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"In Hong Kong, What is Home? Ellen Pau Tackles the Question In Her 30-Year Retrospective"

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On eve of World War II, the British military built the Gin Drinkers Line, a network of bunkers, batteries, trenches and redoubts across the Kowloon hills. They were meant to protect Hong Kong from a **land invasion by the Japanese**, but when Japan finally invaded in December 1941, the line fell two days after the battle began.

But while the Gin Drinkers Line ended in failure, its legacy continues to be felt in a breed of monkeys particular to the city. "When the British discovered that the area was populated with poison nut — a type of toxic tree — "they imported a bunch of monkeys to gobble them all up," says artist Ellen Pau. "These monkeys cross-bred with some local monkeys, and their ancestors are still there."



Like many other nods to Hong Kong's history and culture, this peculiar anecdote found its way into *What About Home Affairs?*, a 30-year retrospective of Pau's career. One of the exhibition's pieces is "I Don't Have Time to Deal with Fear," an augmented reality (AR) work that transports viewers to the Gin Drinkers Line. A few figurines dangle from the ceiling in front of an AR map. Appearing like battleships from afar, a closer look reveals them to be three-dimensional depictions of the Hong Kong skyline. This alludes to another World War II tale. "On December 7, 1941, the British navy deliberately tanked their HMS Tamar to prevent it from falling into the Japanese's hands," says Pau. "Hong Kong's deep seas is chock full of history."

Pau was born into a family of medical workers; her father was the assistant head of Grantham Hospital and her mother was a midwife. She seem destined for one of two paths: either to fully embrace the medical professional – or to vehemently reject it. She opted for the former, but rather than blindly following in her parents' footsteps, she elected to read radiology at the Hong Kong Polytechnic.

"I've always liked physics. It allows me to understand the world in a more philosophical way," she says. "Quantum physics says that there is nothing permanent in this world. Everything is a possibility and that the reality as we know it isn't real." She makes a sweeping motion of the exhibition space. "It made me realise that all of this is in our heads," she says, tapping her head. "If the world is fake, then I can only know what's here."

A career in radiography provided stability, but it proved insufficient to sate Pau's relentless curiosity. It was a stimulating time to be in Hong Kong. During the early 1980s, the city's film industry was on the cusp of a commercial and artistic explosion. In 1982, Danny Yung founded **Zuni Icosahedron**, a pioneering experimental theatre company. The birth of the 8mm video format in 1984 also meant that artists and filmmakers no longer had to lug around a 20-pound recorder to make videos.

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That was the year that Pau joined the Phoenix Cine Club, a society of film lovers run by artist May Fung. "There were discussions going on about the difference between the language used in film and video art," says Pau. "I've always been curious about new things, so I started making videos." She bought her first Sony 8mm Handycam at a Tsim Sha Tsui electronics shop that catered to tourists – "it was so new, it wasn't available in Hong Kong yet!"

Pau finished her first video art piece, *Glove*, a three-minute video about desire, in 1985. The next year, the Phoenix Cine Club folded and Pau banded together with Fung and two other friends, Wong Chi-fai and Comyn Mo, to form Videotage. "There were probably only eight video artists in Hong Kong at that time," she says with a giggle. They borrowed space in Zuni's Happy Valley headquarters.



But Pau still didn't consider herself an artist. Nor did the others, she says. "I had no idea what it means to be an artist," she says. "May Fung called herself a cultural worker."

Besides, she was still working her nine-to-five job as a radiographer – a job she has maintained to this day. "At one point, I thought I was schizophrenic," she says. At first, it was a struggle balancing two careers, and Pau didn't sleep very much. "Maybe three or four hours a night?" she says. "But there are times when I feel that hospital work has a calming effect on me." And these days, she has better learned how to balance the two sides of her life. "I'm getting six hours [of sleep] now. It's a record!"

Works from those early days anchor the Para Site retrospective. Curator Freya Chou brings together Pau's key works, from those early days in the mid-1980s to her most recent efforts. At the entrance, a timeline revisits Pau's repertoire, but also pinpoints some significant cultural and socio-political events of the last two decades, creating a dialogue between the two. The exhibition places as much emphasis on the moving image as much as on the way it's presented, with the dark space divided into chambers where viewers could withdraw, their senses heightened, into the video works. The power of Pau's art lies in her ability to extract from the world around her, and to use that material to strike at the core of the human experience.

