



Copyright 2017 Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

維多利亞女王

# “1997” in Hong Kong Visual Arts: The Restless Historical Transition and the Anxious Construction of Subjectivity

Lo Wai-luk Translator: Hui King-sze K

## Introduction

As this year marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “97” handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China, it is particularly interesting to look back on how local arts practitioners, with their individual life experiences and social-perceptiveness at the time of such an important historical transition, imagined and reflected on “97” through their works.

The handover of Hong Kong was a once-in-a-century historical transition amidst all the restlessness the city found itself in. “97” was thus considered a creative assignment given to many artists. Back then, Wong Wo-bik initiated an ongoing project titled “Visual Research into Contemporary Hong Kong” for Hong Kong Arts Centre. The number of photographer participants had increased from four in 1990 to a total of thirty-one in 1996. Apart from exhibitions, there was also a publication showcasing the works of art involved.<sup>1</sup> In 1997, Holly Lee’s conceptual photographic works, namely *Great Celebration* and *The Story of the White-Haired Girl (97 version)*, took British colonial rulers on the one hand and the oppressed women during the emancipation movement of the Communist Party of China on the other hand as cultural symbols. Imitation and metonymy are used against a backdrop of Hong Kong landmarks and Chinese traditional icons to highlight the hybridity of cultural identity.<sup>2</sup> Tse Chi-tak Ducky “hoped to publish a photography

### Plate 27

John Fung, *Protest is not a crime, Victoria Park*. Gelatin silver print. Image courtesy of the artist.

1 Sylvia Ng, ed. *The Metropolis: Visual Research into Contemporary Hong Kong 1990-1996* (Hong Kong: Photo Pictorial Publishers and Hong Kong Arts Centre, 1996).

2 Fan Wan-jen Anthea, ed. *Not about Truth: Chinese Conceptual Photography since the 90s* (Taipei: Arttouch, 2008): 156-157.

book after 1997 to commemorate the 97 handover and the hybrid identity of Hong Kong people etc.,”<sup>3</sup> hence the publication of *97. camera*. With Su Hei’s help, a group of adolescents was recruited to recount their own stories on “97” and their responses were juxtaposed, in the book, with the original photos on “97” taken by Ducky Tse. *Someone Else’s Story - Our Footnotes: Contemporary Art of Hong Kong (1990-1999)* edited by David Clarke and Ho Hing-kay Oscar could also serve as a valuable reference on the topic.<sup>4</sup>

Curators at that time had developed a growing interest in the “local Hong Kong.” For instance, Oscar Ho, then Exhibition Director of Hong Kong Arts Centre, launched the “Hong Kong Culture Series.” A series of consecutive exhibitions, from “The Art of Li Tiefu Exhibition” in 1991 to “Being China (Being Hong Kong)” in 1996, revealed and recognized the distinctive Hong Kong culture. Amongst them, “Yau Leung Retrospective” (1994, 1998) and “Hong Kong Sixties: Designing Identity” (1994) etc. incorporated grassroots perspective.<sup>5</sup>

This essay, through the works completed around the 90s by four artists, namely Choi Yan-chi, Lo Yuen-man Yvonne, Mui Chong-ki, and Fung Kin-chung John, intends to establish a framework for further discussion on the art of Hong Kong concerning the handover in 1997. Either born and brought up in Hong Kong or moved to Hong Kong from Mainland China/overseas, these four artists received their respective art education and training from the following: Hong Kong and the United States, the United States, Mainland China, and self-learning. All of them had experienced the changes Hong Kong went through in the 70s-90s and have already been making art in a more organized way since the 80s.

### “97”: Hong Kong people under the politics of time

After the signing of the *Sino-British Joint Declaration* in 1984, Hong Kong officially entered the transition period after which its sovereignty would be transferred from Britain to the People’s Republic of China on July 1, 1997. The capitalist Hong Kong as a British colony was to be (whether or not it was actually necessary) returned to (handed back to) the socialist China. In a sense, this was some very direct and pressing politics of time. Nonetheless, there were only negotiations between Britain and China; Hong Kong was a third-party which had absolutely no autonomy over the matter.

3 Tse Chi-tak Ducky. *97. Camera* (Hong Kong: Tse Chi-tak Ducky, 2000): 5.

4 David Clarke and Ho Hing-kay Oscar, eds. *Someone Else’s Story - Our Footnotes: Contemporary Art of Hong Kong (1990-1999)* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Arts Centre, 2002).

5 Ho Hing-kay Oscar. *Deconstruct and Edit - Oscar Ho on Curatorship* (Hong Kong: MCCM Creations, 2016).



The identity of “Hongkongers” instantly became a major concern of Hong Kong citizens during that period. As the social systems and ideologies in Hong Kong differed from those in China, Hong Kong people, when facing such historical changes, were anxious that their original way of life was going to be gravely upset. Rather than arguments and theories about the Hong Kong identity, their attention was drawn to the actual operation of the handover.

So, how did Hongkongers participate in the making of Hong Kong history as solid and substantial praxis of the time?

In the late 70s and early 80s, Hong Kong contemporary art began to flourish in all dimensions. In the wake of localism in the 70s and the various social movements then, art practitioners in the 80s seemed to have somewhat inadvertently integrated their own path through life with the development of Hong Kong culture.

The Tiananmen Square Democracy Movement of 1989 in Beijing ended with the government’s suppression on June 4,<sup>6</sup> altogether seizing the Hong Kong art community with fits of gloominess in the early 90s. The imagery of catastrophe in Sze Yuen Jannie’s *This Time This Space* (1990), the feeling of disorientation in *Surprise* (1993) also by Sze, as well as the sense of calamity in Mak Hin-yeung Antonio’s *Root* (1990) and *Last Tango with Tiger* (1993) are all obvious examples of such sentiments.

After all, between “64” and “97” was not merely the passage of time; ideology and cultural awakening were also playing an important role in the anxiety-ridden society then. If “64” denoted a political proposition, then “97” was a historical one. On the one hand, putting these two in the local Hong Kong context, we came up with the so-called topics of “de-colonization” and “post-colonialism.” On the other hand, in terms of actual art practices, they would relate to how our lives and spirits had been imagined artistically in the collective karma of “1997.”

How did the art community keep scrutinizing and reacting to the changing realities?

In a sense, perhaps “97” does not only refer to July 1, 1997. Upon the 10th anniversary of the return of Hong Kong to China, wen yau, Researcher of Asia Art Archive, initiated the “Talkover/Handover” project, inviting twelve active artists in the 90s to each pair up with another artist of the 00s of their choice and engage themselves in a cross-generation dialog. In the discussion, “various artists recall the Handover as a time of active art production, when artists gave urgent

---

6 Editor’s note: The June 4<sup>th</sup> incident is referred to as “64” in this essay, following how it is usually referred to in Chinese.

responses to political changes, thus attention given to Hong Kong art reached a historic high. Ten years after the Handover, however, the frenzy has subsided, which makes it a challenge to artists as they need to explore new directions in their practice.”<sup>7</sup>

As part of the same project, Asia Art Archive also researched on the development of contemporary art in Hong Kong before and after 1997 and collaborated with 1a space, the presenter of “Talkover/Handover” exhibition. The exhibition, curated by wen yau and Ho Chui-fun Selina, was held at the Cattle Depot Artist Village in To Kwa Wan from July 1 to 29, 2007. The 23 participating artists included: Pau Hoi-lun Ellen, Ching Chin-wai Luke, Leung Mee-ping, Kum Chi-keung, Cheng Yee-man Gum, Wu Wing-ye, Wong Ping-pui Stanley (anothermountainman), Chen Shishen (Sanmu), Kwok Mang-ho (Frog King), So Hing-keung, Lee Ho-wing Michelle, Chan Yuk-keung Kurt, Tse Yim-on, Man Ching-ying Phoebe, Leung Chin-fung Jeff, Leung Chi-wo Warren, Wong Chi-hang Sara, Lau Kin-wah Jasper, Tsang Tak-ping Kith, Lau Guk-zik, Leung Po-shan Anthony, Lam Wai-kit and Yu May-ming.<sup>8</sup>

The exhibited works were all newly created at the time rather than taken from the 90s. Hong Kong people had been through a lot over the past decade: the 2003 outbreak of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), 500,000 people marching on the street in protest against the legislation of Basic Law “Article 23” on 1 July in the same year, and the social movement demanding the “preservation of Queen’s Pier” etc. The (Hong Kong) context had changed, “not only in terms of language, but also the authority over our history and culture. After the ‘battles’ of Star Ferry Pier and Queen’s Pier, local artists and cultural practitioners had somehow experienced the considerable difficulties in fighting for things that had continuously been snatched from our hands.”<sup>9</sup> The creations in 2007 were thus both the artists’ reflection on “97” and a re-presentation of memory.<sup>10</sup>

Let us discuss the works by several artists under the collective karma of “97” below.

