every time it's mounted. If this keeps up, he jokes, eventually it really will be a Great Wall.

There are also over 100 smaller works in the P.S.1 show. Nam June Paik built a freestanding column of video monitors with cascading images of the Great Wall, China Central TV, Chinese rock videos, and Warholesque portraits of Deng Xiao Ping. Bing Hu sculpted ominous wrapped packages like butcher shop parcels. Yuen L. Cheng painted a horned devil figure stabbing a body wrapped in a People's Republic flag.

Yung organized this Saturday's "Tiananmen Square: A Memorial Performance,"



DANCES OF DEATH
Hong Kong's ZUNI Icosahedron remembers Tiananmen Square.

a dance and theater marathon at the Triplex Theater 2 (199 Chambers St). Beginning at 4 p.m., it'll be heavy on contemporary dance, with a list of choreographers including Art Bridgman and Myrna Packer, Barbara Chang, David Dorfman and Yung Yung Tsuai. Yung says that the centerpiece—ZUNI's NYC premiere of "Deep Structure..."—is an experimental dance theater piece that explores the reaction of Hong Kong's Chinese population to events on the mainland. Given Hong Kong's incorporation into China in 1997, she says, the Hong Kong government has discouraged open expression of fear or dis-

content. She says "Deep Structure..." is about the tensions and paranoia that have resulted.

Contemporary dance has been integral to the Centre's programming since Yung founded it 16 years ago. Over the years the Centre expanded to include the visual arts gallery and a busy in-school program, with classes in the Chinese pointed brush and in traditional dance from various Asian cultures. Lee says the point of the school program isn't to show kids art "from a foreign country," but to get them thinking about "how the children there in the room communicate with one another" across

racial and ethnic differences. In the pointed brush class, for instance, kids are specifically *not* taught how to make "Chinese" art, but how to use the brush to express themselves, to "get to know it as an American tool."

For 10 years the Centre ran its own community school, with dance and art classes for Chinatown residents from pre-schoolers to seniors. Lee and Yung say they had to stop that last year because they were being "harassed" by their landlord, who wanted to expand the restaurant downstairs into their space. According to Yung, he "threatened parents and students" as they entered or exited classes, creating "such a bad atmosphere" that enrollment—200 students a week at its peak—"naturally dropped." In February 1988, the Centre filed complaints with the District Attorney's Office of Chinatown Affairs and the Landlord Tenant Harassment unit. A few months later, they simply moved the classes to another space. But they couldn't keep up the extra rent, so they closed the

school in early '89.

Things have since taken a few more turns, Yung says. The landlord was arrested last fall and indicted for drug trafficking. Lee says he was part of Chinatown's Onionhead gang. Federal agents then seized the building that houses the Centre. "So now our landlord is the U.S. Government," Yung sighs. "It's been a very up and down time." Lee, meanwhile, is considering reopening the school.

(Call 233-2154 or 618-1980 for more information on the Centre's events.)

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