

ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

Shortly after the US presidential elections in November 2004, the Hong Kong-born, Los Angeles-based artist took a trip to Iceland, the only major landmass to intersect the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, the geographical boundary between the massive North American and Eurasian tectonic plates. Tse brought with her a Lilliputian beige plastic bench she had constructed for the project, which she photographed and videotaped on beds of rocks and rivers against gorgeous, soaring landscapes. In the resulting set of eight photos, the bench appears to be of standard size, a distortion of scale accomplished by simply foregrounding the minuscule object in the frame. Perhaps because of this technique, the bench occasionally recalls the lone figures that often appear in Caspar David Friedrich landscapes—the stoic plastic seat engaged in a comical face-off with the natural sublime. The accompanying five-minute video, comprising footage of the bench in roughly the same locations and perspectives as in the photographs, offers further documentation, as well as a humorous denouement, as humans intrude onto the frame, giving the scene a proper sense of scale and revealing the bench's true size.

"Waiting . . ." recalls the artist's photographic documentation of plastic shapes from the late '90s. (For example, her series "Not Exactly A . . .," 1998, depicts blobby fuchsia plastic sculptures against a frosty Canadian landscape, while two other series, "Vagabond or Wanderlust?," 1998, and "Diaspora? Touristry?," 1999, feature blue forms scattered throughout sere swathes of the Californian desert and on Utah and Colorado highways.) But though these earlier works made allusions to consumerism and conservation, "Waiting . . ." is the first project to respond to a specific political event: the reaffirmation of right-wing political power in November 2004. Perhaps it's no coincidence, then, that it is also the first body of work in which Tse has photographed a namable object rather than the abstracted forms featured in her earlier series.

In "Waiting . . .," the inexorable drift of tectonic plates becomes an allegory for American and European political relations, the incongruities of scale an analogy for misguided agendas, the solitary bench a metaphor for American isolationism. (Recall, too, the polysemy of "bench": both as a verb, "to bench" someone, and as a geographically liminal location, an area of rest between two slopes.) The series of correlations is one that privileges slight, sometimes melancholic insinuations. But in another, more visceral register, the video and photographs pit Iceland's awe-inspiring landscape against the pitiful makings of man, a juxtaposition that seems to undermine, or at least call into question, the material underpinnings of civilization.

The show's final element, an unusual (for Tse), only partially plastic sculpture titled *Attempt to Bridge the Abyss*, 2007, was slightly less convincing. Comprising a table inlaid with a blue cavity (presumably representing the Atlantic) crossed with bits of Styrofoam impaled on plastic sticks—which were themselves anchored on each side by lava rocks purchased at Home Depot—the piece's earnest title and overdetermined composition deflated the show's more productive ambiguities.

—David Velasco



Shirley Tse, *Waiting at the Place Where America Parts* from *Eurasia Series #1384* (detail), 2005, light-jet print, high-density polyethylene, polystyrene, 14 3/4 x 14 3/4 x 1/2".

Shirley Tse

MURRAY GUY

Like a diligent student of *The Graduate*, Shirley Tse has made her career in plastics, demarcating with uncommon zeal (and amid sporadic references to Martin Heidegger and Gilles Deleuze) an artistic practice defined less by a particular aesthetic agenda and more by consistent exploitation of her materials. The past few years have seen Tse building sculptures carved with cantilevered reliefs and constructing flat vinyl "paintings" à la Lucio Fontana. "Waiting . . ." the artist's recent solo show at Murray Guy—her fourth there—reasserted her allegiance to Robert Smithson and the legacy of his Earthworks. Here, though, this patrimony was articulated along a political axis that seemed decidedly un-Smithsonian in its engagement with immediate geopolitical tensions.