HOME GROWN Talent
Hong Kong: Homegrown Talent

Chow Chun Fai, Linda Lai, Ho Sin Tung, Adrian Wong, and Pauline J. Yao

PAULINE J. YAO  It’s often said that there is an absence of value attached to specific places in contemporary cultural life, and this might be especially true in the art world, which is often viewed as global, increasingly virtual, or even placeless. The début of Art Basel in Hong Kong is but one example of the global reach of today’s art world. And yet I have to think that Art Basel in Hong Kong forces a confrontation with its locals in ways that differ from Art Basel in Miami Beach perhaps, or even Art Basel. It certainly stems from an appreciation of difference and a desire to recognize that Hong Kong has its own legacy of artistic production. It might also have to do with a Hong Kong sort of “topophilia,” a strong sense of place (or even of love for place), which overwhelmingly becomes mixed with a sense of cultural identity. So, even if we admit that generally the power of place is increasingly diminished, and occasionally lost, here it certainly thrives with implications that are quite complex, if only because this city is a space of transit that has become a permanent home for many.

This topic and its subtext of locality and specificity can be approached with two kinds of perspectives and interpretations. The first relates to the individual: the person, the producer in this case, or artist, as someone being deemed homegrown because of the nature of his/her upbringing or background. The other might be “homegrown” in terms of process: something owing to the space in which it’s produced. My interest is to focus on the latter.

Place is both temporal and spatial, personal and political, and comes layered with histories and memories that run wide and deep. In all discussions of place, it is a question of abstraction and specifics; if art is defined as universal, or form is valued over content, then artists might be encouraged to transcend their local, or shed their locality. If we look at it as content, prime material, then certainly this notion of regionalism, or localism, wouldn’t be seen as a limitation, but as an advantage.

So, what I wanted to do today is to explore the ways in which ideas that originate in this place are materialized in this place, and to what extent these artists and others evaluate aspects of their working practice, their chosen medium, their relationship to material, and ultimately, by extension, their roles as artist in this place.

Chow Chun Fai is a Fine Arts graduate from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Chow is an active member of the Fotanian Art Village (www.fotanian.org), a visiting lecturer at several different universities, and is best known for his paintings of street scenes. Chow Chun has also been involved in a variety of projects, one of which is Painting On and On, an artist-initiated project looking at evolving local artists, and in organizing group exhibitions, seminars, and publications.

Linda Lai has a PhD in Cinema Studies from NYU, and is now a professor in the school of Creative Media in Hong Kong, as a historian and multidisciplinary artist. Her experimental videos and digital installations are often made from found footage, and involve notions of historiography, auto-ethnography, urban studies, and archiving.

Ho Sin Tung, born here in Hong Kong, has also graduated from the Chinese University Fine Arts Department. Her work consists predominantly of drawings, using found and readymade images, maps, charts, and timelines, and involves a combination of imagined and real places.

Adrian Wong was born in Chicago, graduated from Stanford University, and studied sculpture at Yale University. He is best known for installations, sculptures, and videos that uncover lost or hidden histories, and examine the vibe between reality and myth. Interested in modes of narrative and story telling, Wong’s background draws him to performed
acts of excavation, narration, and flirtation with the unknown. He will be hosting the *Wan Dun* bar during this week of the fair.

I would like to ask each of you to say something about the working methods that you think define your own practice and how they relate to where you live. And in particular, is your practice studio-based, non-studio-based? Are you working independently or do you work with others, and in what kind of ways?

CHOW CHUN FAI I will use only four minutes to tell four stories. The first one is that I was a taxi driver. Owning a taxi license in Hong Kong is crazy. Today, if you were to buy one it would be about seven billion Hong Kong dollars! This experience taught me a lot about how to run a business, how to communicate with others, and how to face the reality of the city.

The second is that I have a studio in Fo Tan, an industrial area in the new territories. This is quite significant because you can tell from the local art history that in the 1990s not many artists had a studio. All you could see in the art scene were installations, performances—because there weren't spaces to produce works. You had to install the things at a venue and then you just threw them away after the show. Of course, before us, there were artists working in factories, but maybe we are the first group loud enough to organize some open studios events, so now even the general public recognize us as the Fotanian—as a group of artists working in former factories.

