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Kevin Chen's job: to make sure show goes on

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Eric Luce / The Chronicle

In his undergraduate days at Columbia University, Kevin Chen studied under Robert Thurman, the West's pre-eminent scholar on Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. Chen didn't follow Eastern spirituality as a career path but applied that mind-set to his work as an art and music programmer at Intersection for the Arts. Placid, soft-spoken, with a low, late-night-radio kind of voice, Chen brings to his work a combination of sangfroid and compulsive work ethic. At Intersection, the city's oldest alternative arts space, a co-worker describes his "simultaneously frantic/Zen quality."

During a typical workweek, Chen, 36, becomes a two-headed, inexhaustible dynamo. For the current gallery show, titled "Somewhere in Advance of Nowhere*: Youth, Imagination and Transformation," he worked every day and night last week, as late as 3 a.m., mounting the installation with guest artist Evan Bissell. On Friday, he hosted the reception with Bissell. Saturday he met from 9:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. with a panel of literary-competition judges, and then did more time at Intersection. On Sunday, he was up at 10 a.m. setting up and hosting a jazz concert in Intersection's fall series at the deYoung Museum.

Unlike a curator at large museums and arts institutions, whose job is compartmentalized and circumscribed by union rules, Chen is fully involved in the labor of mounting a show - "down to scrubbing the scuff marks off the floor," says Intersection Executive Director Deborah Cullinan. "Kevin stands side-by-side with the artists we work with in our gallery, literally partnering with them to help them achieve their vision." In the days leading up to a show, she says, Chen's Zen-like composure starts to fade. "Kevin types really fast and really hard when he is stressed. He also runs up and down the stairs really hard. I think he has the ability to make the building shake. The days following often include a few extra cigarettes and sometimes even a 'chew.' In all the years I've known him, he has worn big, heavy, black boots everywhere."

Born to Taiwanese immigrant parents, Chen was raised in Trenton, N.J. He is short with a boyish physique, and has a gentle smile and a hipster's patch of hair on his chin. Chen is self-effacing, ill-inclined to boast or grandstand and says he just "fell into" this line of work. "I've always been making art and when I moved to Berkeley in '94 to be with a college sweetheart, I found out about this place in Berkeley called Kala Institute." At Kala, a cooperative artist facility, Chen worked two to three days in exchange for studio access. Soon he was on the payroll - writing grant proposals, organizing classes and teachers, planning and hanging exhibitions. "I found out I was pretty good at it." When Intersection advertised for a program director in 1998, Chen got the job.



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He has an obsession with details, a love for the infinite perfectibility of any project. The Bissell show, which runs through Nov. 22, is built around a series of large portraits depicting Bay Area poets, ages 15 to 20. Each portrait is framed by a quote from the poet (e.g., "Writing is a beautiful anxiety"), and each has a corresponding phone number and extension to call and hear the poet's voice. In addition to the portraits at the gallery, there are 14 more in public places, including the 16th Street BART station plaza.

It's a multitiered show and one tier came from a random idea that Chen tossed out to Bissell: "I said, 'I have, like, five boxes of frames that are just gathering dust. Why don't we use these?'" Chen and Bissell decided the frames could hold portraits by each of the young poets, depicting educators or artists who influenced them. Taking it one step further, they converted one corner of the gallery into a workshop, where visitors create their own mentor portraits with crayons, markers and colored pencils. Chen says he wanted "an evolving, kind of ongoing exhibition - instead of one that's just static from the time it opens." Bissell, who is 25 and grew up in Mill Valley, says working with Chen "has been like being in both grad school and working as an apprentice to a fine craftsman. ... Kevin believes in and respects art, not as stagnant and vacuum-cased monuments - but objects that hold power, excitement and infinite possibility."



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On Sunday night, having opened the Bissell exhibition and hosted the deYoung Museum concert, Chen was home in his Oakland condo/loft, a converted warehouse near Jack London Square. Smoking a cigarette and drinking red wine, he plays Charlie Mingus and John Coltrane on his CD player and introduces his girlfriend, Lucy Lin. Chen moves slowly and his voice is mellow and untroubled - infused with the afterglow of good and satisfying work.

He shows his recent art project, a series of architectural drawings he calls "The View From There." They're "fictional cities," he says, meticulously detailed and drawn with pencils - often under a magnifying glass. Each piece of paper is 2 feet wide by 3 feet high, but Chen's drawings are only 1 inch high, at the bottom of the frame. The rest is blank paper. There's a fanciful, utopian quality to this miniature work. Chen, who spends so much time representing and enhancing the work of others, is obviously pleased with the result. The drawings are included in two forthcoming group shows: "Double Exposure" at Blank Space in Oakland and "Shifted Focus: An APAture Retrospective" at Kearny Street Workshop in San Francisco. Chen says he wanted to evoke the feeling of seeing the San Francisco skyline from the Oakland estuary, or the hive of downtown from the top of Twin Peaks. "It's that universal feeling of hope and optimism," he says, "just from having that breather point."

somewhere in advance of nowhere: youth, imagination and transformation:* Through Nov. 22. Intersection for the Arts, 446 Valencia St., San Francisco. www.theintersection.org.

Kevin Chen's *The View From There*: Drawings are included in two forthcoming group shows: *Double Exposure*, Oct. 25 through Nov. 17 at Blank Space, 6608 San Pablo Ave., Oakland; and *Shifted Focus: An APAture Retrospective*, Oct. 25 through Jan. 23 at the Kearny Street Workshop, 180 Capp St., San Francisco. www.blankspacegallery.com, www.kearnystreet.org.