



In bloom

冷冷的熱愛

How 曾建華 (Tsang Kin-wah) came to use foul language in his work

By Victoria Ip. Photography by Fanco Lai



It is a boiling summer afternoon that makes you wish clothes hadn't been invented and swimming pools were just a stone's throw away. 曾建華 (Tsang Kin-wah) greets me at 車公廟站 (Che Kung Temple station) with a big grin. He immediately notices the massive mosquito bite on my arm and shoots me a look of disbelief. A tall and thin figure, he looks like he wouldn't harm a fly even if it were adorning his food. He certainly does not look like someone who would ornament his art with foul language — but then looks can be deceiving.

As we walk slowly to his studio apartment in 沙田頭村 (Sha Tin Tau Village), Tsang courteously shows the way with one outstretched hand. Unlike the other people in the crowd, who seem to be absorbed in their own business, Tsang is conscious of his surroundings and has a poet's eye for details.

We are greeted by Tsang's cat Gibson at the door. Inside, a sticker of the British flag is plastered on a cupboard. The red, white and blue flag is much more than a piece of cloth to him. He studied MA Book Arts at Camberwell College of Arts in London from 2002 to 2003, a year that would prove pivotal in his life. Towards the end of the second semester he found his voice as an artist when he began creating his pattern series (2003-2007). (For more information about this, see his website tsangkinwah.com/work2003.htm) It is for these works, which blend foul language with floral patterns, that he is most well known. His studio area is clad in wallpaper with his signature prints. They are brutally honest and the F word is scattered generously (the line "Fucking mindless idiots" remains at the back of my head and refuses to go away).

While in London, Tsang met the most influential person in his life. "He is an artist with wavy hair called Ben Johnson," says Tsang, simulating the curls with his hands. "We had coffee every now and then and he taught me how to be an artist and how to live my life. I have lost contact with him, which is weird since it's like he popped up in my life briefly, taught me all I needed to know, then vanished." I suggest Facebooking the man to touch base with him, but Tsang doesn't respond and seems distracted by his memories.

He also caught the gig bug in London. "Music festivals are the happiest memories I have of my time in London," he says. "It was fun that both guys and girls immerse themselves in the music." But not the clubbing bug. "I don't like the atmosphere, which requires me to speak up so my friends can hear me."

But he found the UK's laidback lifestyle infectious. "I realized that work isn't everything and I'm better at unwinding now. When I go traveling I

look for pastures to lie on. And when friends ask me to take a day off and hop to the beach with them, I'll join."

On a more serious note, Tsang found himself at the receiving end of racist comments in London. Asked if there is a particular incident that stands out, he stares out window in deep concentration before answering in his signature slow drawl: "Two black kids told me off on the bus using Chinese swear words. They must have learnt them on some Chinese TV programmes."

On the whole though, what he gained from his UK experience was positive. He built up his self-confidence while there and learned how to articulate the objective of his artworks. "I'm much more confident and talkative after my masters," he says. "When my professors at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CU) asked me what my work was about in class, I was not able to describe it in just one or two sentences. I'm much better at expressing myself verbally now." Tsang graduated from CU with a fine arts degree in 2000.

His confidence, particularly in his art, is evident as he talks. Wearing a T-shirt with pixel graphics, jeans and a well-worn pair of Converse he looks younger than his 32 years and, while it takes time for him to warm up to a conversation, when he does, he easily gets carried away.

Asked what he is trying to say, when he uses foul language in his work, Tsang responds with a question of his own: "I wonder why it is not okay to say dirty words when it can help you to release emotions." On the dark underbelly of good deeds: "I believe that human nature is ugly. Good deeds aren't necessarily good when we do them because others expect us to."

He also asks me what I make of his new minimal text installation in *What are you looking at?*, his first UK solo exhibition which was held at the Chinese Arts Centre in Manchester during 27 June to 28 September 2008. Inspired by the Stanley Kubrick film *The Shining*, which stars Jack Nicholson, it questions what is good or bad, right or wrong. I tell him it makes me think that the grey area is the current currency and we have bid farewell to the simpler times of black and white. "It's good that my work makes people think," he laughs.

The exhibition also featured his previous pattern installation *I LOVE U*, a piece that reminds me of the not so pretty whys of love. "A lot of men must have told you they love you." Another laugh.

Pamela Kember, art historian at the Hong Kong Art School and a close friend of Tsang, says of the artist: "When he engages in conversation his ideas flow and one can learn a great deal about how his mind works in relation to his art. It is often difficult for artists to articulate their ideas verbally or in

倫敦不僅打開了他的心扉和眼界，更開了他的竅。他在這個過程中建立的自信和藝術視野，並不是他遭受的種族歧視和被邊緣化的經驗可以輕易抹去的。到今日，他想到倫敦，眼神仍舊溫柔

writing. However, Kin-wah comes from a tradition of visual and verbal understanding of language and combines, or crosses the two in deeply fundamental ways so that you cannot separate out which you engage with first — the image, or the text — one informs the other." She first met Tsang after bidding for one of his paintings at a Phillip Charriol auction in 1997. She found his vast ink on canvas — created to the Foundation's theme of *Open Door, Closed Door* — very thought-provoking.

