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"Ko Sin Tung – Stillness in Movement"



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Alexandra Seno interviews Hong Kong artist Ko Sin Tung, who shares her thoughts on a society obsessed with definition and the ever-changing landscape of her native city.



INTERVIEW: Alexandra Seno

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist



Six years ago, Hong Kong artist Ko Sin Tung undertook a residency at the Kunstenhuset Messen in the small town of Ålvik in Norway. What drew her to the town was the search for the unfamiliar, a willingness to explore something radically different from her native Hong Kong. She ended up spending her two months there, completely immersed in the Scandinavian landscape and nature.

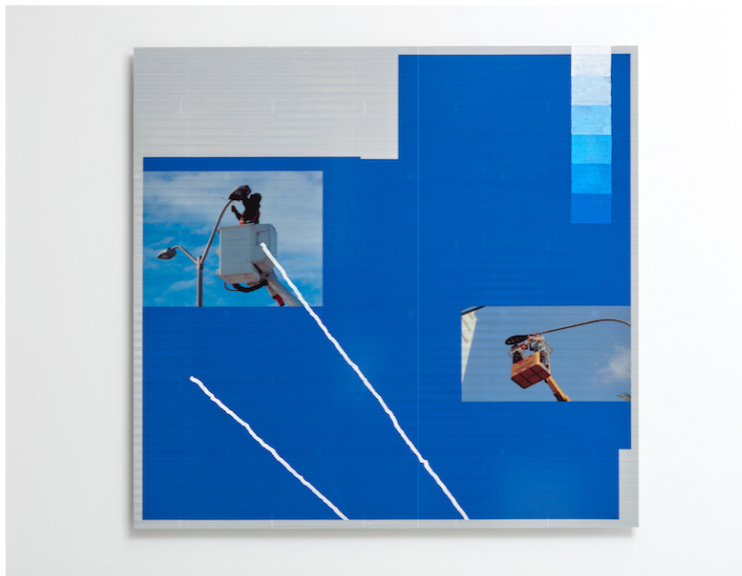
"I enjoyed it so much," she said, "but then I realised I couldn't work in Norway because I couldn't find any inspiration. Nature was all around me, and it was so beautiful, but I couldn't do any art as everything was already perfect. There were no big problems. Living in a small town, you simply enjoy your life," she paused. "The city is more interesting to me."

The highest mission of an artist is to balance our perception of how things seem to be. Certain artists have the capacity to show us the epic element that exists in stillness, while others, conversely, can bring stillness to chaos. Ko Sin Tung belongs to the second category, which is unsurprising since she developed her artistic superpowers in the swirling, fast-paced city of Hong Kong and graduated in Fine Arts at the Chinese University there.

She always starts by taking casual snapshots and looking for found images. "My ideas always come from my environment," the artist explains. "I have lived in Hong Kong for a long time and I still think there are a lot of things for me to discover and explore there." The artistic visions of Ko Sin Tung are both urban and intimate at the same time. Generally, she works on coloured-in wallpaper, patched walls and blurred images, using the technique that best suits the idea.

Over the last couple of years, construction sites have caught the artist attention. She sees these sites as both visually impressive and fascinating. "When I am on the bus and I see the public housing being built all around the city, the massive West Kowloon construction area, I'm fascinated. I think the nature of it is really interesting. Construction sites are closed off from Hong Kong. It seems that once you create the boundary of a construction area, then you can destroy everything there and dig the ground really deep. People tolerate it because they know that things will be completed and they will be better off after the work is finished. That enticing promise makes you accept that the situation is temporary. Hong Kong is beautiful and peaceful, but only on the surface, and I see all of its inner problems reverberate in these construction areas. These are the interesting things that I like to work with."

Her interest in construction sites started in 2017 with her artwork called, *One day, workers replaced the traditional high-pressure sodium streetlights with the new LED ones*, which used enamel paint, acrylic and digital print on aluminium plates.



Ko Sin Tung 高倩彤, *One day, workers replaced the traditional high pressure, sodium street lights with the new LED ones*, 2017. Enamel paint, acrylic, digital print on aluminium plates, 88 cm x 99 cm, 127.5 cm x 119.5 cm, 110 cm x 105 cm, 103 cm x 71.5 cm.

What is the story behind this work?

