

CHUN YIN RAINBOW CHAN FIRENZE LAI  
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# ASSEMBLY: INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong's population has decreased more in the last few years than it has since the 1960s, when records began. In the wake of the 2019 protests, the 2020 National Security Law, and the government's strict 'zero COVID' pandemic response alone, over two hundred thousand Hongkongers have chosen to relocate overseas, particularly to the United Kingdom, Singapore, Taiwan, Canada, and Australia.

While unprecedented in scale, this diasporic movement represents the latest in a series of migrations that have shaped Hong Kong society and keep it connected to communities worldwide in complex ways. How to make sense of these complex networks of displacement as they unfold across generations and indeed different locales? For some it is not physical distance but rather history that intervenes to widen the gap between where they are, and where they came from. How do we understand such individual experiences of movement, transition, and dislocation?

*Assembly* brings together eight Hong Kong-born artists from different generations of the diaspora, who are now based in Naarm/Melbourne, Gadigal Nura/Sydney, London and Vancouver. Each artist has their own migration story, many of which are marked by familiar historical milestones: John Young was sent to Gadigal Nura/Sydney after the 1967 anti-colonial riots, when he was still a schoolboy. Howie Tsui's family relocated, via Nigeria, to Thunder Bay, Canada, around the time of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration. Rainbow Chan moved with family to Sydney on the eve of 1997 Handover. Firenze Lai left for London following the passage of the national security law of 2020.

As diverse as such migration histories may be, they do not determine the individual experience, those layers of significance that distinguish and give meaning to identity in diaspora. Pamela Leung and Cyrus Tang both left Hong Kong—in the 1970s and in the 2000s respectively—to 'get away' from family or social expectations and strike out in search of something new. Nikki Lam arrived as a student in regional Victoria in 2005 on something of a whim. The late Hiram To studied in Scotland from 1978–1983 before moving to Brisbane in 1986, eventually returning to Hong Kong in 1995.

Rather than (re)presenting a stationary image, then, *Assembly* seeks to resist, unsettle or *suspend* readymade notions of diasporic identity. It doesn't aim to present answers, but rather to foster new questions regarding the nature of the connections enacted across diasporic movements. With a concern for the relationship between intergenerational memory and shifting identity, faced by all diasporic communities, this exhibition embraces the resonance and dissonance between eight distinct artistic practices exploring the tension between individual and collective experience, in which Hong Kong remains a distant yet central presence, a source of gravity.

The idea of an 'assembly' brings to mind a gathering of people with a shared purpose. It speaks to social institutions, to spaces of politics and education. An assembly is a forum without a predetermined outcome; it is a place where we commit to be present to ourselves and to each other. Indeed, as a temporary yet intentional construct, the exhibition format itself could be considered an assemblage, pieced together by the curator from diverse components in a way that suggests, by form alone, some kind of narrative coherence or 'whole'. Like the works exhibited here, this is a process of 'making sense', of strategically reorganising, rearranging, and remixing a variety of histories, memories, images, and sounds.

*Assembly* comprises nineteen works by eight artists, produced between the late 1980s to the present. These include works of illustration, multi-channel video, sculptural installation, painting and drawing, printmaking and conceptual photography. Spatially, the exhibition is intentionally dense and eclectic, the sum of eight individual practices, fostering multiple pathways rather than a singular narrative journey. Walking into the space, you first meet the work of three artists: Cyrus Tang's three-channel video *In memory's eye, we travel* (2016) in the distance; Pamela Leung's crocheted mat *Agglomerate* (2022); and a series of multimedia prints and photographs by Hiram To including the artist himself, posed as a super model in *Dior Higher [Dior- orDi]* (2002/2015). While Tang's three-channel video already suggests something of the fragmentary or layered aesthetics that permeate many of the works in *Assembly*, Leung's mat also speaks to the notion of community and everyday acts of resilience both through its fabrication process and its use of overseas Chinese newspapers, woven into an unassuming 'yarn' to make a functional, shared object. To's works, on the other hand, hark from an era of postmodern visual critique, in which To often plays on the seductive power of popular cultural references. In these works, as well as his own curatorial practice at the time, To was highly critical of what he considered the opportunistic embrace of 'Asia' and its diasporic communities by the political and cultural establishment.

Walking into the space, to the right, a single-channel video installation by Nikki Lam and a set of illustrations by Howie Tsui present two alternative worlds, jostling alongside one another. Lam's work, *The Unshakeable Destiny\_2101* (2021), combines visual references to the cinematic construction of Hong Kong with allusions to the recent social protests. Alongside this carefully crafted meditation on distance in time and space from Hong Kong, Tsui's illustrations draw on an earlier generation of Hong Kong martial arts literature and action movies, themselves referencing a quasi-mythical Chinese past. With his visual references to historical Chinese art and culture—amped up here in the scroll format for example—Tsui forges a subversive style, both grotesque and comical, populated by references to Hong Kong's history of social uprisings and the Chinese fictional penchant for righteous rebels.

Turning from Tang's multi-channel video of a slowly disintegrating domestic idyll, like an eerie memory, we encounter two works by Firenze Lai, who has for many years focused on such empathetic portrayals of anonymous individuals she observes or remembers from her wanderings around Hong Kong, as illustrations and paintings. Two more portraits by Lai are presented on the large inside wall of the gallery, separated as if to emphasise their autonomy or isolation. In this space one hears already the lilting, multi-channel audio of Rainbow Chan's monumental installation work, *Fruit Song 生果文* (2022), sung in the *Waitau* 圍頭 dialect of Hong Kong's first settlers, to whom she is related on her mother's side. Before we reach Chan's large hanging banners, and the text (in fact lyrics) of the song on the pink wall at the innermost point of the gallery space, we experience two more encounters: first, a pair of towering paintings by John Young, which reflect a significant turning-point in Young's practice, from a grid-form postmodern critique of image culture towards a concern for the present and more specifically the impact of history—in this case the historical Handover of Hong Kong to Mainland Chinese rule from 1997—on a then uncertain present. Alongside Young's paintings, another work in neon text by Pamela Leung, *Ngor yiu fan uk kei* (2022),

burns brightly above the gallery space. It's declaration 'I want to go home' is not a nostalgic lament from the artist, who has been based in Australia since the 1970s, but rather quotes a desperate student protestor in the 2019 protests, which many of these artists were understandably affected by, albeit at a distance.

