

Kit Kat

By Carmella Laughlin

Inspired by the 2005 mural Event Horizon by Kara Walker

\$400 FIRST PRIZE CREATIVE RESPONSE

Kit Kat she live on a farm,
Kit Kat she play all day long.
Kit Kat she love Big Jim,
Kit Kat she belong to him.
Kit Kat she blacker than clay,
Kit Kat a beauty that way.

Mister Masta Mansa Musa
Loved da Little Ladies Looser
Offered Orphans Oval Opals
Predator Preyed on Pretty Pupils
Nine Nettled Negroes Nodded
Rape Rattled Ruth and Ray
Soon Some Sad Sacrifice
Mista Master full o' Vice

Kit Kat found a secret door
Kit Kat aint round no mo'.
Kit Kat left her Jim a clue,
Kit Kat left him just a few.
Kit Kat didna know how tah fly,
Kit Kat only knew how tah die.

Suzy fell down Kit Kat's hole,
But Suzy crawled just like a mole.
Soon more came that found that way,
Saying "Let massa scream all day"

Trusting Toughs They Tussled Through
United Uniquely Underneath
Victoriously the Vivacious Vanquished
Embraced Endlessly Enduring Eden
Finding Fecal Feasts Forever
In an Infinite December

Kit Kat she lived on the farm,
Kit Kat she played all day long.
Kit Kat she loved her Big Jim,
Kit Kat she still with him.
Kit Kat was blacker than clay,
Kit Kat a beauty that way.

Tseng Kwong Chi: Alienated Tourist

By Carly Dintaman

On the artist's 1979 photograph Disneyland, California

\$400 FIRST PRIZE CRITICAL RESPONSE

A framed black and white photograph of a Disneyland scene (*see Image 1*) casually greets visitors to the second floor of The New School University Welcome Building in New York City. The smiling and waving Mickey Mouse character is the same from any family vacation photograph, yet the triteness stops there as the other subject is more unusual. A thin Asian man in a traditional Mao-style uniform stands straight and sober, unsmiling, with dark sunglasses and a short military haircut, taking with him the lightheartedness of a typical Disneyland photograph. The juxtapositions within Tseng Kwong Chi's *Disneyland, California*—familiar and mysterious, happy and serious, American and foreign, citizen and alien—bring up the complexities of how outsiders and ‘others’ are defined, also perpetuated by its setting in Disneyland and the directness of the piece itself. Thus, Tseng Kwong Chi's *Disneyland, California* exploits conventional tourism and Western stereotypes to illustrate the postmodern artist's examination of alienation, identity, and perception.

Tseng Kwong Chi was born in Hong Kong in 1950 to a family that had fled communist China. He grew up in Vancouver where his family immigrated when he was a teenager¹ and later went to art school in Paris. For most of his professional life, Tseng worked and lived in New York City as an artist until his death in 1990 from AIDs at age 40. Tseng's history is an important part of his work. His *Disneyland, California* piece was part of a larger project that began somewhat accidentally. In 1979, the 29-year-old Tseng was an impoverished artist living with his sister in the East Village of New York City. In order to meet the dress code at an upscale restaurant where they were meeting their visiting parents, Tseng wore the only suit he owned, a Mao-style uniform which he had purchased at a thrift store in Montreal. When the maitre d' at the restaurant took Tseng to be a VIP, a Chinese ambassador, he was appropriately reverent. As Eleanor Rose Ty and Donald C. Goellnicht recount in *Asian North American Identities*, “From that day, Tseng chose to perform his Chineseness, completing his transformation from the quasi-Western appellation signified by Joseph Tseng...to the complete Chinese appellative Tseng Kwong Chi...”² With dark sunglasses and a short military haircut, Tseng purposefully exuded well-known stereotypes of orientalism. His ability to convince the public of his authenticity reinforced the real presence of such stereotypes, especially as his photo identification badge that often read “Slutforart” or “visitor” went unnoticed. His successful crashing of the opening reception of the Metropolitan Museum's Ch'ing Dynasty costume exhibition where he was able to be photographed with and speak to such celebrities as Yves Saint Laurent and Henry Kissinger revealed “the pervasive ignorance of Westerners regarding Asia,”³ as Ty and Goellnicht remark. These incidents embody the core of Tseng's work, suggesting “the power and fixity of Chineseness as alterity in the U.S.”⁴