---

7 From <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/Details/41220>, accessed April 1, 2017.

8 Same as above.

9 Ho Chui-fun Selina. “Talkover/Handover: A Perspective on the History of Art Creation in Hong Kong,” in *Twenty-First Century Bimonthly* 102 (August 2007): 111.

10 Back in 2007, Lumensivum organized the *Dong Ja* Photography Workshop and encouraged Hong Kong citizens to use photos to depict the Hong Kong in their heart. An exhibition was organized for the twenty participants and a photography book was also published. It was a form of empowerment through photography in response to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the handover. “Talkover/Handover 2.0” is to take place in June and July 2017 at 1a space.

### Imagining “97” after “64”

Before “64,” although many Hongkongers felt anxious and considered emigrating to other countries, there were also the more optimistic ones having expectations of China’s economic reform and open-door policy at that time. Aside from the pro-Beijing camp and the leftists, some cultural and political leaders then actually proposed the notion of “democratic reunification,” hoping for a bright political outlook for Hong Kong following the democratization of China.

Lo Yuen-man Yvonne was one of them. Upon graduation with a Master of Fine Arts degree in Photography from the United States in 1985, she decided to return to Hong Kong, for she was “after all, a Chinese.”<sup>11</sup> Despite the possibly better working conditions overseas, according to Lo, the soil was different. “I felt that there may not be any further opportunities for me.”<sup>12</sup> After returning to Hong Kong, she entered the then Hong Kong Baptist College in 1988 to teach photography and is due to retire in 2017.

Things soon became very different after “64.” Lo thought about emigration and even had fetched an application form for moving to Singapore. However, probably due to some personal factors, she did not leave in the end. She got married in 1993 and gave birth to two children over the next few years.

Positioned right in the middle between 1989 and 1997, 1993 was a special year in which Choi Yan-chi, on the other hand, emigrated to Canada out of consideration for her family. While her son was a young teenager, she wished that her artist husband, Hon Chi-fun, could work and create in a more tranquil environment. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Choi ultimately returned to Hong Kong to create works of art in January 1997. Then, in 1999, her husband and son also came back to Hong Kong.

During the restless historical transition of the “1997” Hong Kong, Choi and Lo might have handled their personal and family issues in similar ways; nonetheless, when it comes to their creative pursuit, the two female artists had very different approaches that the contrasts between them are worth further discussion.

“64” acted as a strong creative force for Choi. In her own words,

---

11 From an interview with the artist on March 1, 2017.

12 Same as above.

Before that, the art of Hong Kong, including those works done by myself, was very “contemporary” in the sense of ‘art for art’s sake.’ But after “64”— just like now that the 9/11 attacks have happened — everybody would naturally be thinking where our power lies and what we could actually do under such circumstances. After Margaret Thatcher’s visit to China, a mass migration wave swept Hong Kong and people started to worry about the upcoming “97”. Along with the June 4 incident, the concept of “China” suddenly dawned on the young generation: they might choose to stand aside before, but from that moment onwards, no one could shut his eyes to what was happening.<sup>13</sup>

Through her installation, *From June to October* (1993), (Plate 1) Choi connects violent suppression with violent revolution. Linking China in 1991 with the then Soviet Union, she reverses the use of red and white colors to create an imbalance of visual weight. Together with the exaggerated proportion of images to the background, (Plate 1.1) she criticizes, in a calm manner, how Communism has been squeezing art and restricting the development of culture while the installing of the work itself becomes an experiential and rational process. Moreover, the ceiling-mounted chandelier transforms the space as if it is a dance floor and enables it to be seen clearly. It is clear that when wealth is combined with ideology, authoritarianism is likely to take over everything.

The works by Choi in the 80s focused on breaking the art convention of “Chinese-ness” and the explorations of art itself through diversified attempts. Sometimes the form was emphasized and at other times the concept. Her collaboration with artists in different areas was also prominent in this era. Nonetheless, after “64,” Choi apparently incorporated the Hong Kong point of view into contemporary art and strived to, through her installations, unfold her critique and imagination of Chinese authoritarianism in the context of Hong Kong history. Her most representative work is the *Drowned Series I-VI* (1989, 1992, 1993a, 1993b, 1994, 1997).<sup>14</sup>

The first work of the series, *Drowned I: Book in Book*, (Plates 2, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3) came out in late 1989. Five tropical fish tanks, with only fragments of poetry in the water, are illuminated from below by the spotlights on the ground. The light shines through the fish tanks to reach the five photos of the Goddess of Democracy which are mounted on the wall upside down. The fishes are gone. And as the small fans turn and the breeze ripples the water in the tank, the Hongkongers

<sup>13</sup> Isang Hing-ling. “Choi Yan-chi: Installations for what?” in *Someone Else’s Story - Our Footnotes: Contemporary Art of Hong Kong (1990-1999)*, eds. David Clarke and Ho Hing-kay Oscar (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Arts Centre, 2002): 112

<sup>14</sup> For more about Choi’s emotions and thoughts on “97” after her experience of “64,” please refer to *[Re-]Fabrication - A Research-based Exhibition on Choi Yan-chi’s 30 Years: Paths for Inter - Disciplinary in Art* edited by Linda Lai (Hong Kong: Para Site, 2006, 78-86) for reference.

Plate 1

Choi Yan-chi, *From June to October*, 1993, Haus de Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany. Image courtesy of the artist.



Plate 1.1

Choi Yan-chi, *From June to October* (details), 1993. Image courtesy of the artist.







Plate 2

Choi Yan-chi, *Drowned I: Book in Book*, 1989, the Hong Kong Art Centre. Image courtesy of the artist.



Plates 2.1, 2.2, 2.3

Choi Yan-chi, *Drowned I: Book in Book* (details), 1989. Image courtesy of the artist.



who live in the South are drowned in their own thoughts and emotions, trying to recall that particular movement from afar through an inverted image of democracy. Eventually, it is the “tanks” (in the military sense) driven into the city of Beijing that could never ever be forgotten by Hong Kong people. Expressive and stirring, *Drowned I* also deduces a metaphor for suppression. Quoting the semiotician Charles Peirce (1839-1914), it is the encoding and decoding of the multiple interactions between icons and indexes that give an extensive account of signification. On the one hand, one’s feelings and perceptions of the whole installation are going to be changed drastically once the fish tanks are, finally, associated with military tanks in the mind. Yet, on the other hand, the fishless fish tanks and the inverted photos of the Goddess of Democracy constitute an explicit image that conveys its own message — whether or not the audience think of the military tanks is no longer important. The meaning becomes twofold: different audiences receive the artwork in different ways.

Sentimental or metaphorical, this piece of work lends a new point of view to Choi’s art, namely how China (or “97”) is viewed by Hong Kong.

Choi ponders over the way in which cultural lives are drowned in the times. In *Drowned II*, she puts piles of books into a fish tank, concentrating on the collective drowning of various individuals and cultural lives in the most literal sense possible. As one small bubble bursts by each second, does this signify the last breath before death or a slim chance of survival? After “64,” Choi became concerned about the collective fate of intellectuals. In *Drowned III: Swimming in the Dark*, (Plate 3) the books in the fish tank are drowned in salad oil instead of water. This arrangement renders the pile of books a positive sense of connection and unity. Besides, as the books were all donated and each of them carries its own story, the installation is, in a sense, containing the beneficences bestowed by various individuals and life experiences.

Upon the completion of *Drowned III*, Choi had already built up the generative grammar for the series. The next couple of works are basically contextualized variations along the same lines. When 1997 arrived, it seemed that she had become even more occupied with the “future” question. In January that year, she returned to Hong Kong by invitation and subsequently completed the installation *Past and Future (1)* at the Center for the Arts, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

### Observer and/or participant

Choi was able to come up with new creations soon after “64” and the incident had seemingly been a huge stimulant to her. On the contrary, following the occurrence of political issues, Lo Yuen-man Yvonne did not go back to art making at once.



Plate 3

Choi Yan-chi, *Drowned III: Swimming in the Dark* (details), 1993, The First Asia Pacific Triennial, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. Image courtesy of the artist.