The third story: I am said to be part of the first generation who can be full-time artists in Hong Kong. This is horrible. The debate was that if you want to be professional then you have to be a full-time artist. I don't think this is a very good measure to decide who is an artist. I wanted to tell this story because the art fair is coming here, and working with galleries now has become a common phenomenon in Hong Kong.

The fourth story: I ran the election for the Hong Kong Legislative Council. When I ran the election—well, I gave up all my work last year, and spent the whole year running the election, I didn't declare that this was an art piece, because if I declared that this was some kind of performance, all the audience would just watch it as a performance, and not as a serious election. For me it was also a very local experience, because when you talk about politics, it has to be local.

LINDA LAI I think I'm a very typical homegrown Hong Kong person, in the sense that I have done all those typical things that the Hong Kong kids who might have a flair for art would do: I joined a studio, I learned painting, and would do teachers-student exhibitions, I trained in music, joined a choir, and was very into theater when I was an undergraduate student. But in fact, one or two semesters of oil painting really put me off, and something else took me away from theater.

There's a 20-year gap between those days and when I started self-consciously working on artworks.
and felt I was an artist. I was hired to teach creative writing at the School of Creative Media. And something happened. I had to criticize my students’ works day and night, and suddenly I felt: “It seems I have all the ideas and principles to make them artists and I’m not making anything.”

The first thought that came to my mind was to make a movie. I wanted to do something about my grandmother. I always carried a camera, all those years, so, when I started to think of this in 2002, I already had ten years of video footage with me. Video diaries made without any purpose most of the time. So I started to look at these images as a stranger. Wonderful things came up. I felt I was studying another person’s life.

I don’t work in a studio: I collect things. I’m like a gleaner of my own images in everyday life. Gleaner of found footage—I love Hong Kong movies although they are banal, disgusting, sometimes really horrible, but I love looking at them. That gives me a lot of material to hand. I cut out all these locations shots, and save them.

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— Pauline J. Yao

This is how I get the chance to look at Hong Kong in the past and the swift changes that take place every day in the city space. I hope this portrays the kind of ecology that I wanted to suggest about what is homegrown and how to respond to what you have. I think that when I didn’t try very hard to be a good artist, I became a better artist.

Ho Sintung I want to begin with how I started painting in the first place. I was three years old and I had just decided to learn painting ... All the kids were going to painting classes in their neighborhoods. And, just downstairs from my house there was a painting studio organized by a quite established painter. Of course, my parents and I didn’t know him. That was simply the closest painting studio to my house. It offered me quite a different education from the classic Hong Kong one. Already as a kid, they gave me a big canvas to work on without any specific topic, so you had to think of who you are, what you want to say, and what are you trying to do with your own little space and your own little world. I never had any intention to use Hong Kong as a subject of my work. I think this is just the result of being an artist: I simply capture things that seem strong to me. Many of my references are Western literature and Western movies. I never consider myself typical Hong Kong. But when I was around ten years old, my family moved to Sheung Shui, the most northern part of Hong Kong, very very close to China. I still live there now. My house is far away from everything in Hong Kong; going to China is closer for me than to go to the center of the city. Living there is an interesting experience because you know a lot of mainland people coming to Hong Kong and this experience got into me. You have a strong feeling that your home and the things around you keep changing, not according to your needs but to other people’s needs, the mainland and urban planning. You get the feeling that the place you are in, the place you have memory in, keeps disappearing. You have a fear of losing your own language, and the fear of losing your memory and place. This is one of the reasons why I started doing maps in the first place.

Adrian Wong I’m not from here. I grew up in Chicago, and came here on vacation in 2005 and I’ve been here for eight years. I found a haunted studio at 50% off and signed a two-year lease, thinking that I could just walk away. The first thing that really made me fall in love with Hong Kong is its inexpensive wood. In the States, wood costs were really escalating, and as a sculptor who works quite large, this was a big issue! So, I was really kind of in hog heaven ...
I’m quite transient: I travel a lot, I teach in the United States, but I keep coming back because I started to glean bits of the culture. I am ethnically Chinese, my mother and my father were born in Hong Kong, but were both estranged from their families, so I used that as an excuse to dig into my own genealogy and absorb a culture that I had no real access to. I am fascinated by the place, but I don’t entertain any sort of fantasy that this is who I am.

