

TSANG KIN-WAH

# STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

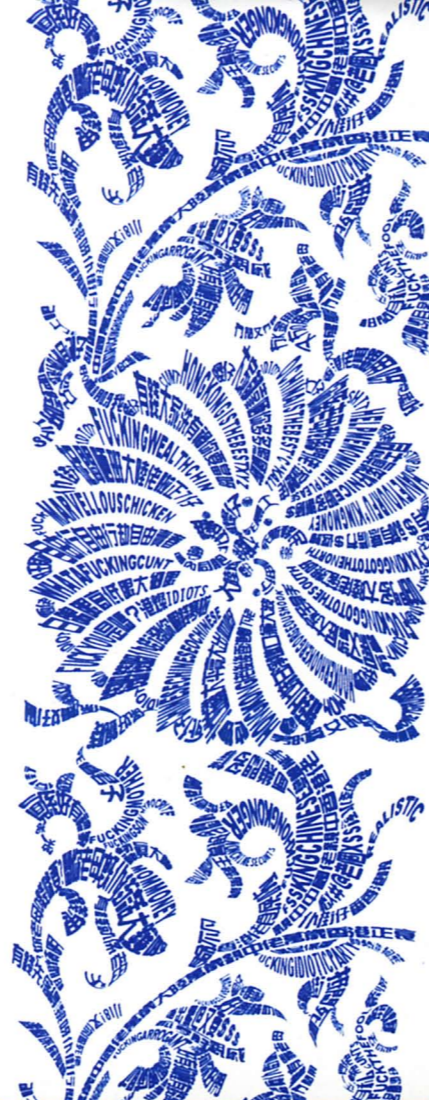
*What is Reality? What is Truth? An emerging  
talent breaks a few rules in seeking answers to ageless  
questions about how to interpret the world.*

*By Andrew Maerkle*

INTERIOR, 2003, Acrylic on paper, silkscreen, dimensions variable. Installation view at Camberwell College of Arts, London. Courtesy the artist.



**INTERIOR, 2003**, Acrylic on paper, silkscreen, dimensions variable. Installation view at Hong Kong Arts Centre. Courtesy the artist.



(Right)  
**UNTITLED - HONG KONG (BLUE ON WHITE), 2006**, Painting, silkscreen and acrylic on fabric, 122 x 122 cm. Courtesy the artist.  
(Bottom)  
**UNTITLED - HONG KONG, 2003-04**, Silkscreen and acrylic on paper, 11.56 x 15.74 x 3.17 m. Installation view at Room With A View Gallery, Shanghai. Courtesy the artist.

**EVEN** a casual visit to Tsang Kin-Wah's website, tsangkinwah.com, reveals an artist who possesses disarming sincerity in the current climate of fast-and-loose conceptual rhetoric. Reproduced in his "About Me" section, Tsang's artist statement begins: "What are TRUTH and REALITY? Do they exist? Can people perceive or find them out? And how?" Another page contains texts Tsang wrote to accompany his various projects, peppered with references to Nietzsche, Barthes, Benjamin, Derrida, the Italian Futurist Marinetti—in each case carefully footnoted like an academic paper. A "Reviews" section contains perhaps the most obsessive bibliography seen on any artist website to date, with links to scans of article after article featuring Tsang's work, detailed to the point of page numbers and a thumbnail of the publication cover.

Written in utilitarian HTML code, the website's design is simple and clean, following a black, white and gray color scheme, with elements that reveal the maker's "hand": a misaligned hyperlink in a sidebar menu or rows of images squeezed into rigid dimensions. The intro page is perhaps the website's splashiest feature. It is dominated by what appears to be an expanse of off-white blankness. Tucked innocuously toward the bottom of the browser, Tsang's name extends in bold type from the left border. Beneath it are two horizontal rows of navigational links in tiny, clean font. The spartan style contrasts with the tedious moving graphics common to high-production websites.