Before studying broad, Lo used to be a news-reporter. However, she did not employ photography to comment on current affairs after her return to Hong Kong. During the series of demonstrations in 1989 and in many more public events thereafter, she did not even pick up her camera. “You have to totally devote yourself to the activities when you take part in one. In this way, I prefer not to be the reporter or recorder on these occasions.”<sup>15</sup> She elaborated,

*At that time, I intentionally avoided doing this (taking pictures), because I thought the whole thing was very complicated and there were lots of parts I could not thoroughly understand. I did not use my camera or artworks to cope with reality. I was always the detached type — perhaps it was a way to escape from reality consciously and seek remedy. My works do not reflect the reality; they present a special space.*<sup>16</sup>

In the winter of 1990, Lo completed *1990-1997* (Plates 4 and 5) in the form of an accordion “book,” making a restart on her art career after “64.” As a hardcover book, the work consists of six pages, seemingly signifying the six years between 1990 and 1997. On the textured paper, there are a

15 From an interview with the artist on March 1, 2017.

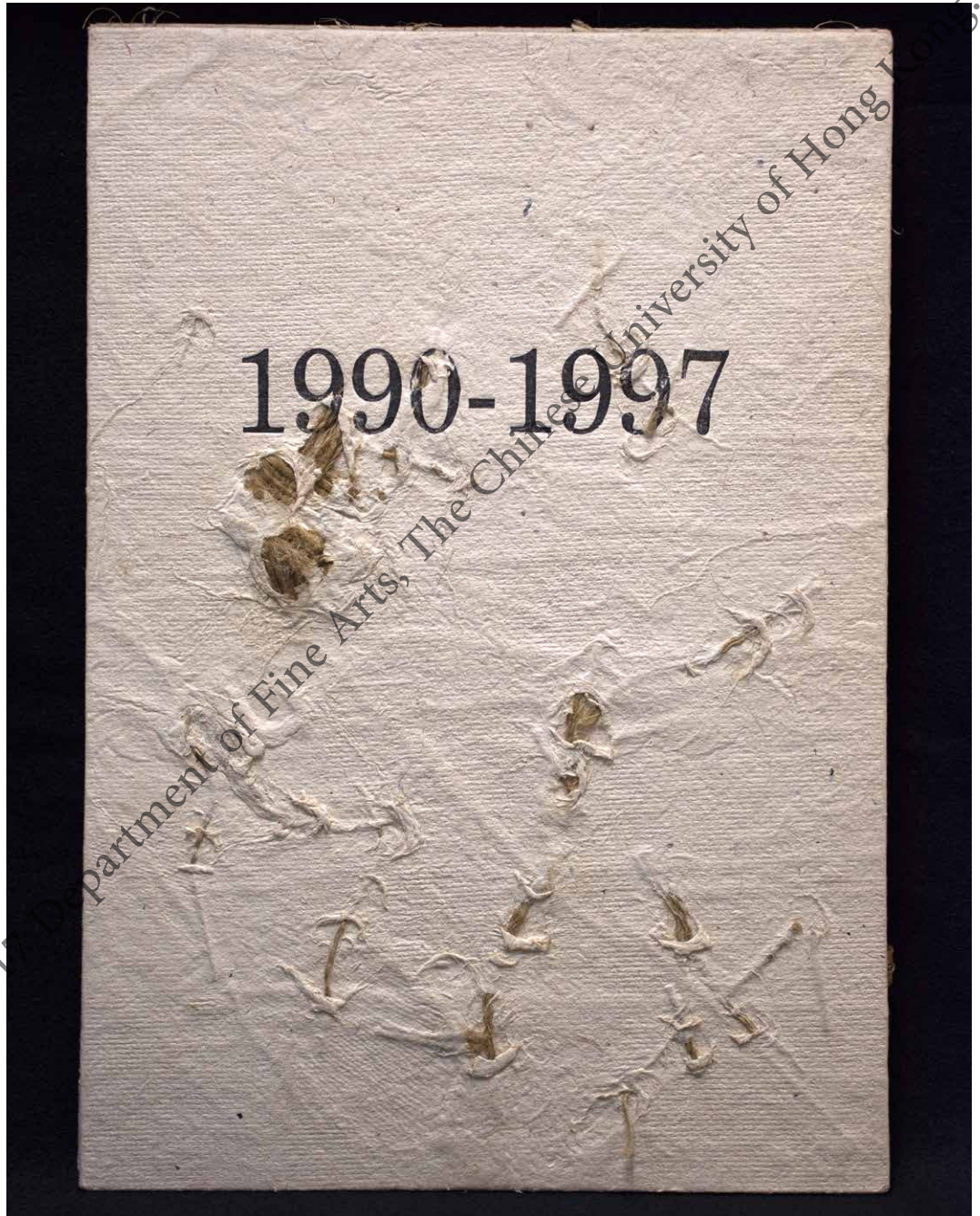
16 Same as above.



variety of images including horses as well as a few flowers, leaves and rusty nails. Together with the “1990-1997” characters, the imagination of “97” is fully revealed through repetition and variation of the images.

Plate 4

Yvonne Lo, 1990-1997  
(cover), 1990. Image  
courtesy of the artist.



In fact, Lo found the images of horse from different sources. She made photocopies of them, then transferred the photocopies onto the book. Horse became the key image probably because Deng Xiaoping, then Chinese political leader, was quoted as saying “horse racing will continue, dancing parties will go on” to illustrate his pledge that Hong Kong would “remain unchanged for 50 years”. At about the same time, Mak Hin-yeung Antonio, who once used the images of horse for his sculptures *Man, Horse* (1979) and *Horse, Crossing I* (1982), also returned to the theme of



Plate 5  
Yvonne Lo, 1990-1997  
(inside pages), 1990.  
Image courtesy of the  
artist.

horse and created *Bound to Win* (1991) and *Bible from Happy Valley* (1992). These horses from the 90s, two wearing a suit and one carrying a large book (perhaps a metaphor of the Basic Law?) on its back, just stand still—the irony that there is no “horse racing”. As in Holly Lee’s *Great Celebration*, a couple of traditional Chinese horses are galloping; yet, one of them leaps onto the shoulder of the queen in the painting, filling the whole work with intriguing meanings all at once.

Now let us have a look at the composition of Lo’s 1990-1997.

It appears that Lo was also skeptical of the saying “horse racing will continue.” Apart from the large and strong horses, there are horse skeletons in different running postures too. As on pages 3 and 4, in addition to horses, a few dead leaves and rusty nails are added whereas pages 5 and 6 are full of the withered already. Apparently, “97” in Lo’s imagination is associated with a kind of gradual decay and corrosion. The images of horse in the book are both static and dynamic. In the top right-hand corner of the last page, the running horse somewhat represents Lo’s imagination of “97” in the year 1990: the spirit of galloping into the future during a historical transition period,



and how she had been dealing with her own uneasiness and confusion. It was also exactly this faith that allowed her to start afresh and pick up her camera again after making this book.

### Hope in life and anxiety about surroundings

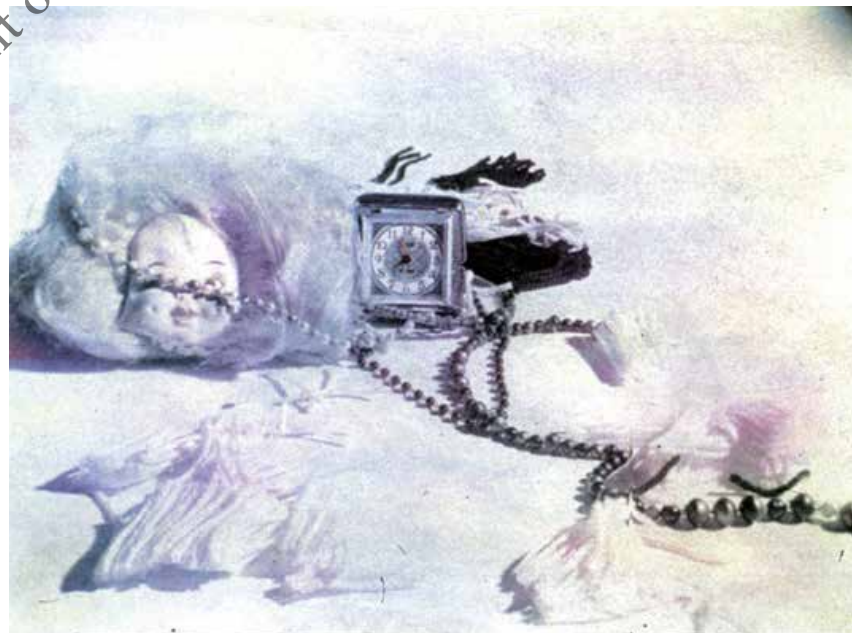
The most representative pre-“97” work by Lo is her photomontage, the *Doll Series*. Since 1985, the artist had made use of a baby/childlike doll (instead of a teenage/mature one) for subjectivity substitution or the objectification of maternal desire. This substitution took place over four periods of time, namely pre-“64,” post-“64,” pre-“97” and post-“97,” hence fits our discussion here well.

