Painting history, emotion onto a legendary street

2018-09-07

By Hong Xiao |   
 China Daily USA |  
 Updated: 2018-09-07 22:54

Artist Chen Dongfan's mission in life is to let his art speak for itself, so he spent eight days painting an asphalt mural directly onto 4,800 square feet of Doyers Street in Manhattan's Chinatown.  
Early in the 20th century, Doyers Street earned the nickname of the Bloody Angle because of the street gang violence and murders that took place there.  
Chen read one description of it saying that residents of Doyers Street had to wash the blood off the street with water every morning.  
"That's impressive," he told China Daily. "Now, after all these years, I'm using color to create art there. It's dramatic, also romantic."  
The artwork is called The Song of Dragon and Flowers to pay tribute to the history of Asian-American immigrants.  
"Dragon as a visual embodiment of this area and Chinese cultural heritage, and flowers are a symbol of peace, also representing the richness of Chinatown's history," Chen explained.  
"The song refers to the style and art-making process of my space painting," he added.  
Chen's artwork is part of the New York City Department of Transportation's Seasonal Streets program, which temporarily transforms streets into vibrant public spaces during warm weather when people use them the most.  
The Song of Dragon and Flowers was selected by the DOT from about a dozen candidates because of its outstanding visual presentation and the meaningful connection with the historical significance of Doyers Street and its Asian-American heritage.  
"The plan sounded crazy, since the busy street had to be blocked from both vehicles and pedestrians while the painting was going on," Chen said.  
"It was also challenging personally as I had to paint nonstop to make sure the project was completed on schedule," said Chen. "I could hardly stand up over the last few days, my back was killing me."  
"But everyone couldn't have been more excited to see the completed work," Chen said, who painted the finishing stokes on July 20.  
"Through the explosion of abstract lines and vivid colors, I wanted to bring an Eastern charm into my work by composing a song with exuberant and dynamic rhythms," he said.  
Born in Shandong province in eastern coastal China in 1982, Chen earned a bachelor's degree in experimental art from the China Academy of Art, Hangzhou, in 2008.  
Chen's work has been exhibited in the US and China and he has participated in a variety of public art projects and large-scale space paintings in New York, Hangzhou, as well as Turin, Italy and Athens, Greece.  
Chen describes his work as "not about dreams, but rather a kind of reality, a kind of memory, a mental world, the intersection between sensation and illusion and it takes time to find a way in."  
Chen is interested in how people react to his work. After the artwork is done, he transforms himself into an observer.  
"I keep an eye on people who visit the site and post photos on Instagram with hashtags, and I like to interact with them," he said.  
"Over time, the colors will fade and finally disappear. It should look different over different stages," he said. "It's just the character of my art, which is integrated into the street, reflecting the changes of time."  
Currently, Chen lives and works in New York and Hangzhou. Living in New York, the ethnic melting pot, he said, gives him the opportunity to think about his ethnic identity.  
"I feel honored to contribute to the community of my own ethnic group and use my brush to tell the story of the past, the present and the future of Chinatown," he said.

http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201809/07/WS5b929111a31033b4f4654e85.html