

## China is Near: Joyce Kozloff's Journey

by Barbara Pollack

*Maybe this project has nothing to do with China. Maybe I knew nothing when I began and I still know nothing about China. This is the project I created because I did not go to China.*

In May 2009, Joyce Kozloff intended to take a trip on the Silk Road in China, from Xian to Dunhuang to Urumqi to Kashgar, a three-week adventure with two women friends, Deborah Irmas and myself. As much as we were looking forward to the trip, it never happened. I could not find the funding and Joyce's brother was diagnosed with a fatal disease so she did not want to leave the United States. While I was content to live with my disappointment, Joyce went on a journey all her own, exploring China from a distance and discovering that it was never far from home.

Inspired by a trove of paper-cut figures that her parents had brought back from China in 1978, Joyce began by drawing maps of the Silk Road. The colorful cut-outs soon decorated routes used for over 3,000 years to connect merchants, pilgrims, armies and nomads from eastern China to the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, as Joyce worked on these collages, the Uyghurs—Muslims living in western China whom we would have encountered had we taken the trip—staged a rebellion against the Han Chinese controlling these outposts. The central government moved in to quash this outburst, threatening to level all remnants of the Islamic culture in the name of modernization. As the headlines brought news of these events, this artist's exploration of the Silk Road began to take on a tinge of nostalgia for a place she had never seen. Perhaps it was already too late to visit the Silk Road; we had missed our chance.

*I made an imaginative leap into the unknown. One thing triggered off the next, triggered off the next. Gradually, I developed a personal iconography from an engaged outsider's perspective, based on found objects that I could only decipher visually.*

In the next stage of this project, Kozloff searched Google Maps for any place called China, finding a wide range of cities around the world, none of which bore any resemblance to the nation of 1.3 billion people. Joyce found funny places: from China, Indiana, to Chinna Ganjam, India, China Lake Naval Base in California and China in Sonora, Mexico. She Googled her way into the issue of globalization, the way that China's humorous and wacky products have infiltrated other countries' markets. It was not surprising that her next stop would be Chinatown, or the three Chinatowns in New York City: in lower Manhattan, in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, and in Flushing, Queens. (She also visited Chinatowns in San Francisco and Oakland, California.) But by and large, instead of grabbing a passport and flying to China, Joyce set off with a Metrocard and subway map to find a nearby China.

*I have been visiting Chinatown all my life, but I had never looked at it in this way. I was going back daily, to streets I had never walked through or paid much attention to in the past. Every day, I would walk for a couple of hours, making a voyage without leaving everything behind, like you have to do when you explore distant lands. The merchandise spread before me was filled with hyperboles and surprises.*

In the United States, Chinatowns were a 20th-century invention of the Chinese immigrant community to attract tourists and win goodwill. Just like menus in Chinese restaurants—one from column A and two from column B—and fortune cookies, these districts with pagodas and tea shops were created for Western consumers. But increasingly, as the number of *tchotchke* shops and knock-off outlets have multiplied, the streets of Chinatown in New York City look more and more like the shopping avenues of Beijing and Shanghai, packed with cell phones, computers and Prada look-alikes. Kozloff discovered not only businesses endemic to Chinatown—the foot massage salons and herbal pharmacies—but also the thousands of products made in China: martial arts DVDs, stuffed pandas, fake jade necklaces, plastic Buddhas, as well as imitation Rolexes and tiny Statues of Liberty. Instead of buying these souvenirs, Joyce Kozloff photographed them, purchasing a camera for the first time in her forty-year artistic career because this was the only way she could convey the gaudy excess.

*The book is called China is Near, but it is really about the presence of things made in China which are everywhere. Every time you turn something upside down, it is made in China. The mind can't wrap itself around the amount of stuff produced there. The more cluttered and dense the pictures, the better they work for me. And that's my aesthetic anyway. There is chaos in the streets of Chinatown that I wanted to express, a feeling of overload.*

Kitsch is a derogatory term, referencing a popular culture that lacks taste and style. Yet kitsch is probably the only word to describe the aesthetic now prevalent in China, even among its contemporary fine artists. As Joyce discovered, recording two works by Chinese artists in her photographs—a full-scale model of Ji Ji's angry panda and a forgery of Yue Minjun's famous smiling face—high art in China is often just a step away from the knickknacks in tourist stores. This may be China's true export—a wildly popular pop culture permeating global taste far beyond the reach of its economic and military power.

Ironically, Kozloff appropriated the title for this project, *China is Near*, from a 1967 Marco Bellocchio film about young Italian Maoists. Once, what the West feared most about China was its political influence as a Communist country. Yet today, Mao's iconic face is found on more cigarette lighters and ashtrays than on his manifesto, *The Little Red Book*. It is telling that Kozloff's project barely notices the Communist period, since China has become a hyper-capitalist society. As many Chinese have told me, this new economy is a return to its ancient Chinese roots, a revitalization of the Silk Road's prominence as a trading center for the world.

*I kind of love the kitsch. I hope it is apparent that my project is about the exchange. These are Chinese artifacts after they enter our culture, mingle with indigenous kitsch, and become dislocated from their origins. American pop saturated the globe first, and now we are seeing a Chinese blowback. It is a foretaste of things to come in the 21st century.*

Joyce Kozloff's art projects over the years—ranging from paintings to public art murals to globes to books—are immersed in traditions not often embraced by the Western art world. During the course of her career and as a pioneer artist in the Pattern and Decoration movement, she drew influences from Islamic tile work, Japanese erotic prints, Mexican muralists, Italian mask makers and American horror films. In recent years, she has made maps her forte, merging ancient and contemporary cultures to examine such issues as war, colonialism and feminism. She has traveled extensively throughout Latin America, Europe and Asia. Her approach—always open-minded and celebratory—is evident in her treatment of China, a country that she has experienced only through outside filters.

Just as much can be discovered about China from what Kozloff left out as by what she included in this series of collages and photographs. There are no images of the intricate brush paintings or Imperial scrolls, which she has seen many times on her visits to the Chinese painting galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. No Ming chairs or porcelain vases. The only pictures of the Imperial sites in China, the Temple of Heaven and the Forbidden City, are from a mural she found in a shopping mall at the corner of Lafayette and Canal Streets. Alternatively, there are no images of contemporary Shanghai or Beijing, no Pearl TV Tower or Bird's Nest Stadium. This book is more about the China that was accessible to her from her loft in New York City. That so much of China can be found so close at hand speaks loudly about its influence and global reach. Perhaps, like a meal at a local Sichuan restaurant, it will never be as spicy and complex as those found in Chongqing or Chengdu. But it still tells us a great deal about America's current relationship to Chinese mass culture, or at least, Joyce Kozloff's relationship to it. For many of us, who grew up eating Chinese food every Sunday night, *China is Near* is only a slice of China, but one that is as rich and intimate as our own childhood memories.

*To experience China, you probably have to travel it for a year or more. So to go for three weeks as we had planned, you can choose a few things to look at very closely and intensely, but just a few. Perhaps that's what I've done with China is Near.*

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