

ArtSeen

In Practice: Covey Gong

By **Jenny Wu**



Installation view: *In Practice: Covey Gong*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2024. Commissioned by SculptureCenter, New York. Courtesy the artist and Derosia, New York.

It is no secret that Giacomo Puccini's opera *Turandot* (1926), the source text behind New York-based sculptor Covey Gong's solo exhibition at SculptureCenter, presents a mythic and embellished vision of dynastic China. The opera's narrative, in which a princess who poses riddles to vet suitors is bested at her own game, comes from *Haft Peykar*, an epic poem by the twelfth-century Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi. This was reworked into a short story by an eighteenth-century French orientalist and adapted for the stage in Germany in 1801 before making its way into the Italian composer's imagination. Puccini never visited China; his posthumously-produced opera illustrates something akin to what artist Astria Suparak, in her ongoing critique of science fiction cinema, calls "Asian futures without Asians." One need only to swap the word "futures" with "pasts" or "legends."

Today, despite the emergence of critical dialogue around *Turandot* and new interpretations featuring all-Asian casts, its feverishly imagined costumes and sets have remained not only intact but one of the main draws of the opera. The dress worn by soprano Christine Goerke, for example, when she starred in the Metropolitan Opera's 2015–16 production by Franco Zeffirelli, is a blue brocade number with a “mandarin”-style choker collar, beaded arabesques, ice-like tassels, and wide, weepy sleeves. Decorative needles protrude from her elaborate crown and, in certain scenes, her back. Spread like the ribs of a fan, they embody, in miniature, the structured symmetry of the Met's set design and the ornateness of its lanterns, stone lions, water features, carved columns, and hip-and-gable roofs.



Covey Gong, *TRD-CLD-052402*, 2024. Brass, copper, bronze, tin, acrylic, steel, aluminum, 94 x 102 x 8 inches. Commissioned by SculptureCenter, New York. Courtesy the artist and Derosia, New York.

One finds references to the sartorial and set choices made for Zeffirelli's production in Gong's three-work show at SculptureCenter. The first piece that visitors encounter, *TRD-RF-052401* (all works 2024), is a fabric and metal structure that resembles a section of a sloping roof. Scalloped, sooty, and spare, this fragment counters *Turandot's* palatial fantasy. Here, a form that was once seen arcing high over singers' heads has been lowered and recast in the language of ruin and realism. Lifted several inches off the floor by a metal truss, the humble roof fragment appears to be buoyed by air as it hovers in waiting.

The formal qualities of Gong's works further subvert the symbolic structure of *Turandot's* set. Consider, for instance, the tiered stage used in Zeffirelli's production. In the finale, the princess and her successful suitor share center stage. Her father, Emperor Altoum, reigns from a throne above them. Lower-ranked characters—ministers of the state, ladies in waiting, and slaves clad in earth tones—congregate around the couple on descending risers. The arrangement is highly symmetrical and hierarchically unambiguous. The subtle asymmetry in Gong's *TRD-CLD-052402*, then, can be read as a challenge to the opera's stratified *mise-en-scène*. Standing nine feet tall and eight feet wide yet barely visible, the sculpture consists of a slight, T-shaped truss holding fifteen transparent tubes of varying lengths on metal wires attached to its crossbar. The tubes hang parallel to the crossbar and are distributed irregularly, like window blinds that have been knocked helter-skelter. The spindly truss is unspectacular, and the wires droop and drag on the floor. Only eight inches deep, the sculpture resembles a backdrop on a stage, one that neither calls attention to itself nor allows the eye to rest on any particular focal point.



Covey Gong, *TRD-FN-052403*, 2024. Brass, bronze, copper, tin, linen, cotton, monitors, cables, footage, 73 x 72 x 9 inches. Pedestal: 5 ½ x 18 x 12 ¾ inches. Commissioned by SculptureCenter, New York. Courtesy the artist and Derosia, New York.

Gong's third work on view at SculptureCenter is a fan-shaped sculpture in the round titled *TRD-FN-052403*. As one might expect, hand fans are used as props in *Turandot*, but Gong's is made of metal and linen. Placed on top of a vertical truss, it echoes the form of Princess Turandot's crown; encountering it is like standing in the presence of a tall and commanding sovereign. Hidden behind the fan, three small video monitors play looped footage of contemporary actors preparing backstage—their faces thickly powdered and brilliantly rouged—to perform *Turandot* in Beijing, Buenos Aires, Houston, and Sydney, as well as workers building stage sets who could be mistaken for characters reenacting the construction of dynastic palaces and statuary.

Puccini's *Turandot* was written, to borrow Suparak's formulation, as an Asian opera without Asians, a performance revolving around a conspicuous void. While effort has been made to place Asian bodies back into the molds from which they were excised, Gong's sculptures do not attempt to fill this void. Instead, they stretch absence to counter presence, courting realism to counter fantasy. In doing so they lay bare the incompleteness of any ornamental forms that are detached from their context to circulate freely through space and time.