Tseng went on to begin his famous photographic series of which *Disneyland, California* is part of, posing in front of popular American tourist attractions and monuments, such as the Hollywood sign, the Statue of Liberty, and Niagra Falls, between 1979 and 1983, resulting in a work of about 150 black and white photographs. After 1983, Tseng expanded internationally with his work, posing in front of famous sites like the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame. In 1987 until his death in 1990, “he entered a phase of nature photography,”⁵ according to Ty and Goellnicht. Throughout his fine art career, Tseng also made 50,000 documentary photographs of his partner Keith Haring at work on murals and subway art and also did commercial photographs for high profile magazines,

including *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, and *GQ*.⁶ His photographs around tourist sites of the world remain his most well-known work, though, and are most often referred to as the “East Meets West” series.

Disneyland, California is especially impacting because of its use of iconic American imagery, Mickey Mouse in particular. As Lucy Lippard states, Tseng’s “power lay in the fact that he was not the expected figure...”⁷ His appearance—rigid expression, hidden eyes, and Mao suit—adds up to the well-known stereotype of the “inscrutable orient”⁸ that pervaded U.S. imagination in the nineteenth century with the influx of Asian workers and following Nixon’s visit to China in 1972, as Ty and Goellnicht recount.⁹ In a performance piece entitled “SlutForArt,” Muna Tseng, the artist’s sister, presents Tseng’s criticism of Nixon’s visit: “A real cultural exchange was supposed to take place between the East and the West, but after a year or so, everything had stayed on a very official level and nothing substantial had been done.”¹⁰ Tseng’s sunglasses and distant attitude, as he looks away from the camera, serve to make him as mysterious as China was to the West at that time. His stiff posture and clenched fist on the shutter release even make him slightly menacing, also touching on Westerners’ negative views of Asians then. This included what Grady Turner, curator of education at the New York Historical Society, terms “Yellow Peril,”¹¹ Americans’ fear of being overtaken by “anonymous Asian hordes,”¹² coupled with the terror of the communist threat in the Reagan era.

Ty and Goellnicht hold that the drama of *Disneyland, California* “derives from the apparent incongruity of oppositions brought together in the present moment: American and foreign, lighthearted and serious, known and unknown.”¹³ These clashing elements, blatantly apparent in Mickey’s smiling face next to Tseng’s stern expression, seem to communicate “political differences and political conformity,”¹⁴ as Ty and Goellnicht explain that Tseng is the communist intruder in a capitalist spectacle that was created during the Cold War era in 1956, where Krushchev was denied entry in 1959.¹⁵ Mickey’s unenthusiastic wave in *Disneyland, California* seems to confirm this. The unbecoming pole between Mickey and Tseng literally draws a line to mark this separation while also serving as “a parody of the careless tourist.”¹⁶

