Chow Chun-fai

Creative chaos

An accidental community of artists will open the doors to their warehouse studios in an exhibition that is as much about inspired disorder, writes Sylvia Hui

Chow Chun-fai sometimes sleeps surrounded by his taxis. A garbage truck's whirring hum breaks the silence of the night, and for a moment the breeze reeks of rot.

But vigorous creation, not decay, predominates here: This is an artist's studio, not a scrap yard.

Chow is a 24-year-old post-graduate in art, not a street-sleeper. Red cabs — the artist's favourite subject — are painted on canvas and pieces of tree trunk which are piled around the floor and on shelves in the 1,200-square-foot space.

It's one of about 15 studios, an artist's colony wedged in between warehouses in Wah Luen Industrial Centre in the New Territories.

It's all a world away from the property giants' idea of the "artistic life", as portrayed in the snazzy designs showing people strolling in café-lined promenades, which bidders have submitted for the West Kowloon Cultural District.

"Our open studio show is different from other exhibitions," explains Pak, pushing away some of the juice cartons and junk on the table to make way for my notepad. "It's very warm and intimate, and you can hold in-depth discussions with the artists."

"I sleep here when I'm tired or when I work late," says the softly spoken Chow, gesturing towards a private compartment which most resembles a domestic bedroom at the back of the room. "It's not allowed here, I think, so don't be too loud about this," he adds half-seriously.

The rest of the studio is cluttered with an improvised sitting area consisting chiefly of an ancient couch, make-shift furniture, bookshelves and junk. Only the artwork by Chow and his two flat-mates, Otto Li and Kwan Sheung-chi, livens up the unmitigated barrenness and unpleasantness of the place.

Like scores of others, Chow, Li and Kwan are fine arts graduates who rent studios fashioned from old industrial warehouses in Fo Tan, an industrial wasteland of grey blocks, dismal, smelly corridors and greasy car repair shops.

Most of the artists are in their twenties, although there are also a couple of older university professors of art. Not all of them live here, but all spend considerable amounts of time in the area working on their art — paintings, sculpture and even drumming.

Starting this weekend until mid-December, these studios and living quarters will double as display galleries in an open exhibition of work by 70 independent artists.

Fotanian 2004: Open Studio, now in its third year, is the largest show of its kind in Hong Kong.

The buzz surrounding the Fo Tan has steadily grown louder in the past few years, with the show growing rapidly from just four studios in 2002 to 20 this year.

The strengthening army of artists attracted about 700 people to last year's exhibition, most friends of the artists, as well as students and local residents. Amusingly, the attraction for most visitors wasn't the art.

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"People didn't really look at the paintings," grins Toner Pak, another artist and organiser of the event. Among the first to move in, he has shared a 900 sq ft studio with four others in the same building for more than three years now.

"They were obviously curious about our dwellings and probably spent much of the time wondering what it was like to live and work here."

Although warehouse-studios or lofts are nothing new to most international cities, I too marvel at the quirkiness of the environs. The flip-flops dangling from Pak's feet and the dishevelled bunk beds lend a background of bewildering domesticity to the five artists' sculptures and paintings which crowd the room.

Meanwhile, Chow's neighbours are labourers working in a mattress storage house. Other studios sit side-by-side with manufacturers of greasy barbecued pork and *cheung fun* (rice rolls).

Chow's studio is at least equipped with air-conditioners — gifts from students he tutors — and a toilet, but there's no shower. "I boil water from the kettle for baths," he says.

In one of the more unusual demonstrations of the interaction in last year's show, Chow's flatmate Kwan offered to exhibit but himself sitting in his miniature sitting room, inviting visitors to sit down and chat with him about his work. Most other artists specialise in more traditional visual arts, such as painting, sculpture, photography, and ceramics. This year, however, even performing artists, including drummers and jugglers, will join in.

Cheap rent is the obvious reason why these young struggling artists have gathered in Fo Tan, but they've also come for the airiness and high ceilings that the warehouses offer. And there's the geographical factor: Fo Tan is the domain of art graduates from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, which is only one rail station away.

Chow and others have the businessmen who ran away to the mainland to thank for the affordability of their studios. As a result of recent economic uncertainty, many entrepreneurs have opted to take advantage of the cheap rents and labour across the border, leaving numerous warehouses and industrial sites shut down and vacated.

But rents are not as cheap as they were a few years back with enthusiastic demand doubling prices to HK$6,000 for a 1,000 sq ft space. Still, it's a good deal, especially when shared between friends.

Fo Tan is not the only place in Hong Kong where artists have taken advantage of old warehouses. Old industrial districts such as Kwun Tong and Chai Wan are also home to a handful of young artists as well as aspiring rock'n'roll geniuses, although these clusters are smaller.

The one community most resembling the Fo Tan gang is the multi-media art space Cattle Depot Artists Village in Kowloon City, which has recently hosted a successful book fair and is the base from which several relatively well-known local arts groups work.

Pak, however, is quick to point out the differences. The artists in Fo Tan are less organised and more defiantly scattered, he says. And more individualistic and reluctant to be labelled, it seems.

"Yes, we have similarities, but Cattle Depot artists are more organised and they're an aggregate body. We're not that," he says.

"We have no strategy and system whatsoever. We're simply a group of studios."

Chow agrees. "The sense of community here is strong enough for us to manage an open studio each year, but it's not strong enough to make us an organisation," he adds.

Doesn't the lack of solidarity make certain things, such as fighting for recognition and government funds, more difficult?

Pak shrugs. "We're fine the way we are. Fighting for stuff is too much trouble."

Chow concurs: "We artists often feel that we don't exactly know how to play the game of wrestling with government officials and corporations."

Inevitably, the subject turns to the raging debate about the West Kowloon mega cultural project which — with its promises of turning Hong Kong into a "world-class cultural hub" — should have received enthusiastic support from at least the arts community. But the three short-listed bidders' race to please the crowd with their suddenly cultural CVs seems to be alienating the public, and local artists appear to be the most cynical of all.

Pak and his flatmates, among others, are thoroughly unimpressed by the project, angrily complaining that the idea is a tourism-themed property project.

"I probably won't even go to fill in the questionnaire during the public consultation," Pak says. His flat-mate Jeff Leung adds somewhat pessimistically: "Many people in the local arts scene are apolitical, they stay clear of current affairs."

While some criticise the government for neglecting local arts development, Chow and Pak say they are aware of their marginalised status but are happy to stay that way. "The fact that the government doesn't intervene is already giving us space," Chow says leniently.

"A lot of people don't understand us. The security guard here, for example, can't understand why I pay rent to paint. 'Do you really make money out of that?' he asks incredulously time and again. I'm ok with those questions."

Chow says he has had sufficient exhibition opportunities. He's not doing badly: Some of his paintings were sold for about HK$40,000 during his last show in a Central gallery. "But it's difficult to rely on selling paintings as real income," he says.

Like his friends, Chow takes up freelance design jobs and works as a tutor. "Being an artist is all very well, but the tutoring gave me a steady income as well as a more stable and recognised identity."

It seems that none of these young artists really care about others' perceptions of them. Nor do they seem to mind living hand-to-mouth, although Chow does say he wants to pursue creative work full-time with a stable source of income. One thing they all passionately care for is their work — and they are losing no time in producing it.

"Some people think we're slackers but the truth is there's never enough time for us to work on the art," Pak says. "There's just so many ideas, so many things to do, and so little time. Now I'm even drawing on the bus."

Fotanian 2004: Open Studio, 1-9pm, Nov 27, 28, December 4, 5, December 11, 12. For more information call 3529 2360, or visit www.fotanart.com

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