

EXHIBITION



A view of Tsang Kin-wah's installation "T REE O GO D EVIL" at Galerie du Monde, the first show in many years from this important figure. Photos: Courtesy of GDM, Elaine Wong

SINS OF HISTORY AND THE FRUITS OF THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

Tsang Kin-wah's massive exhibition at Galerie du Monde is a welcome and much-discussed return

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Tsang Kin-wah's first Hong Kong exhibition in years was one of the most talked-about openings during Art Basel week, even though nobody could quite pronounce the title.

"T REE O GO D EVIL", with the deliberate gaps, is still on view at Central's Galerie du Monde, one of Hong Kong's oldest established commercial galleries.

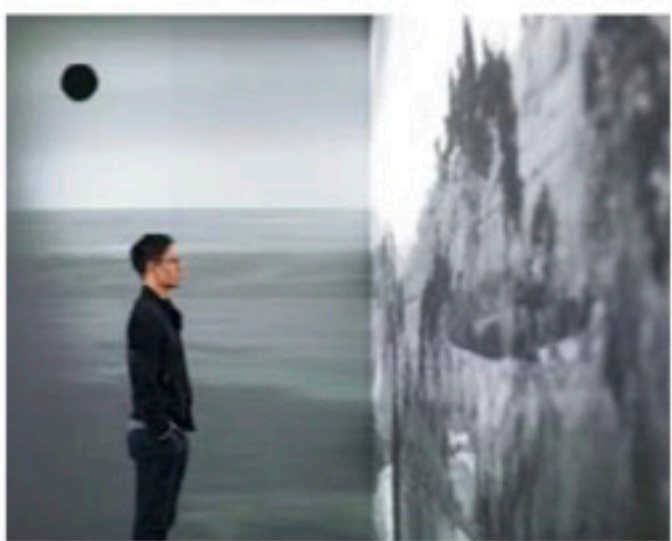
The immersive exhibition that completely takes over the gallery space's surfaces also rings with political urgency. It is a particularly memorable comeback for a person once widely regarded as Hong Kong's most prominent contemporary artist.

In 2014, when he was chosen to represent Hong Kong at the 56th Venice Biennale, Tsang was best known for his wallpapers that concealed Cantonese swear words in elegant floral patterns. Such playful symbols of hybridity morphed into something more sombre in Venice, where his exhibition "The Infinite Nothing" included powerful videos and projections about how human history is trapped in endless, recurring cycles.

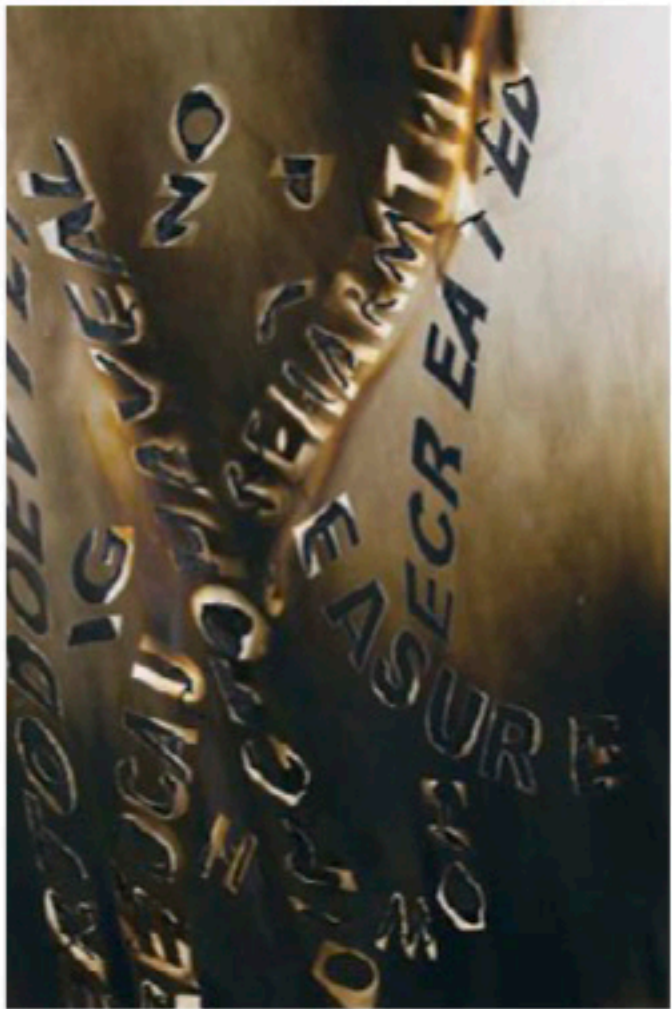
Born in mainland China in 1976, Tsang moved to Hong Kong in 1982 with his family and studied art at Chinese University before pursuing a master's degree in book art in London.