The first one, *A Doll's Head and a Mini Clock*, (Plate 6) was created by Lo in the United States. It features a bodiless head with shadows that resemble limbs, a necklace which seems to be a little girl's plaything, and a mini-clock usually carried around by overseas student. The other objects in the photo, for instance, the lock of hair, also have female association. In this sense, the work is not a collage of photographic images; it rather relies on the collage of objects themselves for the tension.

The doll looks happy and curious, probably a reflection of how Lo felt when she was studying aboard before “64.” Nonetheless, the whole world changed after “64.” There was growing tension between what a female had to bear in life and the gradually bleaker surroundings. Thus it was not a surprise the next couple of works in the *Doll Series* only emerged in 1992 when the artist had picked herself up and felt powerful enough to face the challenges of her times.

#### Plate 6

Yvonne Lo, *A Doll's Head and a Mini Clock*, Kwik print (Kwik EP), 28x35 cm, 1985. Image courtesy of the artist.



This series could therefore be understood as the manifestation of the anxious subject during a restless period of historical transition; of an emotional need.

In *A Doll Descended from above*, (Plate 7) Lo applied patches of the color of bruises to a middle-class woman's room which would otherwise be tranquil and regular. With the pile of broken dolls on the ground and the overhanging branches that cover the woman's face, it is hard to tell whether the doll descended from above is a good or bad omen. Such ambiguity perhaps also reflects the craving and anxiety felt by Lo at that time—she was about to get married and enter another phase of life while being adversely affected by the circumstances.

Apart from the above-mentioned *A Doll Descended from above*, the *Doll Series* include three more pieces of work from 1992, namely *Childhood Memory*, *A Place of Nowhere* and *Curls and Ties*. In 1997, four pieces were added: *Running Away Dolls*, *Two Dolls were Wrapped Up by Measures*, *Wrapped Up Doll with Free Hands*, and *Annunciation*. Then, in 2000, there was the last one, *Doll with Photographs*.

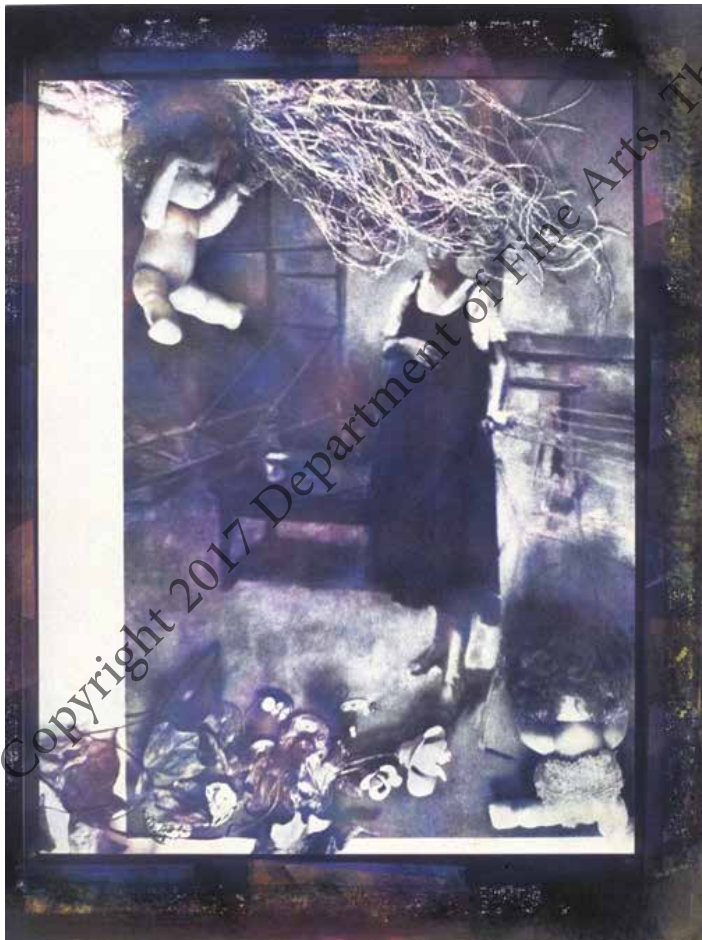


Plate 7

Yvonne Lo, *A Doll Descended from above*, Kwik print (Kwik EP), 28x35cm, 1992. Image courtesy of the artist.

*Childhood Memory* (Plate 8) incorporates a family photo, a traditional alarm clock and a teddy bear etc. The spatial atmosphere suggests a small fishing village. According to Lo, though, it is not like where she used to live when she was little. To be more exact, the work showcases a space for the heart, which either embraces childhood memories in the past or echoes today’s longing for inner space.

As in *A Place of Nowhere*, (Plate 9) the doll turns its back on the camera and faces towards a high and solid wall that is visualized by white paper with the word “Liberty” written on it. It could not get any further.

*Curls and Ties* (Plate 10) features two dolls, two birds and four English sentences (i.e. “is/ to wed the limitless/ to recall freedom/ to act out our hope”). The lack of a grammatical subject might have been Lo’s subtle way of saying “we can act out our hope whenever we are with our partners.”

Lo got married in 1993 and became a mother in subsequent years. Despite living a relatively stable life as a teacher and researcher, she was not satisfied inside. This is revealed in her work *A Growing Flame in a Blue Room* (Plate 11) from 1995, where there is a growing flame over a white chair in a room partially filled with smoke. The question is: is the smoke from outside of the room or caused by the flame? While the windows are closed and the smoke envelopes the flowerless branches of a peach tree, is the flame burning any invisible body? Does the utter neatness of the room speaks of Lo’s mental distress and agony?

There is indeed a strong contrast in the use of colors and tones between *A Growing Flame in a Blue Room* and *A Doll Descended from above*, demonstrating how the artist’s perspective and mood had shifted after her marriage. A sense of disquiet apparently arose as she started to realize the discrepancy between reality and ideals.

Around the time of the handover of Hong Kong in 1997, Lo created *Two Dolls were Wrapped Up by Measures*, *Running Away Dolls* and *Wrapped Up Doll with Free Hands*. (Plate 12) The contrast of the post-“64” dolls in 1992 with the pre-“97” dolls in 1997 is significant: the former are dark and gloomy while the latter are bright and shimmering. Lo did not want to exhibit simplified harmony and tranquility in her works, nor did she attempt to conceal the vague sense of destruction therein. She simply preferred expressing her own anxiety and misgivings to making political statements through art. From 1993 to 1996, although she appeared to have departed from this leitmotif, as “97” approached, she strived to create four more pieces of work with great effort. At length, the whole series was finished in 2000 with *Doll with Photographs*, (Plate 13) the indescribable composition and almost expressionist colors of which constitute a metaphor for the soul-crushing reality.





Plate 8 (top left)

Yvonne Lo, *Childhood Memory*, Kwik print (Kwik EP), 28x35cm, 1992. Image courtesy of the artist.



Plate 9 (center left)

Yvonne Lo, *A Place of Nowhere*, Kwik print and mixed-media, 30x26x3cm, 1992. Image courtesy of the artist.

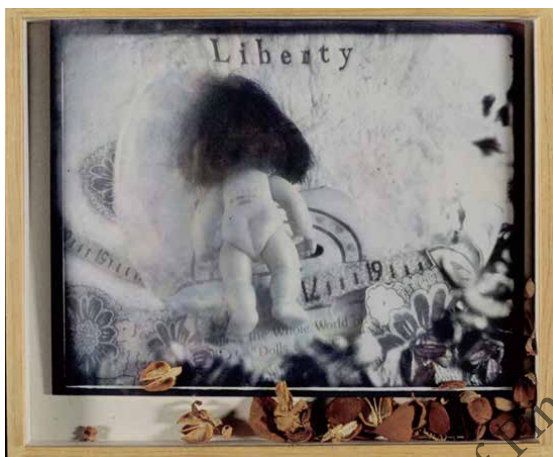


Plate 10 (bottom left)

Yvonne Lo, *Curls and Ties*, Kwik print and mixed-media, 30x26x3cm, 1992. Image courtesy of the artist.

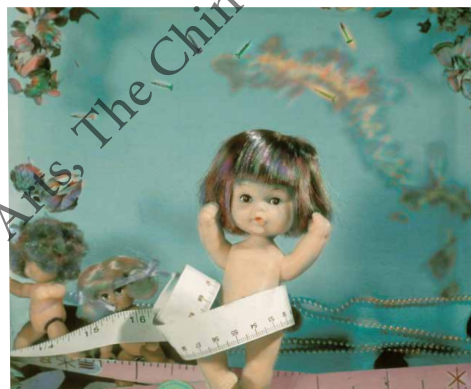


Plate 11 (top right)

Yvonne Lo, *A Growing Flame in a Blue Room*, digital print, 40x42cm, 1995. Image courtesy of the artist.

