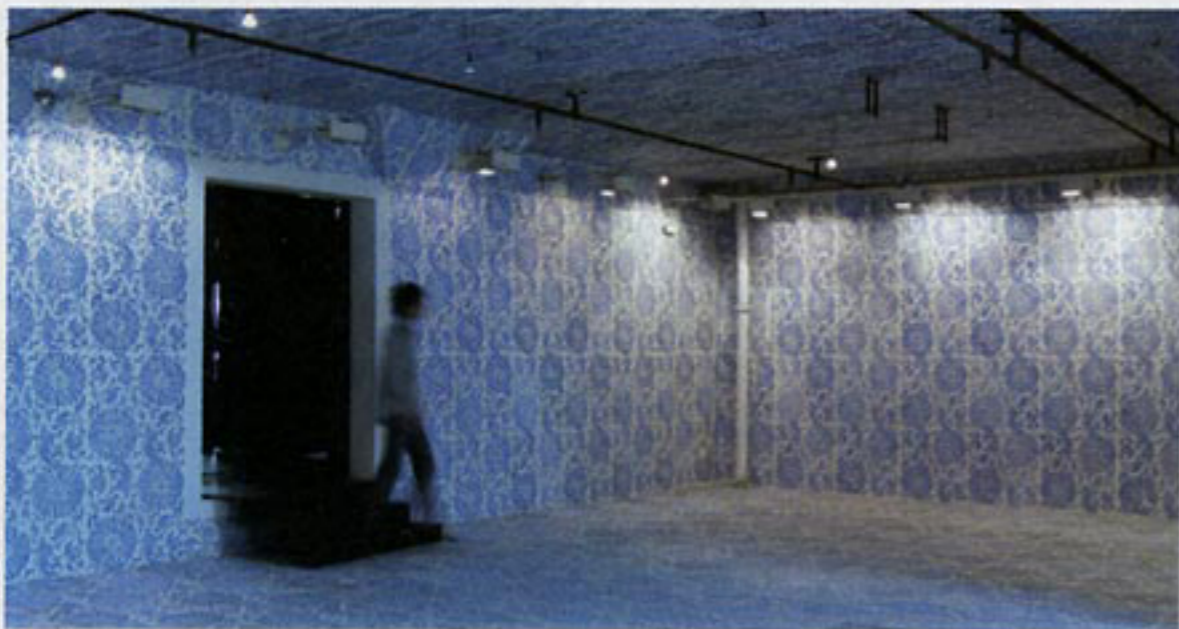


ARTYFACTS by Rebecca Catching

if walls could talk

Tsang Kin Wah's quiet riot



From a distance, Tsang Kin Wah's 曾建华 patterned wallpaper looks like something you'd find in a trendy design boutique. But on closer inspection, his seemingly inchoate rantings against colonialism, racism and materialism become clear. So while some critics see his art as solely two dimensional, others believe the duality of its nature creates a third dimen-

sion where meaning can frolic at will.

In patterns that are both aural and visual, Tsang's work plays with words. "Dragon/Jormungand/Serpent/Imperiality/Devil/Chinese/Norwegian/Satan/God/Overman" spirals across the paper in a dance of free association, while the draconian grammar of a primary school text book taps out a rhythm

that epitomizes the Hong Kong lifestyle: "ISHOPYOUSHOPHE SHOPS HESHOPITSHOPTHEY SHOP".

Typically, viewers are first seduced by the visual charisma of his works, then appalled by the language he employs. Indeed, it is Tsang's aim is to shock shoppers out of their stupor. "Most people don't realize that there is a different way of living. They don't think about why they go on shopping holidays."

It's not surprising that some people have asked the artist to tone down his message, to turn it into something more genteel, something that will fit comfortably over the living room sofa. But Tsang dismisses such requests, saying, "They just think that it's an art piece and nothing related to them."

Tsang's wrath, however, targets not just the consumer mentality, but those who cater to it. In one exhibition at a gallery in Hong Kong, he papered the walls with a pattern that cursed the gallery owner: "F**ing White Man John Batten." That display might have cost the

artist plenty, had it not been supported, nay encouraged, by Batten himself.

Indeed, race and colonialism play a strong role in Tsang's work. Even the patterns he uses were inspired by 19-th century British designer William Morris – who in turn was inspired by Chinese porcelain – which speaks to HK's colonial past. In one exhibition, Tsang used both English and Chinese texts to stage a race war on paper, a filigree of epithets which both attract and repel the viewer.

Born in Guangzhou and raised in Hong Kong, Tsang is well positioned to comment on the historical antagonism and shifting roles between the Chinese mainland and the SAR. His works on show at MoCA this month explore this history in blue and white patterns reminiscent of Chinese porcelain, a cultural symbol shared by Chinese everywhere. ■

Reversing Horizons: Artist Reflections of the Hong Kong Handover 10th Anniversary, Shanghai Museum of Contemporary Art, 231 Nanjing Xi Lu, by Huangpi Lu, Until August 8, RMB 20 (6327 9900)