

## **Sculpting Sculptures: The Sculpture of Hong Kong**

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In 2009 and 2010, there were two large-scale sculpture shows held consecutively in Hong Kong, the coverage and the size of audiences of which advanced the development of sculptural art in Hong Kong to an unprecedented height. The two events are “Oasis · Mirage: Hong Kong International Sculpture Symposium 2009” and “Echo – Hong Kong Sculpture Biennial 2010”. Despite having moved my art studio to Guangzhou a while ago, I had the good fortune of participating in the two events and came away with some memorable experiences and feelings. Below is a retrospective account of my participation in and reflections on the two exhibitions.<sup>1</sup>

### **Development of sculpture in Hong Kong: an overview**

A “heavy industry” compared to other visual arts disciplines, sculpture requires the commitment of large capital expenditures for materials and tools which amount to far more than other art forms. The demand for working space is a tricky issue to solve in Hong Kong where land is scarce. The noise and dust produced during production is more likely to attract complaints from neighbours and families than not. And yet these are problems which can only be understood and appreciated by the sculpture artists themselves. Even those artists who manage to beat all the odds and produce pieces of work ready for show will be running into a raft of new problems: arrangements for packing and transportation before a show and storage after the show. The taxing demand of capital investment and space is a good enough deterrent to any aspiring sculptor and explains why so there are only a handful of artists working in sculpture in Hong Kong.

But not all are deterred. Hong Kong keeps producing a constant stream of artists who dedicate themselves to sculpture. Back in the 1930s, Cai Li’an left his native Vietnam and settled in Hong Kong, where he set up a studio in a hillside squatter settlement near Lion Rock in Kowloon Tong and started teaching sculpture. Cai was later joined by Zheng Ke, Yin Jichang, Pang Tin-neon who fled the war and jointly kick-started the germination of sculptural art in Hong Kong. After such a promising start, however, the development of sculpture came to a halt following the return of

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<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note: See latter half of essay for further information on the two events.

these trailblazers to the Mainland after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

Returning from their studies in Taiwan in the late 1950s, Cheung Yee and Van Lau began dedicating themselves to teaching and making sculpture, thereby prompting the genesis of local sculptural art. Over the next half a century, the majority of home-grown sculpture artists had been the students or protégés of the two masters, with only the odd exceptions of returnees from the west or Mainland transplants. The Hong Kong Sculptors Association was established under the auspices of the two masters, who brought together over a dozen sculptors in organizing an array of exhibitions and related activities<sup>2</sup>, most notably the “Contemporary Open Air Sculpture”<sup>3</sup> held at the Piazza of the Hong Kong Coliseum and the exhibition, “Ten Years of Hong Kong Sculpture”<sup>4</sup>, held at the Hong Kong Arts Centre.

The heavy industry of sculptural art was given another boost in 2007 when Ha Bik-chuen and Tai Sheung-shing Victor, *et al* founded the Hong Kong Sculpture Society and united the over thirty sculpture artists active in the territories in launching a series of exhibitions and related activities.

### **Oasis · Mirage: Hong Kong International Sculpture Symposium 2009**

Jointly organized by the Art Promotion Office of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department and the Hong Kong Sculpture Society, and supported by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council and private sponsorships, “Oasis · Mirage: Hong Kong International Sculpture Symposium 2009” was an 11-day sculptural art extravaganza

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<sup>2</sup> Editor's note: List of committee members of the Hong Kong Sculptors Association 1982: Van Lau (President), Aries Lee (Vice President), Cheung Yee (Chairman), Ko Wah-man Norman (Secretary), Tong King-sum (Treasurer), Lau Yau-kuen (Organizer), Chu Hon-sun (Organizer), Mak Hin-yeung (Researcher), Chu Hing-wah, Chui Fai-shing, Ha Bik-chuen, Li Ki-kwok Victor, O Shiu-wai Samuel, Poon Shui Wah, Tso Chung-kuen. Organized by the Hong Kong Arts Centre, the association's inaugural exhibition, “Hong Kong Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition” was held at the Pao Sui Loong Galleries of the Hong Kong Arts Centre between 11–21 September 1982.

<sup>3</sup> Editor's note: “Contemporary Open Air Sculpture” was jointly organized by the Urban Council and the Hong Kong Sculptors Association, curated by the Hong Kong Museum of Art and ran from 1 March to 25 April 1984 at the Piazza of the Hong Kong Coliseum, 9 Cheong Wan Road, Hung Hom. Participating local sculptors included Cheung Yee, Chu Hing-wah, Chu Hon-sun, Ha Bik-chuen, Ko Wah-man Norman, Lai Chi-man, Aries Lee, Li Ki-kwok, Mak Hin-yeung, Tong King-sum and Van Lau, alongside overseas sculptural artists Ju Ming, Pan He and Tan Teng-kee.

