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Jonathan Thomson

### Inside Looking Out at Oasge Kwun Tong

It is a great pity that art from Hong Kong often seems to play second fiddle to art from mainland China. That mainland Chinese artists seem to have come to dominate the market in Hong Kong over the past decade or so, not only at auctions but also in many galleries, is not surprising as China's economic power has grown. But it has left many people wondering at times if there are any Hong Kong artists at all. The answer, of course, is that there certainly are, and they are making art that is often very different from that of their mainland cousins.

This small but important exhibition, entitled *Inside Looking Out*, brought together the work of six singularly different artists—Chow Chunfai, Kwan Sheungchi, Lam Tungpang, Lee Kit, Ma Chihang, and Pak Sheungchuen—from the vibrant Fotan studios located near Shatin in Hong Kong's New Territories. Ma Chihang's documentary video entitled *Mr. 221 Diary (07 Memorial Edition)* offers a history of the group and their coming together. This work raises a number of questions but provides no answers.

This is an appropriate title for the work of a group of artists, whose art addresses a number of important issues relevant to current art practice in Hong Kong within the loose realm of conceptual art. Among these are how best to use materials in painting, sculpture, installation art, and film to realize one's artistic objective and to highlight such things as isolation and



Chow Chunfai, *Days of Being Wild, "passing that telephone booth every time"*, 2007, enamel paint on vinyl canvas, 100 x 150 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Osage Kwun Tong.

in a changing, shrinking world, and the subtle oppressiveness of violence that seems to permeate all levels of society.

Not all appropriations work well for an artist, particularly if the artist is working with material that is beyond their immediate cultural environment. For Chow Chunfai, however, it works very well indeed. His use of thick enamel paint to transfigure images from such Chinese films as *Days of Being Wild*, *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon*, and *Once a Thief* does not simply alter the original work, but also changes the entire visual tone and the internal narrative, imbuing it with a fresh energy and a brooding malevolence. The inclusion of English and Chinese subtitles reinforces the layered darkness of the narrative. This is especially true of Chow's deconstruction of *Days of Being Wild* and *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon*. The films chosen are well known and this might help people to relate immediately to the Chow's altered versions.

The brooding quality of Chow's work is also present in Lam Tungpang's paintings, but it is, by turns, of a much subtler and gentler nature. The message in his *Global Warming* (2007), a spare, elegant work in which a polar bear stands forlornly on a burning ice flow while not far from it is another piece of floating ice on which a fire rages. The silent mountain range towers in the background adding force to

a sad, almost surreal one (but is destruction not always surreal?) that is in direct contrast to his beautifully realized painting *Living No.1* (2007). Here soft geometry and muted, almost pastoral, colors combine to form a dreamy narrative without human presence: only the bed with its striped bedspread suggests human activity. This work has the touch and sensitivity of David Hockney to it.

There is a quiet feeling of desperation embedded in Pak Sheungchuen's photographs and drawings. They suggest journeys taken but not quite fully realized. It is as if he is searching for something, as in his C-Prints entitled *Two Water Pools* (2007) and his *Draw a Tree* (2007). Kwan Sheungchi's installation *Don't Let the Tower Fall!* (2007) possesses the sense of desperation and brings up a feeling of panic in the viewer as one watches a disaster about to happen yet one cannot do anything to prevent it. There is a similar feeling when looking at Lam's *Global Warming*: we are witness to catastrophe but are powerless, at that moment, to do anything about it.

Isolating the objects of everyday life and placing them apart from their usual setting makes one look again at their value both as objects and as potential artworks. Lee Kit's fabric works, painted in stripes and patterns, are more graphic than painting. He has found in his

the simple beauty of even the most mundane things that we use without thinking about.

Osage has one of the most exciting and innovative ranges of programs of any gallery—or even museum—in Hong Kong. It is to be congratulated for its willingness to take risks consistently with their exhibitions. Each exhibition and catalogue provides a vital educational and documentary addition to Hong Kong art.

Ian Findlay

### Lu Peng at Plum Blossoms

Reflecting the immediacy of China's rapidly changing cultural, social, and consumerist environment is a difficult task for any artist. But since the early 1980s, Chinese artists have sought to signal the momentous changes in their country's search for identity and attitudes towards itself at all levels of society. In doing so, artists have leapt the great divide from the 1950s to the late 1970s, when they were denied the freedom to challenge accepted standards and to develop a new art language and aesthetic to address real conditions.

What a different world today. During the past two decades, each month seems to have brought some new theme