Looking at Looking

AN INTERVIEW WITH LAM TUNG PANG

BY CHLOE CHU

Forming the landscape, 2018, charcoal, ink, acrylic, and scale-model on plywood, 64.5×88.5×7.4cm. Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.

It was July 1, the 23rd anniversary of Hong Kong's handover from the United Kingdom to China, when I headed to the Hong Kong Museum of Art to see Lam Tung Pang's video installation *Image-coated* (2019). Projected onto a translucent screen over windows with panoramic views of Victoria Harbour, the central video is a bricolage of animated charcoal drawings, manipulated camera footage, and found images forming a multilayered, fantastical chronicle delineating the port-city's history through its morphing landscape. As a rough contour of an undeveloped Victoria Harbour faded from the screen and the foreboding sound of rumbling thunder filled the space, I walked toward the uncovered windows where Lam had drawn raindrops with a whiteboard marker. Outside, gliding across the waters, was a behemoth barge stacked with 80 shipping containers bearing banners that altogether read: "In celebration of the National Security Law." The historic addendum, prohibiting vaguely defined acts of secession, subversion, terrorism, or foreign intervention, had come into effect just the night prior, muzzling Hong Kong's freedom of speech and pro-democracy movement. Lam's invocation of stormy weather symbolically and prophetically captured the city's doubly heavy uncertainty that day.

When I spoke to the artist the following week at his studio in the industrial area of Fotan, he described *Image-coated* as one of three "love letters" that he has written to Hong Kong over the past year, a time of unprecedented changes in the place he calls home. We discussed these projects, as well as the importance—and sometimes impossibility—of clear-eyed perspectives on time and one's surroundings.

Portrait of **LAM TUNG PANG**. Photo by Stephenie Kay. Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.

You have said that *Image-coated* embodies all the aspects of your practice, so let's start there. The Lou Ting, a chimera with human extremities, scales, and a fish tail, appears in a drawing adjacent to the video. Accompanying this image is a quote from a history book referencing a late-Ming/early-Qing dynasty poem about the creature. Blending fact and myth, the verses say that because the Lou Ting resisted the rule of the Qing empire, they were considered barbarians. The video also begins with a Lou Ting staring out at gently rippling waters and untouched hills. Why did you foreground this figure?

The whole project started with the museum's glass windows, which I was invited to use, and an 1856 etching of Victoria Harbour by an anonymous artist, drawn from the museum's collection. The scene that the print depicts is emblematic of Hong Kong—contemporary postcards of the city frame that same location, as do the museum's windows. I was interested in overlapping the colonial-era image with the view from the installation's site, but I felt that the work was missing an imaginary aspect.

Lou Ting is one of few myths about Hong Kong. According to the story, the human-fish characters fled to Hong Kong amid a Chinese civil war and settled on the coast, bringing with them their ways of life on the mainland. At the same time, they adapted to this place and forged a new sense of belonging. In the video, the Lou Ting quotes a line, "Although they lost the war, they strived to reshape their identity." The amphibious form of Lou Ting recalls the Hong Kong people, who are constantly drifting between different cultural and sociopolitical terrains. Thus, I layered the Lou Ting legend with two superimposed perspectives of Victoria Harbour—the 1856 print appears in the video projected over the window, while the scene outside is like a real-time video in itself—bringing together different Hong Kongs.

The Lou Ting also adds to the interactions between the installation's elements. Opposite the Lou Ting wall drawing is a charcoal rendering of a person staring through binoculars. Meanwhile, the Lou Ting faces the window, like it is taking in the sea. Both the actual harbor and the projection feature an island. It is as if the two are looking at each other. In this sense, the work is an entanglement of different gazes. There are many modes of "looking."

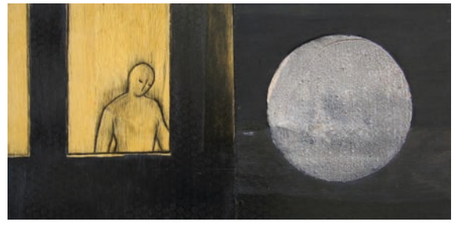
Detailed installation view of *Image-coated*, 2019, video installation with projection on window and wall, digital prints on wall, sound, dimensions variable, at the Hong Kong Museum of Art. Courtesy the artist.

