

Frieze

BY HERA CHAN

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Who Really is Christopher K. Ho?

With a show at The Bronx Museum of the Arts, disguise, diasporic identity and dolphins collide in the New York-based artist's work

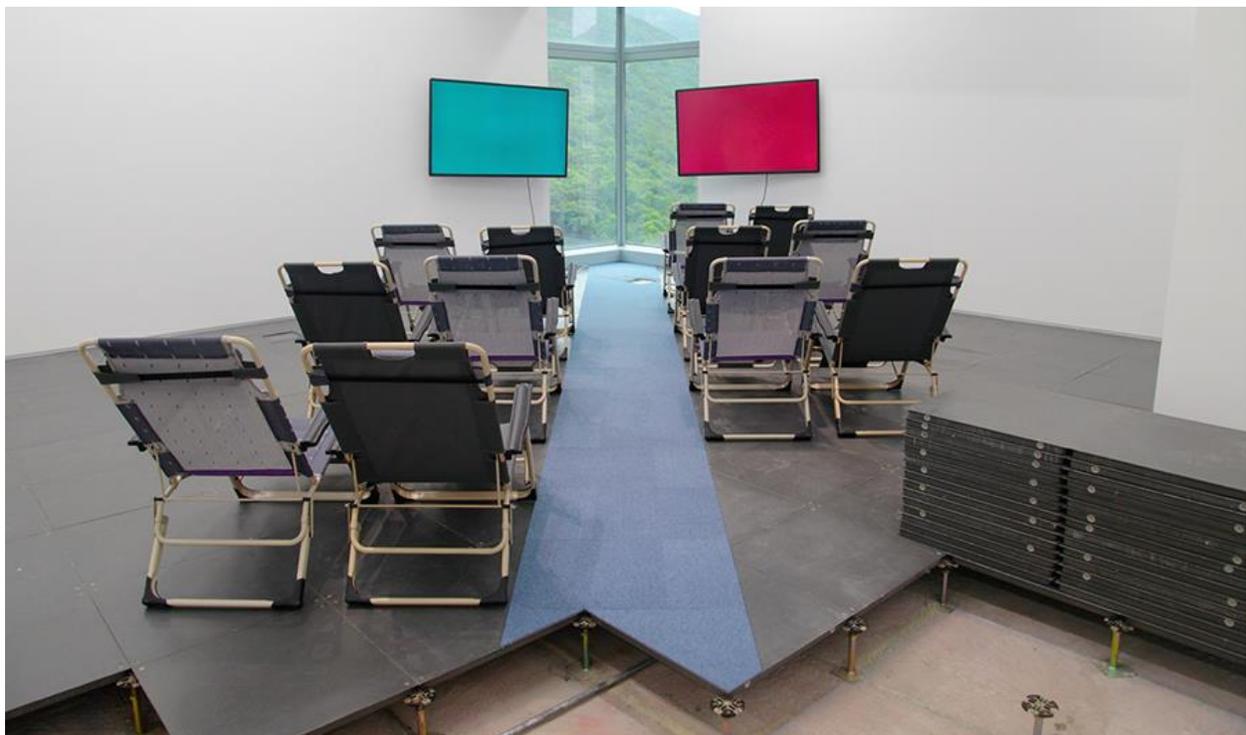


After his hit release in 1966, Don Ho opened and closed every show with 'Tiny Bubbles'. He was Hawaiian, Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch, German. Don loved his stint in the United States Air Force because it brought him 'closer to God'. Criticized for shameless commercialism and popularizing a style of Hawaiian music meant for tourists, Don maintained his status as a Waikiki nightclub lure until his death in 2007. New York-based conceptual artist Christopher K. Ho has often been asked if he is related to this hero of veterans and retirees. What may have read as racial rebuke is shaped into a personal reckoning and material for Ho's latest series of work.

Seen from Yankee Stadium, a 38-foot banner covers the entrance to The Bronx Museum of the Arts. It reads: 'MIRAMAR at Waikiki'. Expertly installed to be lopsided, the banner shows a Chinese-style roof with a mosaic mural of

the Buddhavista Guanyin. A 1960s rendition of an unverified Dunhuang cave painting, the mosaic was created with tiles fired in Italy and recreated by Ho using Google Street View. From the inside of the museum looking out, the reverse side of the banner reads 'DON HO TERRACE', set in the museum's typography. In 1957, Young Chi Wan and Ho's maternal grandfather, Ho Sien Heng, founded the Miramar Hotel and Investment Company. Throughout the exhibition, you find fragments of the original Miramar hotel procured through eBay: an ashtray, room service menu, postcards. Ho himself immigrated from Hong Kong to the United States when he was four, following the familiar path that stops in Hawaii.

