

Southern Exposure Gallery, San Francisco, January 2011

Essay by Michael Hall

What is a life worth living? We all reach a place where we start to question and reflect on the actions in our life. Where have we been, where do we see ourselves going – these questions are reflected on and then lost to the momentum of the daily grind. Not everyone will make their mark in the annals of history. Not everyone's actions will be memorialized, bronzed, marbled or collected for posterity. But that does not detract from someone's legacy. The works in Ken Lo's exhibition, "every stone tethered to sleep / every presence wedded to stone", are memorials, but not on the grand scale of the Lincoln Memorial or some civic bronze erected to a forgotten city founder. These are humble, personable monuments to a life lived, the choices taken, the accomplishments and failures – in essence, the actions and decisions that make up a life.

The first impulse is to look at one's achievements – work, our relationships, family and friends. Most artists would point to their artwork when asked about their legacy. So it makes perfect sense for Lo to refer to his curriculum vitae as his grand memorial. If this is the end of something for Ken Lo, and he is looking back, it is fitting that the summary of his artistic endeavors is what is chiseled into the face of his tombstone. There's a brutal, gallow's humor in this gesture. He has in a sense freed himself of the weight of accomplishment by "burying" it and in this same stroke has literally set in stone.

"Failures" such as romantic rejections are just as important to one's self as the accomplishments and Ken Lo has had his fair share of the former. In fact it is usually the failures that are the most formative. It's commendable that Lo can compile a substantial list of rejections from memory – far more exceptional to

post it publicly, and in a medium of such permanence. For some people these moments are stepping stones or a breaking point. Despite the schadenfreude one might experience in reading such a list, these are crucial moments. They are often embarrassing instances we tuck away and tend reveal unexpectedly in future actions – trails of an emotional marker.

With his work, “At Home in the World”, Lo had 365 small polished stones engraved with his name, the date and the inscription “Was Here” to leave once a day in a location that he deemed significant. He literally leaves a physical reminder of his presence in a place, at a specific, yet fleeting moment in time. Ken has referred to the daily stones as physical markers in one’s life, a surrogate for the body, “like a bread-crumbs trail of where a person has been. I’m thinking of them as memorials to moments that have “passed” – no matter how mundane. It’s a bid for a silly kind of immortality. But that’s what art objects are too.”

I wonder how it would feel to come across one of these stones, left beside a tree, on a bench or the back of a toilet (all locations the artist has left the stones). It would be baffling at first. It would certainly seem out of place and if I didn’t know Ken Lo I would ask myself, “Who”? It is in part a lonely gesture – a sad kind of territorial pissing – a call for remembrance from an unknown human being. There may be a giddy surprise followed by a survey of the place you now stand with this stone in hand, realizing the overlapping paths you have just shared.

Ken is an artist who shares himself generously. He is as quick to create a dialog as he is to recommend a good scotch. In a new work, Lo memorializes in stone Facebook posts between himself and friends to attest to the meaningful and ridiculous things we say to one another in the detached conversation tools of our age. It may at first seem like a ridiculous kind of communication to make so permanent but if you are like so many today the majority of our correspondence is this flippant, digital exchange. These may seem so transient and immaterial

due to their lack of physicality but Ken resolves this by locking the intangible, fleeting moments in the permanence of the materials they are etched in.

The work is in a way is nostalgic. Lo recognizes that the significance of these moments comes only after they have passed. In this work he is celebrating his relationships, and saying, "I'm going to miss this when it's gone. Let's memorialize it now, and keep it as a souvenir for much, much later." After all, isn't it often the small, daily and minute moments we so fervently remember?