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By STEVEN TANAMACHI
Nichi Bei Times

Scott Tsuchitani placed his face all over San Francisco last year. In response to the Asian Art Museum's "Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile" exhibit over the summer and its advertisements appearing on lamp posts, in newspapers and on buses around the city, Tsuchitani toyed with the ad's image.

He Photoshopped his own face over the geisha's and created posters and postcards with the spoof. These, he distributed around Japantown and even managed to sneak into the Museum.

Now his mug is on display, along with 11 others' works, in Kearny Street Workshop's exhibit "Pirated: A Post Asian Perspective," in which the artists are "identifying, exposing and resisting acts of theft and unauthorized appropriation," according to the exhibit organizers.

"Pirated" is on view at the SomArts Cultural Center, 934 Brannan St., San Francisco through Sunday, May 29, 12-4 p.m.

Nichi Bei Times: In the work I have seen of yours, you used photographs and doctoring of those images. What theme are you expressing with this?

Scott Tsuchitani: For the moment, I believe in a socially engaged practice of art that is grounded in my lived experience. I employ "head-swapping" as an aesthetic means with which to create and explore new meaning, be it social commentary, self-portrait, sometimes both, and/or other intentions of which at times I may not be consciously aware. It's like playing with signs and symbols, taking familiar ones and combining them in unfamiliar ways, so that meaning is destabilized.

I believe that when we are faced with uncertainty or not knowing, then an opportunity for growth and wisdom arises; we have to drop all our illusions of certainty and security and honestly deal with reality as it is, right in front of us, in this moment.

NBT: Have you gotten into any trouble with the Asian Art Museum since displaying your geisha im-



ages?

ST: I did not get into any trouble, although I was informed by J-town folks that the museum was calling around to community orgs to try to find out "who did this."

The museum made no public acknowledgement of my work, until Annie Nakao decided to cover it for the *SF Chronicle*, at which time (Asian Art Museum Director) Emily Sano weighed in on the matter. In the article Sano claims to have been entertained by my work, but other sources have informed me that my work struck quite a nerve among museum management...

I want to make clear that my work is not about a beef with the museum or Emily Sano per se, but rather about larger issues of culture, representation, and racialization of the Asian body. The geisha exhibition effectively provided an opportunity and vehicle for me to take my creative expression to a much larger audience than I'd otherwise have access to, through the appropriation of its ubiquitous promotional images.

NBT: How, if at all, do you feel that your identity as a Sansei shows in your work?

ST: As an artist, I can try to talk about how I think being *Sansei* informs my work, but as far as how it shows in my work, that's up to the viewer to decide...

I identify as an artist, as *Sansei*, as Asian American, but I don't see myself as "Sansei artist," "Japanese American artist," or "Asian American artist," and I don't see what I do as "political art."

My work is informed by (my) most deeply held values and beliefs, the deepest of which have grown out of the wisdom of direct experience, and being *Sansei* is only a part of that experience.

NBT: How do you think your art at the exhibit fits in with the other artists? And how does your work mesh with the title ("Pirated") of the exhibit?

ST: I think all of the work there deals with some aspect of piracy, be it cultural appropriation, guerrilla intervention, legacy of colonialism, etc.

My work involves piracy on several levels: I'm responding to piracy in the form of selective cultural appropriation by the West of my ancestral culture — i.e. *geisha* — and challenging the cultural politics inherent

in that act of borrowing that not are innocent, that is rather, as I see it, informed by a history of colonial power relations.

I'm pirating the museum's heavily-funded advertising imagery and creating something new out of it, reversing meaning in the process.

NBT: What is the one effect that you would most like viewers to take with them after viewing your work?

ST: I like my work to have something to offer in terms of pleasure — e.g. humor, beauty, or some form of entertainment — but not without requiring active engagement of the audience in return.

I value ambiguity, uncertainty, paradox, as well as emotional connection. I like density and layered meaning, combining poignancy or drama with humor and fun. I don't believe art was meant to be explained, but rather to be directly experienced and interpreted by the viewer, and that affects the strategies with which I engage the audience.

If the work can bring joy, challenge structures of domination, inspire, empower and create cultural space for the marginalized, then I've really succeeded.