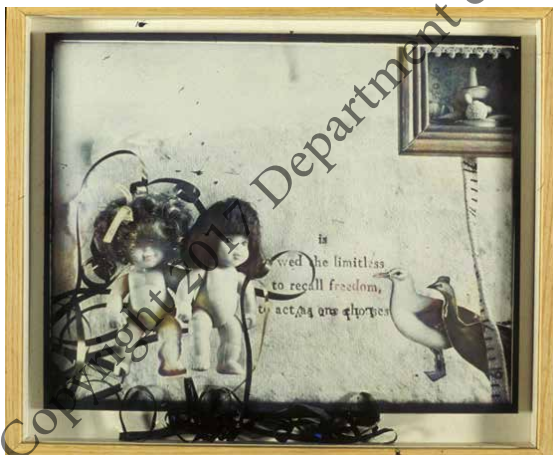


Plate 12 (center right)

Yvonne Lo, *Wrapped Up Doll with Free Hands*, digital print, 26x20cm, 1997. Image courtesy of the artist.



Plate 13 (bottom right)

Yvonne Lo, *Doll With Imagegraphs*, digital print, 35x28cm, 2000. Image courtesy of the artist.

### A nativist's anxiety

On the eve of his graduation from Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in 1963, Mui Chong-ki travelled to Hong Kong via Macau by himself. Having received education in the mainland China during the teenage years, he believed that art should have a connection with people. Concerned about the minority and the lower class in Hong Kong, he naturally took them as the main subjects of his woodblock prints and sketches. However, as Hong Kong was, after all, not considered his homeland, his constant contemplation of China continued to be a major inspiration for his art.

Mui had a very complicated feeling towards the ten-year Cultural Revolution of China. Having left where he grew up before the Revolution started, he was fortunate enough to get away from the fanatical horrors of the movement. Yet, with this freedom, he was also struck by a deepening sense of sorrow at the same time.<sup>17</sup> As soon as the Cultural Revolution came to an end and China carried out economic reform and open-door policy, Mui decided to travel around the mainland and paint. First, he went back to Northern Guangdong and Southern Hunan, where he had been living for twenty years. Then, he went to Sichuan and Kunming, to which he and his family retreated during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Each journey took about three months and Mui had made over 400 sketches throughout the trip. The sketches were later exhibited in Singapore in 1983 and Illinois of the United States in 1984. The exhibition was titled “Memories of China,” which was also the title of his first artist monograph. Between September and December 1985, Mui travelled to Xiangxi and the south part of Guizhou to conduct another major sketching trip.

Critics and art lovers tend to consider Mui a nativist artist, whereas the leftist newspapers regard him as a patriotic artist. In the introduction of *Memories of China*, Mui bluntly articulated his feelings about China and Hong Kong:

*It was with mixed feelings that I left China, where I was born and raised, some twenty years ago. I left with a deep sense of the inevitable mixed with a lingering reluctance. I returned once or twice to Guangzhou to visit my old home but during the years that followed I stopped visiting. Nearly twenty years have passed since I arrived in Hong Kong. I came alone and soon realized that there would never really be a niche for me in this metropolis, nor that it would inspire in me any great affection. Nevertheless, I stayed and will tarry here despite her excessive modernization and materialism.<sup>18</sup>*

---

17 From an interview with the artist on December 28, 2012.

18 Mui Chong-ki. *Memories of China* (English version) (Hong Kong: Myer Publishing Ltd., 1983): 8.



Most of the sketches included in *Memories of China* feature traditional architecture, residential buildings, old streets, mountain ranges, (Plate 14) piers and woods that Mui had come across in his journey. Only one or two of the sketches are about modern architecture. (Plates 15, 16) Rather than the modernization of China, the book documents Mui's trip back home as well as the little villages and ordinary people he stumbled upon.

In between "64" and "97," Mui spent five years from 1992 to 1997 drawing over 1100 sketches of different places in Hong Kong and published *Hong Kong Enters a New Era: Drawing Album by Mui Chong Ki* before the handover.<sup>19</sup> Apart from documenting a city in transition, he also intended to learn about the place where he had been residing for thirty years all over again and to witness how Hong Kong would enter a new era in the most familiar way possible. That was nearly a cultural practice in performance art: it was a wanderer's attempt to deal with the drifting sense of cultural marginality and isolation arising from his yearning for the motherland which he had been experiencing throughout the years. Upon the completion of this project, Mui moved back to Guangzhou in 2002.

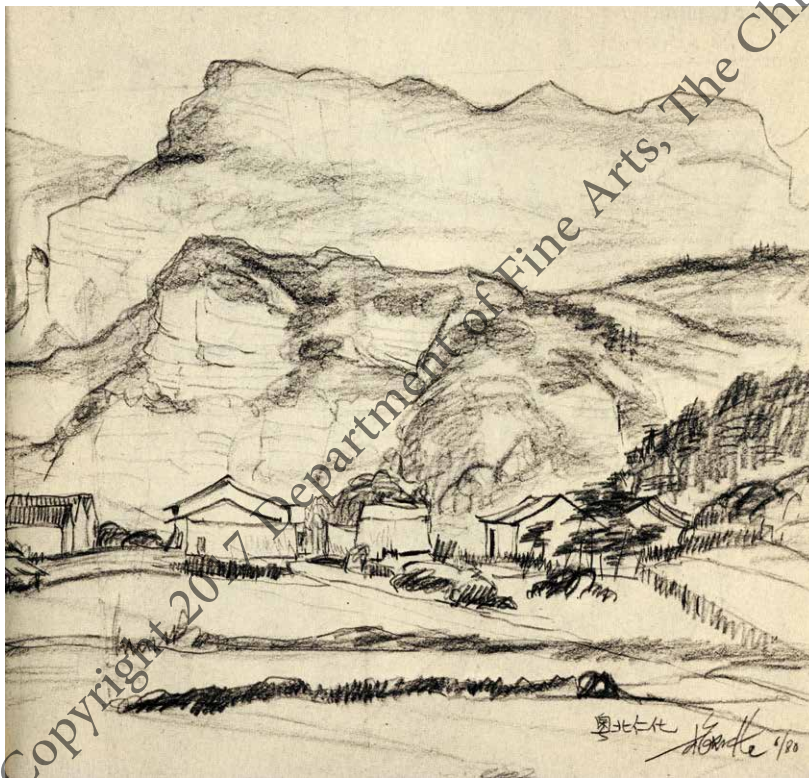


Plate 14

Mui Chong-ki, *Renhua, North of Shaoguan* (details), sketch on paper, size unknown, 1980. (After *Memories of China* [Hong Kong: Myer Publishing Ltd., 1983]: 20)

19 Mui Chong-ki. *Hong Kong Enters a New Era: Drawing Album by Mui Chong Ki* (Hong Kong: Water Poon Workshop, 1997).

Plate 15

Mui Chong-ki, *Sketch 1433* (details), sketch on paper, size unknown, 1993. (After *Hong Kong Enters a New Era* [Hong Kong: Water Poon Workshop, 1997]: 68)

