



CHINAMAN'S CHANCE

VIEWS OF THE CHINESE
AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Chinese immigrants have a long history in America. However, only a few Chinese were in America until gold was discovered in California in 1848. When news of the discovery reached China, many saw this as an opportunity to escape extreme poverty and sought passage to California. By 1865, about 50,000 Chinese had come to America to try their luck, but their winds of fortune would blow in another direction.

The First Transcontinental Railroad was considered the greatest American technological feat of the 19th century. It created a mechanized transportation network that revolutionized the economy of the West. The first Chinese were hired to do the dangerous work of blasting. They were lowered by ropes from the tops of cliffs in wicker baskets, and while suspended, planted explosives that were used to blast tunnels. Once the fuses were lit, they needed to climb the rope back to the top before the dynamite exploded. It was from these dangerous tasks that the phrase "A Chinaman's Chance in Hell" was coined. Later shortened to "Chinaman's Chance", the obvious meaning of the phrase defined many of the early Chinese American experiences.

Chinaman's Chance: Views of the Chinese American Experience, with Arthur Ou, Amanda Ross-Ho, and Zhi Lin, is a multi-media, contemporary art exhibition that examines the diverse Chinese American experience from 1860 to 2008.

ZHI LIN, born and educated in China, has lived in America since 1989. In response to his fear that America is witnessing a growing anti-immigration movement as well as resurgent Sinophobia, Zhi's four, life-size watercolors focus on the plight of the Chinese railroad workers. It is his hope that viewers will analyze the current socio-political landscape and prevent history from repeating itself.

Also, in collaboration with Dan Boord and Luis Valdavino, the three artists have created a large-scale painting/video/installation that depicts a re-enactment of the Golden Spike Ceremony in Promontory, Utah. The high definition video is projected on a canvas painted with the names of over 900 Chinese work groups. These groups, consisting of 20 to 30 men, are some of the only written records of the 23,000 Chinese workers employed by the Central Pacific Railroad. At least 1200 of these nameless workers perished constructing the Transcontinental Railroad.

Golden Spike Site, Promontory, Utah, 2008, Chinese ink on paper, Zhi Lin, Courtesy of Koplín Del Río Gallery





Untitled (Mirror Lake 1), 2007, Piezo pigment print on rag paper, Arthur Ou, courtesy Hudson Franklin, New York

ARTHUR OU, born in Taiwan in 1974, has lived in America since 1985. As a multi-media artist, Ou explores the past and the present, Eastern and Western culture, and art and architecture. Included in the exhibition are Ou's three series *Untitled (Cased Mountains)*, *Untitled (Screen Tests)* and *Untitled (Mirror Lake)*.

The blend of Eastern and Western art forms is especially apparent in Ou's *Untitled (Mirror Lake)* images. In the 1860's, Carlton E. Watkins was one of the first artists to photograph the splendors of Mirror Lake. In Ou's series, he floats traditional Chinese landscape paintings on the surface of Mirror Lake and then photographs the reflection of mountains, the water, and the watercolor painting. His man-made landscape seems to negate the iconic images of the glorified West. While these large format images pay homage to Watkins, more importantly, they reflect Ou's personal interpretation of the blending of cultures and art forms.



(detail) 2007 *Snapshot of a 1964 Self-Portrait*, Digital photo, Ruyell Ho

AMANDA ROSS-HO was born and raised in Chicago. In her installation piece for the exhibition, Ross-Ho “curates,” contextualizes, and presents the art works of her father. Of mixed race heritage, Ross-Ho presents a different and much less traditional Chinese American experience. Her connection with her Chinese heritage is once-removed, accessed by navigating her father’s experience. Furthermore, it is by negotiating his work as an artist that she is able to understand her own working practice. “Seeking stability within this constantly shifting space, I compensate by manipulating the lens of attention itself, altering perspective on immediate, local surroundings through continual adjustments of focus, aperture, and resolution. With a degree of urgency, I am looking to find, and to behold, what is important.”

While *Chinaman's Chance: Views of the Chinese American Experience* is not meant to be an historic railroad show, the exhibition uses this important period as a starting point to investigate the topics of assimilation, identity and the concept of being American. Zhi Lin wants to challenge the viewers and ask them if they know the sacrifices that were made by the Chinese in American history. Does this parallel his Chinese American experience? Arthur Ou seeks harmony between the past and the present and the East and the West. His view of the Chinese American experience is reflected in his work where one art form negates the other. For Amanda Ross-Ho, much of her Chinese American experience has been through the eyes of her father. As in her art, she examines, edits and chooses what is important. While each of the artists have had unique experiences, together they present three cohesive perspectives of the Chinese in America. I hope that the viewer's experience will be simultaneously cerebral, physical, historical, contemporary, foreign and universal.

I would like to thank Pasadena Art Alliance for their generous support of this exhibition. Also, I thank Mary Leigh Cherry and Philip Martin of Cherry and Martin, Eleana Del Rio of Koplín Del Rio Gallery, Nicole Francis of Hudson Franklin, and all the staff at Pacific Asia Museum. Most of all, I would like to thank Daniel Boord, Ruyell Ho, Arthur Ou, Amanda Ross-Ho, Luis Valdavino and Zhi Lin, for their tireless efforts in creating this exhibition.

Chip Tom, *Exhibition Curator*

COVER: *Names of the Unremembered: Transcontinental*, 2008, Painting (acrylic and pencil on canvas)/video projection, Painting: Zhi Lin, video: Daniel Boord and Luis Valdovino

ADMISSION: \$7 adults, \$5 students/seniors. Children 11 and under free.

PARKING in the museum lot on the corner of Los Robles and Union.



46 North Los Robles Ave., Pasadena, CA 91101
626-449-2742 www.pacificasiamuseum.org