The edited volume *Narrating Hong Kong Culture and Identity*, notably begins with the 1997 essay 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', by the Jamaican-born British cultural theorist Stuart Hall.<sup>1</sup> In his essay Hall questions the nature of postcolonial culture and identities in the Caribbean, a region which (the editors imply) shares with Hong Kong the status of being a kind of postcolonial island on the geographic margins of empire. Hall discusses different modes of cultural identification, asking if then-emergent postcolonial identities were 'not the rediscovery but rather the production of identity. Not an identity grounded in archaeology, but in the *re-telling* of the past?'<sup>2</sup>

In the 1980s, the US-born British based artist RB Kitaj attempted to theorise how diasporic experience might impact such retelling, based on his understanding of his European Jewish heritage. In his book *The First Diasporist Manifesto*, a collection of short narrative reflections, Kitaj describes how the inherently fragmented nature of his work—work which was 'contradictory at its heart'—could lead to misinterpretation.<sup>3</sup> 'People are always saying the meanings in my pictures refuse to be fixed, to be settled, to be stable,' writes Kitaj, '[but] *that's* Diasporism, which welcomes interesting, creative misreading.'<sup>4</sup> Kitaj continues, 'The Diasporist pursuit of a homeless logic of *ethnie* may [in fact] be the radical (root) core of a new art...[that can] relate our past experience of Diaspora to a present understanding of it in painted, hopefully universal, pictures which may speak to many people.'<sup>5</sup>

The Hong Kong writer Leung Ping-kwan, in his semi-autobiographical short story 'Islands and Continents', negotiates this tension between the individual and the universal, which resonates with concerns explored in *Assembly*. In this story, Leung refers to Hong Kong as 'our little island', in contrast to the vast 'continent' that is the Mainland to the north. But where he characterises his Mainland-born grandfather—the patriarch and authority in the village—as ultimately ill-adapted, Leung portrays his mother as canny and adaptable, able to negotiate different possible pasts and presents.

'Mother was the traditional devoted daughter and virtuous wife', writes Leung,

...with all the qualities of Bai Yan, 'White Swallow', the Hong Kong film star of the fifties and sixties. She always did her best in every situation, even if she herself was treated unfairly. She didn't seem to have the words to tell her own story, but found sustenance in radio soaps, Cantonese dramas and even romantic Hollywood movies. She was a very practical person, someone who tried hard to make a living within the limits imposed by her actual situation, taking all sorts of work to make ends meet. I remember she made plastic flowers, stuck together match boxes, and for a while threaded beads for ornamental belts. These were all jobs farmed out by small wholesalers, piecework for housewives who slaved away at home for a pittance. Mother was not at all stuck-up about having had a good education. She didn't mind

doing this sort of thing. As she threaded great piles of beaded belts, she used to compete with her sisters, reciting poems from the Tang and Song dynasties. The lively, down-to-earth setting, with manual work going on all around, gave the ancient words an added vitality.<sup>6</sup>

In this brief portrait of his mother Leung narrates a layered, particular history of Hong Kong, yet one that speaks to shared experiences of dislocation, in its many forms—geographical, familial, cultural. This isn't a heroic narrative of 'success', 'fortune' or 'happiness', but rather a story of survival. Many of the works in *Assembly* engage with similarly vital yet pragmatic renegotiations of the old and the new, the 'here' and the 'there', the popular and the classic, the remembered and imagined. They work with fragments and glimpses, because this is their present. In this way, the exhibition bears witness not necessarily to a subversive spirit of resistance so much as something perhaps more potent: resilience. Like Leung's story, the artists gathered in *Assembly* present a tension between the particular and the communal—a tension in which the diaspora becomes a space of emergence.

1. Stuart Hall, 'Cultural identity and diaspora' (1997), in Pun Ngai, Yee Lai-Man, ed.s, *Narrating Hong Kong Culture and Identity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7–23.
2. *ibid*, 9.
3. Ronald Brooks Kitaj, *The First Diasporist Manifesto* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 40–41.
4. *ibid*, 35, 37.
5. *ibid*, 40–41.
6. Ping-kwan Leung, 'Islands and Continents', trans. Caroline Manson, in John Minford, Brian Holton, and Agnes Hung-chong Chan, ed.s, *Islands and Continents: Short Stories by Leung Ping-kwan* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 74.

## CHUN YIN RAINBOW CHAN

Chun Yin Rainbow Chan 陳雋然 (b. 1990, Hong Kong) is an award-winning vocalist, producer and multi-disciplinary artist who moved to Australia with her family in 1996, on the eve of the Handover. Chan completed her music degree at the University of Sydney in 2011, and a Master of Fine Arts (Research) at UNSW Art & Design in 2020. As a musician, Chan has developed a DIY style of bittersweet electro pop reflecting her diverse popular cultural influences, punctuated by repurposed field-recordings and found sounds. Her visual art develops this interest in remix culture, creative (mis)translation, and diasporic heritage. Chan has performed at numerous venues and festivals in Australia and internationally, including Sydney Opera House, Melbourne Music Week, Iceland Airwaves, National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, Tai Kwun in Hong Kong, and SXSW in Austin. Her artwork has been exhibited at Firstdraft, Artspace, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, and I-Project Space, Beijing. In 2020, Chan was part of Artspace's One Year Studio Program and was selected as the Performance Space x West Kowloon Exchange resident artist. In 2022, she was voted "Artist of the Year" in the 2022 FBi radio SMAC Awards and recognised in the "40 Under 40: Most Influential Asian Australians Award" for her contribution to arts and culture.

Since 2017, Chan has been researching her matrilineal ties to Hong Kong's *Waitau* 圍頭 ('walled village') community, believed to be the area's first settlers during the Song Dynasty (960–1279). This project reimagines a *Waitau* ritual known as the bridal lament, a performance of grief in which the bride would weep and sing for three days with family and friends, expressing their sorrow and defiance in the face of arranged marriages. With her mother's help, Chan travelled to *Waitau* villages in Hong Kong's New Territories to learn from women elders, producing a bold new body of work. *Fruit Song* 生果文 (2022), created as part of Chan's Artspace fellowship, comprises two large painted silk banners with embroidered pearls and tassels made with traditional weaving (which the artist has also been learning). Chan depicts the fruit and lyrics on the banners as a confident 'amateur', a learner. The accompanying three-channel audio track is Chan's contemporary rendition of the *Fruit Song* 生果文, sung in *Waitau* but produced in her particular style of finely layered pop, laced with beats and sounds crafted from field recordings made during her research trips. Rather than seeking to preserve tradition as a static artefact, Chan's creative method reinvigorates this knowledge, making it open again for cross-generational learning and contemporary resonance.

In 2021, *Songs from a Walled Village*, a documentary produced by Chan on this project for ABC Radio National, was a finalist in the 2021 Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union Prizes; and in 2023, Chan premiered *The Bridal Lament*, her one-woman performance reinterpreting *Waitau* women's wedding rituals, in Liveworks and OzAsia festivals.

