

Contemporary Hong Kong Art Exhibition

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The recent *Contemporary Hong Kong Art* exhibition at the Museum of Art, which replaced its previous Hong Kong Art Biennial, should have been one of the art exhibition highlights of 2000. On the surface the exhibition appeared to simply present an innocuous overview of Hong Kong art. Nothing wrong with that - historical and contemporary art overviews can be useful and educative, however this exhibition said a great deal more about arts policy, the Museum of Art's own artistic interests and the 'establishment' view of Hong Kong's art scene than really presenting any new fresh viewpoints.

The Museum of Art invited five individual guest curators to present aspects of Hong Kong's art development. These curators were: Van Lau, Wucius Wong, Leung Kui-ting and the Museum's curator of modern art, Tang Hoi-chu who each presented an aspect of Hong Kong's art development up to the present day, and Kan Tai-keung, who looked at Hong Kong's development in graphic and product design. Each curator selected a series or individual pieces of art and then explained their framework for their own individual choices in a written statement (published in a free newspaper style handout by the Museum and available at the exhibition).

The Museum of Art, with its prominent Hong Kong waterfront position, is a major disappointment for residents and for any Hong Kong visitor - the poor visitor attendance numbers to the Museum of Art surely reflect a moribund organisation. The whole curatorial direction of the Museum appears to be run purely on the personal interests and expertise of the Museum Director. Although the Museum has a remit to present all art forms, traditional Chinese art takes precedence. Since it opened 10 years ago, the Museum has never organised any exhibition of contemporary Chinese art (while the rest of world craves it!), any exhibition of photography (in a photography mad city!), or, any exhibition of applied arts (jewellery etc). The Museum does buy overseas art shows; however, it rarely organises any themed exhibitions itself nor appears to use the large resources and (latently) talented staff that it employs. The recent showing of *Inside Out* at the Museum is ignominious because it is a 'fly-in' exhibition organised by the New York-based Asia Society - the Museum should be embarrassed that it did not organise its own similar exhibition years ago.

It was therefore no surprise that photography, the applied arts, video and ceramics were only represented by one or two examples in this exhibition. What would you expect considering the Museum of Art's track record? It goes without saying (again considering the Museum of Art's track record) that there were no instances of any art with strong political or social messages. Indeed, the whole exhibition showed only art that is either landscape, abstract, commercial or concerned with the personal psychological concerns of the artist. Hong Kong artists need to tackle bigger issues and our publicly funded museums need a total administrative and curatorial overhaul.

The exhibition included a number of important Hong Kong painters - but it seemed that which was actually shown was based on what was in the Museum of Art's permanent collection. Thus a minor Ng Kwun-lun was on show whereas, if you happened to be walking past his new framing shop on Hong Kong Island, you could actually see a large and important work. Mounting such an exhibition based around your own collection seems both lazy and narrow-minded! The result delegated Hong Kong painters to minor regional status - actually, possibly a fair assessment, but not entirely fair to the exemplary work of Wucius Wong, Lui Shou-kwan, Ng Kwun-lun et al.

Leung Kui-ting's selection of contemporary artists was also intriguing - most of the selected artists were employed in University art departments and/or were leading members of Hong Kong's publicly funded independent art organisations. Coincidence? Leung, in his curator's introduction, introduced participating artist's by mentioning their academic qualifications. Thus, there was a definite 'establishment' feel to this selection - I am personally surprised that some individual artists actually decided to join the show. Each artist is a leading Hong Kong contemporary artist, but the selection had a "best-of" feeling to it and the result was a flimsy overview of the contemporary art scene. Again, the selection of work belittled the concept of the exhibition: most of the work had been seen before and, as only each artist had one work on display, our knowledge of an artist's body of work was not expanded.

The highlight of *Contemporary Hong Kong Art* was the graphic and product design section (curator: Kan Tai-keung). Here was an intelligent selection with a range of work (borrowed from a number of lenders) displaying the correct balance of historical and contemporary design - thus seeing Johnson Chow's enamel designs for the Freezinhot Bottle Co sat well beside Lo Koon-chia's "Children's Paradise Bi-monthly" cartoon books. Freeman Lau's *Searching for Position 3* - a stainless steel construction - was a witty piece of fine art that out-positioned the senior Van Lau's own sculpture that seemed stuck in a 1960's time-warp and had been displayed as an example of the 'Hong Kong School' of fine art; it seems that Hong Kong designers can even match their fine art contemporaries! Thus the work of Craig Au-yeung, Henry Steiner, Stanley Wong and the Amazing Twins - indeed all of the designers shown in this exhibition - displayed both excellent graphic and fine art skills.

Contemporary Hong Kong Art seemed more a homage to the exhibition's distinguished (and they really are) curators than about presenting an interesting and engaged exhibition. This tendency to homage can also be seen in the current City Festival exhibition, *Blue Is Blue*, with one official curator but with a so-called 'hanging committee' (whatever that means!) of arts personalities invited by the Fringe Club. By inviting such dignitaries - who generally are merely, and rightly, asked to officiate at an exhibition opening - smacks of 'face-gaining' on the part of the organisation hosting the exhibition. Let it end please, and let's have challenging and stimulating exhibitions in the future!

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