But then, adjusting the computer screen, a funny thing happens. As the light shifts across the LCD display, the off-white expanse resolves into a barely visible gray floral wallpaper-like pattern, recalling those popularized by William Morris, a leader of the 19th-century British Arts and Crafts movement. Adjust the screen further and the pattern itself begins to transform. A bud at the end of a looping tendril suddenly becomes a tight cohort of words, their letters bulging or squeezing into organic shapes: "BUY\$HIT / BUYART\$ / BUYTASTE / MEETCUNT\$." Curling vines prick with shocking vitriol: "GREEDYARTIST FUKING\$SHOW," and "FUKINGLIKEART\$ FUK." Looping, like a severed, sparking electrical cable, a line of Chinese characters repeats a similar message: "Buyartbuywor ksbuypaintingsbuywallpaperbuytaste..."

**TALL** and lanky, with glasses and a mop of black hair, Tsang Kin-Wah is quiet, unassuming—his personality belying the aggressive outpouring of profanity that is his works' hallmark.

Characteristically, Tsang's website portrait is cropped from the torso up, with Tsang barely entering one corner of the frame. Facing left, he crouches pensively, chin resting on one hand, shadows obscuring most of his face. An installation of his obscenity-laced wallpaper takes up most of the image.

Tsang's art career could have followed many possible directions. He practiced calligraphy as a child, learning advanced styles such as the running, regular and seal scripts, and continued studying it at the fine arts department at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, where he graduated with a BA in 2000. At school he won numerous distinctions, including prizes for Western painting and printmaking, watercolor and drawing. Shortly upon graduation, he also earned the prize of excellence at the 2001 Hong Kong Art Biennial, a showcase for local artists. His work at the time included satirical prints inspired by comic-book illustrations, scroll-like ceramic "friezes" replicating the comic-book characters in relief and a series of ink rubbings addressing the 1900 Boxer Rebellion—which presaged the fall of the Qing dynasty—from a contemporary perspective.

In 2002, seeking to broaden his horizons, Tsang took advantage of a scholarship from the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office to study book arts at the London Institute's Camberwell College of the Arts, where he found his artistic voice. Having difficulty adjusting to life in a foreign country, Tsang was impressed—and daunted—by the self-confidence of his peers in articulating their artistic concepts. But then one day two black

youths on the street verbally assaulted him with racial insults. Tsang recalls, "I was really upset by the whole situation. The people and environment looked pleasant at first glance but, in fact, as time went by they revealed a totally different side."

The incident occurred just as Tsang was beginning to deepen his exploration of the interactions between text and space. He seized upon the opportunity to express his unhappiness and frustration, producing his first pattern installation, *Interior* (2003), as his course came to a close. For this work, he used silk-screen prints to cover the structural surfaces in a gallery space—walls, floor and ceiling—with a dense black-on-white floral pattern that turned the environment into a staid, Victorian parlor. The wallpaper popped with aimless, disembodied curses: IDIOTICWORDS, FUCKER, FUCKMYMIND, FUKINGSHUTYOURCUNT, FUKINGSTUPIDMINDLESS, IDIOTFUCKER, DAMNTHESHIT, WORDLESSCUNT, FUCKALLTHEMEANINGFULLSHIT.

If the aptly-titled installation suggested the margins of a troubled teenager's notebook written larger than life, it also impressed viewers with its sheer three-dimensional and psychic density. In his artist statement about the work, Tsang discusses theories of passive text, designed to present ideas to the reader as smoothly as possible, and active text that uses visual elements to enhance literal meaning. *Interior* pushed this concept further to turn a passive experience—getting verbally abused by hostile strangers—into an active rejoinder to the world's slings and arrows. And conjuring the Victorian era, the height of the British Empire when citizens followed strict social and moral codes at home but soldiers, administrators and profiteers advanced the colonial enterprise abroad, the installation hinted at language's role as a façade complicit in the adjudication of power: the ever-shifting ground of legal-speak, double-speak, broken promises.

Although Tsang denies having a specific agenda, his next work, *Untitled - Hong Kong* (2003), originally made for The Room With A View Gallery, Shanghai, reflected on the 1997 handover of Hong Kong from British to Chinese rule. Tsang stuck to the Victorian theme, appropriating a William Morris-



(Above, Both Images) **WHITE CUBE, 2005**, Silkscreen on paper and canvas, dimensions variable. Installation view at John Batten Gallery, Hong Kong. Courtesy the artist.

