

R. Chiu Leong

b.1943, Los Angeles, California, lives in Volcano,
Hawai'i

exhibited in *Biennial IV*

left to right

Volcano 1, Volcano 3, Volcano 2, 1987

glazed stoneware

Volcanoes erupting above me and below me. Magma flowing through my veins as I recite mantras to still the moment as the clay takes form. Flames leaping from the chimney, copper oxide transforms to volcanic red in this black smoked inferno.

R. CHIU LEONG

*Born 1943 in Los Angeles, California
Lives in Volcano on Hawai'i*

Chiu Leong is well-known in Hawai'i for the finely thrown and beautifully glazed ceramics he has been making for over twenty years. It may come as a surprise to many then that in this exhibition he is showing black and white photographs. But Leong studied photography at the Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles and for several years in the late 1960s and early 1970s worked as a commercial photographer in Los Angeles and New York. Thus, Leong's recent photographs are not so much a radical artistic change for him as a return to a medium he knows well and a renewed exploration of its creative possibilities for personal expression.

Leong grew up in Los Angeles, the first-born son of immigrant Chinese parents who prized scholarship, the sciences, and family values. In this traditional Asian-American family the arts were never discussed. After high school Leong studied for one year at Los Angeles City College but in 1961 came to Honolulu and enrolled at the University of Hawai'i—Mānoa. Leong had had the experience of growing up as part of a minority group in Los Angeles, so he chose Hawai'i because of its substantial Asian-American population and culture. While at the University of Hawai'i Leong studied engineering to satisfy his family's desire that he pursue a practical career. He also took a two-semester course in ceramics taught by

Toshiko Takaezu. Working in clay excited him, and when he returned to Los Angeles in 1963 it was with the intention of studying ceramics at Otis Art Institute. His parents, however would only support his enrolling in a commercial art program not a fine art curriculum. At the time the only degree program in commercial art was at Art Center College of Design, then located in Hollywood. Leong quickly put together a photography portfolio as part of his application and was accepted into Art Center's photography program. He left Art Center a semester before graduating, however, in order to take a job as a photographer working in the rock and roll music scene in Hollywood. He worked successfully in this business for four years, creating images for many album covers, including the first album of Frank Zappa. For a time he was caught up in the newness and excitement of the music scene, but in 1969 Leong moved to New York and became an advertising photographer doing studio shoots of fashion and food subjects for print advertisements. Leong returned to Los Angeles in 1970 and set up his own commercial photography studio, but he began to realize the life he was leading wasn't how he wanted to spend his time and that he needed to get away from fast-paced, glamorous civilization.

Leong had become interested in Chinese poetry, and reading *Cold Mountain Poems* by Gary Snyder, translations of

poems by the T'ang Dynasty poet Han Shan, who abandoned urban life to wander in the T'ien t'ai mountains, inspired Leong to do some searching of his own to find out what more life might hold for him beyond the commercial world. Leong traveled to many areas around the United States looking for a suitable place to, as he has said, "grow myself." His requirements were basic and simple; he wanted a place with clean air and water, and some kind of artistic community. In 1972, Leong sold everything and left Los Angeles for Hawai'i, purposefully choosing to fly to Hilo rather than stay in the more cosmopolitan Honolulu. He arrived with a backpack, some money, and the desire to be "a homesteader and a potter." In 1975 Leong acquired property near Volcano, and the slopes of Mauna Loa became his own mountain to wander and explore. The quiet and isolation of Volcano were ideally suited to Leong's goal of making a place that would accommodate all of his needs—living, working, creating—in one environment. At this time Leong also began to study *chado*, the way of tea. The philosophy of the tea ceremony, with its attention to, respect for, and refinement of every element of life, its humanistic sensibility for integrating all aspects of living, became the foundation of Leong's approach to his own existence. Over the past twenty years Leong and his wife, dancer/choreographer Eva Lee, have cre-

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LEONG (continued)

ated a remarkable tranquil environment in the forest at Volcano—a large rustic structure encompassing a ceramics studio, gallery, dance/photography studio which also functions as a performance space, and living areas, all surrounded by gardens.

A darkroom for photography had been planned into the overall design of the building in the 1980s but it was not until 1994, when finances permitted, that it was added and the studio space for shooting was enclosed and finished. With functional spaces to work in, Leong purchased photography equipment to replace what he had sold or given away in the past. Leong had remained involved with photography over the years, but primarily to shoot promotional/publicity images for Eva's performance works, using facilities at the Volcano Art Center to process film and make prints.

In 1993 Leong took a series of photographs of Eva and a visiting actress friend, who covered their nude bodies with clay slip and spontaneously interacted in front of the camera. It wasn't until more than a year later, however, that Leong developed and printed the images. At first dismayed that mold had damaged the film emulsion, Leong was intrigued how the patterns of mold growth visible in prints made from the negatives complemented the mottled, clay-covered bodies of the two women, adding textural contrasts that enhanced the mystery and visual interest of the works. Aside from the serendipitous effects of the mold, the power of the

images themselves, communicating human emotions in a simple and straightforward manner, excited Leong and made him want to do more work in this vein.

Leong embarked on a body of work, selections from which are presented in this exhibition. He devised a simple format for the photography sessions which is unchanging—he always uses the same camera and film, works only with available light from the north-facing studio skylight, and poses his subjects in front of standard black seamless photography background paper. Leong wants no variation, no mystery in the technical aspects of his images. The only unknown, the sole variable element is the juncture with the artist and the subject, and all energy gets focused on this moment. Leong's subjects have included friends, acquaintances, occasionally strangers that he has approached or who have approached him, and they have come to work with him as individuals, couples, families, and groups.

Leong considers working with his subjects to be a collaborative art form, an exchange in which the common goal is to discover the essential human being, to reveal the beauty, excitement and mystery that are within all of us. Each session resembles a kind of ceremony and begins in the corner of the studio with a clothes rack, mirror and bowl of porcelain slip. As if preparing for a ritual, the subjects undress and coat their

bodies with liquid clay, then move onto the black-papered area where, to soft musical sounds in the background, they are encouraged to begin a journey of discovery about themselves.

It is a situation of exceptional vulnerability, Leong acknowledges, "It is rare that people let their guard down in front of a camera and other people, let alone when they are naked and covered with mud." Nevertheless, Leong says that there is something transformative in the act of smearing clay on the body. It gives a patina that masks our differences and separates us from our outward personas. In some way it connects us to primal feelings, releasing us from our present selves and inhibitions and linking us to an ancestral, common past. Gently, gradually Leong establishes a bond of trust between himself and his subjects. As a session progresses, self-consciousness falls away, an inner sensitivity comes forward, and subjects reach deeper into their experiences and psyches.

Leong has titled this ongoing body of photographs *Endangered Species*. It is not that he feels humans are endangered but that a certain quality of humanity is in danger of disappearing. It is this humanity that Leong strives to reveal in the studio with his subjects and capture for the viewer in his photographs. His images are his proof that it still exists. They help us appreciate the uniqueness of human beings and celebrate the common bond we all share.