

ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

DAVE MCKENZIE
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NIKI DE SAINT PHALLE
CHAO-CHEN YANG

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Shih Meng Hsin, (*), 2020, iron, wood, lightbulbs. Installation view. Photo: Kagaw Omin.*

The gallery's second room was even darker and contained just two works. In the corner burned *Fire, 2020*, actually a laptop whose screen cast the fleshy glow of the titular element onto the corner wall it was facing. *Waiting, 2020*, a set of magnifying glasses protruding from the back wall on twisted bronze wires, suggested the implied movement of the light columns at the gallery entrance while catching beacons of light, dimly reflected in their ever-inquisitive lenses.

Shih's evocation of the nocturnal streetscape didn't go all the way, of course; absent, for instance, was the perpetual signage of 7-Eleven and FamilyMart stores glowing green and turquoise, the aroma of frying food in the night markets, and the sulfur stench of the geysers of the Beitou District on the city's mountainous outskirts, where weekend warriors check into hot-spring hotels to sweat their cares away. OK, so this was far from an exhaustive conjuring of the outside we just exchanged for the inside. But the gallery space is small, and a map can never take the place of the territory. Shih was sensitive to the need to deal economically with space and took advantage of the opportunity that this necessity presented: namely, the chance to sketch out a pared-down atmosphere from a minute and exacting selection of elements. Taken together, they formed a portrait of urban life past sundown, attuned to the energies that remain awake even when we're not.

—Travis Jeppesen

SEOUL

Choi Byungso

ARARIO GALLERY

Even the most discerning eyes might initially have mistaken Choi Byungso's recent four-part drawing, *Untitled, 2019*, for a monochrome painting. Filled to the brim with markings in ballpoint-pen ink and graphite, the work's surface shimmered ever so faintly under the dim light, embodying the sensuous gestures of *dansaekhwa*. Yet the support is not canvas or even *hanji*, the traditional handmade Korean paper utilized by some of Choi's contemporaries. Instead, the chosen medium is folded newspaper; other works by the artist are made with actual newspapers.

Banal as newspaper may be, in the age of social media, disinformation, and fake news, one could not help but to feel a tinge of melancholy

in the presence of this emblem of the bygone public sphere. This peculiar forlornness pervaded "Sens et Non-Sens: Works from 1974–2020," which provided a glimpse into Choi's extensive practice in drawing, photography, and installation over the span of his career. In the newspaper drawings that were on view, all from the past five years, the ink and graphite marks are sensorial gestures as much as they are, as the artist puts it, erasures of the support. The pressure of the pen and pencil tears the paper, even as it imparts soothing rhythmic cadences. What emerges in these works is something like a representation of mourning. This solemnity was compounded by *Untitled 016000, 2016*, an installation comprising more than eight thousand twisted white metal hangers sprawled across the gallery floor. Together, the drawings and the installation seemed to ask: What is the purpose of this vicious cycle of disinformation? Does it merely feed into its isomorphic cousin, the ruthless production of capital and waste?

These works may speak to the present, yet it behooves us to recall that when Choi began the newspaper series in the mid-1970s, dictator Park Chung-hee had declared martial law (the Yushin system) and suspended constitutional rights. Freedom of the press was also curtailed, engendering a searing skepticism of the media among the public. Perhaps the erstwhile public sphere that we so yearn for was never there in the first place. A flood in Choi's studio in the early '80s destroyed most of his works up until that point, including the early newspaper pieces, but luckily two photographic works from this period survived and were on hand here. One is *Untitled 9750000-2, 1975*, a group of four photos, each showing a different everyday item set on a chair, with the object's name, in English, at the top: UMBRELLA, NEWSPAPER, BOTTLE, SUITCASE. A doorknob appears at the top-left corner of each image—almost as a trompe l'oeil device, pinning the work to the wall. Though clearly miming Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs, 1965*, the work does not ruminate on representation so much as collapse the referent and the signifier into one single image. All we see is the image as it stages and constructs our world.

Likewise, *Untitled 9750000-1, 1975*, reveals an image from *National Geographic* portraying two birds in flight, along with the words SKY, CLOUD, WIND, BIRDS, FLYING, and MEETING. At first, the piece cleaves to the sort of interrogation of linguistic and visual inscriptions typical of American Conceptual art. But the choices of the magazine and language (English, not Korean) are telling for another reason: It was a

View of "Choi Byungso: Sens et Non-Sens: Works from 1974–2020," 2020–21. From top: *Untitled, 2019*; *Untitled 016000, 2016*.



National Geographic map that the US State Department used to draw the border between North and South Korea; this division, in the words of then US colonel and future secretary of state Dean Rusk, "made no sense economically or geographically." In 1969, the magazine ran a headline on the "success story" of South Korea since the end of the Korean War in 1953; at that very moment, the American government was fully aware that the country was plunging further into authoritarianism. Not only does Choi's work telegraph the pretensions of the liberal world order, it also points to representation's greater machinations. A gentle reminder emerges: Representation has always been inextricable from power and violence, and that power reverberates differently depending on one's geopolitical and socioeconomic position.

—Adela Kim

SINGAPORE

Heman Chong

STPI

Heman Chong insists that there are "zero metaphors and zero irony" in his practice. "What you see is what you get," he says. If this was true of Chong's most recent show, "Peace Prosperity and Friendship with All Nations," curated by Kathleen Ditzig, then it was only because the show—a presentation of works inspired by the year 2020—hardly needed an extra layer to make its point.

Take, for example, the mural in which the phrase PEACE PROSPERITY AND FRIENDSHIP WITH ALL NATIONS appears in a thick black classic-monster-movie font. Dripping with a hypocrisy as sticky and chilling as the kitschy typography would suggest, these words appear on the coin minted to mark Britain's departure from the European Union on January 31, 2020. Chong's derision of the UK government's handling of Brexit speaks to a certain postcolonial schadenfreude. It has been a turbulent few years for the ideals of Western democracy, and the Covid-19 pandemic has further challenged the sanctity of a system in which individual liberty is placed above the greater good. East Asian societies tend to function through a culture of willingness to submit to a collective goal that, along with its benign authoritarianism, was pivotal to Singapore's swift and effective containment of the disease.

The state's efficiency relies as well on the public's acceptance of an official lexicon that emphasizes communal accountability over government control. A period of lockdown is known in Singapore as a "circuit breaker," and the citywide system of mandatory contact tracing is called SafeEntry (enabled by the TraceTogether app). These terms and their associated symbols—the omnipresent QR code and a cross in a box used to mark out areas for social distancing—were the central motifs of Chong's "Circuit Breaker Paintings" and "Safe Entry (Version 2.0-2.7)," both 2020. Each of the eight works that make up the latter series depict an apparently identical QR code, the artist's brushwork being the only variation distinguishing one canvas from the next. The color scheme cannot be accidental: a base layer of blood red stenciled over with corporeal pink beige. It is human skin warped by machine vision—a metaphor for the age if ever there was one.

Unsettlingly, the QR code is functional, linking the viewer not to a SafeEntry page but to a video, just over an hour and a quarter long, of Chong walking two and a half miles through a deserted Changi Airport at the height of the crisis in April of last year. It's a small act of transgression, recorded at a moment when citizens could be penalized for leaving their immediate neighborhoods, in a place known for its intolerance of rule breaking at the best of times. In the worst of times, a lonely walk, the tonic to so many looping lockdown days, feels like a little ode to human resilience.