The subject of the work is the replacement of the old style of streetlights with LED lighting. The image actually came from a news report, which was talking about how Hong Kong, China, and the US have this trend of changing the streetlights from the old high-pressure lights to new LEDs. They claim that LED technology is mature enough now and can be less expensive. As I started reading more of the stories, I began collecting the images that I found from different news stories.

What is it about these news stories that attracted you to make the artwork?

What attracted me, firstly, was the visual element. You can usually see the machine they use to rise up, with the sky in the background, which is quite an abstract image. Also, it is interesting that by changing the streetlights to LED, they are giving the city environment a different atmosphere. The old style streetlights are yellow but the LED is so different. They say LED helps people to see more clearly, This is true but some of the research says that it has more power, so the light is stronger and can stop people getting to sleep if they are too close to it. There are pros and cons.

What I wanted to talk about is the attitude that people have nowadays, and how they rely heavily on new technology. The work is more about a clear aesthetic of what I feel people want most of all. They want to see more things, even at night. It is a metaphor.

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Installation View of Ko Sin Tung and Wang Wei's exhibition *Muse For A Mimeticist* at Edouard Malingue Gallery Shanghai

There is the subject matter and there is also your interest in materials. Can you describe the process of how you made this particular work?

I knew there was a road sign company in the Fo Tan area, and I always wondered whether I could give them an image which they could make into my own road sign, so that's what I tried to do. I gave them the image as a base for the work. There are three layers to manufacture these signs. The first is a white reflective layer, the second a semi-transparent image that they print digitally, and then a protective, transparent layer.

They made the base of the work, and I painted on the surface, which was quite abstract. You can see there are two parallel white lines, which were taken from the image of the machine rising up. It has the angle of how they touch the sky. I wanted to create an effect that would remind the public of the stock market, with everything rising up. There is another part that goes from white to blue in a gradient, which represents the lights getting brighter. This work was exhibited last year with Wang Wei in Shanghai [*Muse for a Mimeticist* 24.06.17 – 20.08.17, Edouard Malingue Gallery, Shanghai].

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This and other work you have produced on signage has a very Hong Kong aesthetic to me. Do you think the location where you exhibit your work, such as China, changes the work?



The readings sometimes change when you are in a different location, which is normal. However, you can find problems in other parts of the world that are similar to those in Hong Kong, if not the same, especially in China. The buildings might look different, but global issues are at the core of it all.



Installation View of Ko Sin Tung and Wang Wei's exhibition *Muse For A Mimeticist* at Edouard Malingue Gallery Shanghai

Besides your 2D works, you also do video works. What is the relationship between them?

I see them as a mix. I am not sure about the relationship because I don't really identify these works by the medium I use. Instead, I identify them more by the concept or by the issue I am talking about. I've started to realise in the last few years that there may be two main paths in my art practice. One is more about the images that I like to work on, where you can see the pixilation of the images, and the other is more realistic. I paint on some of the work. On the other path, I deal with my observations on construction sites. So I started to think about how these paths are splitting in two directions, but I'm still trying to find a link, something that joins them together. It is something I am not quite sure about at the moment, but I am working on it.

Thank you very much for donating the piece to support Asia Art Archive. As an artist, why is your relationship to AAA and why do you support us?

Asia Art Archive is a really special organisation in its mission and contribution to the art development. As a young artist, I don't have any really direct benefit from it right now. But it is building an archive, and recording history, which is important. So, it is really worth my support.

About the artist

Ko Sin Tung is a highly promising, emerging Hong Kong artist, graduated from the Department of Fine Arts at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. In 2012 she completed a residency at the Kunstnarhuset Messen, Ålvik, Norway. She has previously been exhibited at the 8th Vladivostok Biennale of Visual Arts, Vladivostok, Asia Society Hong Kong Center and Para Site, Hong Kong, amongst other locations. Ko Sin Tung has also been awarded multiple awards including Project Grant (Emerging Artists Scheme) from the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (2014), the Pure Art Foundation Grant 2013-2014 (2014) and Jury's Special Prize of Huayu Youth Award (2016). Ko lives and works in Hong Kong.

Alexandra Seno is Head of Development at Asia Art Archive. An art critic for RTHK Radio 4, she has served on the executive committee of the Oriental Ceramics Society of Hong Kong, the board of Para Site Art Space, and as adviser to non-profits Spring Workshop in Hong Kong and Calle Wright in Manila. She has written about culture and the economics of culture for publications including the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, Newsweek Magazine, The Art Newspaper and Architectural Record Magazine.