Longans are dismantled by the howling wind  
 Pineapples are sentenced to life in the ground  
 Lychees and Longans are enslaved, bound bodies  
 Mangoes shed tears upon green skin  
 Plantains, raw and round, refuse to be relinquished  
 Star Fruits, unripe, is split into five regardless  
 Saturn Peaches, so beautiful, sigh in the darkness  
 Grape vines were once draped in golden light  
 Mandarins are torn from all her sisters  
 Sand Pears, I doubt I will ever taste them again  
 Sugarcane is sweet from the beginning to the end

龍眼結球風拆散  
 菠蘿盛上坐樓監  
 荔枝龍眼奴受網  
 芒果皮青淚暗流  
 牙蕉咁圓難割捨  
 上念唔圓五繡開  
 蟠桃生沙嘆憑影  
 葡萄枝上吊金光  
 沙柑姑嫂同分散  
 沙梨難望我回嚙  
 百蔗到頭甜到尾



Chun Yin Rainbow Chan, *Fruit Song* 生果文, 2022, habotai silk, silk dye, freshwater pearls, 花帶 patterned braids, linocut print, polyamide thread, cotton, vinyl lettering, wall paint, multichannel audio (5:20 minutes), dimensions variable. Courtesy Art Gallery of New South Wales Collection — purchased with funds provided by the Asian Art Collection Benefactors 2023. Assembly exhibition view, CIW Gallery, 2024. Photo: David Paterson.

Nikki Lam (b.1988, Hong Kong) is a visual artist and curator based in Naarm/Melbourne, who moved to Australia in 2005 to study. Lam has a Bachelor of Visual Arts in Photomedia from Monash University (2009), an Executive Master of Arts from the University of Melbourne (2014), and is currently completing her Doctorate in Art at RMIT, Melbourne. Lam's work has been shown widely across Australia and internationally, including at *Melbourne Now* (2022), at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2022, and the 32<sup>nd</sup> annual *Primavera: Young Australian Artists* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, in 2023.

In her expanded practice in writing, curating and festival making, Lam has explored anti-colonial methods, as well as relational and community practices as co-director of Hyphenated Projects and the Hyphenated Biennial, and curator at The Substation, Naarm/Melbourne. Between 2014–2017, Lam was Artistic Director at CHANNELS, the Australian video art festival, and visual arts editor at *Peril* magazine. She has also held programming and production roles at the Australian Centre for Moving Image, Next Wave Festival, Footscray Community Arts Centre, and others.

Working primarily with moving images, Lam is interested in the complexity of diasporic experience, drawing on her own migration to speculate truths through creative processes of translation, fragmentation and re-generation. *the unshakeable destiny\_2101* (2021), related to her doctoral research, is the first part of a modular moving image film trilogy reflecting on creative agency during times of cultural, social, and political transition, critically interpreted through screen cultures. Lam has said she intuitively developed the trilogy as a way of processing changes occurring in Hong Kong over recent years, particularly from the diasporic context of being 'from' yet no longer 'in' Hong Kong. Shot on 16mm film for its aesthetic qualities, the work intentionally references the films of iconic director Wong Kar Wai, himself a child émigré from Shanghai. Woven through this slow homage are incisive allusions to the city's colonial past and incidents from the 2019 protests. Lam challenges the colonial nostalgia of such films, through ambivalent interventions, from the laser pointer (deemed an 'offensive weapon' by police during the protests), to the deceptive use of subtitles, which at times reveal script directions, leading the viewer away from the image before them. The work also complicates notions of truth by ostensibly revealing its artifice, only to reinforce or deepen it in the process. For example, by placing on-screen objects in the gallery space or allowing her camera to eventually pull out, revealing the tightly constructed film set through which we have been following the nameless protagonist. These acts of deflation or self-defeat seem somehow to echo the work's title, 'the unshakeable destiny', which are the final words of outgoing British colonial governor Chris Patten's farewell speech at the 1997 Handover ceremony.



Nikki Lam, *the unshakable destiny\_2101*, 2021, 16mm film transferred to 2K digital video with sound, 2021. Courtesy the artist. Assembly exhibition view, CIW Gallery, 2024. Photo: RLDI Photography.



Nikki Lam, *the unshakable destiny\_2101*, 2021, 16mm film transferred to 2K digital video with sound, 2021 (still). Courtesy the artist.

Firenze Lai Ching Yin 黎清妍 (b. 1984, Hong Kong) is an artist, illustrator, editorial designer and publisher, living and working in London since 2022. Lai graduated in painting from Hong Kong Art School (HKAS) in 2006, co-founding the independent art space Hulahoop Gallery that year, which ran until 2009. From 2005, Lai contributed illustrations on issues of psychology and society for Hong Kong's *Ming Pao Weekly* newspaper, and has been painting full time since 2011. Lai's work has been widely exhibited in Hong Kong and internationally, including at the Venice Biennale (2017), New York's New Museum (2015), and the 10<sup>th</sup> Shanghai Biennale (2014), among others. Since 2006, Lai has also designed and published five books on her drawings and paintings.

Rather than focusing on appearances, Lai attempts to grasp the essential presence of the anonymous people she depicts. Describing them as 'figures' rather than portraits, Lai's drawings, paintings and recently watercolours, always pay close attention to gestures and postures, to capture a mood rather than outward appearance. In this way, one intuitively reads these works as suspended moments, long since passed yet perhaps still resonant. Lai's ostensibly straightforward observations, often recollections developed into paintings from quick sketches and photographs, communicate something universal about the uncanny nature of the lived body and the paradox of urban isolation.

In *Noise* (2011) and *The Wind* (2011), Lai subtly depicts the effects of two kinds of invisible forces, which are common yet by nature difficult to describe to another and so remain solitary experiences. Not long after these works were made, Lai commented, 'The challenging thing about drawings is how to depict a thought or feeling accurately, while for paintings it's more about conveying a certain mood or atmosphere.'<sup>1</sup> The paintings *Betting Station* (2013) and *Security Guard* (2013) each focus on the kind of people one might walk past without noticing. They bear witness to a familiar tension throughout Lai's work, between our capacity for empathy and solidarity, yet our inherent isolation as individuals. Lai is fascinated by the impossibility of truly knowing how one is seen by another. Yet in works such as these, as we watch the guard standing taut, with her white-gloved hands politely clasped; or notice the punter's nervously wrapped legs and arched back, we are invited to look and wonder what they may have been thinking or feeling at that moment.

In the wake of Hong Kong's social movements, as public space has become more contested, Lai's sensitive observations of individual lives navigating the city take on added significance.

1. Firenze Lai, *Phototropism* (Hong Kong: hulahoop, 2014), 96.



Firenze Lai, *Security Guard*, 2013, oil on canvas, 50.0 × 40.7cm. Courtesy White Rabbit Collection, Sydney.



Firenze Lai, *Noise*, 2011, ink on paperboard, 29.7 × 42.0cm. Courtesy White Rabbit Collection, Sydney.



Firenze Lai, *The Wind*, 2011, ink on paperboard, 27 × 22cm. Courtesy White Rabbit Collection, Sydney.



