



ARTIST

Albert Chong

TITLE

Sana, Bamboo, St. Ann, Jamaica

DATE

1994

DIMENSIONS

14 in H x 11 in W

MEDIUM

Gelatin Silver Print

CATALOGUE NUMBER

1995.014

CURRENT LOCATION

1114-14B

ALBERT CHONG

BORN

1958

BIRTHPLACE

Kingston, Jamaica

GENDER

Male

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

American, Afro-Asian

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 1995
Fine Print Program, 1996
Robert B. Menschel Gallery, 2000

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 87
Contact Sheet 97
Contact Sheet 105

BIOGRAPHY

Art for me is a process of deep communication that has few parallels in the creative world. It permits and encourages an exchange of ideas at a faster rate and with more accessibility and subtle nuances than conventional methods of communication. I think of art as humanity's second language, a universal tongue that has infinite dialects, meanings and ideas that can be clearly transmitted if the artist so desires. My work has sought to give expression to my human visual intuition that operates at levels beyond verbal or literary expression. Each work can function independently but is connected to the larger body of art that seeks to give my perspective on the story of our humanity and our rapidly disintegrating connection to the natural world. That perspective ranges from aesthetic beauty for its own sake to the personal, political and a numerous other concerns that could be said to constitute my artistic vision.

I have long been interested in the traditions, objects of devotion, and rituals associated with religion and the spiritual life. I often use the rich iconography and symbolism of orthodox and unorthodox belief systems in my work, not as way of providing answers but rather posing questions. In doing so, I can address the relationship between politics, religion, and culture, while avoiding being didactic or simplistic.

I was born and raised in Kingston, Jamaica and immigrated to the USA at age 18, I discovered photography in high school in Jamaica and since that time it has become my primary medium of artistic expression although I do work occasionally in installation based work as well. I presently live and work in Boulder, Colorado where I am a professor of art teaching photography at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

Albert Chong
September 23, 2018

ESSAYS

For several years Albert Chong has been the subject of his photographs, installations, and artist books. Like Cindy Sherman or Lucas Samaras, Chong's work nods in the direction of self-portraiture as it reaches past the conventions of self-expression. Chong appears in his work as a master of ceremonies presiding over the conjuring of spirits, magic rites, and ancient rituals. Even when he is not physically represented, we feel his presence leading us back and forth through time and over routes that begin in Africa and China, and pass through Jamaica. Out of ordinary objects as eggshells, coconuts, hair, and bone Chong creates contemporary improvisations between art and culture, where the ephemera of daily life is transformed into objects of worship and reverence. Thelma Golden, Associate Curator at the Whitney Museum of Art, describes this process when she writes, 'Chong, transplanted from Jamaica to New York, has enabled the components of these divergent cultures to make peace as they negotiate their way into his art. The camera functions as an extension of this artist's psyche; it allows him to piece together history and biography while simultaneously examining culture through the refracted lenses of time and distance.' (1) In his most recent work from the district of Bamboo in the Parish of Saint Ann, Jamaica, Chong changes his mode of investigation, but continues to piece together history and biography. Tentatively titled *Yard: A Jamaican Portrait*, this body of work in still in progress, and like much of his previous work, these portraits will likely take many different forms. Besides the portraits, Chong is also making video tapes and creating texts that record his interaction with the 'social life of the district, the odd assortment of individuals that revolve around the small country store, and the stories they tell about their lives in Jamaica.' Just from his portraits we can see that life in Saint Ann's Parish is a hard get by. Clothes are worn long and hard, dirt paths are the area's thoroughfares, and the simple country store has bars on the window and heavy wooden shutters as protection from hurricanes and bandits. Chong includes these observations within the frame of his portraits, and then concentrates on the people he has come to visit. In that time of concentration and collaboration his visitors relax before the camera, settle into their surroundings, and find something close at hand to provide them with support. A child finds the crook of her mother's arm, a young man grasps the bars of the store window, a man with gray dreadlocks leans against a tree that seems to give with his weight, and a man named Bingo rests against his crutches. Metaphors for describing connections to other times and places, for finding the extraordinary in the commonplace, and for locating a spiritual home have been the inspiration for much of Chong's work over the past 10 years. In this new series of portraits the metaphor of support surrounds the individuals he is photographing and describes the extent of Chong's interest, as an observer and participant, in their lives and stories. Jeffrey Hoone (c)1996 1. Thelma Golden, 'Albert Chong: Eye & I,' catalogue essay for *Ancestral Dialogues - The Photographs of Albert Chong*, The Friends of Photography, San Francisco, CA, Untitled 57, 1994. Albert Chong lives in Boulder, Colorado. He participated in our Artist-in-Residence program in August, 1995. *Yard: A Jamaican Portrait* has been supported in part by a grant from Arts International. At first glance the chaotic clutter in Albert Chong's studio echoes the romantic notion we hold of sun filled rooms where artists rub raw materials into precious commodities of creation. Slides spill over counters, books are crammed onto every shelf, the odor of linseed oil penetrates from the studio below, and boxes of prints fill every space and file cabinet to overflowing. As Chong enters the studio from a short walk across the University of Colorado's campus at Boulder and brushes the snowflakes from his dreadlocks the studio takes on the feel of a sanctuary where 'objects and materials [are] gathered and absorbed within the process of living,'(1) not merely assembled in the process of making art. Over the past 20 years Albert Chong has literally and figuratively built a body of work out of the memories, objects, and beliefs of a life lived as opposed to one simply imagined. The remains of an evening meal might become the centerpiece for the next day's still life, or an ornament for an elaborate installation next year. Family photographs may appear in complex collages or simple arrangements where flowers are gently placed within the frame and rephotographed to resemble a