Yet, the pole also plays a part in equally dividing the composition, giving both subjects the same amount of space to occupy, perhaps suggesting that in addition to the obvious oppositions are similarities between Mickey and Tseng. The strong horizontal lines of the fence and sidewalk curb make the arrangement appear that much more orderly and deliberately planned. Neither Tseng nor Mickey look directly at the camera, their glances crossing, perhaps connecting one to the other. Thus, it appears that Mickey and Tseng are somehow on equal footing. Their most distinctive similarities seem to be in each costume that erases the identity of its wearer. Just as Tseng’s uniform is a mask presenting a persona of a stereotypical Asian, the person wearing the Mickey costume is unknown to the public. Ty and Goellnicht further, “The erasure under the costume...mandated by Disney...is absolute, underscoring capitalism’s production of a uniform subjectivity. This similarity of performance is underscored by the visual similarity between Mickey’s and Tseng’s shining black shoes.”¹⁷ They stress that the mask goes even further, as “the wide eyes and the welcoming smile that make Mickey all inclusive, and in popular mythology all American, belie the fact that entry to this simulacra paradise of neatly trimmed hedges and spotless sidewalks is limited to those who can afford the admission charge.”¹⁸ Thus, in his Mao-style suit, Tseng joins Mickey as one of many characters produced by popular media, exploiting “the experience of looked-at-ness, being othered and relegated to objecthood”¹⁹ through oriental clichés. Tseng’s choice of setting in *Disneyland, California* points to a source of this dilemma: Disney itself.

The Vera List Center for Art and Politics at New School University analyzes Tseng’s photo-

graph as politicizing a setting that usually shuns politics.²⁰ Tseng's work does bring to mind underlying political issues, and the setting, Disneyland, *appears* to spurn politics in the name of fun and innocence. Interestingly, though, Disney has actually become a massive public influence by, for example, providing representations of what ideal American places, people, and values are. In *Disturbing Pleasures*, Henry Giroux points to the rapid emergence of new technologies in creating a shift from a focus on the political to the popular. Giroux stresses that one should not underestimate the power that the media now has in the "shaping of everyday life and global agendas. Unlike traditional cultural forms, the emergence of the new media marks a unique moment in the expansion of cultural imperialism into the sphere of everyday life."²¹ The case of Disney is even more powerful because of its American roots. As Edward Said explains in *Culture and Imperialism*, "the epic scale of the United States' global power and the corresponding power of the national domestic consensus created by the electronic media have no precedents. Never has there been a consensus so difficult to oppose nor so easy and logical to capitulate to unconsciously."²² Giroux explains how Disney is one of the "massive public spheres"²³ that shields itself beneath "the rubric of fun, entertainment, and escape,"²⁴ thus appearing "too 'innocent' to be worthy of political analyses."²⁵

Giroux explains that Disney has relentlessly promoted "an endless regime of representations and commodities that conjure up a nostalgic view as the United States as the 'magic kingdom.'"²⁶ These representations are now defining how, in Stuart Hall's words, we "'come to know how we are constituted and who we are.'"²⁷ Disney may represent the degree to which, as Hall says,

'popular culture has historically become the dominant form of global culture...the scene, par excellence, of commodification, of the industries where culture enters directly into the circuits of... power and capital. It is the space of homogenization where stereotyping and the formulaic mercilessly process the material and experiences it draws into its web, where control over narratives and representations passes into the hands of established cultural bureaucracies, sometimes without a murmur.'²⁸

Thus, with this understanding of Disney, it seems that Tseng, in *Disneyland, California*, is both showing the oppositions between the subjects and how those separations have been formed by popular culture. Giroux explains that Disney has rewritten "narratives of national identity and global expansion...through the reproduction of strict gender roles, unexamined national roles, and a notion of choice that is attached to the proliferation of commodities."²⁹ Giroux furthers that Disney uses strategies of "entertaining escapism, historical forgetting, and repressive pedagogy"³⁰ in all of its media forms—books, movies, theme parks, etc.—to "relentlessly define the United States as white, middle-class, and heterosexual."³¹ No wonder Tseng is out of place in the midst of Disneyland as Asian, lower-middle-class, and homosexual. The fact that even without knowing Tseng's personal background, a viewer—myself included—looks at the photograph and immediately thinks something or someone is out of place reaffirms the entrenched stereotypes that are circulated in popular culture.