Firenze Lai, *Betting Station*, 2013, ink on paperboard, 29.7 × 42.0cm. Courtesy White Rabbit Collection, Sydney.

# PAMELA LEUNG

Pamela Leung 鄭詠兒 (b.1951) is a Hong Kong-born artist who moved to Gadigal Nura/Sydney in 1976, at a time when Australia had been offering amnesty to undocumented migrants. After successful careers as a designer and small business owner, in 2016 Leung completed a Master of Fine Art at the National Art School, Sydney. Since then, Leung has exhibited widely in Australia and internationally, including in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Sweden, Paris, and the United Kingdom. She was the recipient of the Emerging Artist Award at the 65<sup>th</sup> Blake Prize (2018), and her work is in a number of public collections, including Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre collection, as well as private collections in Australia and overseas.

Working across installation, video, performance, sculpture, and painting, Leung's artwork is often labour intensive, using everyday materials to challenge cultural narratives around complex themes such as identity, migration, and cultural memory. By sharing her personal experience of migration, Leung's exhibitions and projects often create a space to share ideas of identity and displacement with diverse audiences, in Australia, Hong Kong and around the world. Leung's works subtly subvert our expectations. For example, the colour red is significant for Leung, not for its Chinese cultural resonance but rather as a reference to the blood that connects all people, regardless of cultural and racial background. In this way, Leung's works continue to see solidarity and empathy rather than division.

*Agglomerate* (2022-) is a mat that symbolises and facilitates community, being made of twine produced by fifty people from the Hong Kong diaspora worldwide using local Chinese-language newspapers— but only those printed with traditional Chinese characters, which have remained favoured in Hong Kong and many overseas Chinese communities. Leung first learnt how to crochet from her 94-year-old mother, who made the central part of the mat. The piece has travelled between Sydney and Sheffield (UK), and now Canberra, continuing to grow through each exhibition and related events.

On the other hand, *Ngor yiu fan uk kei* (2022) is a neon sculpture that subverts assumptions on multiple levels: Literally meaning 'I want to go home' in Cantonese, the phrase isn't the nostalgic plea of a member of the diaspora, but instead directly quotes one of the student protesters occupying a university when besieged by police during the protests of 2019. Meanwhile, the use of transliteration recalls the politicisation of Cantonese during the protests, while neon—now ubiquitous in the contemporary global art world—is here reclaimed by Leung for its local cultural resonance, as part of the architectural and popular cultural image of the modern Hong Kong in which she grew up.



Pamela Leung, *Ngor yiu fan uk kei (I want to go home)*, 2022, neon sculpture. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Olivier Krischer.



Pamela Leung, *Agglomerate*, 2022, crocheted newspaper, approx. 200cm in diameter. Courtesy the artist. Photo: David Patterson.

## CYRUS TANG

Cyrus Tang (b.1969, Hong Kong) relocated to Naarm/Melbourne in 2003, completing a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) at the Victorian College of the Arts in 2004 and a Master of Fine Arts (Research) at Monash University in 2010. She has participated in several residency programs, including the Helsinki International Artist Programme (2013), the National Art Studio in South Korea (2012), Cité internationale des arts in Paris (2009), and the Banff Centre in Canada (2008). Her work has also been supported by significant grants, including from Asialink (2012), Australia Council for the Arts (2011, 2009), and the Georges Mora Fellowship (2008). She has exhibited extensively in Australia and internationally.

Originally trained in ceramics, Tang now works primarily in photomedia and video installations. She is fascinated by the representation of impermanence and decay as a manifestation of nostalgia. Working with mutable materials such as wax, clay, ash, steam, snow, and hair, Tang intentionally uses labour intensive analogue processes to create the haunting visual effects that imbue her works with a unique material sensibility. For Tang, the analogue is the contemporary ruin, a site of utopian resistance or autonomy amid the digital entropy of the contemporary.

*In memory's eye, we travel* (2016) is a haunting three-channel video installation depicting a house as it slowly begins to warp, buckle and disintegrate. The delicate monochrome tones and softness of the lens establish a sense of timelessness, which soon heightens the feeling of unease. The effect of an entirely studio-based process, Tang created a detailed wax model, filming it up-side-down as she applied heat, resulting in the uncanny physics of the space. For Tang, the work reflects on the sudden, unhappy end of a relationship, but also its implications, as her aspirations for a family of her own were 'like a childhood dream slowly melting away.'



Cyrus Tang, *In memory's eye, we travel*, 2016, three-channel video. Courtesy the artist. Assembly exhibition view, CIW Gallery, 2024. Photo: RLDI Photography .

Hiram To 杜子卿 (1964–2017) was born in Hong Kong to Chinese émigré parents, but spent formative periods as a student in Scotland (1978–83) and a practicing artist in Australia (1986–1995). In 1995, he returned to Hong Kong, working in communications and journalism while establishing a significant international career. In 1994, To was offered a landmark solo exhibition at London’s Camden Arts Centre—a first for a contemporary Hong Kong or Chinese artist at a British art museum. In 2005, the Winnipeg Art Gallery, Canada, presented a major survey of his work and produced a comprehensive catalogue, which To designed. In 2007, To was selected as one of three artists to represent Hong Kong at the 52<sup>nd</sup> Venice Biennale.

Despite the critical attention his work attracted, To maintained a studied ambivalence towards the art world. With a background in design and printmaking, his works referenced and even mimicked fashion, film, pop music and commercial advertising, in their aesthetics, communicative power, and use of materials. The works in the series *The printing room* (1989), combine the ‘mechanical’ (photocopies), with the ‘artistic’ (romantic prints). Their red and sepia tones and wax sheen assume the aura of an original, but were produced and sold as cheap \$60 multiples. In *I spy through the rose coloured glass* (1988–89), using similarly kitsch methods, To candidly highlights the romantic fallacy of Australian colonisation by introducing the word ‘disco’—a pun on ‘discovery’: disco/very, very/disco—at the centre of this myth of origin, at a time when much of mainstream Australia was swept by celebrations marking the Bicentennial anniversary of ‘settlement’.

To was keenly sensitive to the dual nature of photographic images as superficial yet powerful spaces documenting and projecting desires. In *Casual Victim* (1991), originally presented as a postcard (another multiple), To cast himself as a high-end tour guide, posing in his classic *Comme des Garçons* shirt at Hong Kong’s iconic Peak tram station. By holding a sign reading ‘Club World’, he seems to position the viewer as a patron or member of some exclusive ‘club’. In these works, ‘[To] creates scenarios in which the self appears to have exited the stage, leaving behind sumptuous traces of an ‘identity’ that never really was.’<sup>1</sup> In this case, the object of sabotage appears to be To himself, as he undermines the myth of the artist as oracle, as source of hidden truths.

