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Curious curator Lance Fung on his transient art installation *Lucky Number Seven*

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By Joseph Golfen

A high school aptitude test told him to be social worker or a doctor, suggesting that Lance Fung's belief in collaboration and social equality made him an ideal fit for a job helping people. Who knew it would lead him to build a museum out of ice?



Lance Fung. Photo by Doug Cody at Bay Area Event Photography

Fung followed his passion for contemporary art and found a career as a celebrated curator. Still driven by social equality, he strives to break down the wall between the art industry and people on the street. He's overseen a number of grandiose exhibitions, including his celebrated *Snow Show*, which organized teams of artists crafting ice architecture in Finland.

The Phoenix Art Museum welcomed Fung for a lecture Tuesday

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evening, during which he talked about his career as a groundbreaking curator, as well as his current project; a revolutionary temporary exhibition hitting Santa Fe-based contemporary art space [Site Santa Fe](#) on June 22. In contrast to typical fundraising events, *Lucky Number Seven*, will focus on experiencing art that is transient rather than the commercial construction of permanent art. The show features only emerging artists from around the globe, a rarity in itself, who will work to create site-specific pieces that are created especially for the show, and will be disassembled following the exhibition.



Part of Fung's Snow Show

New Times sat down with this curious curator to ask him about this new exhibit and how he hopes it will expose more art to the general public.

New Times: Let's start with a simple question: What is a curator?

Lance Fung: Most people know that a curator works in a museum. They get that much. And people in the art world aren't really sure what it means to be curator and the role is changing over time. In a nutshell, a curator is the brain behind of all the exhibitions and collections that are shown at a non-profit space or a museum space. The curator typically works within the non-commercial realm, to avoid conflicts of interest. The curator is supposed to be the visionary and scholar who conceives an exhibition, does their research to collect the works of art, presents it and then allows the critics to come and judge it. But there is a lot of blurring of boundaries as the art world becomes more market influenced.

Although I currently wear the hat of curator, I have a very specific practice, and that is one of curating mostly group exhibitions, and ones dealing with specific circumstances.

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Basically, the works are always made for the location in which they are shown. Unlike many curators, I try to view my audience as being the general public as well as being able to speak to the art world; not the other way around. I feel that lots of the time the general public is marginalized by the art world, which can feel like a private club.

It can be like going to a new bar and going alone. It's not a fun experience until you met some of the other people, and eventually it cracks wide open. I'm trying to support the necessity of having great art brought into the world of the general public.

NT: How did you find your start in a community that is so tough to break into?

LF: Well, at first I went to UC Davis in California and studied science and biology because I was pre-med, but also art because that's what I enjoyed. Naturally, being a good 4th generation Chinese-American meant that my folks wanted a doctor in the family, a professional person who could be self-sustainable, if not a pillar of society. I really wanted at the time...and sometime still wonder if I made the right decision not to be, but I wanted to be a pediatrician.

But it's funny because when I was in school they gave everyone an aptitude test that tells you what kind of vocations you might be good at. And it was very interesting, because my vocations came up: priest, teacher, social work or physician. And now in being in the art world all these years it recently occurred to me that I almost view myself, not literately, but spiritually attempting to do social works through the visual arts. The visual arts is not a very social work-oriented place because often times it's expensive and it's audience is affluent and educated or they're very interested. But it doesn't often hit mainstream. So my work that touched more on social advocacy issues are dealing with things like the environment, social justice or education. So it's interesting that a lot of the concepts found in my high school aptitude test are still very present in my work.

I moved to New York for graduate school and I thought rather than just focus on school, I'd get a part-time job in the art world and see what it was really like. And prior to graduation, I was offered a dream job directing an extremely important gallery of its day, called the Holly Solomon Gallery. And that was sort of training ground for all my future endeavors.

NT: One of your biggest projects thus far has been the *Snow Show*, which involved artists creating enormous structures out of blocks of ice. How did you conceive such a massive undertaking?