The video has several motifs, including a close-up of an eye and a blindfolded figure. Do these images symbolize anything?

It's hard to say exactly. I included the eye to augment the exchange of gazes within the installation. Viewers looking at the video may catch the eye staring back at them. Yet shortly after I completed the work in 2019, a journalist and a protestor were shot in the eye at pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong, and the eye accrued new symbolic meanings in the context of the unrest. This was pure coincidence. There are so many things in the tides of time that are outside of our control. Since last year, lives have been transformed in ways that were not easily foreseeable.

The work encapsulates the uncertainty that best characterizes Hong Kong today. This state is embedded in the installation's media. For example, there are small toys that I put in front of the projectors to cast shadows onto the screen, including a mini palm tree dangling just slightly over the beam of light. Their positions are precarious. This is the visual language of Hong Kong. If you wander around places like Mong Kok, you will encounter makeshift hawker stalls, which are really just goods laid out on trolleys with pop-up canvas tops that can be packed up quickly. The charcoal drawing is also vulnerable—it has no fixative and could morph with just one swipe of a visitor's finger. And because the video is projected onto a translucent screen placed over the window, the light conditions outside will affect it. This reflects my creative process—I don't have to control everything. The environment will shape the work, which is what makes it unique. This is a characteristic that most of my video installations share.

Balcony 11a, 2005, charcoal, nails, and ink on plywood, 81×60.5 cm. Courtesy the artist.



Post-mind, 2003, ink, sand, and acrylics on plywood, 28×57 cm. Courtesy the artist.

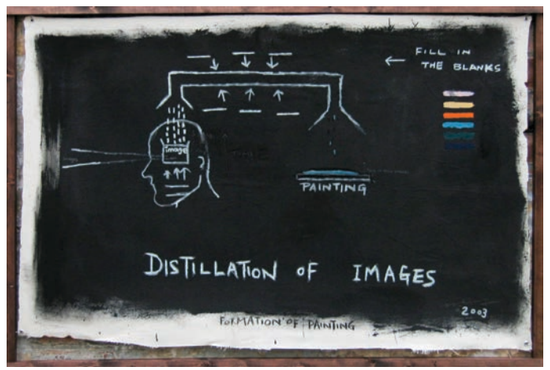
You mentioned that you like playing with perspectives. A lot of your works feature people looking. Your window decal at Hon Ming Gallery for the 2020 "Up Close – Hollywood Road" exhibition had a toy figurine gazing out at a desert. The paintings from your years as a graduate student at Central Saint Martins in London, such as *Balcony 11a* (2005), likewise feature people actively surveying the world. The person staring out the window at the moon in *Post-mind* (2003) even reappears in the video installation *The Great Escape* (2020). Why this fascination with the act of looking?

For me, the basis of creativity is observation, and with that a detached awareness of the fact that you are an observer. In my experience, being an artist entails having strong feelings toward societal events, but at the same time wanting to maintain a distance. I'm not saying artists are indifferent. In fact, the hardest part is feeling deeply but at the same time recognizing that these feelings or opinions require time before they can be articulated. My artistic decisions all stem from different sources of inspiration, which I develop slowly. That process involves a dialogue between different materials and spaces—a visual conversation. Hence the centrality of looking in my works.

Installation view of *The Great Escape*, 2020, video projection, ink and pencil on paper, scale models, acrylics and UV-print on plywood, dimensions variable, at "Anonymous Society for Magick," Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong, 2020. Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery.

In my personal experience, seeing the same thing from many different perspectives and empathizing with them equally can lead to what feels like fissures in one's subjectivity. Your 2017 show at Chambers Fine Art gallery in Beijing was called "Fragmentation." Do you identify with this condition?

