

Four Artists for CultureHall
From Pictures are Words-not-Known at the Lishui Museum of Photography

Lori Grinker, Abraham McNally, Claudia Sohrens, & Bradly Treadaway

Curated by Sean Justice

Western Artists are familiar with art of the idea, aka conceptual art—from Fluxus to performance to Relational Aesthetics. And whether or not our own practices directly engage that domain, we're comfortable with a notion of aesthetics that posits "aboutness" as separate from appearance, or content divided from form, because we know that sometimes what a work is about is more important than how it looks. As well, we feel the pull, like gravity, that conceptualism exerts on curators, gallerists, and collectors, and consequently we pour over artist statements that explain everything in a few short sentences.

In other parts of the world, though, this fracturing of the whole into distinctly separated parts appears as merely a conceit or a style that marks elitism or seriousness. In China, artists take pains to unravel the aboutness of their work only in the context of its Western reception; in their studios they're more comfortable with an embodied unity, the integrated form-idea. When I began talking and working with artists in Beijing in 2005, this differently nuanced conversation struck me immediately, and suggested a new set of questions. Last April, when asked to curate an exhibit of Western conceptual photography for the Lishui Museum of Photography, in China, I focused on the way that questions inform practice.

In fact, questions are the starting point. When I teach, the goal is to use materials and technology (film and lenses; computers and cameras) to ask questions that explore the world—culture, relationships, history, dreams. For some students, though, the work of finding the right question is hidden beneath the glossy surface of an already-found answer. I mean this in a

particular way: the picture we're looking at is not the work. The picture is the residue of the work.

The confusion of picture with work emerges because our understanding of the art-making process has been derailed; or, perhaps we've just gotten the words wrong. What we call the "work" is not really the work at all, but rather the result of the work. The actual work is the question that the artist asks. The picture (or the sculpture, or the dance, or the computer interactive poem), is an attempt to articulate the question, and perhaps to suggest an answer. By the time an audience sees any particular artwork, the real work—the dynamic, sweat-and-grime work—is done and gone. What we see is what's left over. At that point, as viewers, our job is to see through the art and imagine the work, the questions, behind it.

Most of the time, however, we engage with art as if it were a mirror. We only want to see ourselves. And when we do, we "like" the art. And if we don't see ourselves, we "don't like" it. In both cases we miss the point entirely. The artist didn't bleed and cry for us to feel good or not feel good. That is perverse. No, the artist looked carefully, felt deeply, and explored and experimented and failed a million times because...why? Why would anyone put themselves through that pain and potential humiliation? This is the wonder that we search for, perhaps to glimpse briefly, perhaps to breathe into our own lives. But it's impossible to reach that state of awareness, of transparency, if we're searching for a mirror.

These four photographers work in a way that lets us see their process. They explore issues of family, domesticity, and heritage; in their pictures we see them wrestling with forces of alienation and a desire for tradition that sometimes seems at odds with modernity—though the images each makes are quite distinctly their own. As a group they represent the larger Lishui exhibit, titled *Pictures are Words-not-Known*, in which I explore the notion that concept is

always interwoven with artifact, where neither can be easily separated from the other, into either distinct parts, or layers. Rather, I propose that we consider the work of artists—their pictures, sculptures, films, buildings, and all manner of objects—by looking sideways, at an angle that avoids the reflection of ourselves, in order to glimpse the active questioning that informed the artwork in the first place.



Lori Grinker’s camera maps her family’s diaspora over the past 120 years—from Lithuania through Eastern Europe and into the West. Her pictures invite us to puzzle the disparate cultures and histories that her explorations are reconnecting, the roots that had all but faded from memory, but from which new shoots are now emerging.



Abraham McNally puts photographs and drawings together with found pictures to intimate an indexical connection to a land of idealism which has now been lost. His collages suggest the tension of city against farm, of urban isolation against rural communal living, but

don't literalize those ideas. Instead we gently imagine a family's dreams as they inform one man's modern life.



Claudia Sohrens analyzes the physicality of domestic space and the objects housed within that space. Her documentary scenes, still-life photographs, and re-photographed montages, create and simultaneously invite us to critique the ubiquitous archives we build in our homes. On the one hand, contemporary opulence creates robust possibilities; but on the other hand, that same dynamic can devolve into a debilitating sickness that can destroy the family.



Bradly Treadaway processes memories through the intersection of contemporary technology and historical artifact. His montage constructions evoke his ancestors by framing them within the digital toolsets which threaten to obliterate those very memories; or, perhaps more optimistically, which offer the hope of recalibrating those memories so that they might remain relevant today.

Sean Justice is an artist and educator working with photography, language, and interactive media. He teaches art and technology at various institutions in the New York area, and is pursuing a doctorate in media art education at Teachers College, Columbia University.