LF: I don't consider myself to be a real social worker, and I defiantly don't consider myself to be an artist. But I do think my curatorial methodology gravitates more towards how an artist develops a work of art, then how a curator traditionally develops an exhibition. Typically, a curator comes up with a theme for a show, and more like a scientist, will do their research and select works to support their hypothesis, and then present it after the experiments have been done through an exhibition and have professionals review it and say if the show works or not.

An artist in the other hand, or anyone in the creative field including top scientists, can be inspired by anything that could spawn into a huge work of art.

With the snow show, I was going to Scandinavia on a research trip and I had remembered how I had once seen something about an Ice hotel where people stayed in decorative rooms made of big blocks of ice shaped like ships and dolphins and everything. Plenty of people got married there though it must have made for an interesting honeymoon. And I mentioned it to the people who were bringing me over on the ship and they said that they had one there, but it was too far north for me to see on my first trip. And basically while we were talking I got so excited about the concept of creating an exhibition space out of blocks of ice; basically a temporary museum that would melt at the end of the season.

It then naturally evolved into the first large scale exhibition, that investigated the boundaries, practices, seminaries and differences between the art and architectural worlds. I did it by partnering artists and architects, and giving them the a seemingly impossible task, which they accomplished, and I guess that is what has given this show some legacy. The results of the show were building-sized forms that were created primarily from snow and ice.

Before the show opened, the winter Olympics in Toronto had learned of it, and they asked if I would consider doing a version of it for the winter Olympics. I actually thought of this as someone playing a joke on me at first, but it turned out to be real. I accepted they're offer and it resulted in six new projects for the winter Olympics, where millions of people saw the works through media, and again my audience shifted from the art world to the mainstream. And we got a lot of responses from many people who were not in the art world, but who were very excited and moved by the pieces. And that was phenomenal.

NT: Let's talk a bit about *Lucky Number 7* at Site Santa Fe. One of the most interesting aspects about this show is that fact that all

of these pieces are being created especially for the show, only to be dismantled afterwards. That seems very contrary to what a lot of people think art is.

LF: And also what people value about art. Even museum people value an object and they want an object. That's why a lot of museums want to be a collecting institution, because they want proof that there was art. But I believe that real art and the real message is in the experience. Most people within the art world, not just the general public, are excluded from the process of the making because it's an artist making it in their studio. Then their art is represented in the byproduct of the process and then it's hanging on the wall and we either like it or we don't.

I wanted to expand on the notion of the experience being very important. So my biennial became a two-year-long art process and it's all about experience, including the viewer visiting and viewing the work. Everyone in the show is an emerging artist, which is very unusual, and they are all creating the pieces themselves. But none of the works, 18 super ambitious site-specific creations, will be destroyed. By nature, I selected artists who were working in an ephemeral or temporary way, because I don't believe in the destruction of art at all. That's like burning books. But what I did not want to happen in this biennial was for works of art from this utopian process to then be pimped out and sold into the marketplace. I have no problem with collectors or anything like that, I think everyone should live with art, but what I'm not interested in is the spin, the promotion, the branding and the capitalization of the art that often happens in the art world.

So I just wanted this non-commercial experiment to remain non-commercial. Because it wouldn't be pure if it were all about the experience, and then afterwards it becomes traditional and all the things that were there then go to someone's house or to a museum.

Many of the artists in the show don't do concrete works of art and they do very ephemeral, performance based works that aren't tangible. And this biennial won't deny them an introduction into the international art world, in fact it's going to hopefully catapult some careers. It won't deny them any sales, because they have galleries. This way, people can come see a big, ambitious risk by the artist, and then go get something size appropriate for themselves. Many of these pieces would be too big for most people to collect anyhow. Instead people can commission a piece or follow the artist and support their practice, because these are all artists I truly believe in and that have a lot to say.

These artists are just really decent people who are not

concentrating on making money or making a career, which only makes me respect them more, and make me hope they can make money and have a career. It's a funny thing. I often lecture at school that, it's not the outcome that's important, it's your intention.

NT: How will *Lucky Number Seven* engage the general public?

