

# CREATIVE DESTRUCTIVISM

FLUX FUELS CHINATOWN'S  
RAW ENERGY

BY CARRIE PATERSON

**GALLERIES** are opening, galleries are closing, some are struggling to get by. They are moving to New York, they are moving to Culver City. They are hoping for a renewal on a lease. A fluorescent orange mason line is strung high above Hill Street, the remnant of Nancy Popp's cartographic performance from the PERFORM! NOW! Festival. It's two weeks later, and the Chinatown Association is asking the curators why the artist hasn't taken it down. Simply, she has declined to remove it.

This is the meta-Chinatown where artists are in their milieu but feel at once at home and estranged. Like Popp's mason line, the art world is an overlay on an already crowded urban map. The uncanny nature of the place is the combination of its emptiness and its potential. There's probably an equation to describe this continuum, but I'm not a mathematician, only an observer counting storefronts: open for business, open, shut, locked, door ajar, closed for renovation, empty, bright new little designer boutique, fountain of meager pennies. Isn't there supposed to be good luck here? No — that's the other plaza, the other side of Hill. Apparently, the two sides are in competition with each another. How unfortunate that people don't work together more.

Rife with politics, occasionally marred by graffiti, and a gathering place at busy restaurants, bars and malls, LA's Chinatown is jammed, but with more trinkets and objects than people. This is also true of the galleries, where there is no shortage of art. However, buyers here, and often viewers, have to be of the most adventurous sort. Collectors from the West Side, legitimately fearing downtown traffic and snarls on the 10 Freeway, often balk at coming to Chinatown. You'd think galleries would be open on Sundays. Well, they were going to try that. Maybe someone organized will pick up that ball again.

Chinatown.com announces that 2010 is the Year of the Tiger, when "unpredictability bodes for a year of change and social upheaval." What will happen next? For the last 10 years, this has been a question, watching galleries like China Art Objects, Goodman Tevis and 4F put on excellent shows and then self-destruct. John Souza, director of the latter, said they hoped the gallery could continue, but the building was sold out from under them three times in one year while they were trying to renegotiate their lease.

Last summer, Jancar Gallery moved into the old Black Dragon Society with a strong stable of artists and creative assistant curator Maya Lujan. Charlie James Gallery showed a young activist focused on Latino and African-American relations in the old Telic (Nery Gabriel Lemus). Earlier, Telic moved its "Public School" project down Chung King Road. Mara McCarthy started an excellent program at The Box (the old 4F) in 2007. Tom Solomon has been in the old Acuña-Hansen (dearly missed) for two years with a program that tends toward the conceptual, museological and art historical. All of this is refreshing.

Gallery life cycles in Chinatown are short and sometimes inspiring. People move in, capitalize on the energy and then, packing up, they move on. What ever happened to C-Level? Right — Machine Project.



Right: Mariel Carranza sitting in her rocking chair made of glass shards on Chung King Road. Photo by Marty Schnapp

Below Right: Kathryn Andrews, *Gaylen Gerber*, 2010, Paint on billboards, Installation view, photo by Gaylen Gerber, courtesy of the artist and Thomas Solomon Gallery, Los Angeles

Should Chinatown be more of a coherent experience? Should developers be allowed to buy up swaths of buildings? What would artists and gallerists do if they had to pay four times the price per square foot, as if they were in Culver City, or Wilshire? What would Chinatown look like if the city were to enforce a blight ordinance, and landholders were taxed when they left their buildings empty or in disrepair? Wouldn't there be more art? Would Hollywood come back and be positive about the place for once, not just film stories about crime, gangsters and unspeakable things occurring in the alleyways, but rather hopeful stories — about young people making their mark, about different generations learning from one another, about old and new living side by side?

What would a story of a "successful" Chinatown look like? Or is it already that way? Are you an artist who likes to perform as a fly outside a reputable restaurant's kitchen, intimating a sad, dark story while being a capitalist on an image of failure? Are you an entrepre-



neur seeking to build your business or boutique up from scratch? This could be your place, too! Genevieve Pepin, who just opened Pepin Moore Gallery this summer, chose Chinatown because it was "much more romantic" than an industrial location like Culver City. Those big boxes don't exist here ... unless you are lucky enough, like Tom Solomon, to be one of the partners running art out of the rehabilitated porn theater on Cottage Home Street.

We all need to declare it: Chinatown is amazing. It's open for experimentation. It's walkable, there is parking and ample public transit, it's friendly, and there's great food. "CHINATOWNLAND" proclaimed the vacant lot between the Barber Shop gallery and the Hill Street Gate to Gin Ling Way in Hollywood-sign letters: Chinatown is an attraction and it has been officially occupied!

And then, one day, the sign was just gone, the vacant lot restored. Chinatown: Hope springs eternal. ☺

