

IS MAH JONG THE BEST ART IN L.A.'S CHINATOWN?

I knew the manager of the Mah Jong Parlor wouldn't call. Installation art never calls. At least not on the phone. That's one of the things I like about it. The distance it maintains while drawing you into its mystery, the closer you get the further it recedes, leaving you to imagine the myriad possibilities for meaning. It may haunt the viewer, but it never calls.

The piece I'm referring to, what I've titled Mah Jong Parlor, is located on Los Angeles' Chung King Road, a few doors in either direction from the 4-F Gallery and The Happy Lion. I've made multiple trips to Chung King Road in search of stimulating, surprising contemporary art. Often I've been disappointed, either by the work displayed—anemic, undeveloped and/or derivative, or by the closed signs on gallery doors. Their hours, like the art, can seem arbitrary and subjective.

But each trip, my curiosity has been excited by an invariably open, yet forbidding, storefront. Framed by a double door open to the street, the room's interior is bathed in an eerie viridian and fluorescent glow, its fore-grounded fish tank, game playing Chinese men, bouncing about children and odd collection of adults caught in the act of eating, always, with chopsticks from bowls make for a consistently strange and beautiful sight.

On my most recent trip, my curiosity sufficiently excited, I took my first bold step beyond the parlour's threshold toward the tables where men sat noisily slapping down and shuffling around the game's tiles. I was greeted by startled looks and Chinese words, then a woman who'd been tending a moon faced infant at a back table, rushed forward, smiling, as if to block my further intrusion. She watched my eyes absorbing details as I introduced myself and said I'd like to ask a few

questions about the place. She was too diplomatic to shoo me out with a broom. Instead, she said I'd have to talk to the manager. He wasn't there. I left my card for him to call. I knew he wouldn't. My ardor for the place as an installation piece only grew.

In Chinatown, as in Los Angeles, there are certain things that are better left unknown, if one is to have piece of mind, even false piece of mind, living here. I have learned in passing all I care to know. I take comfort in the fleeting impression bathed in green light, I don't want details, I'm tired of text.

In a world of obscene openness, when I have to surrender my name to strangers every time I want an over-priced cup of coffee and my computer is invaded daily by pornographic spam, not knowing is interesting. Not knowing is surprising. Not knowing is energetic and unexpected. In taking a step through the parlor's doorway, I feel like the obscenity, the spam, invading their world. My privileged gaze is thrown into question and I feel embarrassed for having looked.

Chung King Road is the opposite of L.A., an anti-suburban street devoted to pedestrians, no cars allowed, with red paper lanterns crossing overhead instead of power lines. People live above the storefronts, and tucked between the recently arrived galleries is a remaining underlayer of the previous ethnic enclave. On the day of my recent visit all the galleries, save for 4-F, were closed, while a benevolent society, a sewing factory and a few art and jewelry stores devoted to Chinese goods joined the Mah Jong Parlor in giving the street the feel of its previous life. The road is a place for foot and face time, for collapsing the distances between,

offering an appealing sense of intimacy with full rooms and lively banter. The parlor is a reminder of how rarely such conditions exist in community starved L.A. Yet on another level the scene is troubling, the people are poorly dressed, the lighting is unflattering, the food looks suspect served in aluminum trays, the language is foreign and the men are too young to be playing games in the middle of the afternoon. They should be in cars, like everyone else, and the children should be in school.

I could call the local business or cultural associations, or a Chinese friend to investigate the parlor further, but that would be like checking a lumber yard to find out more about Charles Ray's Plank Piece. I have to figure this out for myself. I take notes, I memorize details of my brief foray into this open mystery, such as the thin, youngish man in the gray sweater vest and the white shirt with a smoldering cigarette in a plastic ashtray by his side. The ash was several inches long. A man of few puffs. A young woman set down a steaming bowl of beef and

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green peppers next to the smoldering ashtray. It was just after 2 o'clock on a Thursday afternoon. Was this a waiter satisfying his need for food and games on his way to a night shift? Was I a cop looking for illegal gambling?

Everything seemed slightly murky, like the fish water.

As art, The Mah Jong Parlor is site specific, relies on its context within the surrounding art galleries for its meaning. It makes me think of the foreign nature of contemporary art, how I often feel like an outsider looking in on a club, and how I don't always find something to respond to, but when I do, it makes the effort seem worthwhile, like I've won a game round and get to shout "mah jong," as the parlor's winners do. I think of the movie "Chinatown," and Jack Nicholson, the befuddled yet tenacious detective navigating a squirrely world with his clipped nose.

If I don't want to get mine clipped a second time I will keep to the street side of the Mah Jong Parlor's fish tank. I will admire from a polite distance. I will be a woman of few puffs.