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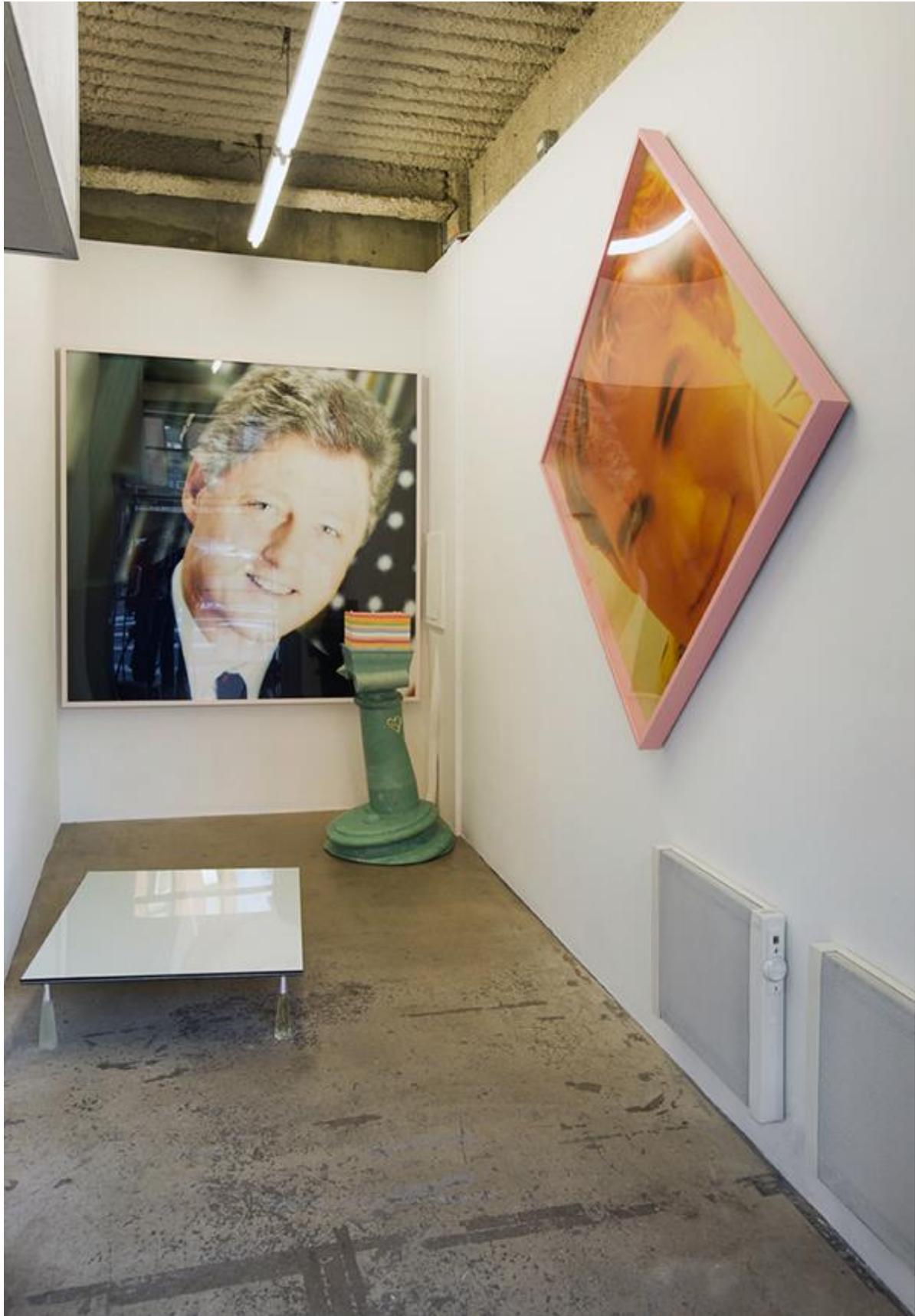


Christopher H.Ko, *CX888*, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and de Sarthe gallery, Hong Kong

Back then, the Miramar Group had three hotels, located in Hong Kong, Honolulu and Los Angeles – as guided by the Cathay Pacific route and traced by many Hong Kong émigrés. These hotels envisioned a future of mobility wherein the very act of movement felt still. These were destinations in themselves and fronts for luxurious lives most émigrés would never have a chance to live. (In 1977, *Business Week* reported that the Hong Kong

Miramar provided computer cards rather than keys for your room lock.) Diasporic narratives often focus on the notion of home, whether through repatriation or place-making in a nation that deems you 'alien'.