<sup>4</sup> Editor's note: “Ten Years of Hong Kong Sculpture: A 10th Anniversary Programme of Hong Kong Arts Centre” was presented by the Hong Kong Arts Centre and co-organized by Michael Chen, the Hong Kong Arts Centre and the Hong Kong Sculptors Association from 26 February to 15 March 1988 at the Pao Sui Loong Galleries, Hong Kong Arts Centre. Participating artists included Cheung Yee, Chu Hing-wah, Chu Hon-sun, Ha Bik-chuen, Ho Hing-kay Oscar, Ko Wah-man Norman, Lai Yat-fong Roger, Lay Yau-kuen, Aries Lee, Li Ki-kwok Victor, Mak Hin-yeung Antonio, Poon Sui-wah, Tong King-sum, Van Lau and Ricky Yeung, all of whom were members of the association with the exceptions of Ho Hing-kay Oscar and Ricky Yeung.

held at the West Kowloon Waterfront Promenade in March 2009, featuring 14 sculpture artists from Mainland China to as far wide as Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan, Bangladesh, Zimbabwe, USA, Czech Republic and Hong Kong who created large outdoor sculptural artworks on site using a combination of materials such as marble and wood. Blessed by the visits of a good number of students, citizens and members of the media, “Oasis · Mirage” offered a cultural feast for the city.

Sculpture workshops are an activity unique to the art form. What makes a sculpture workshop truly distinctive is that it allows a group of sculptors to work *in situ* all at the same time. The size of a group can vary from an intimate two or three-piece combo to as big as a 40 or 50-strong assemblage; the size of the finished products can measure up to 4, 5 cubic metres and in a wide choice of materials ranging from metal, wood to stone. Originated in Europe, the practice of sculpture workshops/camps didn't reach China until the 1980s. Now gaining a strong foothold all over the world, sculpture workshops are held worldwide, numbering some 20 each year with quite a few being held in big Chinese cities such as Beijing, Changchun, Guilin, Urumqi and Hui'an in Fujian each year. The results are the over 1,000 pieces of sculptural works that put China on the map of international art.

Sharing is at the core of sculpture camps. A major departure from their usual practice of working in indoor working spaces, participating sculpture artists found themselves making art in public spaces under the full glare of the public, even engaging audiences in conversations during designated time periods. Through offering a variety of school activities, the organiser invited the headmasters and art teachers of secondary schools from across the territory to bring field trip groups to see the site of art production up close and personal. As well as gaining an insider's view of the making of large-scale sculptural works, students also got to try their hand at making simple sculptures in the workshop on site, which was integrated into the special programming to create an invaluable field learning experiences. The organizer also assembled a stellar line-up for the talk series held concurrently in the Central Library, offering the public a comprehensive view of sculptural art as it happens in the rest of the world.

### **Echo – Hong Kong Sculpture Biennial 2010**

An associated programme of the Hong Kong Contemporary Art Biennial Awards, “Echo: Hong Kong Sculpture Biennial 2010” was jointly organized by the Department of Fine Arts of The Chinese University of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Sculpture Society and Artist Commune, co-organized with the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts and the Art Promotion Office, and supported by the Hong Kong Art School. Running

between May and August 2010, the exhibition was held at the three venues of The Chinese University of Hong Kong campus, the Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre and Artist Commune.

The exhibition has three distinguished features. The first feature is that it showcased the works of a record number of 68 sculptors at any one exhibition in Hong Kong. Joining the forces of art colleges, arts organizations and the government, the event brought together artists across the generations as well as the teaching staff from the Department of Sculpture of the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. Besides being responsible for the logistics and transportation of sculptural works to and from Guangzhou, the Department of Fine Arts of The Chinese University of Hong Kong also played host to 12 members of the teaching staff from Guangzhou who attended the opening ceremony and the talk series. As a result of cooperation on all fronts, the exhibition distinguishes itself as a professional, cross-territory, large-scale professional sculptural art activity. Secondly, the scope of the exhibition venues, which encompassed schools, public and private exhibition venues situated across the island side, Kowloon and the New Territories, both indoors and outdoors. Thirdly, a wide variety of styles ranging from realist to abstract, from traditional to modern, all coalesced into one showcase.

Producing sculpture exhibition on a large scale is not an easy task. The over 60 participating sculptors would not have a problem to agree that, capital investment notwithstanding, the costs of packing and transportation alone would make such an endeavour prohibitive. For this alone, the organizer and the participating artists deserved full credit and recognition.

### **Hong Kong Sculptural Art 2010**

From a wider perspective, the works created by local sculpture artists at the two large-scale activities offer an overview of the recent development of sculptural art in Hong Kong:

#### **1. A variety of materials**

A cosmopolitan city like Hong Kong is always quick to harness the latest materials and techniques. Local artists are renowned for their pioneering spirit and experimental edge in introducing new materials to the realm of sculpture while making new discoveries along the way. Aside from using the traditional sculptural materials of wood, stone and bronze, this exhibition also employed ephemeral materials such as plastic, recycled wood, sponge, soda cans and polyfoam, coupled with technological applications of sound, light and electricity as well as digital and 3-D printing.

The availability of new materials and the application of new technologies is one of the reasons that keep art reinventing and reinvigorating itself. The history of art tells us that, at different points on the modern art timeline, the invention of the electric welding machine directly brought about the creation of direct metal artworks and that resin facilitated the presentation of pop art in new formats. It was due to the experimental mind of these sculptural artists that Hong Kong is constantly sprouting new forms of sculpture.

