



**A**fter 156 years of British rule, Hong Kong reverted back to Chinese rule in 1997 and is now officially known as Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). From being an international centre of trade and commerce with a population that was largely apolitical, the new Hong Kong is negotiating a new future based on a history of three different, and often conflicting, cultures and political systems - traditional Chinese, communist Chinese, and British capitalism and democracy.

With this background, the artist TSANG Kin-Wah has become one of Hong Kong's most sophisticated and exciting voices of visual commentary. His work reflects many of the social and political realities of Hong Kong and the region.

Born in 1976 in Guangdong China, Tsang migrated to Hong Kong in 1982 with his parents. He later travelled and studied at the Camberwell College of Arts, the London Institute, under a British Chevening Postgraduate Scholarship before returning to Hong Kong where he currently lives.

His work is a direct analysis of the separation between appearance and reality and can be described as both quaint and acidic. His Wall paper series are hand printed pattern designs of William Morris. On the surface it appears very 'British', very elegant, controlled and tranquil.

The work uses text as visual device not unlike another Chinese artist, Xu Bing. Tsang acknowledges the influence of calligraphy, which in Chinese culture is considered one of the highest art forms, on his own work. Unlike Xu Bing though, who renders his calligraphy illegible, Tsang's text must be read for meaning of the whole work to emerge.

First impressions of Tsang's art show intertwining patterns of plants and flowers. Closer inspection however reveals the base of the pattern to be made up of foul language text. The effect is a surface beauty and elegance that masks a deeper anger, dissatisfaction and frustration.

One might ask does the duality of themes mark the essence of his work?

Tsang says, "This is one of my main ideas, or you could say that it is the most powerful thing in my work, which switches the viewer's point of view from one extreme to another. For me, this is one of the things that we experience a lot but forgot sometimes. 'Nice appearance equals nice interior.' I don't think so. To some extent, my work is also a reflection of myself which seems pretty shy and quiet but has much anger towards different things that happen around me."

## WHEN THINGS ARE NOT AS THEY SEEM: PORTRAIT OF HONG KONG ARTIST TSANG KIN-WAH

Tsang highlights the difference between illusion and truth of a reality. He suggests that awareness of the difference between the two can lead to greater insight into people and our constructed worlds.

His anger likely stems from his background. "Contradictory space is like human condition," he comments. "To live in Hong Kong society, we have to suppress our emotions, be it happiness or sadness. There is just no way out to express it. When you see the foul languages in these wallpapers, you will suddenly realise these are the messages you want to scream out aloud, messages which are left behind or hidden in your heart."

More than six years have passed since the handover, and the effects of 'one country - two systems' are showing. Economic downturn and the withdrawal of basic democratic rights including freedom of speech and the imposition of severe censorship, have stirred strong emotions all over the territory.

Tsang's work is a reflection of this political reality and it needs to be read on several levels. For example, the floral image is highly indicative of sex and sexual organs, another cultural taboo in the new Hong Kong. By using floral imagery however Tsang manages to address this taboo in a visually 'acceptable' manner.

I asked Tsang whether the play between appearance and reality in his work is a way of subverting certain types of cultural taboos.

He says, "The socio-political situation in Hong Kong did affect me quite a lot in the past and still does. I would watch the news report everyday and look at the people or things that happened around. Many queer or weird things or phenomenon (this is my point of view, maybe the majority would think that they are normal) gave me much inspiration for my creation."

Tsang's artistic career is a bit like watching the changes and development of Hong Kong. He belongs to the long history and culture of China but also has lived in and been influenced by a British system. As a result, he is caught between the limits and values of both.

The paradox of Tsang's success is that messages that are meant to be repressed or censored are instead being accepted, praised and celebrated. To date, Tsang has been shown in some of Hong Kong's most prestigious exhibitions, including the Hong Kong Art Biennale (2003), and he has received numerous prizes, accolades, scholarship and residencies.

Tsang himself is ironical about the success of his work, "Yes," he says "my work has been shown in some 'prestigious' exhibitions and it seems that my work has been accepted. But I don't think that they really understand my works. I remember some cultural administrator once told me that they like the images of my works but not the text."

Story by COFA Art Administration Student Ka Yan Tung.

Originally published in *Artwrite*. The COFA online Art History & Theory student journal.