

In Search of the Real Thing: Contemporary Art in Hong Kong

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With celebrations still taking place to mark the tenth anniversary of the Hong Kong handover, a new exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai, recalls the period leading up to reunification and afterward. Anyone expecting grand political narratives and the clashing of cultures will be disappointed, however. The overriding tone of *Reversing Horizons: Artist Reflections of the Hong Kong Handover 10th Anniversary* is thoughtful and even a little domestic. Yet in so being it reveals an authentic portrait of Hong Kong and a sense of identity that is complex and fluid.

Works by more than thirty of the territory's artists are included, from evergreens such as Gaylord Chan to new faces Kwan Sheung-chi and Law Yuk-mui, who graduated from the Chinese University of Hong Kong only in 2006.

Artworks span a range of contemporary art practice, from film and photography to sculpture and even some painting, courtesy of Liu Chun-kwong's cool abstractions. But it is most often the installation work that captures one's attention. Many works stand out, yet a high point is achieved by Tsang Kin-wah's brilliantly deceptive untitled work shown earlier this year in the exhibition *Chinglish* at the Hong Kong Museum of Art.

In *Chinglish*, Tsang's piece consisted of an empty room with the walls, floor, and ceiling covered by wonderfully elaborate wallpaper featuring blue and white swirling rosettes. The patterns recall heavily ornate wallpaper designs by William Morris. Yet a closer look reveals that the swirling shapes are in fact made up of tiny lines of text in Chinese and English featuring the ugliest curses and expletives. "Fucking arrogant cunt!" and "Give me all your fucking money!" are typical. Transformation of one's perception of the work is immediate, and the shock is almost physical. Unfortunately, however, at MOCA the work is tucked into a strange half-space that is open at both ends. Unlike its earlier manifestation in Hong Kong, where the visitor was entirely surrounded by the work, in Shanghai one is always aware of passing traffic and the impact of the installation is lessened somewhat as a result.

Other big hitters include this year's participants at the Hong Kong pavilion of the 52nd Venice Biennale: Map Office—a collaborative project by designers Laurent Gutierrez and Valérie Portefaix—and Amy Cheung all focus on the erosion of Hong Kong's cultural heritage and identity.

Cheung presents the second half of her self-destructing installation, *Devil's Advocate: A Song and a Landscape*. The work was originally intended to be shown at Venice, but lack of funds meant that only the "female" part of the work—a series of melting ice sculptures—finally made the journey. Instead, the male half of the installation is presented here for the first time. The work is made up



Tsang Kin-wah, *Untitled*, 2003–04, silkscreen and acrylic on paper. Courtesy of the artist and Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.

cars—about the size of Galapagos turtles—are extremely difficult to manoeuvre, and it was a rare moment when they finally “clunked” together.

For Mainland audiences brought up to see Hong Kong in the light of glitzy consumerism and gangster movies, such pieces may prove puzzling. But according to Gao Shi-ming, one of the co-curators of *Reversing Horizons*, an important aim of the exhibition is to reveal the true complexity and hybridity of Hong Kong visual culture. “Mainland audiences are used to art with heavy political symbolism and lots of spectacle, but in Hong Kong it's quite different,” says Gao, who is director of the Visual Culture Research Institute of the China Art Academy in Hangzhou. “Art practice in Hong Kong is focused on everyday experience, and it is much more intimate and personal and critical.”

Pak Sheung-chuen's minute analysis of Hong Kong's constructed environment illustrates this idea. “For example, he'll measure the precise height at which his head meets the bottom of a flight of slanting stairs; all these little, very precise measurements that produce a kind of useless awareness. There's no spectacle in his work; it's very subtle and very focused on people's daily lives and the subtle ways in which people's behaviour is guided and controlled,” continues Gao.

Photographer Ching Chin-wai works through similar issues of micro-control in his fuzzy studies of different family groups in Hong Kong and Shanghai public parks. According to Chang Tsong-zung, who produced the exhibition with Gao, Ching's photos reflect on the commercialization of spaces in Hong Kong and changing lifestyle habits. “Instead of going to public parks, people are encouraged to go to shopping malls, which is partly seduction but partly because there are so few public spaces that are accessible and have amenities. In many parts of Hong Kong it is very difficult to find a place to sit down unless you pay, and I think this is very much a reflection of the way that property developers are running our lives,” says Chang.



Amy Cheung, *Devil's Advocate: A Song and a Landscape (Part 1)*, 2007, mixed media installation. Courtesy of the artist and Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.

with the word “Handover” in the title, there’s little mention of the sorts of big issues that people in the territory, including artists, were talking about in the countdown to June 30, 1997, or even the landmark events that have happened since then. Yet Chang suggests that this would be to give a false impression of art in the territory. “Hong Kong society is essentially so distant from politics. There are no real politicians to speak of, only the property developers and civil servants.”

“The dramatic political events are June 4, 1989, which has been kept as a reminder [in Hong Kong], and the recent street marches. These are the only occasions when there has been an autonomous expression of a collective wish, but that’s as far as it goes. Art with a grand narrative or an ideological charge seems to be alien to Hong Kong’s sensibilities.” Instead, Chang says artists are more concerned with “micro politics” and levels of control that operate at the surface of daily life. “It is exposing these sorts of things—assumptions about laws and behaviour—which is the main focus.”

More surprising, however, is the absence of a number of prominent faces from the Hong Kong art crowd, the most important being Kith Tsang, co-founder of the Para/Site Art Space. For an exhibition that sets out to present the best of the Hong Kong, this is a let down. “I think Kith Tsang is the one person I would have liked to be in it, but isn’t,” says Chang. “I did invite him to send a proposal, but I never heard anything back, and by the time I managed to contact him it was too late. He’s very important for the art scene and has consistently reflected on the development of Hong Kong identity, so it’s disappointing that he’s not here.”



Hung Keung, *I love my country's sky*, 2007, video. Courtesy of the artist and Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.

several Videotage artists whose work was shown looped together on a notebook computer. The impression is very much of secondary works—however misleading this impression really is.

Despite such glitches, *Reversing Horizons* does produce many high points, and few are higher than Hung Keung’s sly video installation *I love my country's sky*. Previously shown as an award-winning seven-minute short film, the work is here presented for the first time as a video installation. The viewer walks along a corridor whose walls feature over life-sized video projections of people blowing kisses. A distorted audio track of triumphal marching music underlines a teasing take on the idea of love for one’s country. According to Hung, the kissers used in the installation were selected from his classmates at Central Saint Martins, London (where he studied for an M.A. in film and video in 1997), and, somewhat ironically, include a Tibetan monk refugee.

As much as it explores the past and present, *Reversing Horizons* underlines the ticklish balancing act Hong Kong artists must come to perfect. They must be close enough to the Mainland’s booming art scene to gain international visibility, but at the same time far enough away to retain the distinct identity that drives some of its best art. “Hong Kong artists now get far less attention than they did around 1997. The mid-90s was probably a high point. But then the Post 89 exhibition launched the first wave of mainland artists on to the international scene, and nothing has been the same since. Now, for the Western world, art practice in China is firmly connected in the imagination with the mainland, and Beijing in particular,” says Gao.

Yet if all of this suggests that the territory is struggling to find a place in the story of new art in China, Hong Kong still asserts its importance in a number of ways, the most significant of which being the fact that most of the recent headline-grabbing prices being paid for contemporary Chinese art have been achieved—for the time being at least—in Hong Kong salerooms.

Reversing Horizons: Artist Reflections of the Hong Kong Handover 10th Anniversary was on exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai (www.mocashanghai.org), from July 8 to August 8, 2007.