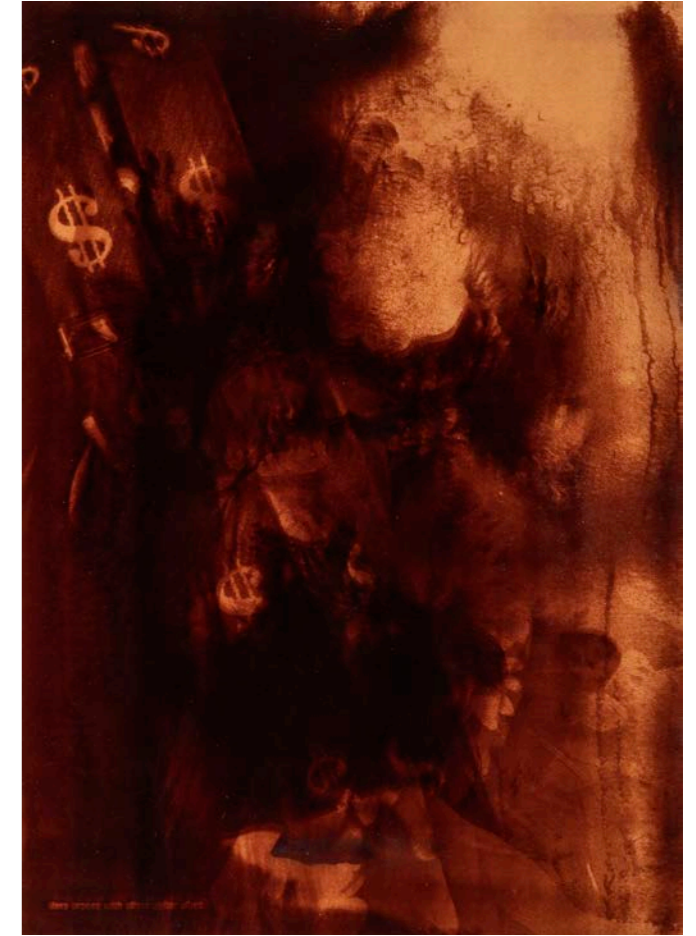
1. Donna McAlear, ‘Performing Attitudes’, in Joan Padgett ed., *Hiram To: Don’t Let me be Misunderstood* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2002), 9.

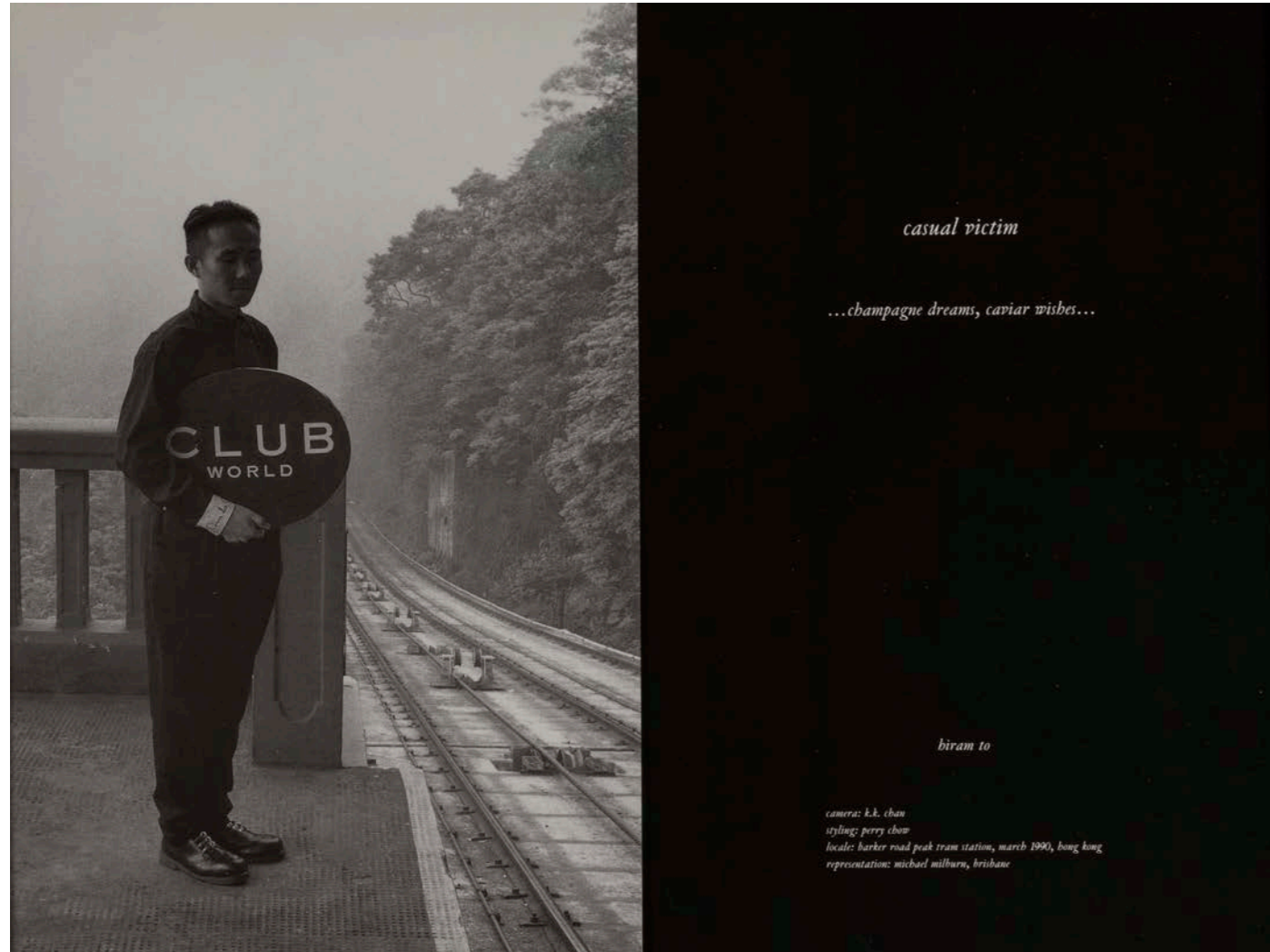


Hiram To, *I spy through the rose coloured glass*, 1988–89, laser copy and modelling compound, 121.3H × 160.9W × 0.13Dcm. Courtesy Griffith University Art Museum, purchased 1996.



Top and Bottom: Hiram To, *Untitled from The printing room*, 1989, photocopy with wax and red and sepia toner, 49.2H × 39.7W × 2Dcm [framed]. Courtesy Griffith University Art Collection, purchased 1989.





Hiram To, *Casual Victim*, 1991, printed card, 38H × 46W × 1.8Dcm [framed]. Courtesy Griffith University Art Collection, purchased with assistance from the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body, 1991.