The blame of misguided perception cannot be placed entirely on Disney, though, as each viewer of Tseng's work has a role in its connotation. There is something to be said for the immediate effect of the photograph's face value, the directness, simplicity, and seemingly obviousness. Some may call the work, along with Tseng's entire series, kitschy, cheesy, or tacky. True, what could be more American than Mickey Mouse and more Chinese than a Mao uniform? There is certainly a level of camp in the "East Meets West" series as Dan Bacalzo writes in "Portraits of the Self and Other" that Tseng's photographs are "highly stylized and charged with an ironic sense of humor."³²

This follows Susan Sontag's 1966 description that "[t]he essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration."³³ Based on male homosexuals' popular use of camp, as well-known in drag, Bacalzo also points to its deeper implications: as "a strategy that allows those who fall outside of 'dominant culture' to assert and affirm their very existence."³⁴ Tseng, for example, utilizes an exaggerated cultural stereotype in his work to demand attention. Thus, perhaps Tseng's use of camp can be attributed to his effort to make a statement as a gay, Asian man; or to the popular postmodern style of his time, also apparent in the work of Andy Warhol, one of his contemporaries; or maybe it is simply a result of the fun, lighthearted person Tseng's friends and family knew him to be. The artist's cousin, Jenny Yee, describes him as "Just fun loving...Any time he could have fun he would go for it...He's the type that, you know, do it today and forget about it tomorrow."³⁵

Therefore, it could even be suggested that Tseng had no intention of making a political statement with his work. His sister, Muna Tseng, states, "He did not want to be identified as an Asian-American artist, he hated that."³⁶ Tseng's friend, Kristoffer Haynes, even suggests that Tseng "didn't want to have anything to do with [being Asian]."³⁷ In response, though, Bill T. Jones, choreographer who worked with Haring and Tseng, states, "However, his imagery was always the curious, blank Chinese, Tourist. I would say to Kwong that you don't fool me, I know, I can sense protest when I see it."³⁸ Perhaps, then, the tackiness of Tseng's work makes the point: the fact that all the artist needed to fool society of his identity was a cheap uniform is evidence and testament to people's quick, superficial ways of judging. In fact, according to Bacalzo:

Muna Tseng has since discovered that her brother's cherished Mao suit is not a Communist uniform at all; ironically it is a Nationalist army uniform from the 1930s. The fact that everyone, including Tseng Kwong Chi himself, mistook it for a symbol of Communist China demonstrates how easy it was to deceive viewers. All that mattered was the initial impression, even if it was a wrong one."³⁹

Because Tseng presented himself in a particular way that he deemed fit to misguiding the viewer, it could be said that his work is more a reflection of society than the artist himself. Bacalzo says that Tseng's self portraits present "a persona created by Tseng as an art object that resonates with the representational history of Asian Americans. This persona is specifically an 'Other,' a product of the colonial perception of non-Western peoples as strange and different from their perceptions of themselves."⁴⁰ The very simplicity of the actual photographs compared with the complex discussions that have been based on them could be evidence to the role of the viewer in constructing meaning. Bacalzo writes, "The ways in which one person views another is dependent upon the ways in which society has conditioned such a viewing. Stereotypes act as a cultural shorthand to inform our ways of seeing."⁴¹ My analysis in itself serves as evidence: I, a white, American university student, have extricated a deeper story from Tseng's work based on what I have been taught to see and observe so far in my life. Therefore, it could even be argued that the validity of this discussion is unimportant; it is the very fact that analytical discussion is taking place that is the point.

Nonetheless, I would still argue that Tseng's *Disneyland, California* is infused with a political message relating to his experience—and that of many others—as an Asian American. Tseng said that his images define him as an ambiguous ambassador, an "inquisitive traveler and 'a witness of my time.'"⁴² He may, consciously or not, exploit the idea of the tourist as a stranger to suggest his own alienation in a world where he, growing up Asian, Canadian, French, American, had no one particular home. Even more so, though, the tourist site perpetuates the artificiality of the work, as Bacalzo states that tourist sites "are authentic in the same way that Tseng is authentic—no one notices that it's an act, or it's the act they came to see. Authenticity is not as important, and

perhaps not even desirable or obtainable.”⁴³ Bacalzo continues that Tseng’s “artistic persona relied not on any sense of “authenticity,” but on others’ projections onto his image.”⁴⁴ Therefore, in provoking extensive discussion through simplistic means, Tseng pulls the viewer into his work as a contributor, who, by pointing fingers, ends up pointing at herself too.

