

TSENG KWONG CHI

b. September 6, 1950, Hong Kong

d. March 10, 1990, New York, New York

PHOTOGRAPHER

“My photographs are social studies and social comments on Western society and its relationship with the East.”

Although his work engages a wide variety of traditions, Tseng’s best-known photographs are self-portraits that explore perceptions of identity and stereotypes.

Tseng Kwong Chi, also known as Joseph Tseng, was the preeminent photographer of the 1980s New York pop scene. His work engages a wide variety of traditions, from landscape photography to portraiture. His best-known photographs examine perceptions of “foreign-ness,” as he experimented artistically with his Asian-American identity.

Tseng immigrated as a teen with his family to Canada. After studying Fine Arts in Paris, he moved to New York City. Tseng compiled portraits of the period’s most celebrated artists. He produced the largest Keith Haring archive, taking more than 40,000 photographs of the renowned graffiti artist and his drawings and murals.

Tseng’s most famous body of work is his collection of self-portraits, titled “Expeditionary Self-Portrait Series” or alternatively “East Meets West.” In the series, Tseng adopted the identity of a stereotypical Chinese dignitary, donning

a Mao suit, mirrored sunglasses and an ID badge that read “SlutforArt.” He situated himself in front of well-known Western monuments and tourist sites, including the World Trade Center, the Eiffel Tower and Mount Rushmore.

Tseng’s photographs exploit the juxtaposition of perceived and self-assigned identities. Reductive stereotypes were particularly relevant for LGBT Americans of his generation.

At age 39, Tseng died of AIDS-related illness. The stunning portfolio he amassed in his brief career secured his legacy as one of the best photographers of his era. His work has been displayed in museums worldwide, including the Guggenheim and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



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