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# Kwan Sheung Chi's "Not retrospective"

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Kwan Sheung Chi, *Handover*, 2023. Three-channel video (black and white, silent), 11:16 minutes. Installation view at Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong, 2024. Image courtesy of the artist and Kiang Malingue.

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**Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong**

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Everything about Kwan Sheung Chi feels elusive, even when he's telling you about himself. Take the artist's press release for "Not retrospective," which includes "less [sic] than 40 recent and previous sculptures, photographs and videos." A biography cites two solo shows Kwan staged in 2002, one year before he graduated from the Chinese University of Hong Kong and one year after his joint funeral-as-exhibition with artist Chow Chun Fai, when they burned their art. The first is "A Retrospective of Kwan Sheung Chi" at Hong Kong's 1a space, for which there is scant online record. The second is "Kwan Sheung Chi Touring Series Exhibitions," described as ten "major" exhibitions at different Hong Kong venues that apparently involved Kwan photographing himself in each site.

Kwan has long resisted the market's tendency to commodify artists by leaning into commodification as a systematic process that resonates with the conceptual grid—an approach that couches critical gestures within layers of satire. Divided into three sections, “Not retrospective” stages this sleight of hand. It begins with a small white cube crudely built from wooden boards like a stage set, where a trio of pennant banners strung up at the entrance made from dust jackets for Marx's *Capital* (*Karl Marx's Capital*, 2015), introduces a salon-style installation of works. A perfume bottle contains the artist's sweat (*L'art s'évapore* (formerly known as “*Eau dévoilé*”) (2012/23), and a video of Kwan cutting off his little toe from a black-and-white photograph of his foot, *The fifth toe* (or “*You can have what's left of mine.*”) (2015/23), is shown alongside a cement cast of that digit poised on a display stand, ready for sale. Framed on the wall and in a vitrine are iterations from the series “‘I am Artist' Exercise Book” (2003–04). The titular phrase is repeatedly handwritten across the pages of school notebooks in English and Chinese, as if to equate the unrelenting monotony of indoctrination with the formulaic repetition of commercial branding.

Every object looks back. The bronze sculpture of a horse with a metal fence for a torso, *Iron Horse — After Antonio Mak* (2008/20), references a sculpture by artist Antonio Mak, for whom Kwan created an installation at the Hong Kong Museum of Art in 2008. He lined up 100 metal fences used by the Hong Kong police, known in Cantonese as “iron horses,” into rows. One photograph, dated 2013, of someone taking a piece of white paper from a stack, feels prophetic in the aftermath of the anti-lockdown movement that erupted in China in 2022, when people raised blank pages as protest signs to bypass—and make a point about—censorship. *Untitled (White)* (2013/23), represented here by a framed sixth of one of the work's original sheets, responded to the removal of Kwan's works from a group show organised for the Hugo Boss Award in 2013, which he won, at the Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai. These included the video *A Flags-Raising-Lowering Ceremony at my home's clothes drying rack* (2007), showing the flags of China, the United Kingdom, and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region hung from a clothes line extending from an apartment window, and *Hong Kong* (2012), a stack of giveaway posters of a Hong Kong map with the text “Free” affixed to the plinth.

These layers amplify the irony in “Not retrospective,” which one work in particular distills. Hung next to the doorway leading to the second room is a sheet of ruled paper on which the two lines comprising this composition's title alternate: *I Will Not Make Any Political Art. I Did Not Make Any Political Art* (2020). Next door, the video of those lines being written is shown on one of the screens installed on either side of a desk that faces a large projection wall. A selection of Kwan's video works cycle through this three-channel space, including the black-and-white *Handover* (2023), where the hands of Kwan, his wife and frequent collaborator, artist Wong Wai Yin, and their son, pass a glass made of ice between them until it melts. The video's title, while faithfully representing its content, is an unmistakable reference to the 1997 Handover, when Hong Kong was transferred from British to Chinese rule: another kind of dissolution.

Kwan's proclivity for the double entendre reaches its climax in the video, *In Defence of Kwan Sheung Chi* (2023). Wearing a blue suit, Wong Wai Yin delivers a speech at a blue lectern in a blue room. In the manner of a bureaucratic spokesperson making a veiled threat, she praises Kwan's artistic merits and defends his right “to show his talent,” in spite of “malicious” attacks from outside that “undermine [...] the prosperity and stability of Hong Kong in the name of the so-called ‘freedom of speech.’” Made of painted cardboard, that same lectern appears in this show's final room, an empty blue-carpeted space enclosed by blue curtains. It hangs under a spotlight like an invitation for someone—anyone—to speak.