Hiram To, *Higher [Dior-orDi]*, 2002 printed 2015, photographic print face mounted on acrylic, 150 × 63cm approx. Courtesy Art Gallery of New South Wales Collection — gift of Scott Redford 2021.

# HOWIE TSUI

Howie Tsui (Tsui Ho Yan) 徐浩恩 was born in Hong Kong in 1978, but spent his early years living between Lagos, Nigeria—where his father had relocated the family in 1974—and Hong Kong, before his family migrated to Canada, in 1984, to settle in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Tsui currently lives and works in Vancouver<sup>1</sup>. He completed his Bachelor of Fine Arts at the University of Waterloo, Canada, in 2002. He has exhibited widely internationally and his work has been acquired by significant public collections in Canada and abroad, including the National Gallery of Canada, Vancouver Art Gallery, M+ in Hong Kong, the Ringling Museum and the Art Gallery of NSW.

Working with a variety of media, including ink and brush, illustration, sound sculptures, lenticular lightboxes, and media installations, Tsui constructs tense, fictive environments that subvert classical art forms and traditional narrative genres, often associated with the historical Chinese literati class. Formally, Tsui has developed a style of vivid, exaggerated and often grotesque imagery, which uses traditional and contemporary themes and materials to satirise and disarm forms of political and cultural hegemony. Tsui's syntheses of diverse materials and cultural inputs addressing superstition, trauma, surveillance and otherness, articulate a practice that is often concerned with liminal and diasporic perspectives.

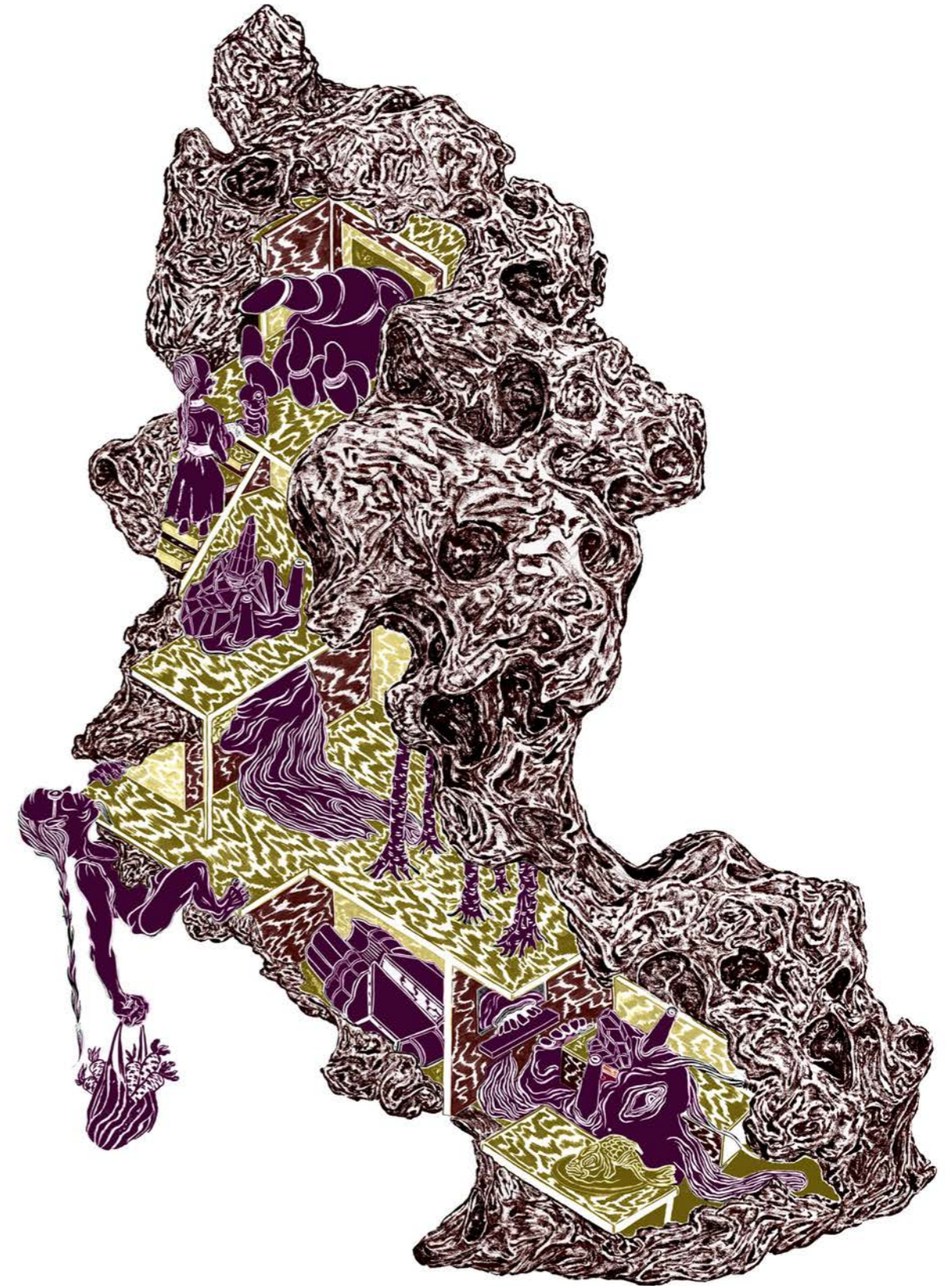
*Retainers of Anarchy* (2018) is a handscroll comprised of elements Tsui originally created for a large non-linear, multi-channel animation. In this work he combines characters and scenarios from the popular martial arts fiction of Hong Kong writer Jin Yong 金庸 (Louis Cha, 1924–2018), with scenes from Hong Kong history and contemporary society, against an image of the Qing dynasty painting *One Hundred Horses* (1728) by Italian-born Giuseppe Castiglione, renowned for his hybrid style combining Chinese and European painting traditions. This work reflects on order and chaos, and the potential for social cohesion through self-organised communities, like the iconic Kowloon Walled City—the apartment-like building shown here.

*Avatars of Entombment* (2018), is a recent series of works on paper based on scholar rocks. Traditionally for aesthetic contemplation, here the rocks are encrusted with cangue-like wooden boards used to humiliate, torture and execute people in Imperial China. Tsui associates these contortions and restrictions with the sense of 'claustrophobia' felt by the Hong Kong diaspora community, pressured by the reach of the region's new anti-secession laws, but also the rising incidents of anti-Asian hate in North America and elsewhere. Tsui was inspired to develop this series after visiting the Terracotta Warriors, in Xi'an, where he saw examples of the terracotta soldiers fused with earth and other burial objects. However, Tsui is also interested in how the cangue compels us to confront the kinds of sensational, xenophobic images aimed at Chinese people overseas. In this way, the cangue structures reference archaic punishments yet allude to contemporary realities. Moreover, Tsui is interested in the relationship of scholar rocks to the longer history of counterfeit culture, since these 'natural' objects were often handcrafted to conceal their handmade status.

