

The 15th Hong Kong Art Biennial has more weird and wonderful exhibits than you can shake a stick at, discovers **Kevin Kwong**

Wood you believe it?

LOCALLY UNIQUE OR simply parochial? Insular or relevant? At the end of the day, good art is that which communicates, and most – though certainly not all – works on display at the 15th Hong Kong Art Biennial do just that.

The exhibition, which runs until March 5 at the Hong Kong Museum of Art, showcases 108 works, including paintings, ceramics, prints, sculpture, photography, installation and new media. There's also a section on Chinese painting, calligraphy and seals. These works were selected after an open competition that forms the backbone of the biennial.

Adjudicators were quick to point out that most entries lacked originality, a sense of identity and direction – which meant the judging panel could pick only six, out of a possible 10, winners. They are Ching Chin-wai, Fung Yat-fung, Kan Chi-hung, Cedric Maridet, Yau Wan-kei and Zheng Bo. Criticism aside, the event still offers the public a chance to see some impressive works.

Staying afloat in the latest flood of new media – in particular video/sound installation and digital photography – are two distinctive ceramic pieces by Tsang Cheung-shing titled *Karma* (2004) and *Escapism* (2005). A regular in local and regional ceramic exhibitions and competitions, the former police officer is showing pieces that are realistic, dark and – unlike most works on display – universal.

Karma presents a damaged machine gun with entrails spilling from its broken parts. Tsang says it tells the story of the battle between civilisation and the uncivilised. "Civilisation wins and the world has become civilised. But will the slaughter stop? Will the karma continue?"

Escapism, which captures the split second when a child plunges into water, is more personal. It depicts Tsang's desire to return to a past when there was a distinct difference between good and evil. Fiona Wong, a judge of the ceramics category, says this piece is a major eye-catcher because of the artist's "amazingly sublime control of technique".

Another attention-grabbing piece is a wood sculpture titled *Baggage* by Fung Lik-yan. It comprises five faceless figures who, judging by their posture, are evidently shouldering the many burdens that Hong Kong life presents.

Jury member Yuko Hasegawa says she's particularly interested in works that are metaphorical and poetic, yet reflecting social background, and *Baggage*, which shows trunk-carriers in a "Balkenhol style", fits those criteria.

Tsang Kin-wah made quite a splash on the local art scene last year when he was awarded the Sovereign Asian Art Prize and held his critically acclaimed solo exhibition, *White Cube*, at the John Batten Gallery. Here on show are both *White Cube* and an untitled installation, in which the artist wallpapered two cubicles (the latter from ceiling to floor) with beautiful prints, patterns and profanity.

According to Tsang, *White Cube* critically questions the concept and myth of a gallery and its role. "Walls are painted white to create a neutral space for the arts in a gallery," he says. "*White Cube* is a space that exists on its own and has de-



tached itself from daily life. It is a sacred place that only belongs to arts and nothing else.

"A gallery has never been a neutral space for showing arts. Subjectivity, stand-points, selection of arts and artists are always involved, mixed and spread throughout the space," Tsang says.

"It's a constructed space using whiteness and neutrality as a mask to cover the things behind and it's also a space that people visit not solely for arts but, sometimes, for other things like home decoration, taste and social status."

Similarly, the untitled piece digs deep into superficiality. "Beautiful things can be either beautiful or ugly inside and the same applies to ugly or vulgar objects," Tsang says.

"The linkage between the surface and the inside, the outer and the inner, is rather fragile and is reliant on how people perceive or interpret things."

Another installation, *Allegory – 19 Crows*, by Lam Yuk-lin, is an artistic statement about the Cattle Depot Artists Village and the 19 artists and organisations based there. Some have flourished, while others faded away. But unless you're familiar with the background of the village, the allegory isn't immediately clear.

One of the few surprises of the biennial is tucked away in the Chinese art category. "The quality of entries in the Chinese category, especially works of calligraphy, was visibly superior to the quality of those in the western category," says judge Liu Xilin, a researcher at the National Art Museum of China. "As for Chinese painting,

the landscapes were notably high in artistic quality. This may be linked to urbanites' yearnings for the long-lost peace of nature. The manifestation of acuity in visual design is another notable feature of art in Hong Kong."

One of the major criticisms of the Hong Kong Art Biennial is that it has no curatorial vision or policy because the event/competition is open to all local artists. The event is also seen as ultra-conservative in its approach.

