

Chan Yuk-keung: Hong Kong's Art Innovator

by John Batten

If art has a social role and if artists have a social function then importantly it is to make us – the humble audience – question our assumptions of the world in which we live. This questioning does not happen in isolation however – it works within the values of a culture and builds from, or reacts against this same culture and in this process of questioning another angle of thought or understanding emerges and a subtle change in what we know our culture to be occurs.

.....thus an artist does the cultural equivalent of a scientific researcher who builds on the work of other researchers to create a new theory, invention or scientific breakthrough. Our artists, musicians, architects, designers, writers, film and theatre directors all build on the work of their historic predecessors and make, embellish and announce what we are – they define what we - society – actually is.

Hong Kong has a handful of original artists that, in their work, challenge the visual senses and make the viewer look, think and look again. They are at that intersection of creation that defines the time and place in which we live. Of course, our world view is made up of other important components: historic events, personal tragedy and highlights, technological advances - but the whole amalgam gives us an insight into the question: 'what is our culture?'

Looking for individuals who are our cultural 'leaders' can be problematic – cantopop singers and action-movie actors are obvious. Chan Yuk-keung stands almost alone in the visual arts as he is both an outstanding artist and influential teacher who has taught, nurtured and encouraged a generation of other artists.

Chan Yuk-keung has just completed a residency at the Hong Kong Arts Centre – turning the Pao Gallery into an artist's workshop and within one month developing a series of sculptural installations that Chan termed 'flat work'. The finished art was some of the most complex, thought-provoking and outstanding ever seen in Hong Kong and sadly was only exhibited for one week.

You, however, still have the opportunity to visit Para/Site Art Space in Sheung Wan to view a selection of Chan's previous work, see a video of Chan working on and talking about his work at the Arts Centre and purchase the catalogue of this retrospective-type exhibition. Anyone interested in one of Hong Kong's pre-eminent contemporary artists should see this exhibition – you will not be disappointed.

Chan is a fairly unassuming person; quiet, unflamboyant, cloistered - in a sense - by working as an Associate Professor in the Fine Arts Department of Chinese University. He is a rare exhibitor – has had only a couple of solo exhibitions – but his work regularly appears in group exhibitions – both political and thematic. He has represented Hong Kong in overseas exhibitions – most notably at the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial in Brisbane in 1996. He is - in what would be termed in more mature art communities - an 'artists' artist'; an artist that is pure: both technically and morally. Indeed, Chan himself still maintains for himself and encourages his students to consider the social aims of their artwork and to see their work like the layers of an onion: having spiritual, physical and cultural dimensions.

As an undergraduate at The Chinese University of Hong Kong Chan saw himself as a painter and printmaker as well as experimenting with more traditional ink on paper. As a post-graduate Master's student at Cranbrooke Academy of Art near Michigan in USA – Chan was heavily influenced by Anselm Kiefer, Robert Rauschenberg and Franz Kline and many works dating from this period are complex mixed media paintings using similar transfer techniques employed by these artists. Drawing has always been important for Chan and even his sculptural installations at the recent HK Arts Centre exhibition are like horizontal sheets of paper with scratches, dashes of ink and cuttings of pencil, burnt in places: avant-garde Chinese ink painting.

Like most committed artists, Chan's work only developed and focussed after studies at art school had been completed. Drawing inspiration from Dada and surrealism and his own interest in beautifully functional objects (such as the typewriter) and, in particular, looking at the absurdist juxtapositions of everyday objects by the Belgian artist Rene Magritte Chan has successfully developed his own particular style. He combines aspects of sculpture, site-specific installation and the use of found and commercially manufactured objects in his work. He says – in a dada-like way! - that he “is standing at the same line (as the surrealists) but at opposite ends” and that when he manipulates and uses objects in his work - such as torches, chairs, knives – he is consciously trying to “put a myth into a daily object”.

Chan often presents a visual conundrum to the viewer: objects are placed in positions where they should not be and when we ask ‘why’, Chan is actually asking ‘why not?’. Importantly, Chan's work has an ironically cutting political and social edge to it. He is a taste-maker – but not of the Vivienne Tam or Jackie Chan kind, more like an activist throwing out challenges to the complacent.

Chan says that teaching is “painful”, but that he likes the results of teaching: students' ideas translated into an understandable visual language. On a simple practical level Chan has inspired many students by his own example of constructing intricate conceptual work on site. Chan demonstrates that artists do not require space to produce art in. Many of his own large-scale sculptural pieces were initially constructed at his home and then assembled and re-worked on site. A generation of CUHK students have used a similar strategy when preparing work for exhibition. Chan says that his own work is “about details” and he is critical of students who do not take extra care in finishing off work as well as they possibly can. Chan tends to use wood as a major component of his art pieces – it is “more convenient than metal and less toxic than plastic”.

The Hong Kong Art Centre and Para/Site Art Space should be congratulated for organising such a successful exhibition about this vital artist and teacher. Let's hope that next time it is one of our publicly funded art museums that honour Chan Yuk-keung with a major retrospective.

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