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Koki Tanaka's public art takes the bus

by Christopher Knight

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Public art these days doesn't get much better than Koki Tanaka's "A painting to public," which is on view as part of the Tokyo-born, L.A.-based artist's debut show at Chinatown's The Box. Conceptually the work is simplicity itself, although it took a bit of doing to get it made.

First Tanaka painted a small picture of a bicycle being carried in a rack on the front of an MTA bus. Trailing by a videographer, he strapped the painting to his bicycle, rode over to a neighborhood bus stop and, when the bus came, loaded the bicycle onto the rack. The painting faced forward, and the artist boarded the bus.

For the duration of the trip, the painting was on public view. When he reached his destination he retrieved the bicycle and peddled away.



At The Box, the bicycle, painting, photographs and a video are all installed, creating something like a nesting doll of images within images and an event within an event. The general audience on the street intersects the specialized audience that goes to art galleries. (There might even be some overlap.) And forget the bureaucratic dance that tends to tamp down public commissions, draining away lively provocation or just plain fun. Like a street artist of a different kind -- meaning Tanaka didn't intrude on anyone's space -- he shunned review committees, nonprofit grants and civic ordinance paperwork and approvals for this public art work. He just did it.

And the art is a pleasure to see, partly because it's also a slyly devastating critique of a social climate in which art is marginalized as some sort of exclusive luxury item. Tanaka, 35, is working in a difficult but fertile territory opened up by artists such as David Hammons. "A painting to public" remains at The Box until March 19 -- and then maybe on a bus near you.

The Box, 977 Chung King Rd., Chinatown, (213) 625-1747, through March 19. Closed Sunday through Tuesday. www.theboxla.com