

Hong Kong Biennial 2003

by John Batten

Every two years the Hong Kong Museum of Art transforms itself into a venue featuring contemporary art by Hong Kong artists. The Hong Kong Biennial is an open art competition organised by the Hong Kong Museum of Art on behalf of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department. Adjudicated by a panel of local and overseas judges, ten winners are chosen and their work is exhibited with artwork from other entrants occupying three large gallery spaces within the Museum.

It could be argued that the Hong Kong Biennial is similar to a survey exhibition of contemporary Hong Kong art. A true survey exhibition, however, is when curators encourage artists and invite them to exhibit a large body of their recent artwork. The relevance of the Biennial is further lowered by the fact that much of this year's artwork has already been seen in other venues. I think the Biennial must evolve out of its present competition-based format. As one of the adjudicators, Siu King-chung, aptly states:

"...despite the nicely packaged and well-stated rationale adjudication, it is more a process of employing careful calculations to confine the number of exhibits and awardees relative to the size of exhibition space and resources available, than to offer true judgement of artworks".

Could I suggest that the Hong Kong Museum of Art says to the Leisure and Cultural Services Department: "Sorry, we are a mature and respected public museum. We no longer wish to organise an art competition for you on our premises. We have some good, talented curators who wish to be responsible and creative and who wish to concentrate on developing a programme of themed, group and solo of exhibitions of Hong Kong contemporary art." Please!

After ascending the Museum's escalator most viewers will immediately enter the large gallery space directly in front of them. However, I was most impressed by the consistent display in the smaller gallery on the same floor that contained both abstract art and examples of traditional ink on paper paintings.

Wilson Shieh presents a new theme in his beautifully brushed paintings on gold cardboard. He explains that he was inspired in this new work by the 2-person boy bands prevalent during the 1980s who sang and harmonised together to the accompaniment of keyboards. He presents a series of 'club' works with pairs of people (one clothed, one naked) entangled in unlikely postures depicting different activities; thus the 'karaoke club' shows a couple awkwardly balanced as the singer sings into his microphone; the 'jockey club' depicts a naked person of unknown sex riding the legs of an upturned cowgirl. Shieh's work emits a feeling of the type of decadence associated with Berlin of the 1920s; a combination of whimsy and a strange hermaphrodite-type sexuality. Over the last few years he has mastered both technique and extended his content. His creation of a visual 'other world' is rare for a Hong Kong artist and reminds me of the work of Luis Chan. He is a worthy winner.

Sitting opposite Shieh is a discreet abstract painting by Cheang Oi-kuan – beautifully finished it consists of pencil lines drawn on canvas to give a horizontal plane and sewn into the canvas are short pink threads that stand finely at a

90° angle to the canvas – giving the work another dimension: a vertical plane. From various angles the work is 3-dimensional. A fine simply executed painting.

Those familiar with the work of Kwok Ying will be aware of her use of cement and graphite. Her Biennial work was outstanding. Two series of recent work is shown: four mixed media works that visually recreate the simple cheap towels that most houses in Hong Kong and China possess: these simple utilitarian ‘commodities’ – as Kwok Ying rightly calls them – have a mundane beauty. The coloured pencil lines on a concrete slipped canvas depicting woven cotton threads is subtle and effective – yes, ‘Good Morning’ towels do have a simple vernacular beauty that Kwok Ying identifies and intelligently recreates. I also liked her ‘Two Biscuits’ – two simple constructions using wooden boards and stretched canvas to replicate two common biscuits – they make you smile. Kwok Ying is a strong artist presently studying in Britain – I am sure more fine work will follow.

In the same gallery situated amongst a series of fine traditional calligraphy is Chow Chun-fai’s *Mahjong*. But first look at the surrounding calligraphy – perfectly situated and complemented by the adjacent contemporary art. I think this is a successful display and Cheng Foo-ning’s *Lyrics of Song by Roman Law* is beautifully written in a circle formation – a poignant piece of calligraphy. Eileen Lam’s *Seal Carvings* consisting of an actual set of seals and an example of each seal chopped on paper is beautifully executed and presented.

Chow Chun-fai’s *Mahjong* is one of the most successful mixed media construction/sculptural pieces in the Biennial. A round mahjong table with round seats set up with round-shaped (unusable!) mahjong pieces is one of the most absurdist pieces in the exhibition – this work, although simple, has an anarchic spirit that is lacking in most of the elaborate video and videoed performance pieces seen in the Biennial’s upper gallery. Why this piece – because its subject matter is mahjong? – has been placed alongside traditional calligraphy is a mystery. It should be given centre-stage in the Biennial’s main gallery.

A successful set of videos and done in the same absurdist tradition is Ching Chin-wai’s *Easy to Learn Cantonese* series which he developed while undertaking an artist residency at New York’s PS1. Ching asks randomly selected people to sit in front of a video and be recorded saying ‘I love you’; in another video people are saying ‘sorry’. Ching is making a comment about Hong Kong people who tend to use English over their native Cantonese for phrases that are considered potentially embarrassing. The absurdity in this video is that it is foreigners who are now taught and repeat on the video the Cantonese phrases that Hong Kong people invariably avoid! Ching’s work is a subtle nudge about the Hong Kong psyche, but it sadly will not be appreciated by many viewers as there is no explanatory wall text. To demonstrate that he is an artist in other media, Ching also submitted a large multi-panelled black and white photograph which is the result of completely sealing up a small bedroom in a To Kwa Wan flat and using it as a camera. A small pinhole in a window allowing the only light and projected onto photographic paper pinned on the rear wall of the bedroom – the resulting upside down and reversed photograph (and the image reproduced in the catalogue is wrong!) is an image of the building opposite the bedroom. The random shop signs, dirty windows, flotsam thrown out of windows and hanging washing is a strong comment about the city in which we live.

If you are a frequent visitor to art exhibitions then many of this Biennial's exhibits will be familiar – many have been seen in other venues and other exhibitions this year. Wong Wai-yin's *Home-moving Furniture* was seen in the exhibition accompanying this year's Fine Arts Department Graduation Exhibition at Chinese University as was the work of Lam Tin-wai and Lee Kwok-chuen. Annie Wan had an extensive solo exhibition of her ceramics at the Visual Art Centre and Joyce Hsu's bugs have been seen in almost every venue in Hong Kong over the last year (at Para/Site Art Space she was depicted as a Hong Kong born Canadian artist living in San Francisco!).

Two of our better painters are Tsang Tsui-mei and Yeung Tong-lung, who shared 1aspace in To Kwa Wan earlier this year to present their recent paintings – and it was an excellent exhibition. Seen at the Biennial is a small, inadequate in number, sampling of both their work and both depict similar, but different, sparse desolate spaces. Tsang's are wide landscapes – almost traditional but twisted to include small modernist elements and containing hints of psychological tension. Yeung's are lonely interiors – Hong Kong's middle aged and elderly waiting for something to happen, sitting, talking or watching TV with resignation. Both artists are wonderfully melancholic, and in this town it is a fact that introspection is publically discouraged. Both artists, who are generously recognised by their peers, will probably never receive the public accolades due them.

The intentionally mind-numbing and slow video *Fountain* by Wong Lai-kuen is a simple and effective piece by a young art student at the Hong Kong Art Centre. And around the corner is a winning entry: a series of photographs entitled *This is an Orange* – sorry, more fitting as a winner of an advertising design competition than a fine art competition! Seeman Ho had a small corner allocated to her installation *A Tree to be Found*. Originally installed in Para/Site Art Space the pathetic little area allocated for her work at the Biennial gives no hint of the power and fun of the original.

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