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'Impermanence' full of life -- and death

BY MARGARET HAWKINS

Galleries

Fittingly titled "Impermanence" LEE Mingwei's interactive installation at the Chicago Cultural Center confronts us with the transitory nature of life and human connection. Each of his four highly conceptual pieces considers the poignancy of passing time, encouraging us to think about -- and, in the participatory work, experience -- the edge between life and death, trust and fear, intimacy and absence.

The simplest expression of this idea -- and the only non-participatory work in the show -- is "100 Days With Lily," an oddly moving photographic work that documents the artist's relationship with a flower he planted as a bulb and then nurtured through its growth, blossoming, wilting and death. If most of us consider a houseplant an almost inanimate object, Mingwei's attention to its life cycle makes it seem more like a pet or a friend and inevitably its death is sad. But it is the obsessiveness of Mingwei's documentation that makes this work psychologically interesting. The five photographs tell of his ongoing daily activities with the plant, which he carried with him everywhere for 100 days, even after it died on day 79. The work is a little reminiscent of the weird short story by Guy de Maupassant about the man who falls in love with a coil of woman's hair he finds in a secret drawer in an antique desk. He takes the hair everywhere, even buying it its own seat at the opera. Unlike De Maupassant, though, Mingwei does not consider the relationship of attachment to madness; his subject is devotion, death and letting go.

"Gernika in Sand" approaches impermanence from a different point of view. In this work, Mingwei has reproduced Picasso's classic painting about war in sand, a most impermanent medium, on the galley floor several times the size of the original. The work is interactive; viewers were invited to watch the artist make the sand painting and, at intervals, to walk on it, destroying it even as he created it. Part of our enjoyment of the work is the knowledge that at the end of the show it will disappear and viewers further enjoy participating in a trusting agreement with the artist throughout its exhibition: We choose to preserve it although we easily could destroy it.

Sand painting is a traditional form; Buddhist artists spend many hours creating sand mandalas that will disappear in far less time than they took to make. Here Mingwei's intentions and Eastern origins -- he was born in Taiwan -- seem especially clear. Artistic practice and religious practice are one, and in a changeable world attention to the present is all.

Thoughts of death are implicit in much of Mingwei's work but it is the explicit subject of "The Letter Writing Project?226-130?" which consists of three booths equipped with stationery where viewers are invited to write letters to absent or deceased loved ones. Writers may then address and seal these letters, to be posted by the Cultural Center, or leave them open to be read by others and posted through a kind of psychic mail on little shelves Mingwei provides.

The templelike environment here is conducive to confession and the number of letters posted -- some sealed, some not -- suggest that a lot of viewers have taken this opportunity to communicate with their dead and departed. It's such a good idea and so beautifully executed that one almost wants it to be institutionalized. Every post office and funeral home should have one.

Mingwei is probably best known for his most outrageous work, "The Sleeping Project?226-130?" a version of which is on view here. First introduced at the Venice Biennale in 2003, the installation features a grouping of platform beds and nightstands and an invitation to viewers to enter a lottery, which, if won, offers a night alone with the artist in the gallery. Volunteers are asked to bring personal items for the night that they then leave behind on view.

This work flirts with sexual humor, punning on the meaning of the phrase "sleeping with?226-130?" the artist. Also, though, it makes us think about the riskiness as well as the opportunity for self-knowledge inherent in any intense encounter with a stranger. Even entering the lottery feels risky and that, of course, is Mingwei's point. Life is a lottery, his work suggests, and the only certain thing is change.

Interested parties may enter "The Sleeping Project" lottery at the Cultural Center; available nights are June 21-24.

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