Earlier this year, Ho showed a series of work at de Sarthe in Hong Kong called 'CX 888', as invited by de Sarthe residents Ingrid Pui Yee Chu and Savannah Gorton of the non-profit curatorial initiative Forever & Today. 'CX 888' references Cathay Pacific's daily Hong Kong to Vancouver flight. The show included family photographs taken in Honolulu and a mysterious piece called *DO N O T R A C E* (2018): an anagram of DON HO TERRACE wherein the remaining letters formed Queen Elizabeth II's cipher 'E II R' with the 'E' and 'R' the bright red of Hong Kong pre-1997 British phone booths and the bar in 'H' faded to oblivion. Over the course of his career, Ho has often assumed other identities – fabricated with the pastiche of art history or, in this case, an ambiguously racialized popular musician. In 2010, he published *Hirsch E.P. Rothko* by Hirsch E.P. Rothko, a pocket paperback with a green newsprint interior that asserts the relevance of regional painting, positioning the United States as a marginal, not international power. (Of course, Hirsch E.P. Rothko is an anagram of Christopher K. Ho.)



Christopher K. Ho, 'Privileged White People', installation view, Forever & Today, New York. Courtesy: the artist and Forever & Today, New York

These disguised gestures poking at the (former?) political primacy of the United States can be found throughout Ho's opus. He has talked about white supremacy (in his solo exhibition 'Privileged White People', Forever & Today Inc. in New York, 2013), patriarchy (during a lecture-performance on 'Orientalism, Colonialisms, Patriarchies' at Asia Contemporary Art Week in New York, 2015) and unrequited political love (in 'Dear John', his 2017 show at Hotchkiss Tremaine Gallery in Lakeville, Connecticut, 2017). Strongly influenced by Hal Foster (as an undergraduate at Cornell), Rosalind Krauss (while studying for an M.Phil at Columbia) and, most importantly, his high school teacher Marjory Reid, from whom he inherited the legacy of institutional critique in the United States, Ho's work is self-deprecating, hyper-critical, referential and cast in layers. If his previous work made its point through nine turns, his current exhibition, 'Aloha to the World at the Don Ho Terrace', at the Bronx Museum is more direct. After two decades of showing work, this exhibition is the most indexical of his personal experience yet – complete with familial effects and sentiment on display.

Part of a generation of artists of colour who grew up in the 1990s, Ho felt both unable to harmonize with the language of identity politics at the time and unable to find like-minded practitioners to articulate a different relationship to being raced in America. At a time – then as now – when a politics of representation is cast as a solution to intersectional inequality, Ho presents us with the poor image. The Dunhuang Caves appear to us as a Buddhist beacon. Sources – including a book written during Empress Wu's Tang Dynasty (c.680 CE) and inscriptions on ancient steles – indicate that the Dunhuang Caves were built because a Buddhist monk named Le Zun had a vision of a thousand Buddhas bathed in light. Notably, Dunhuang was a frontier town during the Tang Dynasty, a cultural melting pot like New York.

CHRISTOPHER K HO SIGNED RECORD S0.JPG



Christopher K. Ho, 'Aloha to the World at the Don Ho Terrace', 2018–19, installation detail at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York. Courtesy: the artist and the Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York; photograph: © Mario Babbio

The soundtrack for 'Aloha to the World at the Don Ho Terrace' runs on a 22 minute 12 second loop. One speaker is shaped like a grey garden rock and the other like a chunk of coral: kitschy evocations of postwar hotel décor. They alternately play four different versions of the song performed by the Tenebrae Choir for the film *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (2005) 'So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish', played on ehru. The instrumentalist plays in the style of a child amateur and the recording is filtered through a 1980s speaker phone. It tells the tale of dolphins who, ascending to the moon to flee planetary destruction, send a message to the humans, which is received garbled. As the story goes, humans, while thinking themselves to be the most intelligent species on the planet, are only the third – less intelligent than dolphins, who attempt to warn mankind of impending disaster through their marine park choreography. Escaping to the moon in a final flourish, their

misinterpreted message is: 'So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish.' The New York that Ho knows is ending – wrought with new anxieties and a new federal administration; the artist stands on the Don Ho Terrace, ready to bid farewell and say aloha to the world.

Christopher K. Ho's 'Aloha to the World at the Don Ho Terrace' is on view at The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, until 6 January 2019.

Main image: Christopher K. Ho, Untitled (Photograph from family trip to Hawaii), c. 1982. Courtesy: the artist

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