In the two-screen video "Bik Lai Chu," a woman repeatedly bangs her head against a dressing room table – a frank study of how gender stereotypes and social norms imprison the female psyche and body. "Bik Lai Chu" is also a pun on a cleaning product popular in Hong Kong households.

This humour also cuts through "Expiration," in which Pau went out into the streets of London and asked passersby what their "best before dates" were. The result is by turns whimsical and touching. The artist's favourites include "before my husband's death," from an elderly woman, and "before 1966, the year that England won World Cup," from a retired football player.

Deceptively simple, the video wasn't just a sociological experiment. The idea of a "best before" date also referenced Videotage's eviction from their former site on Oil Street in 2000, and the pessimism perpetuating Hong Kong society during the post-handover days. "If you ask anyone on the street, half of them were bound to think that Hong Kong was best before 1997."

Does she think that the city has seen its best? "No, but I think Hong Kong is a city with a lot of deadlines," she says. "2047, all the elections we have. The constant need to catch up. People are on edge all the time."

This neuroticism is manifested in the visually stunning "Drained II," a video art piece that ruthlessly multiplies the shot of a female performer walking on stage and falling until she becomes a mere stick and the lot of frames resembling Hong Kong caged homes. Pau rejects the idea of art as political commentary "because we can just have a chat, face to face," she says. But sometimes, it's the most abstract works that are the most profound.

As in "Blue," a piece created after the June 4th incident in 1989, when pro-democracy demonstrators were violently cleared from Tiananmen Square, resulting in thousands of deaths. "I was creating another work, but I couldn't bring myself to complete it after June 4th, so I created 'Blue.'" In the seven-minute-long video, grainy shots of a blue blob, a smattering of fireworks, war footage, and a performing dancer, are set to a soaring soundtrack. Even in the absence of a discernible narrative, the video is saturated with a chilling sense of loss, it's increasingly hard to sit through a video art piece, much less be touched by it, in a world saturated with moving images.

Does the artist fear that social media is making people numb to images? "No, why?" she responds. "I am not putting my art on a Youtube channel. It's a completely different experience, viewing a video on computer screen and seeing it projected on a 10-metre screen."

Indeed, the artist's best works are those that evoke visceral responses from viewers, like Recycling Cinema, where the disjunction between image and sound lead the eye and body to travel in opposite directions. The 14-minute video debuted at the 2011 Venice Biennale and has been recreated in its entirety for the show.

Two years ago, Pau began working on Emergence (A work in progress), a work that pays tribute to Hong Kong's emblem, the bauhinia – more specifically known by its Latin name, *bauhinia blakeana*. Discovered by a French missionary in Pok Fu Lam during the late 19th century, the flower has played an important role in Hong Kong's horticultural and political history. It is sterile, meaning that propagation can only be carried out via artificial cultivation. When Hong Kong was handed back to China in 1997, the bauhinia was chosen as the city's emblem, but fearing that its Chinese name joeng4 zi2 ging1 (洋紫荆) might sound too western for the Chinese government, the joeng4 character (洋, literally

translating into the West or foreign) was taken out of the title in the Hong Kong Basic Law.

Enlisting the help of a Chinese laboratory to decode the DNA of the flower, Pau plans to use the result to create a sound art piece. "It has such a sad story," she says. "Nobody can figure out its history. It cannot reproduce on its own. It's controversial. I feel like I should do something for it."



Pau is ever the reserved yet persistent champion of local history and identity – which raises the question, exactly what is “home affairs” in the exhibition title? The Chinese title (當家當當家：鮑蔦倫回顧展) is equally if not more ambitious, with emphasis placed as much on the second character, gaa1 (家, meaning “home”) as on the first, dong1 (當, meaning to take responsibility). What does taking charge of a home mean?

For Pau, home traverses the personal and political, the abstract and the tangible. It is the books, jewellery, Sony 8mm recorder and unopened music albums, scattered through the exhibition. It's Bik Lai Chu, both the art piece and the household cleaning product. Home is also Videotage, an organisation that Pau helmed for three decades. All of which culminates in art, and life. “This is what living means, I suppose,” she says. “Everyone needs a purpose. You can't just eat, sleep and slowly waste away.”

*What About Home Affairs?* runs until February 17, 2019 at Para Site. [Click here](#) for more information.