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“Kwan Sheung Chi”

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REVIEWS HONG KONG

# Kwan Sheung Chi

Kiang Malingue 馬凌畫廊 | Hong Kong

By Nuit Banai 🌐



View of “Kwan Sheung Chi: Not retrospective,” 2023–24. Photo: Samson Wong Pak Hang.

Given the abundant references to Marcel Duchamp and Marcel Broodthaers in his work, Kwan Sheung Chi would probably not mind being introduced as their progeny. “Not retrospective,” a collection of pieces made between 2003 and 2023, showed how Kwan has adapted the two artists’ renegotiation of the commodity status of art and artist over the past century to the context of contemporary Hong Kong.

A selection of Kwan’s works from over the past two decades was displayed in a specially constructed white cube in the gallery. Meanwhile, *Karl Marx’s Capital*, 2015, a festoon made of the dust jackets of secondhand copies of the book, was strung across the room, adding a festive note to the show’s marking of exploitation’s eternal returns. Underlining the value of performative labor in the series “I am artist’ Exercise Book,” 2003–2004, Kwan repeats the affirmation in English and Chinese in exercise books used by schoolchildren to practice penmanship. Alongside were tools for the fabrication of artistic personae and attitude, among them *Correction pen corrected with its own content*, 2023/2012, a bottle of correction fluid lathered in the same white liquid and dated backward as if to affirm the show’s title, and *Marlboro*, 2015, a whetstone for sharpening calligraphy nibs in the shape of a cigarette box with the brand’s logo. *L’art s’évapore (formerly known as ‘Eau dévoilé’)*, 2023/2012, a half-filled perfume bottle and atomizer whose contents were identified on the checklist as “artist’s perspiration,” was similarly dated from the perspective of the present.

A second room resembling an interrogation chamber screened a loop of five videos, suggesting that Kwan's practice is more than a catalogue of postures and parodies on the intersection between art and economics. Alluding to Hong Kong's evolving identity since the end of British rule in 1997, the three-channel *Handover*, 2023, shows a merry-go-round of three hands relaying from one to another a drinking glass made of ice and filled with water, until it completely melts. *Resistance is Futile. You will be assimilated.*, 2023, meditates on autocratic rule by transforming the warning sent by the Borg (the recurring antagonists in *Star Trek*) into a teleprompter message so embellished by diversely accented speakers that it eventually begins to seem like a garbled sequence of non sequiturs. Playing simultaneously on facing monitors, *I Will Not Make Any Political Art. I Did Not Make Any Political Art*, 2020, and *Three Black Pens*, 2023, explore the results of creativity's absorption within a prescribed political realm. In the former, a single hand carefully transcribes the titular phrases in an exercise book as a halting voice dictates them aloud, while, in the latter, three hands holding Sharpie pens attempt to cover the other pens with black ink with varying degrees of success. Finally, *In Defense of Kwan Sheung Chi*, 2023, imagines a time when artist and politician will be one and the same: It features a Mandarin-speaking spokesperson played by Kwan's wife, artist Doris Wong Wai Yin, standing at an official podium and delivering a stirring bureaucratse-inflected vindication of Kwan's practice.

In the dimly lit back room, the exhibition's choreography from white cube to black box concluded with *Starship the Defiant*, 2023, consisting of the podium from *In Defense of Kwan Sheung Chi* suspended in midair and illuminated with a spotlight as a ready-to-use cardboard prop. Kwan's works capitalize on the contingency of spoken, written, and visual language to counter the proposition of a single unchanging truth and to index the manufactured dimension of all discourses. It is through the "creative act," as Duchamp called it, that the public is left to interpret what they have seen, read, and heard as a social product of our time.