

LOS ANGELES  
REDCAT

# Ming Wong

MAKING CHINATOWN

Los Angeles, the land of movie magic, seems a logical stop for Berlin-based Singaporean artist Ming Wong, who explores the notion of racial and sexual identity through original video narratives and reinterpretations of classic films, such as Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000) and Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). For his first solo exhibition in Los Angeles, Wong presented a remake of Roman Polanski's 1974 neo-noir detective story *Chinatown*—a movie seething with scandal and corruption set in 1930s Los Angeles—shot on location at the REDCAT gallery, which also commissioned the project.

In Wong's *Making Chinatown* (2012), as with his other filmic works, the fakery and gimmicks of cinema are purposefully highlighted, as opposed to being artfully hidden from viewers. The sets for *Making Chinatown* are flat backdrops made from enlarged film stills pulled from the original Polanski movie, onto which Wong's film was projected as a seven-channel installation. Though the decision to create "fake" sets for *Making Chinatown* was born from the lack of a multimillion-dollar movie budget, the absence of pretense and illusion creates a curious atmosphere, which invites viewers to contemplate the meaning behind each reinterpreted word and movement.

The first segment of the installation sets up the irony and absurdity that is pervasive throughout the film—that is to say, *Making Chinatown* is a remake of a movie in which a Chinese enclave symbolizes all that is bad about Los Angeles, with Jack Nicholson's original lead role instead played by the artist. In Polanski's *Chinatown*, Nicholson, as Detective Gittes, recounts a bigoted tale about "screwing like a Chinaman." However, such impudent jokes become convoluted when spoken by the Chinese-Singaporean Wong. In an interview with REDCAT, Wong says, "In the end we cannot tell who is laughing at whom, or who is screwing whom." This inversion was what led Wong to revisit the private-eye flick: "The artifice of the city speaks to me," he says. "The day that I was at Grauman's Chinese Theatre it was packed with Chinese tourists. I was not sure if they fully understood the irony of them being there, in a place with such a history of mischaracterization and misappropriation. The project touches upon this." Wong explores Western-manufactured "Chinese" identity by deconstructing the chinoiserie of Los Angeles' Chinatown, and satirizing Hollywood's racist portrayals of Asian characters by acting in "whiteface."

Besides Detective Gittes, Wong also plays all of the film's other main characters in *Making Chinatown*, literally donning various hats, as well as wigs, dresses, suits, prosthetics and makeup. In a postcoital scene between Detective Gittes and the film's female protagonist, Mrs. Mulwray, both

played by Wong, the artist has essentially slept with himself. Both the act of cross-dressing and the fact that the artist also happens to be a gay man challenge viewers to contemplate the related issues of sexuality, gender and identity.

The self-reflexive and self-referential nature of this remake comes to a head when the curator of *Making Chinatown*, Aram Moshayedi, fills in for the role of a brutish, white-suited gangster—originally played by Polanski in his film—who violently slices Detective Gittes' nose to deter his investigation of municipal corruption. If Polanski's cameo was perhaps a muted reference to the director's control over an actor's work, Moshayedi's appearance in Wong's remake jocularly hints at the possibility of a similarly sensitive relationship between curator and artist.

One of the goals of art is to stimulate dialogue, and despite its intentionally flat, two-dimensional acting and stage sets, Ming Wong's *Making Chinatown* is a thought provoking, multilayered work. As with the original film, *Making Chinatown* ends in a very unhappy, un-Hollywood way: a bloody shoot-out that leads to the death of Mrs. Mulwray, followed by the famous last lines, said to a horrified Detective Gittes: "Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown." Yet audiences will hardly be able to dismiss the many conundrums of identity explored in Wong's remake.

JENNIFER S. LI

## MING WONG

*Making Chinatown*  
2012

Still from seven-channel video installation.  
Courtesy the artist and REDCAT,  
Los Angeles.

