

Art in America

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PREVIEWS NOV. 08, 2013

Feng Shui Curating at P!

by Jessica Dawson



Connie Samaras,
Grandmother Rock,
Pacific Coast, 2013,
archival ink jet from
film, 35 by 45 inches.
Edition of 5.

On a recent morning at the gallery called P!, on New York's Lower East Side, New York-based feng shui master Ye Lei Ming was putting the final touches on an unusual curatorial experiment. Ye was studying a photograph of Mel Bochner in hopes of deciding where to install one of the artist's 1972 floor pieces.

Ye considered the artist's birthdate. He fell silent for some time.

Nearby, P! director Prem Krishnamurthy and the artist and curator Ali Wong (who also goes by Kit Yi Wong) waited patiently. For \$300, the pair had hired Ye to choose the artists and help install P!'s latest exhibition, "The Ceiling Should Be Green" (today through Dec. 22) in accordance with the ancient Chinese principles of manipulating chi, or life force, in an auspicious manner. Ye's efforts aim to subvert the strictures of traditional exhibition design.

"Curatorial practice has become really professionalized," Krishnamurthy told *A.I.A.* in a phone interview prior to Ye's final gallery visit. "There are a set of norms representing rationalist, European ways of thinking about space. This show is about, in good faith, exploring other modes of thinking."

To create "The Ceiling Should Be Green," Krishnamurthy and Wong compiled a list of artists they wanted to work with. They submitted that list to Ye. By analyzing the artists' birthdates and birthplaces, he arrived at nine artists to include in the show—Bochner, Jessica Stockholder and Tony Labat among them.

"He read each artist and told us who was strong and who wasn't," Krishnamurthy said. "'This is a really good artist, you must include this artist,' and 'This is a very tall artist and he will give you trouble, but you should include him in the show.'"

Ye has worked with artists before. In 2011, Wong hired him to advise her on how to improve her creative practice. At the time, she was an MFA candidate at Yale, and Ye's consultations resulted in her using her studio to serve Chinese meals once a week free of charge. More recently, Wong approached Krishnamurthy about applying feng shui to an exhibition. This is Ye's first stab at organizing an exhibition.

Krishnamurthy and Wong were faithful to Ye's suggestions. On his first visit to the gallery, Ye admired the red floor but recommended that the ceiling be painted green—hence the exhibition's title—owing to the strong chi produced by red-green pairings. Ye also insisted that the gallery's rear wall feature a large work depicting mountains and sea.

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8 November 2013

By the time Ye appeared for his final walkthrough this week, the gallery's ceiling was a brilliant shade of emerald and artist Connie Samaras's large-scale photograph of a mountainous seaside outcropping leaned against a back wall, ready for hanging.

Outfitted in a blue striped oxford, pressed pants and a windbreaker, Ye took the curator's final questions. As he spoke, Wong simultaneously translated his pronouncements—Ye speaks only Chinese—for Krishnamurthy and a visiting critic. Wong held her iPhone at eye level to record Ye's responses. (Wong's footage will be included in the final cut of a video work, made under the name Kit Yi Wong, also on view in the show.)

Gesturing rapidly, his eyebrows moving animatedly, Ye occasionally consulted a weathered yellow book and eagerly made suggestions. He told the curators that he didn't understand Stockholder's piece, so they needed to add explanatory wall text, which Krishnamurthy vowed to produce before opening day.

But by the time Krishnamurthy asked where Ohad Meromi's 2012 plywood installation should go, Ye had grown weary.

"He doesn't want to take care of minor issues," Wong translated from Ye's animated reply. "He says Ohad's work doesn't affect the feng shui, so you should decide yourself where it goes."

Ye leads a gallery talk Nov. 10 at 3 P.M.