(Right) Artist installing **DISTRICT BORDERS** (2006) at Shanghai Street Artspace, Hong Kong. Courtesy the artist. (Bottom) Artist installing **FUCKING ART MADE BY THE FUCKING PEOPLE AND FOR THE FUCKING PEOPLE, A JOY TO THE FUCKING MAKER AND THE FUCKING USER** (2007) at CODA museum, Apeldoorn. Courtesy the artist.

style Chinoiserie pattern that had, in turn, been inspired by Ming and Qing dynasty blue-and-white porcelain. Here, Tsang mixed English and Chinese slang into great chrysanthemum pinwheels, the different languages overlaid, distorted and stretched for visual and semantic effect: CUNTCUNTCUNT, YOURMOMLOVEMEBUTNOTU, PRETENTIOUSDICK. Dense concentrations of nasty street Chinese abound: “Gochasechasechasechaseyourgrannie,” “Yourdaughterisalsomine.” The wordplay in Chinese is more sophisticated than in English, sometimes with words repeated to evoke both an aural and visual “baby-talk,” augmented by double meanings depending on whether the reader is from Hong Kong or the mainland. And whereas *Interior* was an avalanche of curses, *Untitled – Hong Kong* alludes to the social tensions and anxieties informing post-1997 Hong Kong, with numerous references to the city’s economic rival, Shanghai, as well as greed and money.

Blending vastly different languages in the same graphic space, Tsang balanced the characteristics of both. His English typeface recalled the psychedelic posters from San Francisco’s late-1960s “Summer of Love” era. Trying to make the Chinese as legible as possible, Tsang was constrained by the relative complexity of the written characters, but still managed to squeeze entire sentences into the same area as two or three English words. Strategically balancing the point size, spacing and clarity, he ultimately replicated an exaggerated, eye-catching advertising font.

Following his return to Hong Kong from London, Tsang had few opportunities to exhibit. He supported himself by working as an archivist for the local non-profit art space, Videotage, while designing artworks on his computer at home. However, Hong Kong dealer John Batten spotted a work of Tsang’s, cropped and printed on canvas, at the 2003 Hong Kong Art Biennial. Batten



(Above) Artist installing **DRAGON/JORMUNGAND/SERPENT/IMPERIALITY/DEVIL/CHINESE/NORWEGIAN/SATAN/GOD/OVERMAN...** (2006) at National Museum of Art, Design and Architecture, Oslo. Courtesy the artist. (Bottom) Artist installing **MomFDad-FDaughterFTeacherFJesusFMaryFBillFMonicaFPoliticianFPastor-FKidFMomFTeen...** (2007) at Yvon Lambert Gallery New York. Courtesy the artist.

was intrigued, but suspecting the work had been compromised for exhibition purposes, thought little of it. A few weeks later at an exhibition of graduates from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, a friend of Batten’s told him to check out the men’s room, where a Hong Kong version of *Interior* was installed. Batten recalls, “As soon as I entered, I understood Kin-Wah’s work. It immediately made sense because he had not compromised on the installation: the whole men’s toilet was wallpapered.” Tsang’s website convinced Batten that the artist was addressing issues few others in Hong Kong consider—what the dealer describes as a “concern for the underdog.” He got in touch with the artist and began a year long process of discussing a solo show.

The result was 2005’s *White Cube*, which helped establish Tsang’s reputation. Formally, the work followed Tsang’s previous pattern installations, mixing English and Chinese profanity, but it included a specific target: the art market. Tsang provoked collectors with phrases like “BUYTHEARTANDSHOWYOU RFUCKINGTASTE,” conspicuously marked up the prices of individual works on the exhibition price list in a comment on the inflationary values of the current art boom and even needled John Batten himself with “FUCKINGWHITEMANJOHNBATTEN.”

Batten says he had no trepidation whatsoever about the show or its contents. He reflects on the audience reaction, “People loved the exhibition. As a white space, it looked ‘beautiful’ and then visitors realized that the patterns were in fact a series of profanities that were blunt, offensive and embarrassing. The Cantonese street language was very descriptive too. Local visitors were reading something they hear daily.”