## 2. An open mind

Hong Kong has always been the convergence of the latest information and trends. Not bound by traditions, local sculptural artists are gifted by an open mind for innovations and an insatiable appetite for topics and issues that range from social, global to environmental, resulting in sculptural works exceptionally original in concept and creativity that surprised and delighted the audience at the “Echo: Hong Kong Sculpture Biennial” exhibition.

## 3. A steady supply of new blood

In recent years, the line-ups of sculpture exhibitions have been given a boost by the introduction of new faces alongside the more established names. It is not only a source of delight to have up-and-coming artists hailing from the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Art School featured in the biennial line-up, but also a testament that a group of young artists is driven by a passion for art into ploughing their savings to realize their aspirations despite the odds. Their unwavering pursuit of artistic ideals in a commercial society such as Hong Kong makes their endeavours all the more precious.

### **The development of Hong Kong sculptural art: space and opportunities**

The Hong Kong Sculpture Biennial has enjoyed two successful seasons<sup>5</sup> and the Hong Kong International Sculpture Symposium will return to the territory at the end of 2011. Have conditions such as creative spaces and opportunities been established for the sustainable development of sculptural art in Hong Kong? The following discussion will explore the issue from two perspectives: education and prospects.

Recent years have seen a major shift in the tertiary curriculum, with the City University of Hong Kong, Lingnan University, Hong Kong Baptist University and the

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<sup>5</sup> Editor’s note: Co-organized by Artist Commune and the Hong Kong Sculpture Society in collaboration with the Guangzhou Sculpture Academy, the debut Hong Kong Sculpture Biennial Exhibition was held at Artist Commune between 21 June and 16 July 2008, curated by Chu Tat-shing, Leung Shiu-kee and Yu Chang, featuring the works of some 40 local sculptural artists from Hong Kong and over 20 from the Mainland as well as students from three local tertiary institutions.

Hong Kong Art School joining the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and the Hong Kong Institute of Education in offering programmes in studio art courses. Though a comprehensive undergraduate programme in sculpture studies has yet to be introduced<sup>6</sup>, a few of the institutions are offering courses in sculpture and three-dimensional art with high student intake. As well as elevating the standard of the art form academically and technically, the provision of systematic training is a definite plus for its talent pool.

However, with a bigger talent pool come the uncertainties of prospects. While sculpture students can work without worries on campus with well-equipped and accessible facilities under the guidance of the teaching staff while exhibiting at student shows that attract the occasional buyer and collector, taking up sculpture as a profession upon graduation will be significantly different. Though the studios at the Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre offer a venue solution, the facilities can only be rented out for time slots and do not offer long-term storage for materials or tools. The best solution that has emerged in recent years comes in the form of industrial spaces. But with the property market bouncing back fuelling a boom in the rentals market, working spaces in areas such as the Fotan industrial district are no longer offered at affordable rental prices. Due to a multitude of reasons, the Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre in Shek Kip Mei is experiencing a process of exodus of its independent artists in residence.

Aside from venue, aspiring artists are also faced with the uncertainty of their prospects. The scarcity of living space in Hong Kong means that even the most affluent of households and corporates would rather opt for two-dimensional graphic art as wall fixtures and interior decoration than sacrificing precious living space for three-dimensional sculptural pieces.

Prospects for aspiring artists, however, appear more promising across the border where the majority of sculpture studies graduates manage to find jobs of their interests. There has been a surging demand for sculptural works by provinces and cities all across China: cultural spots, tourist attractions, celebrity portraits, architectural spaces and a score of sculpture parks have been springing up across the country. Cultural departments have been established within the framework of the government to take charge of the planning of sculptural art: the Department of Arts of the Ministry of Culture under the central government, and the various culture departments and bureaus of culture under the administration of different provincial departments. In some cities, sculptures offices have been set up to promote the policy of “public art percentage”, setting some of the best examples for Hong Kong to follow.

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<sup>6</sup> Editor's note: In 2007, the Hong Kong Art School offered the territory's first three-year undergraduate programme, BA in Fine Arts (Sculpture), co-presented and conferred by the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University.

While there is a general agreement that the government should take a leading role in promoting cultural development regionally, the fact that the two large-scale international sculpture events have been initiated by the private sector does lead us to contemplate the intricacies involved.

Size is a double-edged sword. Distinguished by its scale of production, sculptural artworks are perfectly suited for long-term displays in outdoor environments that are easily accessible to the public. The groups of sculptural works displayed at the Taikoo Shing in Quarry Bay on the island side, Yat Tung Estate in rural Tung Chung and the recent art work acquisitions for the recreational areas of the new government headquarters occupying the old waterfront Tamar site has brought a sense of drama and opulence to the city that no other visual arts disciplines can. Sculptural art, after decades of perfecting its unique cultural role, has accumulated a fair share of achievements. It's time that more resources be made available to boost its social functions, as a means to the ends of firmly putting Hong Kong on the international cultural map and providing a quality cultural life for its people.

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