- 1 Jean Claire Van Ryzin, “Sibling Reverie: An Homage to Kwong Chi,” *Austin American Statesman*, January 3, 2002, ProQuest, <http://proquest.umi.com.libproxy.newschool.edu/pqdweb?index=2&did=97952168&SrchMode=2&sid=1&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1273358141&clientId=16774>.
- 2 Eleanor Rose Ty and Donald C. Goellnicht, *Asian North American Identities: Beyond the Hyphen* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 175.
- 3 Grady T. Turner, “The accidental ambassador – photography, Tseng Kwong Chi, traveling exhibition,” *Art in America*, March 7, 1997.
- 4 Ty and Goellnicht, *Asian North American Identities*, 175.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid., 174.
- 7 Lucy Lippard, “Surprise Packages,” *On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art and Place* (NY: New York Press, 1999), 35.
- 8 Ty and Goellnicht, *Asian North American Identities*, 176.
- 10 Muna Tseng and Ping Chong, “SlutForArt,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 22, no. 1 (January 2000): 120, Project MUSE, http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.newschool.edu/journals/performing_arts_journal/v022/22.1tseng.html.
- 11 Turner, “The accidental ambassador.”
- 12 Ty and Goellnicht, *Asian North American Identities*, 176.
- 13 Ibid., 177.
- 14 Turner, “The accidental ambassador.
- 15 Ty and Goellnicht, *Asian North American Identities*, 177.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid., 178.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid., 181.
- 20 The Vera List Center for Art and Politics, *Agency: A Thematic and Partial Tour of The New School Art Collection* (New York: New School University, 2007).
- 21 Henry A. Giroux, *Disturbing pleasures: learning popular culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 27.
- 22 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 323.
- 23 Giroux, *Disturbing Pleasures*, 28.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid., 31.
- 27 Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Popular Culture?” in Dent, *Black Popular Culture*, 24, quoted in Henry A. Giroux, *Disturbing pleasures: learning popular culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 31.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Henry A. Giroux, *Disturbing Pleasures*, 31.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Dan Bacalzo, “Portraits of the Self and Other: SlutForArt and the Photographs of Tseng Kwong Chi,” *Theater Journal* 53, no. 1 (March 2001): 87-88, Project MUSE, http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.newschool.edu/journals/theatre_journal/v053/53.1bacalzo.html.

- 33 Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1966), 275, quoted in Dan Bacalzo, "Portraits of the Self and Other: SlutForArt and the Photographs of Tseng Kwong Chi," *Theater Journal* 53, no. 1 (March 2001): 87, Project MUSE, http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.newschool.edu/journals/theatre_journal/v053/53.1bacalzo.html.
- 34 Bacalzo, "Portraits of the Self and Other," 88.
- 35 Jenny Yi quoted in Muna Tseng and Ping Chong, "SlutForArt," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 22, no. 1 (2000): 114, Project MUSE http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.newschool.edu/journals/performing_arts_journal/v022/22.1tseng.pdf.
- 36 Tseng and Chong, "SlutForArt," 120.
- 37 Krisoffer Haynes quoted in Muna Tseng and Ping Chong, "SlutForArt," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 22, no. 1 (2000): 119, Project MUSE http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.newschool.edu/journals/performing_arts_journal/v022/22.1tseng.pdf.
- 38 Bill T. Jones quoted in Muna Tseng and Ping Chong, "SlutForArt," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 22, no. 1 (2000): 120, Project MUSE http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.newschool.edu/journals/performing_arts_journal/v022/22.1tseng.pdf.
- 39 C. Carr, "Just Visiting This Planet," *The Village Voice*, March 9, 1999, 67, in Dan Bacalzo, "Portraits of the Self and Other: SlutForArt and the Photographs of Tseng Kwong Chi," *Theater Journal* 53, no. 1 (March 2001): 82, Project MUSE, http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.newschool.edu/journals/theatre_journal/v053/53.1bacalzo.html.
- 40 Bacalzo, "Portraits of the Self and Other," 74.
- 41 Ibid., 80.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid., 85.
- 44 Ibid., 87.

