

Now and When, San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery, 2010

Essay by Jaime Cortez

Ken Lo left his artistic DNA all over these works. Not *that* way, but by using art to plumb the questions that tantalize him and repeatedly motivate his art. Lo is forever asking how one's intimate life is going. He is omnivorous on the subject; equally happy to discuss the most exalted spiritual themes of a relationship, or the raunchiest particulars of more reckless couplings. Lo has deft and productive hands that can paint, sculpt, mold, gild, and carve with equal skill, though in this show he is especially compelled by art objects that are not made from scratch, but commercially produced or cobbled together from found objects.

The humming base note underlying many Ken Lo pieces is one of unrequited yearning and melancholy. In "Rice Balla Chronicles," Lo created an elaborate multimedia world of yearning. In this case, the yearning was for camaraderie with basketball legend Kobe Bryant. Using photoshop, shadow puppet animations, Chinese opera, and mock music videos, Lo created a richly articulated fantasy world in which his avatar Yellow Fever, the scrappiest Chinese basketball prodigy in history, reached basketball court communion with Bryant before becoming yet another half-forgotten sports casualty. As an MFA student, he trapped a fly under a plastic glass. Once it had died, he meticulously gilded it. Entitled "Unlucky in Love," the piece transfigured the pesky, germy nuisance into

a golden metaphor of failed connection and airless isolation. It is entirely fitting then, that in his latest body of work, Lo is again plumbing the theme of love, yearning, and (dis)connection.

In “Someone for Someone Forever and Ever,” Ken offers memorials. When I ponder memorials, my mind goes first to public memorials. Civic, corporate, and organizational memorials strive to build consensus around someone’s idea of what is worthy of collective remembrance. Making public memorials stately and epic enhances their consensus-building power. Think of the marbled majesty of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C.’s National Mall. Better yet, think of Lenin’s Tomb in Moscow’s Red Square. Since 1924, the Russians have kept Lenin’s pickled corpse in a stately tomb where it is kept from decomposing through a proprietary chemical process.

Some memorials are based not on structures and objects, but on events. Every July, hundreds of men head for Gettysburg, Pennsylvania to perform as soldiers in massive reenactments of Civil War battles. Proud and anything but ironic, the re-enactors gear up with period costumes, arms, and accessories. The soldiers shoot their thundering blanks. Their smoke and cries fill the air. They march and temporarily die in their brave hundreds. Union and Confederate confederates alike die in their grays and blues, but in the end, the true banner they fight under is that of remembrance.

Though lacking the grand scale of national memorials, more personal and localized forms of commemoration also compel and fascinate. Bronzing the shoes a baby first walked in. Naming a stretch of highway after a dead CHP officer. Maintaining altars for dead ancestors in Asian and Latin American homes. Buying memorial t-shirts when yet another young man is shot down in urban violence. Tattooing the word “mom” across one’s heart.

In “Someone For Someone For Ever And Ever” Ken Lo deflates the epic, stately, or more grave ambitions behind most public and personal memorials. He interviewed artists and curators who had shown their work in the past 40 years at the San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery. He asked them to share remembrances of love. Their stories could be about love lost, love fulfilled, love obscured, or love revealed. He then created a suite of commemorative objects related to each of the stories. Lo honed in on intimate, fleeting turning points in the narratives. These are the kind of moments that are usually unknown to anyone but the couple in question and their closest confidantes. Using commercially-available techniques like bronzing or custom surfboard painting, he has made their intimacies into objects for public delectation in the civic gallery of the City of San Francisco.

The resulting objects and stories alternate between being schmaltzy, comically idiosyncratic, poignant, and almost uncomfortably intimate. They are as sentimental as a locket for a dead person, or as Dadaistic as a fountain of

artificial insemination syringes. I like thinking of Lo's bronzed towel as a kind of legend or key for the entire grouping of objects. A bronzed towel? Such a perverse thing. A towel is a squarely mundane and utilitarian thing, but once bronzed, it is also surprising and elevated. Lo's towel, like all good memorials, is richly storied. Lo explains it thusly:

*"I had sex with a woman and we left a beach-ball sized wet spot on the bed, and I must have made a fleeting face of disappointment when I realized it was on my side of the bed, and I'd be sleeping on it, because my partner immediately said "oh" and without thinking, maybe instinctually, grabbed a bath towel from the side of the bed, and chivalrously laid it over the wet spot. For whatever reason, I was moved by this. I think it was the immediacy of the action, which revealed what must be an uncalculating and considerate soul. I joked we should bronze the towel to commemorate the moment, which is of course what I did. and that's how this project started."*

This towel is not for holding, but for beholding. Without thirsty, wraparound cotton softness, it is a familiar but distant cousin to the original towel – a non-functional doppelganger. The metal coating holds every bit of textured detail from the encased towel, but also bespeaks of "specialness" and hints at permanence. This is of course, what memorials aim to do. They're supposed to extend the life of a memory, allowing us to hold onto it a bit longer, or in

perpetuity. The copper also makes the towel an object of density. Dense with the weight of metal, yes, but dense also with emotion and remembrance transferred to the towel in the purposeful act of bronzing.

Though modest in scale, the bronzed towel insists that something special happened as surely as the Lincoln Memorial does. It was a wet spot on a bed, but dammit, it was an important wet spot. That spot shifted the course of a relationship. It matters and it merits commemoration, and if you don't believe it, here you have the weighty proof, metallized and then chemically patinated, as if foreseeing the weathering of time and corroding of memory unfolding before it.

Fin.