Kenneth Tam Excavates the History of Chinese Labor in the American West

The artist's works resonate in West Texas, where the story of dehumanized and exploited migrant laborers is tangible and ever-present.
MARFA, Tex. — Artist Kenneth Tam’s *Tender is the hand which holds the stone of memory* touches on an important and overlooked event in United States history — the exploitation of tens of thousands of Chinese immigrant laborers during the construction of the Central Pacific section of the Transcontinental Railroad in the late 1800s — against a contemporary exploration of masculinity using the cowboy image as a foil. Through a two-channel video titled “Silent Spikes” (2021) and an accompanying set of sculptural pieces, Tam processes and reshapes past and current events, emotions, and traumas using movement, dialogue, and reenactment.

The work feels physical, visceral, personal, tender. The sculptural elements — precious relics and fossilized carcasses laden with stone and cast-off debris — seem unearthed from an archeological dig. A leather saddle, sawed into pieces, serves as the armature for works mounted on walls the color of raw meat, lending the impression of a carved-up body.
The video vacillates between past and present. Chinese workers who contributed labor and expertise to constructing rail lines through rough, mountainous terrain prepare for a strike. The men are given a voice through narration, their imagined thoughts (in Cantonese with subtitles) backed by the evocative sounds of stringed instruments, conjuring up both traditional Chinese music and soundtracks of mid-20th-century western movies. A dark, rocky tunnel with a distant opening appears. Though the image of a passageway through the bowels of the earth recurs, the light at the end never seems to come any closer.

On the adjacent screen, a lone individual, then a group, all self-identified Asian American men, dressed like cartoon cowboys on an ethereally-lit stage perform the exaggerated, almost erotic, motions of horseback riding. Though there is no dust, grassland, or horse, there is sensitivity, intimacy, and care in the men’s movements and dialog, elements not typically included in the made-for-TV version of the cowboy myth. Here the archetype of the North American cowboy as a “rugged individual” is recast and reemerges in a different light.
Installation view, Kenneth Tam, *Tender is the hand which holds the stone of memory*, Ballroom Marfa, October 26 – May 7, 2023. Floor pieces, front to back: “He does not know the custom” (2022) and “Why did you strike me” (2022); wall pieces, left to right: “Dear Mother” (2022), “The scent of tea” (2022), and “At night we talk of home” (2022) (photo Alyce Santoro/Hyperallergic)
Perhaps installed out here in Marfa, in the midst of ranchland and close to the US/Mexico border, Tam’s work will have a different resonance than it does with audiences in more urban settings. Rangeland, cattle, and their stewards exist a stone’s throw from the gallery walls. Those who live here have a visceral understanding of the rugged individual as a dangerous fiction — nothing and no one survives alone in the desert. This is a place where cowboys are very real and the story of migrants dehumanized, dismissed, and exploited for their labor is tangible and ever-present.

Tam takes the character of the stoic cowboy figure and recuperates it by infusing it with emotion and sensuality. A part of the mythology that goes unspoken in the work on view is the cowboy as a heroic conqueror and colonizer during the expansion of the territories of the United States. In this sense, Tam’s reenactments are complicated; empathy with the victims of oppression in the name of industrialization and “progress” can and does exist alongside fascination with the “wild west” spirit that enabled (and enables) such atrocities to occur. If there is a light at the tunnel, perhaps it is in the unearthing of hidden histories of the many who are sacrificed for the wealth of the few, and in the making of new, more nuanced, sensitive, and humane myths.
Kenneth Tam, "At night we talk of home" (2022), leather saddle, aqua-resin, pepper spray, broken ceramic, paint, steel, 12 x 14 x 10 inches (photo Alyce Santoro/Hyperallergic)
Kenneth Tam, “The scent of tea” (2022), leather saddle, aqua-resin, cologne bottle, jade, hand of doll, paint, steel, 16w x 23h x 14d inches (photo Alyce Santoro/Hyperallergic)
Kenneth Tam, “Silent Spikes (still) (2021), two-channel HD video, sound, 20:29 minutes (photo Jason Mandella, courtesy the artist and Commonwealth and Council)
Tender is the hand which holds the stone of memory continues at Ballroom Marfa (108 E. San Antonio St., Marfa, Texas 79843) through May 7, 2023. The exhibition was organized by Daisy Nam with assistance from Alexann Susholtz.