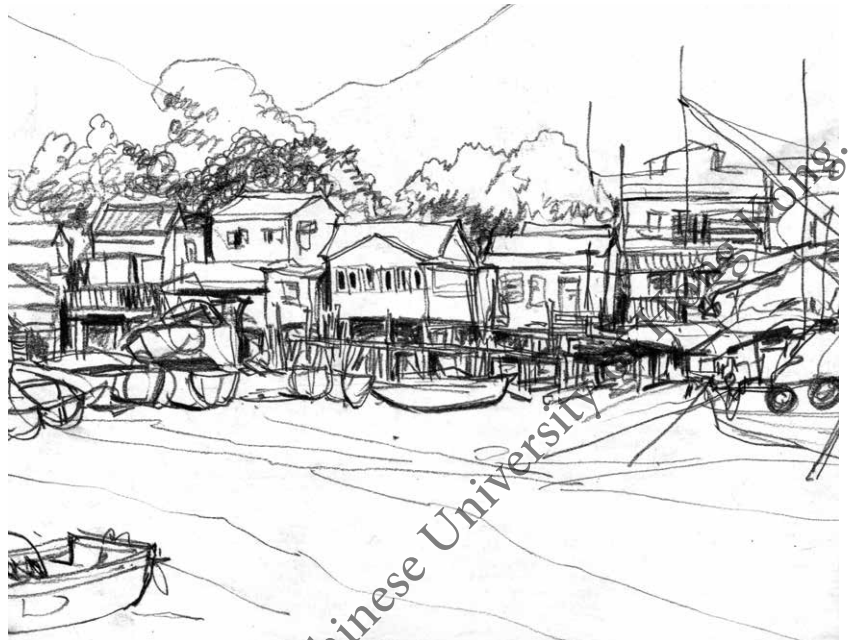
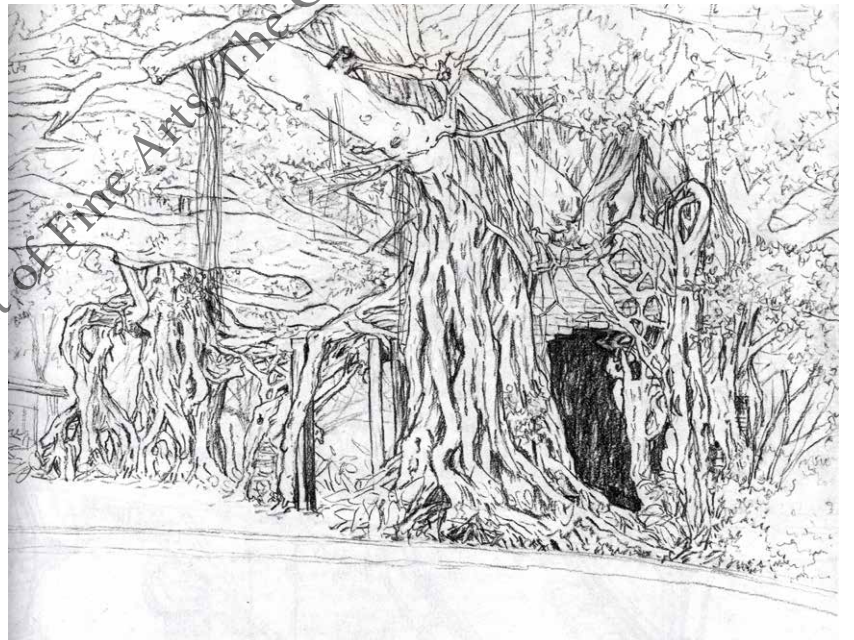


Plate 16

Mui Chong-ki, *Sketch 0314*, sketch on paper, size unknown, 1996. (After *Hong Kong Enters a New Era* [Hong Kong: Water Poon Workshop, 1997]: 245)



One of the leitmotifs that runs through Mui's sketches is fishing villages and boat people. What would happen during the transition of Hong Kong? Mui showed great sympathy for the people living in this city with his meticulous drawing. Against a background of skyscrapers, the vertical and straight lines in the sketch seem to be signaling the ruthlessness of future urban development. (Plates 17, 18) The sketcher did not only record what he saw, but also poured his heart out in the works.





Plate 17

Mui Chong-ki, *Sketch 1062*, sketch on paper, size unknown, 1994. (After *Hong Kong Enters a New Era* [Hong Kong: Water Poon Workshop, 1997]: 103)

When Mui was making the “97” sketches, he always wandered about the streets. At that time, cranes became the most frequent subject of his works, which was very different from his sketches of Hong Kong in the 80s. Instead of depicting natural landscape, villages, fishermen and ordinary people on the streets, Mui visited various construction sites around Hong Kong and made an authentic record of the ever-changing face of the city. Compared to the feeble outlines of the mountain ridge, the cranes were emphasized, with thick and solid lines, as tools that were transforming the then Hong Kong. (Plate 19)

Gradually, it seems Mui had mastered the skills at capturing the orderliness in disorder so as to convey his profound understanding of the “97” transition. Having continuously sketched Hong Kong, a city that was constantly undergoing dramatic changes, for five years, there is no doubt that Mui also transformed himself in the process. He beheld things and drew differently. The lines showed greater variation and complexity, carrying in themselves an ineffable affection. Meanwhile, the Hong Kong landscapes in the 90s were vividly portrayed in some of the sketches, as if they were ablaze in the intense imagination induced.

*Hong Kong Enters a New Era: Drawing Album* by Mui Chong Ki can be regarded as Mui’s self-reflection on his nativist art. Aware of the changes in himself, he takes pride in having fused together nativism, nationalism and modernism in his art.

Plate 18

Mui Chong-ki, *Sketch 0126*, sketch on paper, size unknown, 1997. (After *Hong Kong Enters a New Era* [Hong Kong: Water Poon Workshop, 1997]: 295)

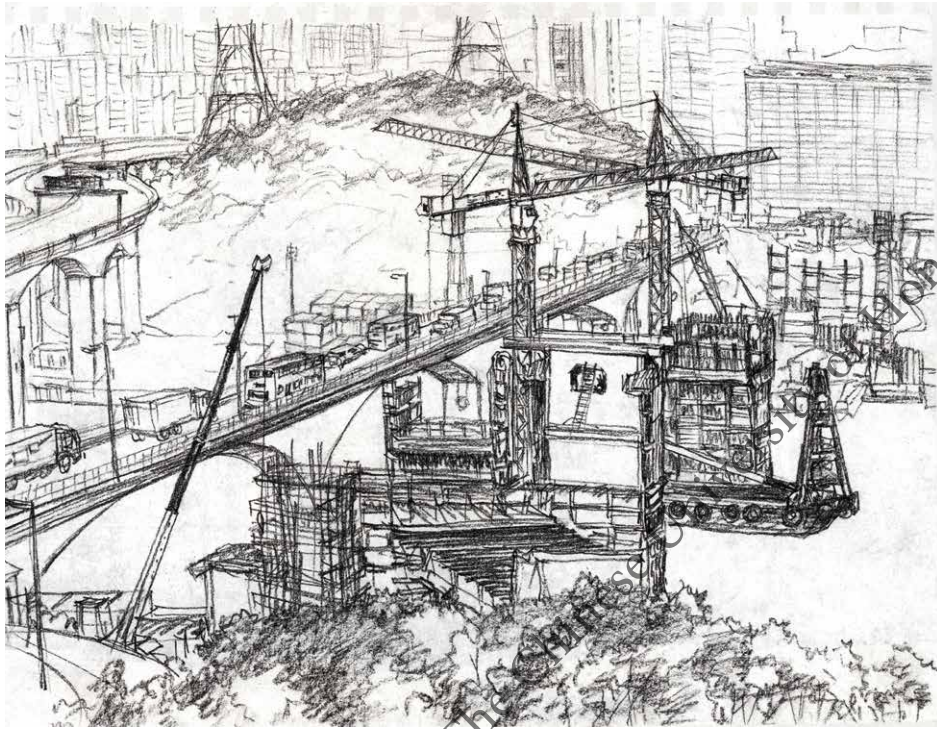
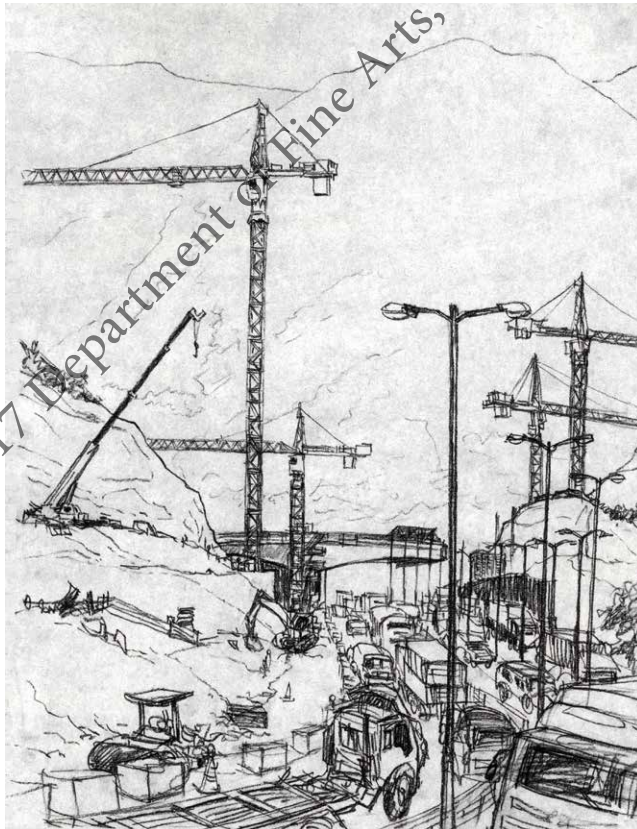


Plate 19

Mui Chong-ki, *Sketch 0130*, sketch on paper, size unknown, 1997. (After *Hong Kong Enters a New Era* [Hong Kong: Water Poon Workshop, 1997]: 293)



## A drifter's street journal

Mui came to Hong Kong alone at the age of 23 with his homeland always on his mind. On the contrary, Fung Kin-chung John left Madagascar, which was to gain independence soon, with his family in 1960. They lived in Macau for a few years before settling in Hong Kong and had never thought about leaving the city since then. To Fung, Hong Kong is his permanent shelter and home is simply where humanity is manifested.