LF: All of the artists came to Santa Fe, without knowing each other, and many of them had never been to America before. But now there is a great sense of community emerging from the artists and the curators and the locals, and it's wonderful. It's really infusing that city with fresh energy.

And the city and the people are inspiring the artists to do works about their experience there. So all the artists have come up with these unbelievably creative projects that range from visual and aesthetic masterpieces to conceptual and political commentary. Nothing is a one-liner, so there aren't images of cactus or tacos or whatever. They're not trying to critique Santa Fe for its good and bad because it's a very complex city, but rather embrace it and illustrate it's complexity, such as it's history of Native Americans, the Hispanics, the Anglos and all the international people moving in, and the extreme economic disparity that exists there. It's a unique mix, but it's not a melting pot or a fusion. It's more like a TV dinner, where you have a lot of different things on one tray, but they're still divided, but they co-exist in the same package. So a lot of the artists notice things like at.

The main tenants of the biennial were three words: Process, experimentation and collaboration. What I realize in giving them that mission is that this exhibit would have to be about the experience. And I realize that when you take all of those words and ideas and wrap them all up they become one word: community. Community has always been very important to me. And within the art community, there is a lot of fracturing and marginalizing of people, especially people trying to break into it. So what I'm trying to do with this biennial is incorporate everyone into this biennial, including the local people who aren't usually part of the community, but who should be part of *Lucky Number Seven's* community.

NT: Will these pieces naturally dissolve like your *Snow Show* or will they be dismantled in some way?

LF: Both actually. A lot of money that goes towards the materials to build this art, and built into the show will be donated so that we can cannibalize someone's artwork and return it back to the raw material it was, whether that is canvas or bricks or television sets. The museums itself is full of ramps that wind you through

and in and out of the space, and just the build out was \$200,000. A lot of that was a ton of plywood. So we will be dismantling it at the close of the show, and all the salvageable material, such as the wood will be given to Habitat for Humanity. And the same sort of thing will happen with the other artist's materials, thereby returning even more to the community. And I'm very excited about that, because that's all part of the show's purpose.

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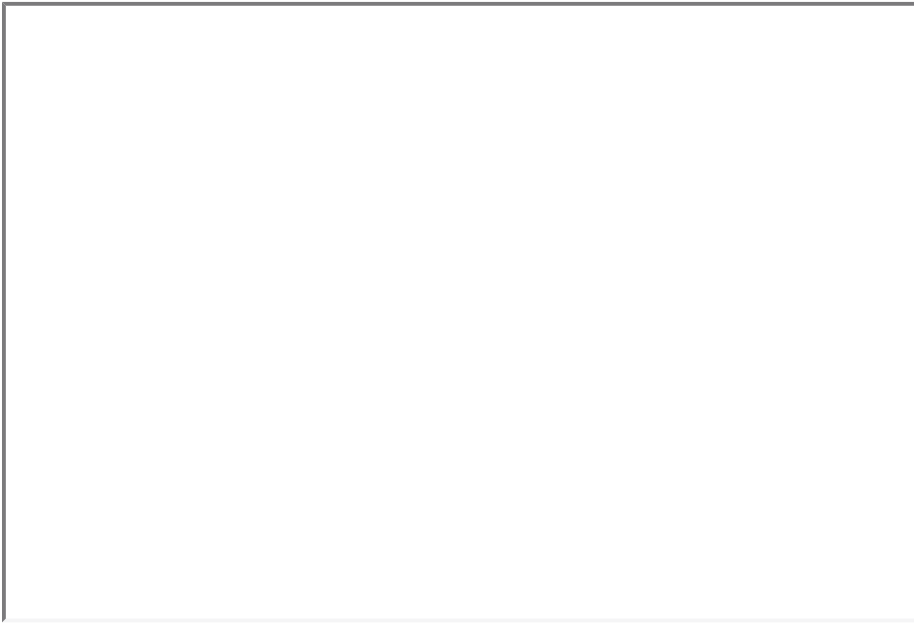
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