

PENTA

Contemporary Artists on Art and Society

By Abby Schultz, March 23, 2020



Tishan Hsu
Photograph by Grace Rivera

Penta brought together four New York-based artists—Tishan Hsu, Christopher Myers, Mika Rottenberg, and Tariku Shiferaw—for dinner at the Midtown Manhattan restaurant Butter to talk about the role art can play in society. The discussion began with an excerpt from W.H. Auden’s poem “In Memory of W.B. Yeats”:

You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:
The parish of rich women, physical decay,
Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

Penta: While poetry may not make anything happen, it does provide “a way of finding meaning,” as the U.K.-based poet Tamar Yoseloff has said. How do you think art—in the form of poetry, painting, sculpture, or anything else—helps society understand the social and political disruptions of our time?

Mika Rottenberg: In times of breakdown or war, sometimes art becomes more conservative. Maybe artists want to do stuff with color and texture and kind of retreat, to say, “I can’t deal with this.” Maybe art should just be about that—feelings and textures. What kind of art was made during real wars? Usually there was not that much, or something [emerges] like Dadaism that tries to find a new logic.

Tariku Shiferaw: When politically hard times happen, there are artists that have gone to abstraction. You could look at [African-American artist] Romare Bearden [1911-88], who retreated to abstraction during hard times. So did [African-American artist] Jack Whitten [1939-2018], who, after 1969, goes deep into abstraction and starts talking about the stars and science fiction, because it affords him something internal, something safe.

Christopher Myers: Jack Whitten notoriously had a body of sculpture that he didn’t show because he felt it was going to pigeonhole him as African-American—which tells you that in terms of social good and socially progressive thinking, with artists who are thinking about conflict and desperation, there’s always going to be a mask at the center. I don’t think of masking in the Western sense of concealment, but more masking in this pre-Western notion of telling another kind of truth. Sometimes the gift of older-generation artists like Jack Whitten is to make clear that there’s a separation between his mask and the work that he’s doing. All of that sculpture work, which for me is some of his most exciting work, is what he’s investigating. It’s not for public consumption.

We all have to deal with markets and we have to deal with sustenance. Romare Bearden worked as a social worker his entire career. What then is his political statement as an active social worker in New York City? That is as much a part of his content as is any kind of abstraction that he’s looking at.

Tishan Hsu: That’s been the trajectory of a lot of what we would consider the paradigm of the modernist artist. Think of [Franz] Kafka, who worked for an insurance company and eked out writing that he never wanted anyone to read, including after his death. The idea that the artist has their true self and has to then wrestle with the external world but somehow manages to eke out this work, whether it’s a painting or a book or whatever—that has been in the modernist paradigm. [Carl] Jung said you have to get to the very personal to get to the very collective.

Art has always been there, will always be here. There are always human beings who need to connect to something personal that ends up having some kind of meaning. You can see that in every culture. That’s what we define as art, whether it’s marketed or not.

Myers: One of the things that interests me about the [Auden] poem is that it’s about Irish identity. Yeats, as an Irishman, is central to Yeats’ practice...in that sense of being a colonized people who is resurrecting the kind of beauty, romance, and specificity of the Irish idiom within an overarching English idiom. What is contrasted in the piece is this sense of Irish literary storytelling, song, and culture as being loud and empty and without any kind of consequence. The fact that we are still talking about Yeats proves the lie to that. Everything from tap dancing to a certain kind of storytelling comes from that kind of early progenitor. Look at the quilts of Gee’s Bend—working-class people making quilts that rival any of the abstract expressionists, their contemporaries—and you realize there is a way in which art is made for speaking from the bottom up. Art is really good at having an outsize voice, a voice that allows for Motown [in Detroit] to Burna Boy in Nigeria; for young, poor people to be able to speak to the masses. What’s sad is when the art world forgets that this is in our capacity—to speak from the bottom up.

