

ARTFORUM

Terence Koh

05.27.16



View of Terence Koh, "bee chapel," 2016.

The mythmaker Terence Koh makes the most of big questions. For his show "bee chapel" at Andrew Edlin's new space on the Bowery, the Beijing-born, Ontario-raised artist has brought upstate New York downtown, covering the gallery's floors in topsoil, conjuring a living-dying apple tree, and building a wax shrine for a colony of bees. Acrylic tubes connect the "chapel" to the outside, allowing the little ciphers to come and go as they please. This is Koh's first solo presentation in New York since nothingtoodoo, his memorable performance at Mary Boone Gallery in 2011.

I MOVED UPSTATE about two-and-a-half years ago. Maybe it's a genetic calling that you have to go to nature for a while, and I started looking for different places. But when we finally found this mountaintop in the Catskills, me and my boyfriend Garrick knew that this was our home.

The first thing we did when we moved up there, we set up a tepee on top of the mountain. We just slept in the tepee and built a fire, looked at the stars and I guess questioned who we are—not just as yourself, but who we are as a species.

I thought that with all of these things going on, what can you do sitting on a mountaintop as an artist, as a human being, as a person that's conscious about what's happening today? I have been reading Krishnamurti, an Indian philosopher. "How do you change society?" he asks. And he goes, "You have to start at the present moment, with yourself and the spirit first, and once you start with the spirit of who we are, then everything takes care of itself." I watched him on YouTube and the next day I was like, "You will build a bee chapel." And I was like, "What's a bee chapel?" Maybe build a place where humans and bees can come together as one, sitting in this room. And then maybe one person sitting here by themselves with their feet up would be one way to spread out the vibrations of what we can do.

At first, I didn't know much about bees. One of the first configurations was a pyramid covered in honey. I just stupidly thought that if you covered a pyramid in honey, the bees would just automatically start doing that. I talked to an architecture consultant about how to build the shape and to bee consultants, and it all came about through different people excited about the project.

When we began to build the bee chapel, Garrick and I were walking on at length trying to find a site. And when we were walking, we saw an apple tree and... Oh, wow, apple tree. We walked around and we saw a second apple tree. It made sense to build the bee chapel in the middle and then it started becoming like a Garden of Eden. In the original version upstate, we called this installation *O felix culpa*, which means "O happy fall" in Latin. It's a happy fall because Adam had to sin and bite the apple, and the happiness of being forgiven by God.



View of Terence Koh, “bee chapel,” 2016.

You can talk to the bees as well. I tell them about what’s happening in the world today. “We’re going to build a new bee chapel in the city, so your sisters are going to have a little sister home.” You just tell them about Bernie Sanders, how Bernie Sanders and Hillary are doing and what’s happening with Syria and stuff like that. Because I think they want to know what’s happening in the world as well. You transmit a living, verbal thing to the bees and who knows? I really believe that we’re going to find all these mysteries that somehow maybe it’s all going to be channeled in a ripple into the world itself.

The whole front room of the gallery is a sine wave system. It’s covered in soil and there’s an apple tree in the middle and a speaker playing sounds. Where the apple tree is there’s a cone of... like a living “NOW” moment. So you are vibrating in the room and then you walk to the apple tree and suddenly you stop vibrating and you can sit around the apple tree. And then you walk away from it and it vibrates again.

There are six sounds being played. The first is a livestream of the background cosmos, from a radio telescope in Hawaii. The second is from a mic in the bee chapel, while the third is a mic from a double-sided candle burning in another of the rooms. There’s one measuring anti-phase energies in the apple tree gallery. And then the tree’s connected and the ground is connected to an EEG monitor, which somehow detects life. It’s something about the voltage system. So any breath, any step, any touch of the tree—I really believe that even the synapses in our brains, the veins, the blood flowing in our system—is going to affect the vibrations in that room. There’s also the sound of two black holes colliding, the famous Chirp. It goes, “Voooo.” It’s 1.2 billion light years away. The existence proves Einstein’s theory that the whole universe is a vibration.

The tree in the front gallery is called Eve. She used to be called Harriett. Because we had the apple tree in the original bee chapel installation, I thought I should create a Garden of Eden in the gallery as well. But I said, “I don’t want to kill a tree just to make a Garden of Eden.” So I started asking different people and came to Andy and Polly who own an apple tree farm in Wurtsboro, New York. And Andy goes, “We happen to be cutting down Harriett because she’s diseased and she would spread the disease to the other trees.” So it came out perfectly. He’s an artist as well so he understood I wasn’t crazy. I was going to move this tree and treat it like a living goddess, move her with as much care as we can to the gallery system and wrap her roots up and bandage her. We spritz her roots with water every day and we talk to her and we sing to her and everything.

That’s the story of Eve.