1. The traditional, ancestral and unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples—Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Stó:lō and Səlilwətaʔ/Səlilwətułh (Tsleil-Waututh) xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.



Howie Tsui, *Avatars of Entombment #1 (Calcify)*, 2022, three-colour silkscreen on Crane Lettra cotton paper, 61.0 × 45.7cm. Courtesy the artist.



Howie Tsui, *Avatars of Entombment #2 (Offering)*, 2022, three-colour silkscreen on Crane Lettra cotton paper, 61.0 × 45.7cm. Courtesy the artist.

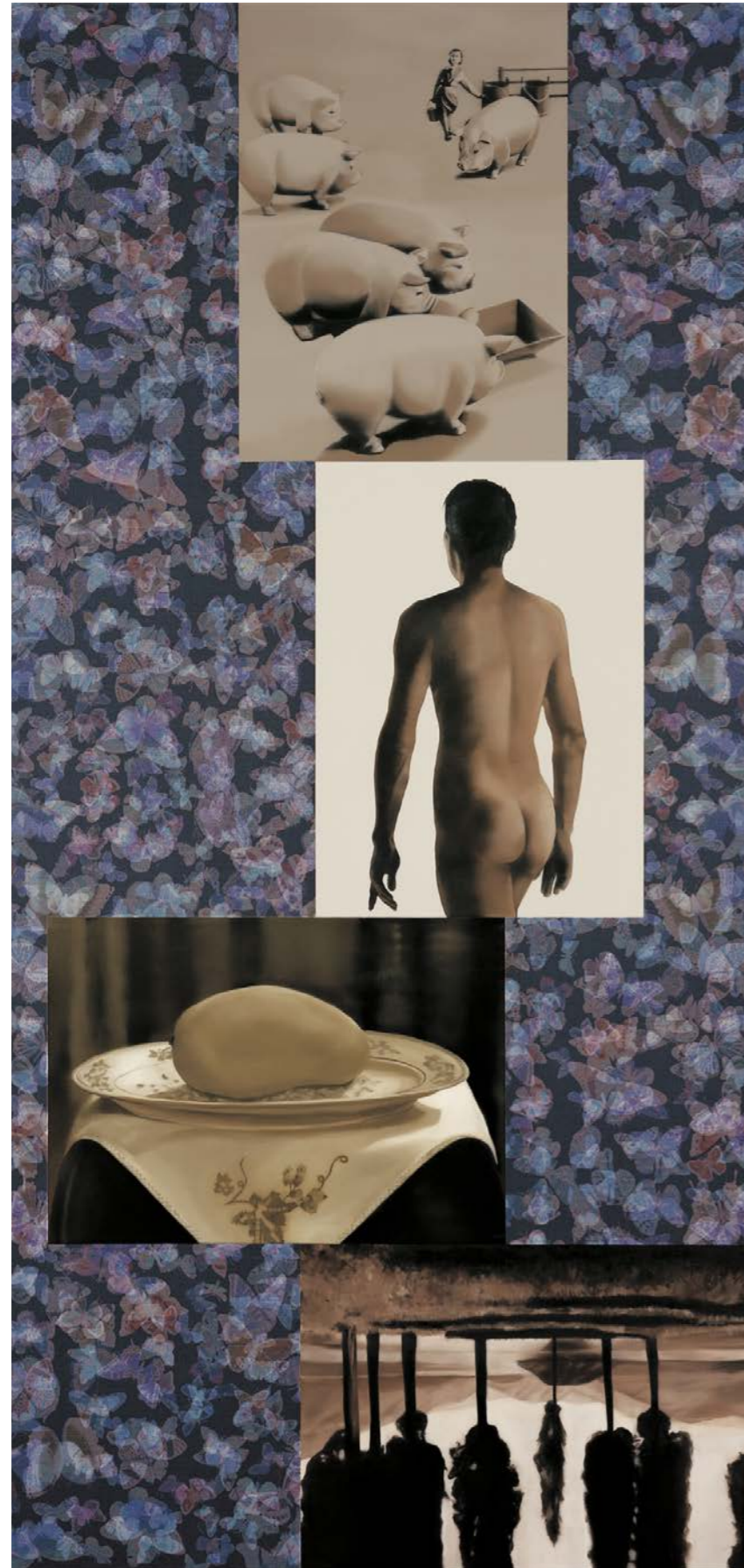


Howie Tsui, *Retainers of Anarchy*, 2018, handscroll, Epson Ultrachrome pigmented ink mounted on rice paper and silk, 25 × 205cm. Courtesy Art Gallery of New South Wales Collection — gift of the artist and ART LABOR Gallery 2019.

