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He captures unique images on film...

FRAME BY FRAME

BY ALICE MAUGHAN

Taiwanese born Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao, a resident of Queens for the past 7 years, is currently holding his first solo museum show at the Queens Museum of Art. His exhibition, *Habitat 7*, is inspired by his observations of the Queens community and the ethnic diversity which surrounds the number 7 subway line.

He realized that for millennia, civilizations had lain their roots along the fertile banks of major rivers to reap their rich natural resources, but today it is the man-made arteries that serve as spines of new communities - none more so than those surrounding the so-called "International Express" of Queens.

"Everyone has come here for a better lifestyle, to chase the American dream, but at the same time they want to hold on to their own culture," says Liao.

Liao, who is now fulfilling his own dreams in America, realized at an early age that high school in Taiwan wasn't for him. "It just didn't fit" he says, "I needed a more liberal education." So, with the financial support from his parents, Liao moved to Vancouver to finish high school and went on to college to study business.

Once again, he realized this wasn't for him. As much as his parents wanted him to have a stable profession, he knew he wanted to be an artist. With this goal in mind, he decided to leave Vancouver. Despite his love for the city, he found his



Photo courtesy of Alice Maughan

Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao, originally from Taiwan, has an exhibition at the Queens Museum of Art.

options were limited, "it's a great place for retirement, but not a place for an aspiring artist," he says.

It was then that he began to make his dreams a reality. He accepted a place at the Pratt Institute in New York to study interior design but quickly realized that photography was his real passion. "It just comes naturally to me," he says.

From Pratt, Liao began his MFA at the School of Visual

Arts, where the *Habitat 7* project was first conceived, and where he won the 2nd Annual New York Times Magazine "Capture the Times" Photography Competition.

The project, which took nearly 3 years to complete consists of 48 pictures in total, 30 of which are on display in the Queens Museum. His technical style is a hybrid of digital manipulation and photography. The initial shots

are taken with a film camera, which weighs an incredible 70 lbs. The film is then scanned into his computer where he can re-arrange the images in Photoshop. "I can add people, take people out, speed things up and play with the lighting for example," he says, "in the pictures everything keeps going - nothing ever stops."

The photographs in the exhibition range from a fruit vendor in Woodside,

Chinatown in Flushing, the Citibank tower in Long Island City, Hunters Point in the early morning and a bustling 42nd Street in Times Square.

With Liao's observational technique, he manages to show the uniqueness of each area in Queens, capturing the diversity of the borough in a very natural way. "Residents of Queens who have been to the exhibition find themselves drawing on their own experiences when they look at my pictures," says Liao. "When people look at my photos, they always have a story to tell."

Liao's project is a wonderful gift to those living in Queens right now, but he is also hoping the pictures will be around in the future to be used as a historical source, preserving the communities which are constantly changing.

To aid this further, he has a book coming out this summer which includes all 48 pictures and an educational video sponsored by the Crystal Foundation which will be shown to art students all over the country.

With *Habitat 7* finally complete, Liao has started pondering his next venture in his quest to give back something of himself to his adopted city. Having originally thought he would develop a new project back in China, he is now considering interesting new ideas in New York.

So, while he no longer needs Queens for his work, he definitely sees himself living here in the future, continuing his study of the #7 train, if only as another passenger pursuing the American dream.

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