Shortly after his arrival in Hong Kong, Fung rejected a vocational arrangement made by his father and ran away from his family. Roaming the city streets alone and living on favors granted by the others, he took on all kinds of odd jobs and came into contact with the deprived in society. Despite the struggle to maintain himself, he never gave up on the poetic side of life. In an interview with senior reporter and art curator Cheung Ping-ling, Fung said,

*When sweat is mixed with cement and plastered all over my forehead, face and glasses, I find that I'm closer to truth than ever. It is from sweat and labor that I realize what fairness and justice mean. And during moments like this, I always have Chou Mengtieh's poetry or a book of philosophy in the pocket of my workwear.<sup>20</sup>*

Fung was arrested for attending an assembly in protest against the fare rises of four public utilities. He was later put on probation for two years. After this incident, he decided to use the camera to chronicle the events and things for which he cared. As a self-taught photographer, Fung focused on capturing the reality through photography rather than going after artistic forms and techniques at the very first beginning. His drifting and disoriented adolescence had a serious impact on his photographic approach, it was even the emotional base that led him into the world of photography. In 1986, Fung held the "Ten Years On" photographic exhibition and most of the works showcased were his street photography. As for his monograph, funded by the Hong Kong Art Development Council and published by Ho Siu-chung Billy and Go Man-ching Simon, *Hong Kong Photographers: John Fung*<sup>21</sup> includes nearly seventy photos taken by Fung in the mid-70s to mid-80s, delineating the photographer's roving past through both its contents and arrangement.

At the beginning of the monograph, a poster of the film *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) pasted on a pillar at the Tsim Sha Tsui pier came into sight. (Plate 20) Turning to the next page, one would see a murky grey wall photographed from the side and a small piece of paper with the title of the work,

---

20 Cheung Ping-ling. "On John Fung who photographs the air: how heavy can gentleness be?" in *Ming Pao*, May 14, 2016.

21 Fung Kin-chung John. *Hong Kong Photographers: John Fung* (Hong Kong: GOHO, 2005).



Plate 20

John Fung, *Star Ferry Pier, Tsim Sha Tsui*. Gelatin silver print. Image courtesy of the artist.



*Come Back, Lok*, written on it is stuck on the cement post protruded from the wall. (Plate 21) As trivial and irrelevant as these little messages for the wanderers might seem to the others, those who are missing their home would somehow notice them on the road. As in the latter part of the monograph, Fung also documented, at first, the scene in which he was holding the hand of his father on the sickbed,<sup>22</sup> and after that, *The Afternoon When Dad Passed Away*.<sup>23</sup> “It was a corridor in the hospital. The sunlight outside shined through the small windows and the dust in the air, like memories.”<sup>24</sup> What Fung captured at that time indeed strikingly resembles a roll of film without images. Finally, the last photo in the monograph features a full moon and a room of light. “May we all be blessed with longevity,” the wanderer thought, as “home” has grown a pair of eyes, beholding him from above.<sup>25</sup>

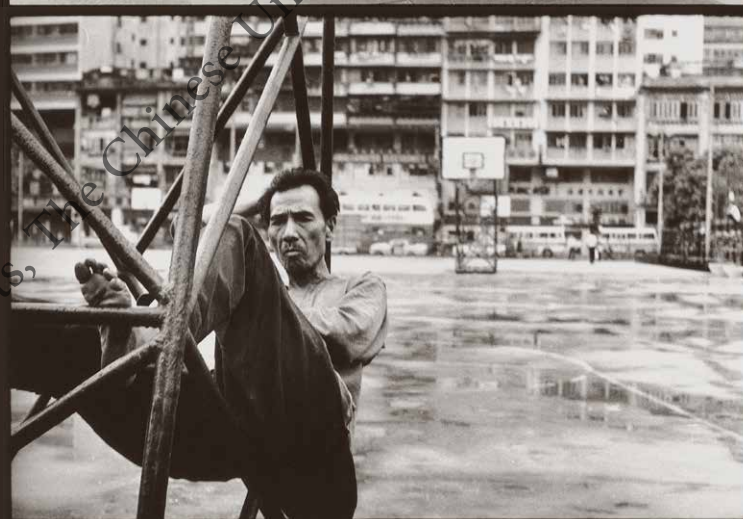
Roaming the streets and alleyways of Hong Kong, Fung paid special attention to the people. The former part of *Hong Kong Photographers: John Fung* mainly features the superfluous men in the city: beggars, (Plate 22) tramps, old people who are sunbathing, teenagers in a daze, middle-agers in confusion, (Plate 23) and Dou Wun, the blind *naamyam* musician, (Plate 24) among others.

22 Ibid, 77.

23 Ibid, 78.

24 From a personal conversation with the artist on April 3, 2017.

25 Fung Kin-chung John. *Hong Kong Photographers: John Fung* (Hong Kong: GOHO, 2005): 82.



Halfway through the monograph, there is this “missing father” notice on an electrical enclosure in the street.<sup>26</sup> And the momentum slowly develops in the latter part of the album, which powerfully criticizes economic inequality in society, challenges traces of colonial rule and depicts loving parent-child relationships.

Photos in *John Fung* probably are not arranged chronologically, but the whole monograph can be regarded as a form of Fung’s self-writing. Under the narrative framework of a wanderer leaving and coming back home, it portrays life as it is, like a flowing river with its own emotional rhythm. Chan Koon-chung described Fung as a “a flâneur with a camera,” who rambled about the streets in Hong Kong and documented the lives of the superfluous, those living on the periphery, innocent

Plate 21 (left)

John Fung, *Admiralty*.  
Gelatin silver print. Image  
courtesy of the artist.

Plate 22 (top right)

John Fung, *Prince’s Building*,  
Central. Gelatin silver  
print. Image courtesy of the  
artist.

Plate 23 (bottom right)

John Fung, *Southern  
Playground*, Wanchai.  
Gelatin silver print. Image  
courtesy of the artist.

26 Ibid, 49.

Plate 24

John Fung, *Traditional Chinese Musician*. Gelatin silver print. Image courtesy of the artist.



children, (Plate 25) the *teahouse*<sup>27</sup> and *Sing Woo Road, Happy Valley* (Plate 26), etc. He did not place great emphasis on the light and shades and a photo's composition; he only cared about the people in the photos. A sense of empathy and compassion permeates every photo, creating an aura of spiritual eloquence and natural beauty. After “64,” Fung changed his living and worked as a documentary photographer for *Next Magazine* in the hope of raising public awareness of certain issues in Hong Kong. He was once in charge of topics such as “pollution.” The magazine later assigned him to take photos for celebrities, resulting in his growing despondence about the job.

It was perhaps an aesthetic choice that Fung's photos are never particularly political. To be more exact, he did not even intentionally chronicle social incidents with his camera. For instance, when he attended the anti-fare-increase assembly, he did not photograph every moment of the event, but only retained one photo of the bronze statue with “Lawful Assembly 70” (Plate 27) written on its stone pedestal at Victoria Park for record.<sup>28</sup> Like Yvonne Lo, he was a participant rather than a recorder of the “64” protest. During that period of time, Fung in fact just travelled back to Hong Kong from Europe and the United States and had locked himself in the darkroom working intensively on his upcoming solo exhibition “On the Road.” That night, in the furious storm, he joined the protest and brought with him the camera. Yet, he did not take any photos:

---

27 Ibid, 73.

28 Editor's note: “70” in the photo refers to the name of the organization, not the year.





Plate 25

John Fung, *Kowloon City*.  
Gelatin silver print. Image  
courtesy of the artist.