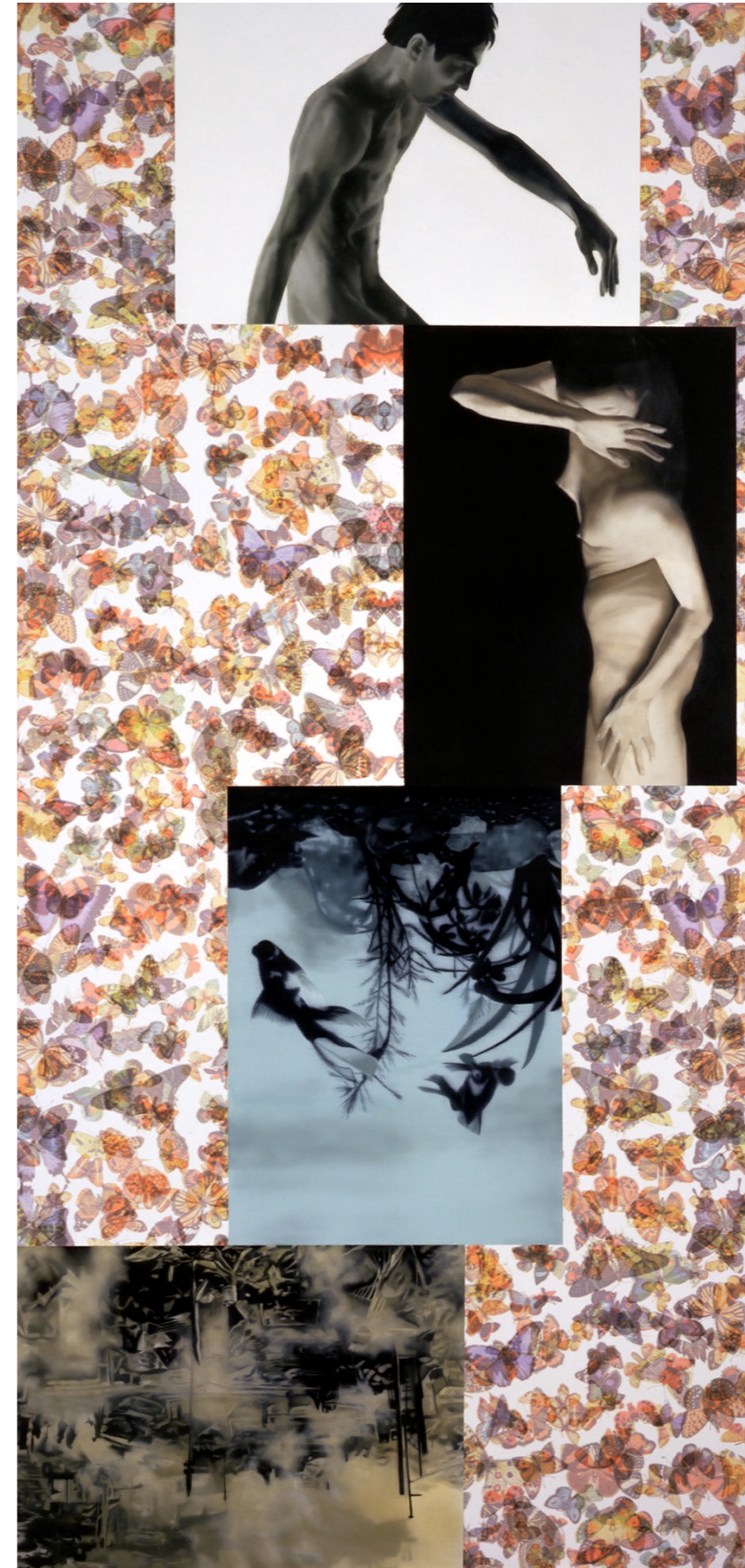
John Young Zerunge AM 楊子榮 (b.1956, Hong Kong) moved to Australia in 1967, in the wake of the 1967 anti-colonial riots in Hong Kong. He read philosophy of science and aesthetics at the University of Sydney and then studied painting and sculpture at Sydney College of the Arts, where he later taught painting as well. Since his first exhibition in 1979, Young has had more than 60 solo exhibitions and participated in over 160 group exhibitions. His works have been shown in major exhibitions both in Australia and abroad, including at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 1995. Significant surveys of Young's work have been held at the TarraWarra Museum of Art (2005–06) and at the Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra (2013). Young has also been an advocate for Asian Australian and diasporic artists, co-founding, the Asian Australian Artists' Association (Gallery 4A) in 1995, now the 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art. In 2020 John Young was conferred as a Member of the Order of Australia in recognition of his substantial and ongoing contribution to the Australian Visual Arts.

For over four decades, Young has developed a series of major phases in his work, moving from issues of authenticity and appropriation to transcultural and finally ethical expression, while interrogating technological reproduction (combining digital and studio processes). *Hong Kong Burns* (2000) and *That Bright Red Star* (2000) relate to Young's earlier *Double Ground Painting* series, which juxtaposed 'stacked' generic nudes, still lifes and landscape images, against apparently unrelated backgrounds. Whereas the *Double Ground Paintings* include historical images, often from the Chinese or European art historical canon, in the background of this pair of works, Young has instead used a dense positive and negative pattern of overlaid butterflies, symbolising a sense of anxiety or unknowing. On this background, Young includes images that echo the classical genres he had once sought to 'weaken' in their reproduction, but here one also finds images from his youth—from propaganda magazines such as *China Pictorial*, which he received as a boy in Sydney, curious about the 'China' that had compelled his departure from Hong Kong. These include images of a model farm and one of Mao's famous mangoes, which became venerated around 1968 as symbols of the leader's generosity when he sent this exotic gift to workers in Beijing rather than eat it himself. Moreover, while Young had frequently included reproductions of nudes in his earlier works, the position of those pictured here, as well as the inclusion of the male nude, gives these works quite a different, disaffected yet personal tone.

Though based in Australia, Young has frequently travelled back to Hong Kong, where he has been able to follow the mood of friends, those who stayed, those who left, and some who have returned. In this uncharacteristically personal pair of imposing paintings, which mark a turning point towards his later *History Projects* works, Young has adapted and developed earlier pictorial and conceptual strategies to try to come to terms with the 1997 Handover and its impact, not only on Hong Kong as a place, but also as a memory.



John Young, *That Bright Red Star*, Autumn 2000, digital print and oil on canvas, 288 × 138cm. Courtesy the artist.



John Young, *Hong Kong Burns*, Autumn 2000, digital print and oil on canvas, 288 × 138cm. Courtesy the artist.

# EXHIBITION INFORMATION

## A S S E M B L Y

15 March–24 May 2024  
 Australian Centre on China in the World Gallery  
 Building 188, Fellows Lane,  
 The Australian National University,  
 Canberra, ACT 2601

E ciw@anu.edu.au

**GUEST CURATOR** Dr Olivier Krischer  
**CIW GALLERY DIRECTOR** Prof. Ari Larissa Heinrich  
**GALLERY MANAGER** Chin-Jie Melodie Liu

**ARTISTS** Chun Yin Rainbow CHAN  
 Nikki LAM  
 Firenze LAI Ching Yin  
 Pamela LEUNG  
 Cyrus TANG  
 Hiram TO  
 Howie TSUI Ho-Yan  
 John YOUNG Zerunge

**ABOUT THE CURATOR** Dr Olivier Krischer is a historian and curator of modern and contemporary art and photomedia from East Asia and its diasporas. He is a lecturer in the Masters of Curating and Cultural Leadership at UNSW Art and Design, and also teaches modern and contemporary Asian art history at the National Art School, Gadigal Nura/Sydney. Previous curatorial projects include *Wei Leng Tay – Abridge* (2021) and *Wayfaring: Photography in 1970s–80s Taiwan* (2021, co-curated with Dr. Shuxia Chen). He is editor and co-author of *John Young: The History Projects* (Power Publications, 2024), *Zhang Peili: from Painting to Video* (ANU Press, 2019) and *Asia through Art and Anthropology: Cultural Translation Across Borders* (2013, with F. Nakamura, M. Perkins).

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Olivier would also like to personally thank peers Natalie Seiz and Rachael Kiang for their collegial advice and conversation; Michelle Wong and Anna Ho for help modelling; much gratitude to Luke Roberts, Scott Redford and Nick Tsoutas for their insight into the work of the late Hiram To; and finally heartfelt thanks to the CIW Gallery and administration team—Ari Heinrich, Sharon Strange, Melodie Liu, Nancy Chiu, Chiu Tung Ng, and Yingbo Ni (exhibition intern): without you this would not have been possible.



Assembly exhibition view, CIW Gallery, 2024. Photo: David Patterson.



Assembly exhibition view, CIW Gallery, 2024. Photo: David Patterson.





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