My process is composed of countless fragmentary experiences, which, layered over each other, make up my feeling towards a subject. It's similar to dating—you meet somebody for the first time and you form an impression, and the next time you meet them you will discover another feature of theirs. Fragmentation occurs in our everyday life. My works revolve around daily experiences and observations instead of grand histories or particular subjects. These fragments ought to be honestly included, addressed, and confronted in art. That show was meant to address the state of fragmentation, but even if the exhibition wasn't themed around this topic, every artwork encapsulates this condition. There is a drawing that I made while in London that portrays this: your brain, after observing different things every day, functions like a boiler. You keep on distilling your observations until you eventually extract an essence. Fragmentary experiences accumulate in a similar way. It is in this sense that life bears a close affinity with art creation.



Distillation of Images, 2003, oil, acrylic, and charcoal on canvas, 30×40 cm. Courtesy the artist.

Next to *Image-coated* was a didactic animation about your practice. It claims that you enjoy watching birds fly and being in nature, as is reflected in your landscape paintings. Is observing nature something that you practice?

Not really! I have made paintings related to animals, like the series *Condition* (2009), which features polar bears, whales, and ducks. In *Where is the white crow?* (2009–10), I use the bird as a metaphor for the homogeneity of society. I have the desire to approach nature, but it's beyond my capacity—I'm the kind of person who immediately after arriving in the countryside, even before encountering the birds, would have already suffered several insect bites. This comes down to the issue of imagination versus reality—as you tackle "reality" you'll realize that sometimes it is just a figment of your mind.

When I worked on the polar bear paintings, people asked me if I was very concerned with the well-being of animals and the environment, and I answered them honestly that I'm not as concerned as they think. When drawing these creatures, I normally project humanity onto their situations. For example, the crisis that polar bears are facing is that their habitat has been destroyed by humans, prompting their suffering and a fight to survive. I am reminded by them of certain marginalized people who are threatened by others and are forced to change in order to preserve their lives. I associate natural phenomenon with human experiences—it's like having mirror images that reflect each other. The animal imageries in my works serve as analogies.

Condition I, 2009, mixed media on canvas and plywood, 160×220 cm. Courtesy the artist.

The artist in front of *Centuries of Hong Kong*, 2011, acrylics, charcoal, and pencil on plywood, 425×717×50 cm, at Conference Room 4, the Hong Kong Legislative Council. Commissioned by the Hong Kong Legislative Council. Courtesy the artist.

Installation view of *Past Continuous Tense*, 2011, charcoal, image-transfer, and acrylic on plywood, 244×1,560×5 cm, at "Planting Time," Tang Contemporary Art, Hong Kong, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Tang Contemporary Art, Hong Kong/Beijing/Bangkok.

You often collage scenes from different points of time. For example, your plywood-based multimedia work that was hung in a conference room in the Legislative Council building before it was damaged on July 1, 2019, during the pro-democracy protests, depicts a landscape you called *Centuries of Hong Kong* (2011). In *Past Continuous Tense* (2011), a 16-meter-wide mural of trees taken from various traditional East Asian paintings, you amalgamated different cultures. Why employ collage in this way?

With collage, there is a freedom to create new associations. This freedom is what Hong Kong has afforded me. I learned this when I was a student of fine art at CUHK [Chinese University of Hong Kong]. If you study overseas, you will likely focus on painting, sculpture, or another medium for three or four years. This is very different from Hong Kong's curriculum, which collapses 5,000 years of Chinese art and another 5,000 years of Western art into three years of study, so it isn't really in-depth. At first, I questioned this way of learning and envied students who were encouraged to specialize. I didn't realize range was an advantage until it occurred to me that CUHK allowed me to pick things that I like from diverse topics. This has greatly influenced my practice.

My professors often reminded me that our generation faced less nationalistic pressure than our predecessors, who felt they had to preserve and promote traditional Chinese culture. I choose my media according to my own preference instead of my nationality. I often stress that I work with Chinese painting styles not because I'm Chinese but because I think the perspectives and layering in Chinese landscapes are thought provoking. My understanding is that it's not about whether Western art or Chinese art is better; it's about choosing the cultures you strongly resonate with.

