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An Art World Provocateur Returns to New York With an Unexpected Subject: Bees

By KEVIN McGARRYMAY 25, 2016



The artist Terence Koh recently installed a single-occupancy "bee chapel" upstate, left; at right, the chapel has been reconstructed in a modified form at Andrew Edlin Gallery on the Bowery. Credit From left: Stewart Shining; Olya Vysotskaya

“Good afternoon,” the elusive artist Terence Koh said over the phone earlier this week. He’d called to discuss his new show, which opened at Andrew Edlin Gallery over the weekend. “I’m inside the bee chapel. I’m lying down and looking straight up at the ceiling. They’re really busy today because it’s sunny.”

The Beijing-born, Canadian-raised enfant terrible was once the poster boy of aughts excess — a decade ago, he gold-plated his own feces and [sold them](#) at Art Basel for about a half-million dollars; he also once, rather infamously, [told T](#), “I am the Naomi Campbell of the art world.” But the past few years have brought a different turn: He discontinued his gallery representations and, in 2014, moved to a mountaintop in the Catskills. The relocation was widely construed as a ceremonial retirement of sorts, but Koh insists the opposite: “I never had any

intention of quitting the art world, I just moved to a different part of the world,” he says. “It was something that happened naturally.” He has since lived peacefully in what he describes as a personal Eden dusted with goldenrod and apple trees. In the branches of one, he built a hut and called it a “bee chapel,” which would become the titular heart of his new exhibition.



At the gallery, the bees are separated from visitors who enter the chapel by steel mesh, and can fly outside to gather pollen via plastic tubes. Olya Vysotskaya

News of Edlin’s move to a new address pregnant with Manhattan symbolism, 212 Bowery, inspired Koh to reach out in hopes of bringing the chapel — a human-scale hive of sorts, made of wood and wax, with a door to let in a single viewer at a time — to the city. “I emailed Andrew about three times and he ignored me. He didn’t know who I was because he specialized in outsider art,” Koh says. Last autumn, Edlin visited Koh’s farm with his wife and daughter, and come spring, people were buzzing about Koh’s return to downtown.

Outside the gallery sit solar panels that power the show; inside, there are seven rooms built to represent the days of the week, each lined with a flooring of raw earth trucked in from New Jersey. While honeybees are in fact quite docile creatures, for the safety of litigious Manhattanites, there is a metal mesh physically separating humans and insects inside the chapel itself. The bees occupy a one-and-a-half inch crawl space between the interior chamber and its

walls, known to beekeepers as “bee space.” “You can see them through the mesh and you can smell them and they’re dropping pollen at you. The hive pretty much vibrates as well,” Koh says. “The idea is I want to be able to resonate with the bees at the same time as the bees are resonating with us.”



The exhibition also includes a beeswax candle burning from both ends, which is mic'ed and amplified into the galleries as one of several aural vibrational profiles.

Credit Olya Vysotskaya

This notion came to him while reading the Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti, who wrote extensively during the political tumult of the 1960s — an era Koh feels is particularly relevant again today. (Indeed, other, framed works in the show combine organic materials like honey, wax and earth with ephemera from the presidential race, like Bernie, Hillary and Trump buttons).

“Krishnamurti asked: how do you get out of this chaos?” Koh relates. His answer: “You have to start with one person first, and before that, the spirit.”

The exhibition, of course, advances an ecological cause: In recent years, dwindling bee populations have evolved from disconcerting trend into an acute threat to food production and human viability on Earth. The show taps into more transcendental expressions of oneness, as well. Beyond the colony’s own humming, which is mic'ed and amplified, similarly themed soundtracks play in each of the spaces. “We create the sense that everything in the show is living in a

vibration,” Koh says. In one instance, he worked with NASA, which suggested he include a Hawaiian radio station live-streaming the collision of two black holes 1.2 billion light years away. Another track — much more D.I.Y., but somehow equally profound — chronicles the approach of two flames burning from opposite sides of the same candle.



An ailing apple tree the artist has named “Harriet” has been moved into the gallery, where it is cared for, as well. Credit Olya Vysotskaya

Perhaps the most aching and esoteric drone comes from a diseased apple tree Koh has named Harriet, removed from the orchard of a neighbor’s farm because it posed a threat to nearby trees. Transplanted into the gallery with bandaged roots that are watered several times a day, Harriet hangs on in a suspended state of Promethean living death, and receives an ongoing electroencephalogram (EEG), which the artist explains as a “life-force monitor.” These electrical currents that quantify the tree’s being are played in concert with the conjoined universes and dueling flames.

“Terence Koh: Bee Chapel” is on view through July 1 at Andrew Edlin Gallery, 212 Bowery, New York, edlingallery.com.