

ART PAPERS

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FOLLOW SUIT

Centre A: Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Art, Vancouver, Canada

In the opening scene of *Day of the Locust* (1939), Nathanael West describes a Los Angeles neighborhood inhabited by movie extras and retired circus performers, where homes built hastily and cheaply with “plaster, lath and paper” are embellished to reflect their inhabitants’ various aspirations. West’s description of “Mexican ranch houses,” “Samoan huts,” “Egyptian and Japanese temples,” and “Swiss chalets” distills an aesthetic of surface that reduces cultural specificities to consumer-ready façades.

Follow Suit [February 13–April 12, 2014], curated by Alice Ming Wai Jim, explores the latest imagining of this California dream, in which the gated community of the 2000s—an archetype made ubiquitous by such television programming as *The O.C.* and *Real Housewives*—is relocated to the outskirts of Beijing. On view are works by Canada-based filmmaker Henry Tsang and photographer Kotama Bouabane that consider the peculiar community of Ju Jun (“Orange County”). Conceived by Chinese developers in 1999, that project employed a Southern California architect who based multiple structures in Orange County on his own studies of Italian domestic style. At a glance, Ju Jun might be dismissed as yet another example of the Chinese “copy culture” that is at turns derided and feared by Western media. Yet Tsang and Bouabane expose the complex role of imitation in the process of identity-making, highlighting new possibilities for collaboration within a truly global culture.

Tsang began his work on Ju Jun by traveling to the suburban Beijing development, where he filmed himself walking on the sidewalk in front of selected houses. Then he found identical structures in the California prototype, where he repeated the gesture. The resulting installation consists of four projections running on a four-minute loop in which Tsang walks seamlessly from one frame to the next, creating an uninterrupted stroll through seemingly identical neighborhoods. A viewer who scrutinizes the landscaping, building materials, or environmental noise

in an effort to distinguish the “original” Orange County from its “copy” will do so in vain. In Tsang’s imagining, there is no discernible difference between the two.

Among the works on display by Bouabane are scenes from the Beijing World Park, where Chinese visitors (for the most part) can tour replicas of iconic landmarks including the pyramids of Egypt and the Eiffel Tower. These vignettes are interspersed with images shot in residential areas near Disneyland (Anaheim, CA), in which lawns and shrubbery are manicured to almost surreal or plastic effect. Bouabane became interested in the Chinese phenomenon of architectural copy—one form of *Shanzhai*, or imitation goods—after documenting North American trade shows and boating expos, for which fantasy spaces are constructed and displayed in large warehouses. These environments, like the ones created by Ju Jun and the Beijing World Park, reveal how lifestyle is staged and sold, and how image constructs identity and informs consumer behavior. Bouabane’s Anaheim/Beijing juxtaposition suggests that these processes are at once in constant motion and part of an exchange—not a one-way transaction between inventor and copyist, West and East.

Follow Suit thus posits that developments such as Ju Jun—and by extension China’s vast culture of pirated goods—are the result of vision and innovation, not the creative or industrial laziness and poor quality with which “knockoffs” are associated in the West. Producers of *Shanzhai* react incredibly quickly to evolving trends, demonstrating a flexibility impossible in more regulated or researched markets. To maintain Western manufacture as the place of vision—and Chinese manufacture as the place of copy—is to maintain a deeply out-of-date attitude with regard to where the cultural “center” and its margins really lie.

Such perceptions also distort the Chinese principle of “learned mastery” into something that is oppressive of individual creativity. Yet operated outside copyright

law, *Shanzhai*, as legal scholar William Hennessey has argued, is a phenomenon that has the capacity to parody and even undermine the hierarchies that dictate and institutionalize consumer culture from the top down. In other words, *Shanzhai* can be liberating, from the ground up.

Centre A Executive Director Tyler Russell suggests that new perspectives such as those represented in Tsang’s and Bouabane’s work on Ju Jun capture the truly global flow of images, thereby promoting new opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue and community. The result, he argues, whittles the “otherness” away from the “other.” This reduction relates to Russell’s broader goals for Centre A, which he explains has moved beyond its “self-conscious stage” to focus on overcoming a cultural power gap. Now that Asian artists work and are exhibited in a still-Western-centric art world, we can shift our focus away from identity, toward working together to realize projects through critical dialogue. In a global economy that the World Bank has projected will be dominated by China within a decade or so, expanding our sense of community—and our view of what constitutes relevant industry or culture—is certainly the way forward. Nathanael West’s California is, after all, already just one of countless comparable points on the map.

—Jenni Pace

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Henry Tsang, *Orange County*, 2003, 4-channel video projection [courtesy of the artist]; Kotama Bouabane, *Horse*, 2011, C-print, 24 x 36 inches [courtesy of the artist and Erin Stump Projects, Toronto, ON]