**PJY** One thing I wanted to discuss, and, Adrian, you mentioned it very practically, is the materials and access to them. I realized when putting this group of people together, that we have Adrian who works primarily in sculpture, Ho Sin Tung doing primarily drawings, Linda predominantly working in video, and Chow Chun working primarily in painting. So we have a kind of representation of all these different media, but at the same time all of you have not only done things that are outside that comfort zone, but in some cases combined and worked across media.

Chow Chun Fai, I think of your paintings and how they are embedded with film. And Adrian, some of your sculptural works involve some kind of theatrical and performative parts. There’s a kind of crossing over, and a kind of “intermedia” maybe, but not so much in the sense of being new media as much as it is crossing these disciplines or areas. How have you settled on a particular media that you work in? And when you’re coming up with certain concepts, ideas, what is the chosen avenue for that sort of manifestation?

**AW** I was originally trained as a social scientist. I left a psychology program to become a sculptor. The initial outlet for a lot of my projects has been theater, but I became more and more interested in reality. For example, for the bar that I’m producing with Absolut Art Bureau, I thought initially to stage the entire thing as a theatrical production. We were hiring professional actors and singers to portray characters that I found to be emblematic of this city. For budgetary reasons and difficulties in managing such a large cast, I decided to actually cast people in the bar ... as themselves. So now, our bathroom attendant is the security guard from my apartment complex and the maître d’ is the captain of the Star Ferry that goes across the harbor.

I was looking for an awkward waiter and we were auditioning to find somebody who could play a sort of mix between Buster Keaton and Goofy the dog, but we thought, “well, we want a goofy waiter, let’s go to some restaurant and find one!” I think a lot of the things about bridging boundaries allows me to approach these projects through the techniques of research that I’ve learned in a different field, as a psychologist, to plumb out the little nugget of interests that I’m stopping at as I just go through my daily life.

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— Adrian Wong

**CCF** Two things are affecting my choice of media. The first one is my training. I studied at the Chinese University in Hong Kong, which is not like the Central Academy in China: we learn everything, from brush and ink to landscape, and then two hours later we do installation, then oil painting. So, when I pick up the brush, I always ask myself why should I pick up oil as a medium? I could always do something else. The other thing is space. Even though I now have my own studio, and many artists have a shared studio in the industrial area, space is still very limited. Space is always the biggest issue in Hong Kong. Not only because of the cost but also because of who owns it. Space is something that affects our working process and even our practice.

**HST** I do videos and sometimes installations, drawings, and I also have a column in the newspaper. I never really use a medium to set boundaries to myself, but when people introduce me, they need this kind of label. Usually I am described as a painter who uses pencil, and that’s sort of true, because I mostly use pencil as my medium. I think pencil offers a very intimate relationship with the material. When I use pencil, I feel like I am at a desk, writing something. When I first started making my artwork, I never considered anything like an audience. So it’s like the relationship of writing a letter to someone, and the audience is sort of an extra to me.

**UX** I consider myself an intermedia artist, and intermedia is actually a
very important principle in my work. I guess that for the sake of communicating myself to others, I would say that I'm primarily a montage artist, working with moving images. One test for each work I make is always where it goes. The works I like the best are those that happen to be accepted in different places. For example, a film I made was accepted as an experimental film in an experimental film festival, but has also been accepted as a documentary in a documentary film festival. In editing my videos, I often bring in things from other disciplines, from ethnography for instance, or from generative art, calculation, formalism.

Things need to gesture; sometimes they match together and evolve in different things. It's exciting to work together artistically to spring forth out of that and to kind of dump things into the world that maybe won't necessarily come from a particular category.

