



review

Christopher K. Ho: Privileged White People

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By Ming Lin

If you haven't heard, the 90s are in again. For his new solo exhibition at Forever & Today, Inc., a non-profit space in Chinatown, New York, Christopher K. Ho, an artist with a penchant for drawing out uncomfortable identity issues with tongue-in-cheek narratives, makes a case for this only recently concluded decade. Previous works in this vein include *Accidental Racism*, 2010, in which a white dreadlocked youth clutched doggedly to a carved wooden version of the BET award trophy and *Regional Painting*, 2010, in which the artist himself took up residence in a rural cabin in order to tease out the tenets of regionalism, ultimately locating within it a very viable mode of criticality despite its campy connotations. While the name of this exhibition may read pejoratively, Ho's examination of the politics of race and socioeconomic trends are extremely nuanced.

With various artifacts on display, Ho has composed an anthropological survey of sorts, painting a portrait of an oft overlooked demographic, or indeed one so pervasive as to have been rendered invisible: privileged white people. It's a status with which most wouldn't readily identify or flaunt and that is the crux of Ho's investigations. An oversized photograph of former president Bill Clinton smiles disarmingly from the back wall and, adjacent to it, another of James Van Der Beek, also known as

Dawson, of the 90s hit TV series *Dawson's Creek*. On the ground, encased between two sheets of glass, is what appears a large letter of acceptance embossed with a make-believe college emblem and some sort of technical diagram. The supports on which the certificate balances are four bottles of Eau D'Issey, and the smell of the designer scent subtly permeates the entirety of the small gallery space.

These three objects together stand as signifiers within the aesthetics of white privilege, particularly a breed which emerged in the 90s, which Ho seeks to define. Distilling the demographic into these ostensibly simplistic terms, aside from invoking an ounce of ridicule, is also more earnestly an attempt to visualize a semiotic system with which to speak critically about the era and its attending ideological premises. For Ho, the 1980s gave birth to identity politics, what he reads as a particularly potent strain of art practice combining issues of personal identity with political issues. Directly mirroring this movement, and resulting from a similar grouping of influences he locates "The Clinton Group": a group of neo abstract expressionists which can be found dominating the youthful gallery scene of today, comprised of artists who came of age in the 90s. Whereas, the 80s crowd was reared on many significant political events, invoking more radical leanings, the Clinton Crew by contrast has little cultural baggage. And due to this favorable disposition, Ho finds a spirit of benevolence teetering precariously towards the benign.

At second glance, the iconic smile of Clinton is sickly sweet, and not only that, but the portrait itself is awkwardly skewed within the frame. Dawson's countenance too has an almost pathetic eagerness to it. These are the icons of the 90s, their decency and candor have bred an idealism which, in terms of art, lends itself to a practice that is at once marked by "social grace" as Ho would put it, or else has very little to say. The scent of Eau D'Issey, the generation's stab at white-bread multiculturalism, is a reference to the subtle, and often stifling forces at play. In *Privileged White People*, Ho, performing an ethnographic analysis to find the cultural underpinnings of a pervasive contemporary art practice, has maneuvered a delicate critique. And, like most good anthropological work these days, his findings are neither finite nor conclusive.

Forever & Today, Inc., 141 Division Street, New York, NY,
foreverandtoday.org/Christopher_K_Ho.html



Installation view of Christopher K. Ho: Privileged White People. Courtesy of the artist and Forever & Today, Inc., New York. Photo credit: Mike Garten.



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