
Rose Tang 罗丝唐: Sexual Travesty

The Taiwanese artist **Rose Tang**, having adopted a transvestite persona and pseudonym, has created a conceptual series of self-portraits experimenting with print work on different media using old photographs drawn from family albums dating from the colonial era, and offering the viewer a visual juxtaposition wherein identity, gender, nostalgia and travesty play a central role. The series reveals a near cinematic effect: within massive frames, whose design and manufacture are directly adapted from windows, doors and traditional folding screens, we see sepia tinted images burnt onto reflective surfaces displaying the artist's own body in female dress, sometimes in exaggerated postures and photographs of figures wearing qi pao, long-shirted costumes and Tang-style jackets which recall the late Qing dynasty.

While each individual work stems from a collective collaboration within the **island6Lab**, the artist has created an emblematic style in his personal search for liberty. As one is often socially categorized due to gender, the artist in the created female persona seeks to escape the confines of social convention, professional restrictions and perhaps, I might add, the question of typology so often associated with the history of photography.

Whereas it may be more usual for transsexuals or transvestites to find personal liberty from their individual psyche by enacting either comportment or physical transformation through a new identity, the same freedom is betrayed within the masquerade of the public opinion. The social mores and stringent familial conformity in China have been unsparing in their dismissal or outright condemnation of such "abnormality". What proves a double take is the travesty of Rose Tang as an embodiment of exactly the opposite! Rather than the need to conceal the new self, the act of artistic creation and self/subject is openly displayed, allowing the artist to create a personal dichotomy within his photographic installations.

The artist continues to penetrate further into social dogma and myth: using archival material, found negatives and photographs, he presents a series which portrays a China long since past. The figures are presented larger than life, augmenting the otherwise obscured details of the individual countenance, costumes and expressions, enhancing the limited resolution of the technology of the era to give us a chance to examine at close proximity images of antiquity. Traditional Chinese dress and fashion of the day appear constrictive while still allowing one to breathe. The presentation of such work in such a manner in recent years (which otherwise might be misperceived as an extenuation of the nostalgia so common to Shanghai's collective social consciousness) bears heavily against the historical stigma and usurps authority from typological practice and theory. Rose subverts the document and affects a highly aesthetic visceral ploy, one that proves to be a unique parody.

A rather atypical aspect of the artist's work is found in "*Bed Machine*", a shadow-activated device standing at the juncture between the public and private, the physical and spiritual, created by Rose Tang in collaboration with the **island6Lab**. The interactive concept is emblematic of Rose Tang's approach to technology drawn from her reflections on the turbulent change of China today. Yet, a parallel tension within the internal identity crisis which the artist experienced in the transfer of gender echoes more prominently here than in other creations. Viewers of "*The*

Confessional” are received by a digital avatar priest trapped within a flat screen asking the penitents to reveal, not sins, but everyday truths. The participants are offered a visual sequence of video which captures intimate and random depictions of the urban experience.

Rose Tang and the **island6Lab** have worked in a state of constant experimentation and his deliberate aesthetic and conscious manipulations of costume, self and visual record serve to challenge gender identification with a bold provocative humor. The man behind the mask demands that we undergo our own analysis of the individual experience of self-liberation, generalization and collective memory.

R A Suri - 05.01.2008