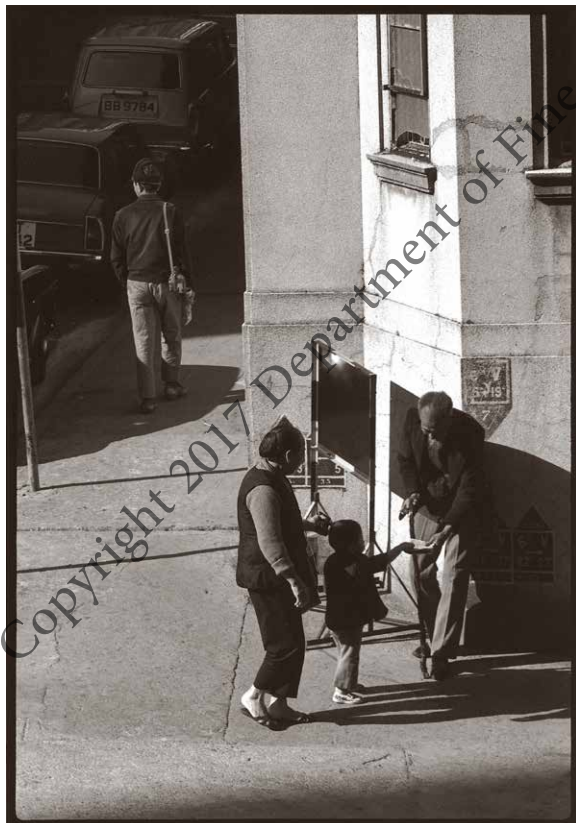


Plate 26

John Fung, *Sing Woo Road,  
Happy Valley*. Gelatin silver  
print. Image courtesy of the  
artist.

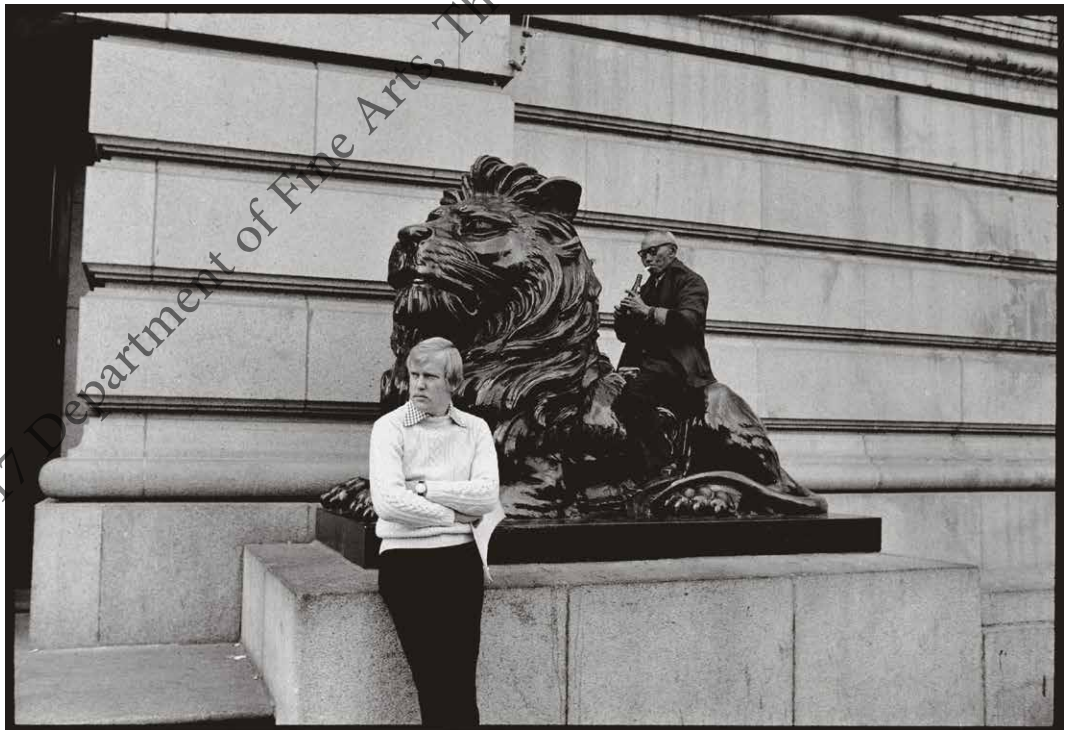


*I can now only remember the howling wind and the pouring rain in which we were walking in a seemingly endless street... And as we marched and shouted at the top of our lungs, we could no longer hold back our tears... Darkness was all over the road... you couldn't help but feel that taking photos was not important anymore.*<sup>29</sup>

Before “97,” Fung did not intend to contribute to the “Hong Kong” discourse with his works. However, after so many years, on the cover of *John Fung*, the scene featuring the lion statue outside the old main building of the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation still stood as an extraordinarily intriguing and impressive record left by Fung for his fellow Hongkongers: a foreign young man with blonde hair is leaning against the pedestal of the lion statue, with folded arms and some documents, as if waiting for someone to whom he will pass on the documents. Behind him, a balding Chinese old man with white hair is drinking a bottle of coke on the back of the lion behind him. (Plate 28) Fung told me that he never took staged photos<sup>30</sup> and this precious montage was indeed a reward from one of the many long walks he had been taking along the Hong Kong streets for years. It was absolutely a miraculous encounter. At the first glance, the old man even becomes a part of the lion sculpture, seemingly holding a hookah in hand or playing the suona on the back of his companion.

Plate 28

John Fung, *Old HSBC Headquarters Building, Central*. Gelatin silver print. Image courtesy of the artist.



29 From a personal conversation with the artist on April 2, 2017.

30 From a personal conversation with the artist on April 3, 2017.

## Conclusion

Through an intertextual reading of four artists' works and their individual lives, this essay aims to look into how anxious Hong Kong artists reflected on their respective relationships with the community as well as the correlation between their lives and art and thus build their sense of subjectivity during such a restless period of historical transition.

Both born and raised in Hong Kong, female artists Choi Yan-chi and Yvonne Lo reacted differently to the big question of "97." Choi emigrated from Hong Kong out of concern for her family in the early years but decided to return to the city in 1997, aspiring to participate in the historical change of times with cultural practices. Lo, on the other hand, thought of emigration but opted to stay at last. In spite of the unsettling circumstances, she still believed that family would be her ultimate way out and therefore became a mother again in 1997.

While Choi and Lo made use of art to express respectively their aspirations for the external reality and inner feelings, they shared the common way to create and orchestrate artworks according to the rationale in their mind. Relatively speaking, Mui Chong-ki and John Fung, as a sketcher and a photographer respectively, frequented the Hong Kong streets and alleyways before "97" and spontaneously documented what they saw through the art medium in which they excelled. They mainly captured the ordinary people and the ordinary places.

In terms of the way art is created, both Mui and Fung can be considered city flâneurs. Nevertheless, Mui, constantly yearning for his home town, often visited the countryside and fishing villages to locate his empathy for the drifted. On the other hand, Fung's sense of drifting was found along his path through life. He was sympathetic about those who stare at the sea on the ferry.

"97" is a collective karma. Before 1997, art practitioners more or less had their own deep or random thoughts and feelings about the event at some point. These Hong Kong artists, despite their anxiety and confusion, continued to make art and construct the common subject and the many forms involved.

At such restless times, Choi focused on critiquing the authority in her works. Fung is yet to achieve his attempts to engage in a societal discourse. Lo made a conscious effort to display her anxiety and uneasiness through art. Mui, upon the reflection on his relationship with Hong Kong, revealed a sense of disquiet at first before he gradually moved on to restore the order in his works.

Both the pre-“97” Mui and Fung adopted the documentary approach for their art. However, after “97,” their artistic styles started to change. Mui developed the paper collage mixed media paintings. Apart from painting broken cars, he even made sculptures with metal remnants and vehicle parts for the “To Wrecks with Love” exhibition (2007). As for Fung, he slowly departed from the specific individuals and switched from shooting film to digital photography. Experimenting with the multifarious aspects of photography such as urban kaleidoscope, landscape and the watery form, Fung put his faith in the art forms to explore the metaphors of reality.<sup>31</sup>

With regard to the creative direction, spirituality and femininity are primarily presented in Lo’s first book, *A Lotus Trip*. However, in the 90s, it seems that more emotions instead of the original spirituality were displayed in her works. It was not until 2015 that the pensive images are seen again in *Moment of Stillness* released then.

Choi co-founded “1a space” with a group of fellow Hong Kong artists after “97” and has been actively curating contemporary art exhibitions for the recent twenty years. Broadly speaking, it is an open historical installation possessing temporality and a form of art for the future that was built upon the subject of community. Choi herself also derived a deep and accumulated understanding of life from her previous political criticisms; her knowledge-based works became more intuition-oriented while a sentimental and sensuous quality is added to them.

It seems that Mui, Fung and Lo have all eventually discovered the beauty in turmoil and in the complex real world after “97.” Following this train of thought, we might as well expect how Choi’s art will further evolve in the future.

Lo Wai-luk is the Associate Professor of the Academy of Film, Hong Kong Baptist University.

---

31 From Fung’s website: <https://www.johnfungphoto.com/>