

HONG KONG  
1A SPACE

## One Suitcase Per Person

At the nonprofit 1a space, guest curator Davina Lee brought together David Diao, Ken Lum and Hiram To, three ethnically Chinese artists with different backgrounds and experience, to contemplate the theme of transnational identity. The small-scale exhibition included Diao's freehand blueprints, Lum's photo-portraits and To's cinematic prints, which addressed not only what it means to be a Chinese descendant estranged from one's ancestral home, in Diao's case, but also provided alternative perceptions to heritage as a non-negotiable indicator of identity. Lum and To, representing two younger generations, showed instances in which cultural circumstance influence a more fluid conception of self.

The exhibition's title derives from one of Diao's displayed works, a simple mahogany canvas inscribed with the Chinese and English phrase "one suitcase per person" in reddish-yellow letters. Diao's "Da Hen Li House" series (2007–11), of which *One Suitcase Per Person* (2011) is a part, sets a tone of melancholic nostalgia and pathos that seems to ask: what, if anything, can one hold on to after geographical, cultural and political dislocation?

The arrangement of "Da Hen Li House," along one entire wall of the gallery, dominated the exhibit. Property layouts of Diao's family's now-demolished housing estate, based on rough sketches and his relative's recollections, were presented alongside personal text-based paintings, such as *Death on Tennis Court* (2007) and *I Lived There Until I Was 6* (2008), which flanked a central two-panel timeline that traces the artist's life, as well as major historical events in relation to the 43-year lifespan of the family home. Considered as a whole, "Da Hen Li House" tells the story of a childhood identity threatened with extinction by overwhelming societal forces, in this instance the upheaval of the Chinese Civil War (1927–49), and poignantly attests to the traumatic nature of cultural dispossession.

Migrant culture is a long-standing concern for Hiram To. For this exhibition, To repurposed imagery from *Soldier of Fortune* (1955)—the first Hollywood film set in Hong Kong—in a two-part series of Plexiglas prints, "Fortune Landscape" (2011), to show how outside perceptions dictate the way Hong Kong residents define themselves. In *Fortune Landscape 1*, American actor Clark Gable and Susan Hayward's double (the actress never stepped outside Los Angeles for the filming of *Soldier of Fortune*), hold an intimate conversation at the landmark Barker Road Station overlooking Hong Kong harbor. Superimposed over the yellow-tinted movie still is an image of a Japanese ikebana floral arrangement. With this addition, *Fortune Landscape 1* not only conflates Hong Kong and Japanese signifiers, it also creates a self-mocking recipe for Asian identity that serves as a gibe at



those guilty of perpetuating stereotyped notions of Asia and the "Far East."

Vancouver-born Ken Lum, a prolific writer and formerly a professor in the Fine Arts Department at the University of British Columbia, presented a broad, general response to the question of whether identity can be shaped by cultural production. His employee-of-the-month portraits, for the fictional "Schnitzel Company" (2004), critiques corporate campaigns that impose a homogenous family image by eliminating all traces of the complex dynamics that shape ethnic and cultural identity from the depictions of its employees. Whether of Indian, Vietnamese, Turkish or Germanic descent, each employee in the series sports an identical bold yellow T-shirt and red cap, smiling exuberantly at the camera. Only the names accompanying the portraits belie the sitters' obfuscated heritage. "Schnitzel Company" puts into sharp focus the unfortunate attitude of corporate diversity programs that seek to increase minority percentages while failing to adjust the status quo to meet the needs of a diverse workplace, and taps into a larger debate about multiculturalism and social cohesion.

Over the past two decades, notions concerning the global migrant population have been shifting from forced dislocation (that is, exiles and refugees, represented here in the works by Diao) to increasingly diverse forms of elective migration (such as émigrés and expatriates, represented here in the works by the Hong Kong- and Australia-based To). In light of this, "One Suitcase Per Person" presented a welcome reinvestigation of the diaspora experience, so central to the 20th-century, which has often envisioned the nation-state as the basis for value creation.

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