Venice was a milestone that solidified his status as one of Hong Kong's most prominent contemporary artists. Yet, since 2017, Tsang has maintained a low profile.

"For me, the Venice show and



Tsang Kin-wah; and a detail of some of the singed text on the walls of the gallery.



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TSANG KIN-WAH, ARTIST

the follow-up [in Hong Kong] were a kind of conclusion to the questions I'd been grappling with," Tsang says, seated in Galerie du Monde's lounge.

He likens that period to a kind of midlife crisis. "I wanted to experiment with smaller projects and explore what else might interest me."

When the pandemic hit, he took it as an opportunity to pause and reflect, and to read widely on political science and philosophy.

Inspired by George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, he began a new series called "EWspeak" – a nod to Orwell's notion of "Newspeak", a language introduced by leaders of the book's totalitarian regime to restrict thoughts and promote state propaganda.

Tsang's series plays with Newspeak's infamous slogans – "War is Peace", "Ignorance is Strength", "Freedom is Slavery" – by omitting letters or rearranging them into cryptic new abbreviations. Two paintings from the series hang in the lounge space at Galerie du Monde.

"History is written through words, and dictators or authoritarian regimes use language and text to control people," Tsang says.

"What I've done is turn political slogans, which are meant to be serious and powerful, into something mundane, subverting how governments manipulate language to shape thinking."

Meanwhile, inside the darkened space of the gallery, Tsang has created an apocalyptic landscape.

A 10-tonne pile of asphalt, in which steel frames and old televisions lie half-buried, forms a

jagged slope on the floor. At the centre, the biblical reference suggested by the exhibition title takes form: the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil from the Garden of Eden is represented by a wallpapered column printed with philosophical quotes and political messages. The wallpaper, however, is scorched from fire, as is the ceiling, which is similarly printed with text.

On the flickering screens of the half-buried televisions, manipulated news footage of human cruelty is displayed. Tsang says he used videos of torture released by ISIS and scenes playing out in Ukraine as the basis of the footage. Fortunately, visitors are spared the details.

In the exhibition guide, Tsang has included a mind map and a list of quotes used throughout the show. His references range from Xunzi, the third great Confucian philosopher after Confucius himself and Mencius, to Hannah Arendt, an influential 20th century political theorist known for exploring themes such as the "banality of evil", freedom and the perils of statelessness.

The references in Tsang's work – and the anger that simmers beneath the surface – often lead viewers to assume they are a direct response to present-day events. "But what I'm really interested in is to reflect on human nature as a collective memory," he says.

Religion, in particular, has long been a lens through which Tsang explores that theme. He reveals that while he only identified as Christian for a few years during his adolescence, the influence has been profound.

"When I was 12 to 14, my school taught that even having a

lustful thought meant you'd already sinned. That sense of guilt has stuck with me," he says.

This exhibition has taken Tsang nearly a year to create, but it is just one part of a much grander vision. What he ultimately imagines is a large-scale installation that resembles an entire city, something akin to Pompeii, through which he can explore the themes of space, time and history on an unprecedented scale.

Is that why he is working with Elaine Kwok, previously Asia managing partner of Hauser & Wirth, one of the world's biggest art gallery businesses, and a high-profile auctioneer at Christie's before that?

According to Tsang, Kwok is using her expertise and network to nurture local talent. Rather than focusing on sales, she is currently helping him explore a possible major solo exhibition with a Hong Kong museum, he says.

Tsang dismisses the notion of the value of his art soaring, thus allowing him to take on more ambitious projects. "What I hope to do is to create something new, more experimental, in a museum or institutional setting. I'm not that interested in commercial stuff," he says.

But first, he is preparing for a year-long project that kicks off in June at the Yalu River Art Museum in Dandong – a city on the border with North Korea.

While this show will centre on a separate concept, he hints that it could eventually become part of the larger "city" project if it aligns with the overarching vision.

"Tsang Kin-Wah: T REE O GO D EVIL", Galerie du Monde, 108 Ruttonjee Centre, 11 Duddell Street, Central, Tue-Sat, 10am-7pm. Until May 24