remembrance of a life passed or a celebration of current or ongoing achievement. Chong himself often appears as a character within the frame in various apparitions from patriarch, to shaman, to a whisper of an image moving across the scene like smoke exhaled, lingered, and gone. Intermixed with these more ephemeral images are straightforward portraits made of residents who live along Shelly Road in Bamboo, Saint Ann, a place remembered and revisited from his youthful days growing up in Jamaica. The work in this exhibition touches on many themes and practices that have been central to contemporary art production over the past twenty years including the expressive search for personal identity, cultural affirmation and exploration, the self-portrait, and the invented tableau. Even though Chong is a tenured professor, and his photographs and installations are regularly exhibited in contemporary art galleries and museums, his work seems to spring from a different well than many of his contemporaries. His work gathers together emotion, poetry, mysticism and mythology and makes them visible. His work never seems like it was created on the back of academic theory but has the feeling that his scenes have been revealed or discovered after a long rest in some ancient and secret place. His techniques for achieving these effects range from subtly manipulating the processing of the Polaroid positive/negative film he prefers in his black and white work to exaggerating contrast, density, and scale in his final prints. But for the most part Chong feels his way through the process of creating images, and as the poet Quincy Troupe has written: Chong's photographs are ultimately a very personal and poetic invocation of the African and Chinese traditions that he grew up with in his native Jamaica. They are highly ritualized, improvised narratives that make both religious and secular connotations. They feed the spirits of both ancestral and living appetites. They illuminate commonplace elements that are, through his magical, shamanistic eyes, transmogrified and transformed into objects of worship.(2) Chong's portraits of residents who live along Shelly Road in the parish of Saint Ann, Jamaica are some of the most recent and accessible works in the exhibition. At first these carefully considered studies, made with a 4x5 camera on a tripod, seem like a radical departure from the rest of the work in the exhibition. But with these portraits Chong has connected his internal life of beliefs and imagination with the more prosaic realities of daily life in present-day Jamaica. Woven into the exhibition the portraits seem to make his still lifes less exotic, while the portraits benefits from the power they absorb from the tableau images that surround them. Together they become part of a process that becomes a visual testament to living, believing, and imagining both within and beyond his ancestral home. On the two preceding pages in this catalogue there is a passage written by Chong and a snapshot of his father. In the passage Chong offers his father an apology for not giving him the snapshot before his father died. He ends the statement by asking, 'How could a photograph mean so much?' This lament is perhaps the essential guide we need to enter into Chong's outpouring of images. Jeffrey Hoone (c) 2000 1. Johnny W. Coleman, 'Winged Evocations and Albert Chong,' in *Winged Evocations. A Kinetic Sculptural Installation and a Meditation on Flight and its Association with Divinity.*, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, 1998 (Oberlin, OH: Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, 1998, p.19. 2. Quincy Troupe, 'In the Eyes, Memory Lies,' in *Ancestral Dialogues, the Photographs of Albert Chong, The Friends of Photography* (San Francisco: The Friends of Photography, 1994) p.4. For their assistance and generosity in preparing this exhibition Light Work thanks David Teplitzky and Peggy Scott. More Albert Chong's work can be viewed at <http://spot.colorado.edu/~chonga/>.