Tsang has never wanted to be everybody's guy. He is not and never has been one to join the crowd. "I have always been very independent," he says. "My happiest memory as a child was when I was home alone and could do whatever I wanted."

His wariness of "crowd mentality" even effects his political views. Tsang is not a registered voter and doesn't believe in spin doctors and their 'shows'. "Sure democracy has its functions," he says, "but it also has its imperfections. It reflects what most people want, yet what the majority favors isn't necessarily good."

He has very loving parents, who have allowed him to discover who he is — an approach that is the road seldom traveled in a city that treats interest classes as tutorials, and vice versa. "Unlike some parents who like to manage their kids' schedule and make them go to tutorial lessons, my parents were quite hands-off and I was given the freedom to do whatever I wanted," he explains. For example, I decided which secondary school to attend. I also liked to solve problems myself in my formative years."

Tsang went to a very strict secondary school in Tai Po, where he was a prefect for a while, before taking the unusual step of resigning from the role. It is one thing to resign from your job, it is quite another to resign from being a prefect. While most of the students aspired to be teacher's pets and obediently observed the school rules, Tsang did what he could do to free himself from authority.

"I grew my locks out partly because my then idol Kurt Cobain had long hair," he explains. "Our school banned long hairstyles, which gave me more reason to keep my hair long. I always got caught by the teachers because of my hair so I resigned from my prefect position."

Tsang was the only fine arts student in his class who didn't attend orientation camp at CU, which is considered a must in local college life. "I was absent since I thought it wouldn't allow me to be free. Social events make me feel uneasy," he says. I try to picture him wearing a camp T-shirt, chanting slogans and running around the campus, but I can't.

Perhaps it is Tsang's preference for channeling his really deep thoughts into his work that shrouds him in mystery. Demystifying him is as hard as reading into a movie by Pedro Almodóvar (his favorite director). "I like channeling what I really want to say into my work instead of telling people directly," he says.

One of Tsang's next projects is doing the artwork for local indie band False Alarm's forthcoming album 《世界真係好攞大同》 (*The World is So Fucking United*), which is scheduled to come out next year. Asked for his impressions of Tsang, band member Ah Ling who was at the Chinese University at the same time as Tsang, says, "When I first met him I thought he is not a talkative guy. Later I found out that he is much quieter than I thought. You could only hear him talk during critique of artworks in class. I guess 10 fingers were more than enough to count the number of times that we spoke during our college years. And he almost never ate with us. But who needs words when the works speak for themselves?"

When asked what similarities False Alarm's music and Tsang's work share, Ling says, "Both Tsang and False Alarm use camouflage in our

I grew my locks out partly because my then idol Kurt Cobain had long hair. I always got caught by the teachers because of my hair

works. Looking at Tsang's works, at first glance you see pretty old-school British wallpaper (think William Morris). Nice for a home of the 70s or 80s. But on close inspection you realize that inside the candy paper is the filth. This is an ambush. And FA's music is all about disappointments and sad truths wrapped in pop tunes. It is our weapon against daily life."

Ling continues, "Above all I know we share a common emotional quality, which is difficult to explain literally. Maybe it's about anger, boredom, youth and love, rebellion towards society. This is the rock n' roll attitude. His works are all about rock n' roll, and at the same time rock n' roll is always about attitude, not volume."

Ying Kwok, curator of the Chinese Arts Centre in Manchester, went to art school with Tsang at CU and curated his recent exhibition, *What are you looking at?* "Tsang was the outstanding one in our class," she recalls. "He was very focused on developing his works and didn't socialize with us very much, which I find outstanding. He has always been kind of mysterious to us."

"Working with Tsang is not easy if you disagree with him," Kwok continues. "He is confident and specific about what he wants. In the exhibition I suggested installing his previous work (*I Love U*) in the public washroom. Tsang wasn't comfortable with the idea. He thought the meaning and function of the environment would twist the original meaning of the piece. I think a finished work can interact with different spaces and contexts in various situations. We had a long and heated discussion and I had to leave him alone to contemplate my suggestion. I am very happy he accepted it in the end."

Professor 呂振光 (Lui Chun-kwong), who was one of Tsang's mentors at CU, says of his former student: "I admire him the most for his patience and persistence. After consulting me in his last semester on his final-year project, which was a work-in-progress, he decided to start from scratch and change its 創作形式 (creative format). In the months that followed, he barely spoke and

immersed himself completely in the project.

"On the one hand we laughed at his stamina behind his back. None of his classmates dared to joke with or assist him since rumor had it that he was upset when one of them joked with him while he was working. On the other hand we were all amazed by his creative drive."