Foreclosure

By Dorothy Krajewski

Inspired by Elaine Reichek, Gauguin at the Harmonium, 1986

\$200 SECOND PRIZE CREATIVE RESPONSE

Father, Daughter, Mother and brothers. They chose their tribe. Parties, booze, the selected women and their sticky cups, the checkered floor. The smoke clouds swirled, drifted up the vents and filled the pipes from the laundry room. From their rusty lungs, young men screamed a roll call. Everyone pissed in the utility sink, a rite of passage. Colors blurred.

Morning. It meant nothing. Layers of Polaroids, business cards, the cat's toy, and the friend who passed from AIDS: memories in Father's hands. Mementos were torn from their staples and tape. Upstairs, her pillows smelled of smoke. The daughter fantasized something handsome with a sense of humor. The modern knight was armored with his own computer company and health insurance. She was in love.

Mother said novenas in bed. The news called for miracles to redeem tenants in the South. But Mother lived in a suburb of America's metropolis, a holy land. Business was invented. Legible contracts stayed with banks. The carbon copies in Father's hands were thin. The same scribble had been faked on his children's report cards. Father repeated the country's covenant: If one worked hard, one was saved.

Three Saint Patricks, two Virgins, an ear, an eye, a nose, flowers; poster from Casablanca, Captain Planet, the family portrait; dead relatives. Father's business: framing, art restoration and supplies. Customers praised him for puzzles and scrapbooks. Father used to paint.

Credit. Ignoring the register's thirst for gold, the store clerk slammed the drawer, his thumb sore from inventory. Father took his lunch back to his counter where Mother's computer tallied losses. The news predicted: a day without a sale. Father purchased a card before closing.

The daughter's wedding was the family's first. White beads, lace, something blue, everything perfect. She couldn't help being charged for extra fabric. Her husband loved her. They shared an innocently perfect kiss. The photo was snapped.

Father lost the store, and Mother lost her job. Daughter moved West for husband and industry. The notice came: *Your cooperation by Thanksgiving would be appreciated.* A check would be written out to Father if he did the service of cleaning the bank's newly acquired property. (It was his mess.)

The brothers recovered. A few days before the vans came, the brothers turned to sea lions. Forgetting their bodies, their bones, they were creatures inhuman.

Father stood by. This was long coming. Logical in retrospect, even the notice was predicted. This was simply foreclosure. A swipe of a card, a ripped paper, a used pen.

The tribe dispersed. The checkered floor stopped – brilliant, dusty, vacant. Nobody was taking pictures anymore. No laughing. The crying stopped too after Father mopped the bank's basement.

The brothers broke in. Their voices bounded through the hallways fetching chewed and torn memories from each empty room. Arguments, agreements, sneaking drunken girlfriends through the kitchen, laughter. Always there had been laughter. And its lack...

For four blocks, neighbors concentrated through their blinds. A cloudy and still day, it was impossible not to listen, but how to comment? It couldn't be stopped. This is progress.

A stretched shirt collar, a bruised cheek, the brothers recounted trespasses. Father never

outlined codes of ethics, but brothers just know. It's unspoken. When their boiling blood thrashes within their bodies, the brothers emerge from their strollers and blocks to relieve each other's pain by leaching it out of the flesh.

The neighbors heard. They remembered coming over. They remembered the girls, the sticky cups, the swirls of smoke, and nailing their photos to the wall.

For a lost home, there is no Hallmark card, no condolences, no prayers.