

July 15, 2020

Via Regular Mail and E-mail (nmaasbach@mocanyc.org)

Nancy Yao Maasbach
President
Museum of Chinese in America
215 Centre Street
New York, NY 10013

Dear Nancy:

I am writing to inform you that I have decided not to exhibit my “Five Cents A Can: Making Visible the Invisible” paintings and installations at MOCA, at the indoor courtyard exhibition space, in October 2020. This is a thoroughly considered decision arrived at after looking into MOCA’s involvement with, and/or acquiescence to, the building of a multi-billion dollar skyscraper jail at the heart of Chinatown.

Since our initial conversation of May 27, 2020, I have spoken to various people, read correspondences and listened to recordings of meetings where artists and community members questioned MOCA’s receipt of approximately \$35 million as part of City Council Member Margaret Chin’s concession deal to vote “yes” for the jail in Chinatown. I have also asked you the direct question of whether MOCA has had conversations with Council Member Chin, or any of her staffers, about concessions or “community give back” for a yes vote for a new jail in Chinatown. You refused to answer by stating, in no uncertain terms, “That’s absurd ... I am not even gonna respond to that.” Your response was the same in every instance that this question came up in meetings with other artists and community members - you refused to answer by deflecting it and then questioning the intelligence or the intention of the questioner who dared to ask the question.

Your defensiveness is consistent with evidence that MOCA knew Council Member Chin was actively in negotiations with Mayor De Blasio for her “yes” vote for the jail in exchange for monetary concessions for Chinatown institutions. You yourself made clear that over the past five years, you have met with Council Member Chin multiple times to seek support for capital fundings to buy the building that MOCA currently rents. In fact, at a December 2018 meeting organized by Council Member Chin for community institutions to meet with Mayor De Blasio about the building of the new jail, you specifically announced to Mayor De Blasio that MOCA would need \$32 million to buy its current location. It is these indisputable facts that led me and other concerned Chinese American artists to ask you about MOCA’s involvement in this concession deal. It is our way of giving MOCA, an institution that we treasure, the opportunity to explain the troubling news that Chin’s “yes” vote for the jail was premised on De Blasio conceding to fund MOCA’s new performance space and acquisition of a permanent home.

Siyon Wong letter to Nancy Yao Maasbach
July 15, 2020

MOCA's unique mission to preserve and present the history of people of Chinese descent in America necessitates a different response than your current refusal to engage the community. You should have, at the get go, explained MOCA's involvement and been forthright with MOCA's position. To date, MOCA has remained publicly silent despite repeated requests by artists and community members to make a public statement.

If MOCA is truly a museum that serves the community where it is situated, then its current leadership fails to demonstrate any understanding of how systematic racism has shaped the history and experience of Chinese people in this community and in America. If MOCA's leadership truly understands what it means to be an ally in the Black Lives Matter movement, then it would know incarceration has been a seminal tool in structural racism against people of color for decades. Your acquiescence to injustice by accepting money for the survival of MOCA is precisely how power pits one struggling minority group against another.

Even if I and the community give MOCA the benefit of the doubt that MOCA was somehow unintentional in being a part of this concession deal between Chin and De Blasio, MOCA demonstrated its complicity by refusing to take a clear and open stance against the jail *after* Chin's "yes" vote.

Nancy, true commitment to racial justice in America requires MOCA to turn down any funding tied to Chin's "yes" vote for the jail in Chinatown. Only this direct refusal for gains that is so tied to oppression would put MOCA on the right track to being a respectable and loved institution worthy of existence. Absent this bold and necessary commitment, I believe MOCA needs a change in leadership.

I still remember that September evening in 2019 when I proudly announced to my two teenage children that their mother will have an art exhibition at the Museum of Chinese in America. Their mouths dropped and were speechless. After all, I am a late-night painter with a full time job. Sadly, today, I must share with them this letter. I told them that it's not an opportunity lost because given MOCA's current leadership who are lacking in social consciousness and vision, it is not an institution that I am proud to exhibit my art.

I treasure MOCA. I will support a MOCA that is brave and owns up to the significance of its actions, at the present and for the sake of history. I refuse to participate in or support a MOCA that strives to secure a physical space at the cost of losing its soul. We are defined by what we do, not what we say.

Sincerely,



Siyon Wong, Artist

artistsiyonwong@gmail.com