Look, and You'll Miss It

Max Blue

One doesn't so much look at Michael Zheng's work as question it. The site -specific pieces in his exhibition "A Tree is a Tree" at the David Ireland House function like a series of Zen kōans, unanswerable riddles in the guise of deceptively simple phrases, intended to coax Buddhist disciples out of their entrenched modes of perception. Zheng's spare and poetic installations similarly act as catalysts for philosophical queries at the intersection of art theory and spirituality, emphasizing the dynamic nature of perceived experience. The title of the show is lifted from a Buddhist proverb, joining a philosophy of perception to a spiritual practice of acceptance.

"Before one knows Buddhism, a tree is a tree.

When one learns about Buddhism, a tree is no longer a tree.

After one really gets Buddhism, a tree is a tree."

This circle of reasoning isn't reflected, so much in the work itself as in the viewer's experience of the work. Zheng plants the seed, but the exhibition blossoms in the mind.

Reflections are everywhere in the show. This theme presents itself in the form of diptychs between Zheng's work and Ireland's, dualities that are present within each of the artworks themselves, and in the way in which the pieces reflect the viewer's consciousness. I mean to call attention both meanings of the word "reflection," to mirror and to contemplate, a dualism that is itself a reaction to the way Zheng plays fast and loose with interpretation.

One of the first pieces viewers encounter upon entering the house is "Mirror Mirror on the Wall." It consists of a grid of 84 photographic prints, themselves behaving almost like mirrors. Each cell of the grid is a smaller piece of a single, long exposure photograph. It features a man walking in front of the wall opposite the one on which the grid has been installed. The effect is immediate disorientation

for anyone entering, announcing the experience of Zheng's work as a concession of our preconceptions and a process of reevaluation.

No piece in the show illustrates the theme of (meta) physical reflection better than "A Percussive Big Bang," not necessarily because it offers the most literal interpretation. Here, Zheng has placed two circular mirrors facing each other in opposite corners of the stairwell, presumably reflecting an infinite tunnel into each other. It seems only natural that the piece that features the most literal reflection in the show is also the only one we can't fully see. However, we know – or presume – that it's there. The title prompts us to wonder if this is true of all of the greater mysteries of the universe, thus demanding that we confront our literal blind faith.

In "The Blind," Zheng has installed a window on the wall beside Ireland's own "Untitled (The View from This Window)", c. 1979. Ireland removed the glass of the window, replacing it with copper plates. A cassette deck on the floor plays a tape of Ireland's verbal description of what a viewer might see through the blocked window. Ireland's piece invites us to imagine what's on the other side of the copper plate. Zheng's piece forces us to confront why we imagine what we do. At first glance, "The Blind" appears to open the space by closing it off, the physical presence of the blind creating the implication of a window beneath it.

But what is the blindness Zheng is pointing to? For me, it isn't whether a window may or may not be underneath the blind. Rather, it is my own assumption that it might be a window as opposed to anything else. Why am I so constrained by my learned associations? Why do I enact them on the world so willfully? Can art like Zheng's free me from these strident shackles of learned perception?

In "As Is," we're confronted with the exhibition's most direct turn inward. One entire room has been converted into a camera obscura, a pinhole lens projecting the outside street scene upside down and backwards onto the walls. The piece also extends Zheng's interaction with Ireland's "Untitled" through the addition of a live feed of the outside street noise. There's something about the passivity with which the viewer engages this piece that feels like a crash course in meditation. It gives the sense that reality is out there somewhere, but only accessible inside our heads. It isn't incidental that the technicality of the camera obscura mimics that of the human eyeball. The image reflected into the space is warped by the contours of the room, analogous to the way our preconceptions deliver information to our brains. It's less about what's there and more about what we make of it. Zheng facilitates the experience, but the work itself is created in and through our individual engagement.

Zheng himself is radically absent from the work, because it exists in relation to Ireland's overbearing presence. His

surrender of ego might be seen as a Zen gesture, but it also serves to illustrate the way in which experience itself can function as art. Is the real creator Zheng? Ireland? The viewer?

Zheng's perceptual concerns reach their apex with "The Wall," in which a photograph of a crack in the walls has been printed at scale and pasted atop the area where the photograph was taken. The print is red where the wall itself is ochre. The crack in the picture aligns perfectly with the crack in the wall, which extends beyond the print in both directions. Here, more than in any other piece in the show, I am forced to wonder what I'm really looking at. A square of colored transparency? A photograph of a different crack that happens to line up with this one? Or, as in "The Blind," is Zheng creating a window by hiding something from view? The answer is, ultimately, unknowable.

Throughout "A Tree is a Tree," Zheng presents us with many unfamiliar ways of seeing. We're left wondering how many of these are illusory? I wonder if the expansive interpretations I've offered in this essay aren't missing the point. That's the nature of the kōan. If you think you understand, you don't. After all, Zheng's is a brand of conceptual art less concerned with a concept than with a raw experience. Perhaps the urge to reinterpret the world based on fresh perspectives these artworks offer only forecloses their greatest implications. By refuting this impulse and sitting in a state of generative disorientation, we might consider many answers to Zheng's riddles, each piece becoming a window through which we glimpse infinity.

Max Blue, 2022

Max Blue writes about the visual arts and modern culture. His criticism and reporting have appeared in Hyperallergic and the San Francisco Examiner, among others. His short fiction has appeared in Mount Hope Magazine and Your Impossible Voice. He lives in San Francisco.