Shiferaw: I don't think art [disrupts] intentionally. It just does it naturally. The moment you introduce yourself into the world, you're already disturbing and disrupting a system that's already ongoing. An unseen person is out there being seen, like Burna Boy. I don't make work to intentionally disrupt, but my existence within a system disrupts it. That's why it's probably more interesting to see works from [those who are] not so rich or privileged.

Penta: Can artists bridge the divide between the practice of making things and the expectations of the art world?

Hsu: There have always been museums, there's always been an art world, and there's always been art. And art sometimes is part of the art world and sometimes it's not. The power of art is that it manages to survive while all of the social, political contexts that surround it change.

I'm curious whether something like performance will survive as a form. [Serbian performance artist Marina] Abramovic managed to do her retrospective in a kind of museum context and preserve the performances after 20, 30 years [at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the spring of 2010].

Rottenberg: Performance, maybe, is one of the only art forms that could survive because it could be like an oral tradition without materiality, like an oral tradition of myth-making, rather than of preserving technology or objects in climate-controlled storage.

Myers: I'm interested in the idea that there are art worlds that aren't easily mappable onto New York or L.A. or Paris. In that space comes a lot of possibility for resistance.

When you see young performance artists in the Philippines or Vietnam or Kenya, everybody is into "durational performance." Why? Because their images of performance are all still images. They think I laid down [in a photo] for 10 hours, and that's what the performance is. It's a fascinating moment of misinterpretation, retranslation. In places in which the language doesn't quite meet up, there is a lot of space for resistance.

Hsu: By where they are and what they're doing, you mean? It's not conscious resistance.

Myers: Mistranslation is one of our most fruitful tools as artists. Meritocracy is a lie. The best artists are not the ones who are selling. The ones who are selling are the ones who have access to the market in a certain way. When you realize that mistranslation is as much a part of this as anything else, it opens up a sense of possibility.

Hsu: It's difficult to say that if a work is succeeding in the market, it's not good work, and only work that is not in the market is good. Because art is bigger than that, no matter how big or powerful the market is. Good art can come from any context, as can bad art.

Myers: Amen.



New York-based artists Christopher Myers and Tishan Hsu.
Photograph by Grace Rivera

Shiferaw: The Aboriginal Australians, the native people of that land, have always made works—song lines, patterns. But in recent years, there are a lot of wealthy entrepreneurs, Western art historians, who have tried to market Aboriginal art as contemporary art, which I find interesting because I don't see it as contemporary art, I see it as its own thing and it's as significant as contemporary art.

Hsu: Even in the context of contemporary art, I don't think it detracts from the power of that work. The work is there, and in a way [the Aboriginal artists have] gained more exposure to the world by somehow being seen as contemporary. They shouldn't need the market or the contemporary collectors, but it has [brought] a lot more people to see the work and to look at it for what it is.

Rottenberg: But then that's problematic, too. It's like: Who can speak for politics? Who has the right? There's also this fear of like, "Oh, I can't speak to that." Since the Trump era, there's a kind of retreating again to, "I can't do work that would touch any kind of sensitive topics because I don't perhaps have the full kind of vision of what that means." There's a lot of fear, too, of upsetting people.

Hsu: Do you feel that's related to the market or a separate issue going on right now?

Rottenberg: It's a separate issue. It's a political issue. It's about what your peers are going to say, rather than if [an artwork] is going to sell or not: "How can you take your privileged freedom to document things that are not in your immediate surroundings or to speak for people that are not you." There's also confusion and questioning about what position you come from as an artist.

Hsu: That's a critical issue. [Artists] dealing with their "work" are dealing with issues that are very much a part of being human that don't actually fall within economics or law or business, or whatever other things that the professional world or the working world deals with. To the extent that artists, because of the road that they're open to, hit on these kinds of collisions and controversies, are actually revealing to the broader world that doesn't have necessarily the time or focus to do so [themselves]—but actually is interested in it. Art is a filter that we can [use to] begin to talk about these other things or begin to be aware of these other things. That's a way that art can illuminate social, political issues.