Another of Tsang's mentors at CU, 陳育強 (Professor Kurt Chan Yuk-keung), says he first realized Tsang's creative potential when he saw his 版畫 (block print) which featured the 面相 (physiognomy) of ex-Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa. It was a politically charged work, a style that he has been faithful to since.

"His classmates loved him since he kept a low profile and his works were fun," says Chan. "They nicknamed him 'The Winner' in his final year at university because of all the prizes he won. He wasn't a goody-two-shoes who did his assignments according to instructions. He did homework for himself, not for his professors."

Fame is a funny thing. Some long for their 15 minutes' worth, while those who find it are often sucked into its vortex and want to shake it off. Only a few seem capable of looking it in the eye and giving it the finger without blinking. Tsang is one of them.

Says John Batten, director of John Batten Gallery who is a close friend of Tsang and curated his exhibition *White Cube* in 2005: "He does not demand glory and I doubt that he ever will. He was and remains hard-working and hard-thinking. I think he is fairly 'pure' in the sense that he does art without thinking of a 'market'."

Kurt Chan adds: "It seems that in recent years he has focused on exhibiting overseas and has seldom shown his work here. I'm surprised that he has broken into the international art scene since he is not a sociable person. Outspoken artists have an advantage since art often needs to be explained. I think his work speaks for itself so it doesn't require a lot of explanation from him."

I ask if Tsang became an artist for fame and





regret it as soon as the question escapes my lips, knowing full well that his answer will be a 72-font size 'No'. "I had wanted to become an artist since I was a kid, a time when you wouldn't think about doing it for fame," says Tsang. "I just wanted to do what I love. I didn't want to become a lawyer, businessman or doctor since these are boring professions to me.

"I don't know if I have become famous or not. I am not particularly fame-conscious, and I don't think I've broken into the international art scene. I'm beginning to know more people there but there are many souls who haven't heard of me. I guess I'm well-known in Hong Kong since most people on the art front know me. But nobody knows me in China."

It is a typically self-deprecatory answer from an artist who would have the right to boast if he wished, considering that his achievements include winning the Tokyo Type Directors Club Prize 2007 and 2005 Sovereign Asian Art Prize.

He is not, it seems, into art for the money either. "I'm not a fan of materialism. In Hong Kong, how much we earn and how we dress are the barometers of success. But I also understand it is like that since first impressions matter. If I were poor I would be a socialist. If I were rich I would be materialistic [laughs]. If you gave me a 2,000-square-foot apartment, it wouldn't make things easier for me since I would have to clean up more space!"

Nor is he a fan of maximalism, which reigns in this city with its multi-functioned mobile phones, over-the-top TV sitcoms and cramped CVs. His work is characterized by his use of bold text, obscured in patterns or in the space so you have to get close to read it. Furniture is kept to a minimum in his studio area, allowing him room to work and Gibson the cat room to play. He seldom shops for new clothes, preferring well-used casual attire that has a sentimental value to him.

Commenting on Tsang's work, Kurt Chan says: "Artists in Hong Kong tend to make works that are heavy with details. They tend to create huge works with lots of colors to vie for audience's attention. Minimalist works are few since they are trained to not appreciate blankness. On the other hand Tsang's work is unobtrusive. Maybe it's due to his studies in the UK, where he learnt to be precise and concise."

Love makes the world go round, so they say. It is love for his trade that drives Tsang to keep pushing new boundaries with his art, constantly dethroning himself and then restoring himself to power. Take his *White Porn Painting* (2008). Featuring titillating images behind a white façade, it reminds us that innocence has always been at the

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root of wicked games.

In the same way he likes to reinvent himself through his art, Tsang also prefers bands whose styles evolve with every album, such as Radiohead and Nirvana. "I like musicians who keep reinventing their music as opposed to sticking to a tried and tested formula," he says. "Kurt Cobain made music because he loved it. He wasn't in it for the fame or money. I think it's inspiring that he did something purely out of love and I guess he has influenced me in this sense."

He continues, "To a great extent I see art as a hobby, not work because it is what I love to do. I hate it when people say that they will throw in the towel if they can't make it in their industry within a certain time frame. I think that they don't like what they do very much and just want to use their work to achieve other goals. When I first started out I didn't think about when I would become famous and how much money I would earn with my works, or whether I would become as successful as Chinese artist Xu Bing."

Like his works, which feature an intense undercurrent bubbling just below the calm surface, the unobtrusive Tsang is very passionate deep down. He tells me about a painting a classmate of his did on a common room at CU. It has since been covered by notice-boards. "It's a shame that white boards are obscuring his work and it is now nothing but wallpaper," he says sadly.

Asked to sum up the artist, curator Kwok concludes, "Tsang is quite shy. It is very easy to make him blush. He doesn't speak much in daily communication with his peers, but it doesn't mean he has nothing to say. He is just like his works. There is a strong emotion beneath the neat and clean presentation." □

Victoria Ip is a freelance writer based in Hong Kong. She thinks that life is too short not to dress up to the nines.