May Fung Mei-wah, a veteran local artist and first-time adjudicator, has raised a number of questions about what this supposed prestigious art event should be. "What do we need?" she asks. "Curatorial boldness? Exciting new works? Works of high aesthetic and critical value? Great aspirations shown by participating artists? Great expectations on the part of the audience?"

Fung says a biennial shouldn't be just another exhibition. "For Hong Kong to become a genuine cultural city within China, the region and the world, its cultural identity should perhaps be critically revisited and envisaged with real individual excellence."

"The biennial should be an important and unique platform for people to get to know Hong Kong's art, and therefore its culture. Such a platform can't be built without curatorial boldness, artistic creativity and a critical audience."

Comparisons have been made between the Hong Kong Art Biennial and the on-going Second Guangzhou Triennial. The latter (which ends next Sunday), curated by Hou Hanru, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Guo Xiaoyan, delves into con-

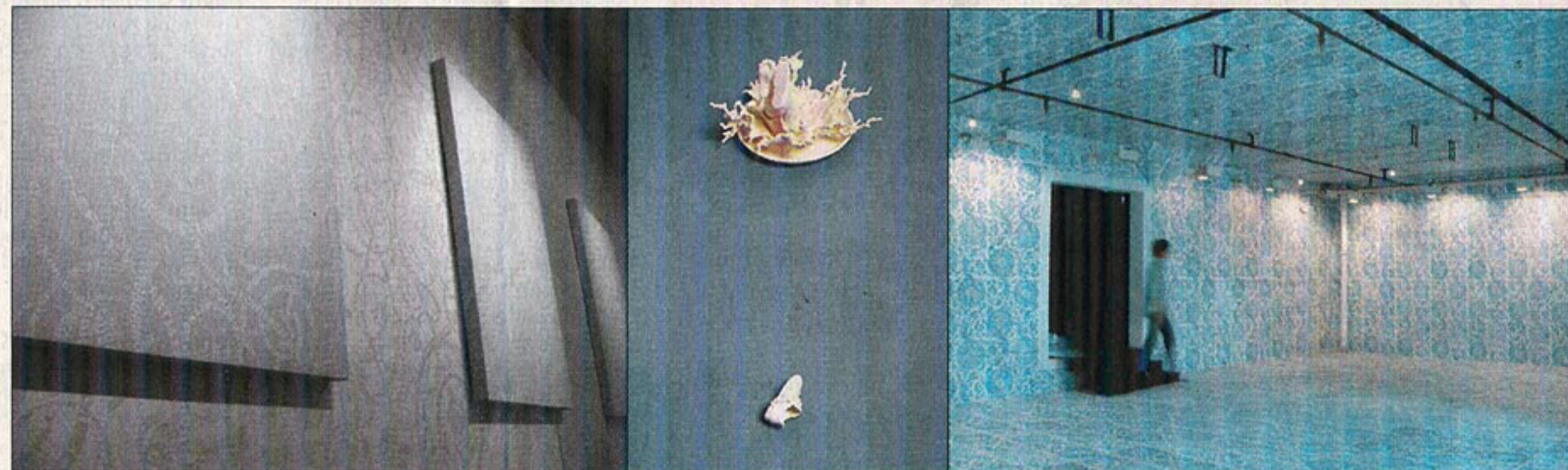
temporary life and culture in the Pearl River Delta through investigation and study.

Although lauded as one of the most important art and cultural events in China today, many who have visited the Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou Xin Yi International Club and Times Museum of Guangdong Museum of Art couldn't but feel a slight hint of blandness in most of the exhibits – and that the vast exhibition space wasn't effectively exploited, despite having a strong curatorial focus and plenty of boldness.

Good or bad, the Hong Kong Art Biennial does possess a strong local flavour, with works that are socially and politically aware. As a result, various themes did emerge, whether of local urban renewal or phenomenon that are event-specific such as Sars.

Assistant curator Mimi Cho Wan-man, who helped put together the biennial at the Museum of Art, says works on a similar theme or style, or of the same medium, are grouped together. "Our objective is to present each piece in ways that best highlight its merits. We've done whatever we could to stop the works from clashing or interfering with one another."

Daily, 10am to 6pm (closed Thu), Hong Kong Museum of Art, Special Gallery 1 and 2, and Contemporary Hong Kong Gallery, 10 Salisbury Rd, TST, \$10



Among the works on display as part of the biennial are (clockwise from top): Fung Lik-yan's *Baggage*, Tsang Kin-wah's untitled silkscreen print, Tsang Cheung-shing's *Escapism* and Tsang Kin-wah's *White Cube*