While your works are never about specific events and don't treat time in a linear fashion, history is clearly important to you. Why?

History isn't only about the past. It's about the present and future. How you view the world now and how you perceive the future will inevitably influence how you interpret history. This is, to me, the most important factor when referencing history in artworks. The reference stems from your current position. For instance, I almost failed all my Chinese painting, Chinese calligraphy, and Chinese art history courses during my undergraduate studies, but later I realized that these traditional works exude a sense of tranquility and distance—one can compose a landscape from the lens of an observer to tell a story—which is interesting to me. I decided to reference these materials, despite having found them boring years ago, and re-read this section of art history to investigate how people viewed this genre of art in the past. But of course, the starting point is how I see it now. History departs from the present and influences the future.

The scale of elements in your works ranges quite dramatically—a single piece could contain both miniscule and large elements. This is seen in *Forming the landscape* (2018), where a surgeon looms over ostensibly ailing hills. Meanwhile, three pin-size figurines appear to be struggling to hold on to the painting—the plywood surface of which has been carved into—with flying shrapnel headed in their direction. What led you to experiment with scale in this way?

Scale is one way to create a world full of layers. Chinese paintings, with their flattened perspectives, have the same logic. My manipulation of scale stems from two factors: first, if you read books related to Chinese paintings, especially the newly published ones, they take extremely detailed shots of the works—you might be surprised at the extent to which they're able to enlarge even the tiniest details, thanks to technology. I was influenced by this. Aside from that, model building has long been my hobby. As a child, I used to build tiny models in the cabinets of my home. This inadvertently trained my sensitivity to scale.

Forming the landscape (detail), 2018, charcoal, ink, acrylic, and scale-model on plywood, 64.5×88.5×7.4cm. Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.

That work, *Forming the landscape*, was shown at your 2019 solo exhibition "Saan Dung Gei" at Hong Kong's Blindspot Gallery. The show was based on your train journey from Hong Kong to Beijing, during which, while in a tunnel, you felt a wave of anxiety. Do you regard creating art as a means to process anxiety?

I don't treat art as therapy to release my negative energy, but not doing it would make me uncomfortable. It's more that when I see something interesting, there's this drive within me to create something out of it. By manifesting your abstract thoughts as objects, other people may establish a connection with it. Why is this important? I think it's because humans, in the grand scheme of things, are just passing travelers. Our lives are points in a much longer process. As people look back, they may come up with different thoughts that build on your idea. In this way, ideas can go beyond our bodily constraints.

In 2019, you presented a mixed-media installation with author Dung Kai-cheung at the Hong Kong Art Centre. The work features a bear who roars into an overpowering gust of wind. On your website you captioned a photo of the work, "我竭力呼叫 白髮變黑" [I yelled until my hair turned black]. I understood the work to be about resistance. What does "resistance" mean to you today?

It has been increasingly challenging to keep a distance to societal affairs since 2019. There were instances when I thought I could no longer hold back and had to shout. That was why I created this work, featuring a shouting polar bear whose fur color turns from white to black. This work is an anomaly in my practice in that it overrides the distance that I normally value.

There are three works—this work, *Image-coated*, and *The Great Escape*—that coincidentally document the notable transformation of Hong Kong society between 2019–20, as well as the emotional baggage that comes with this sociopolitical upheaval. The conditions surrounding the works are not within my power. For example, I wanted to add raindrops to the windows flanking the central video projection of *Image-coated* but had no success for four months. The date that I managed to add the raindrops was May 28, when China's National People's Congress passed the resolution for the National Security Law. It was a Thursday—the only day that the museum is closed to the public. I had no say over the date. What I'm saying is, very often we're already caught within the wave of history without knowing it.

Installation view of *The History of the Adventures of Vivi and Vera – tremendous changes between roof and house, first instalment in the History of Fetish trilogy*, 2019, charcoal, acrylics, found objects, prints, and book on plywood, dimensions variable, at "Beyond the Roof – A Home Animated in Words," Hong Kong Art Centre, 2019. Courtesy the artist.