2005 was momentous for Tsang. Just before “White Cube” opened, he won the Sovereign Asian Art Prize, the top honor in the annual pan-Asian art competition that pays USD 25,000 to acquire the winning artwork. Tsang’s *Untitled – Hong Kong* was one of the headlining works in the Hong Kong Art Biennial and cited in numerous reviews of the exhibition. Despite the acclaim, Tsang was bound to run into resistance eventually. An installation he planned for a commercial space at the Langham Place shopping center in a red-light district, Mong Kok, was shot

down by Langham Place management after Tsang refused to alter the content of his text-patterns, which borrowed lines from girly ads he found in the area. The act of preemptive censorship sent titters through the international media, keen to spot any hint of infringement on expression as the 10th anniversary of Hong Kong’s return to Chinese rule approached.

Since then, Tsang has made installations for Oslo’s National Museum of Art, Design and Architecture, where he applied his patterns to a bank of windows overlooking a public square; the Hong Kong Heritage Museum; and the CODA Museum in Apeldoorn in the Netherlands, where he arranged triangular grids of floral text on the floor. For a permanent installation at a Shu Uemura cosmetics boutique in Costa Mesa, California, Tsang produced his most colorful and labor intensive work to date, hand-painting combinations of bright red, blue, green and yellow text to form intricate rose patterns.

Now represented by Yvon Lambert, with prime spaces in New York and Paris, Tsang is taking his work in new directions. For his 2007 New York debut, he made red-and-blue pattern canvases that, when viewed from a distance, depict images of men and women in pornographic acts—fellatio, threesomes, doggie style—their silhouettes composed of Internet sex-site lingo: CUMFACIALS, NAUGHTYSTUDENT, AMATEUR.

Tsang has also started a series of text installations that are visually distinct from the pattern installations. Instead of camouflaging his provocation in immersive environments, Tsang strips away the sensational elements of his work, installing





minimal lines of text in darkened rooms that appear almost empty. For his show at Yvon Lambert in Paris in early 2008, Tsang juxtaposed the overwhelming *Untitled – Hong Kong*, which he refers to as “saturated,” with his latest work, *BLACK! BLACK! BLACK!* (2008). The installation is a metaphysical musing on racism in French philosophy comprised of white text (IDIOTWHITEPHILOSOPHER) on the white walls and ceiling of a brightly-lit room accompanied by a prolonged fragment of Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy*. The work’s title is borrowed from conservative intellectual Alain Finkielkraut’s comment on the French soccer team that won the 1998 World Cup.

*BLACK! BLACK! BLACK!*’s appearance suggests a virtual inversion of Plato’s allegory of the cave, which used the example of a society of prisoners raised inside a shadowy cave as a metaphor for the limitations of human perception and knowledge. In the show’s elliptical press release, Tsang conceives of a society of prisoners in which white represents virtue, while black represents evil, inferiority and depravity. In Tsang’s version of the allegory, one prisoner escapes from the cave to discover the “truth:” “BLACK, BLACK, BLACK!” Tsang follows this revelation with a series of earnest questions, and a surprisingly simple answer:

“What is Purity?”  
 “What is Impurity?”  
 “What is Good?”  
 “What is Evil?”  
 “What is Love?”  
 “What is Hate?”  
 “...”  
 “NOTHING!”  
 “NOTHING BUT INTERPRETATIONS!”

**AT** the climax of the 1999 blockbuster film *The Matrix*, the hero, Neo, realizes that everything he perceives is nothing more than computer programming. The film cuts away to Neo’s point-of-view: every detail in the dingy hallway where he confronts a trio of digital thugs is rendered in lines of streaming green code. Throughout the film, which borrows liberally from classic thought, including Plato’s cave allegory, Neo is driven by questions about the nature of reality. His revelatory vision bears striking similarities to Tsang Kin-Wah’s approach to creating art that explores the tenuous membranes dividing the realms of thought, action, experience and reaction.

Living and working in an apartment with his girlfriend and cat in the tranquil outskirts of Hong Kong, Tsang is no superhero. But, like Neo, the artist achieves insight into the world as artifice: a construct of social codes and habits of intellect, a vast network of misinformation that, just possibly, can be hacked and rewired with a shock to the right node in the system.



(Above) Artist in front of *BLACK! BLACK! BLACK!*, 2008, cold transparent laminating film, CD player and speakers, 5.93 x 4.49 x 2.65 m. Courtesy Yvon Lambert Gallery, Paris.  
 (Opposite Page) Detail of *BLACK! BLACK! BLACK!*, 2008.