AUDIENCE I'm from Switzerland where young artists often start their practice by forming groups, even running a space together. Additionally, they travel constantly, creating new relations between these groups. I wonder if you do the same, and if you travel, where do you go? Are there a lot of collective practices, collaborations between young artists?

CCF I used to have a studio in Beijing. I rented it for three years and then they wanted to clear the artists out in 2010, so I moved back to Hong Kong. I saw the differences, too. When I dropped into my friends' studios in Beijing, sometimes I saw ten assistants mixing the paint, and the other ten assistants doing the ceramics, while in Hong Kong there isn't the space. Instead, you would cooperate with a partner, a contractor for instance.

AUDIENCE There's a sense of community today. I think Fotan has a strong art scene. It allows emerging artists, mid-career artists, late-career artists to have a space to meet, to interact. Its open studios bring the whole city together once a year. There's also the Foo Tak building in Wan Chai district. There are some very strong communities that are forming, some around galleries' programs. Until recently, Hong Kong has not been a place that offered a large enough community or a large enough flow of international artists to stay here and remain engaged and excited as an artist. But we are bouncing around; there's a fair amount of back and forth between here and, say, Singapore, Tokyo, Bangkok, Taipei, and obviously Beijing, Shanghai.

CCF I just noticed that in the past few years most of my media art students who graduate form groups. This might be a trend that will continue. There are more and more new festivals, grants available, and actually in terms of resources this might be the best time I have seen so far in Hong Kong! Still, students like to go overseas; they are not only aiming to show their works locally—also because all the major media art festivals are outside Hong Kong. To begin with Asian soil: South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan—these are places we all want to go to.

AUDIENCE I have a question about censorship. What do you think about this as an issue for your work to be displayed in Hong Kong or China?

CCF I play with that. I always say I'm doing experiments to test censorship. I just did a work about the Tiananmen incident. I cannot show that work in China. But I wanted to test what would happen in Hong Kong, so I tried to apply that painting to different occasions. It was accepted by a gallery, but it was rejected by the Hong Kong Biennale. I tried to show it at the University, and finally it sold to Switzerland. For me, the work could be considered finished when it is exhibited on the mainland. When reporters ask for images, I try to send this painting. I tried to send it to a mainland magazine, but of course it was censored. I then sent a portrait of me with the painting in the background. The work just hides in my back, so it finally became public on the mainland. But somehow this is also due to self-censorship, hiding the work in my back ...
Usually my work is not so political, but I had a show right after Ai Weiwei was taken away, so I did a picture of him and also a picture of the Hong Kong government. The art space didn't censor the Ai Weiwei work, but they did try to censor the Hong Kong government painting, because they said it's not very appropriate to have a show here and criticize the government. They wanted to take the painting away, and of course I refused. The owner of the space sent the image to a lot of different organizations in Hong Kong and asked people, "How do you feel as a Hong Kong person looking at a painting that criticizes the Hong Kong government?" and actually a lot of people said, "We feel very pleased that people criticize their own government, we are very happy to see that." So they finally showed the painting. I don't consider my paintings to be political, but I use some materials from Chinese news and it actually got shown in China without problems. I think they didn't have time to really look at the painting and just visually it seems okay, so it gets through each time.

I normally like to play within safe constraints. I have very strong political opinions, but I try not to make them too explicit. For a recent work, I did a lot of research on the postwar history of Hong Kong and I turned that into numbers, into how much people had spent, in money but also in purchasing materials, to send back to mainland China. It's ironic, about the position of Hong Kong regarding the whole story of the Cultural Revolution, as it shows how actually it is us, our energy, our money, and our time, especially by women in a domestic space, who sustained the spirit of people in mainland China.

I was very pleased that a lot of older people liked the work, while younger people didn't know that I was criticizing anything ... The most recent censorship I encountered was with the 19th Hong Kong experimental film and video festival: everything was planned, a catalogue was produced, and at the last minute the whole festival was scrapped. The organizers got a series of phone calls from people who were participating who withdrew from the event. So there was not a trace of evidence that it had been censored, but it was. We didn't know what was going on, except that it was somehow related to Ai Weiwei. Ai Weiwei's work made the authorities realize that all independent work can be subversive.

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