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Artforum

"Reviews: Hong Kong - Ellen Pau - Parasite"

REVIEWS

South African trio Dear Ribane, which started in the museum and ended in MACAAL's interior garden. Self-proclaimed "three-dimensional humanoids," Dear Ribane's members were dressed in architectural blue outfits (made from inflatable baby pools) with blue headgear and blue face paint. They orbited around one another, combining spoken word, dance, and music to evoke a spiritual, speculative, broken ocean in need of repair and ready to explode into clouds of cosmic dust.

Outside, at the museum's entrance, is a site-specific installation, Fatiha Zemmouri's *La pesanteur et la grâce* (Gravity and Grace), 2019, made up of rocks of varying sizes, some of which seem to float above the ground. The sense of astonishment and weightlessness is impossible to ignore. Cyrus Kabiru's photographic triplet comprising *Macho Nne: Mount Kenyon Music*, *Macho Nne: Amboseli Mask*, and *Macho Nne: Another Mask*, all 2017, depicts the artist wearing sculptural spectacles made from electronic waste. His eyes obscured, he looks like an extraterrestrial. Hung close to the entrance, the work invites the viewer to consider vision itself and the layers of perception that filter what we see. Clay Apenouvon's sculpture *Film noir, cadre de survie, les passeurs* (Film Noir, Survival Frame, Smugglers), 2019, involves a large golden frame from which reams of black stretch film hang onto the floor, some of them enfolding several scaled-down figures that look like pilgrims carrying loads of rocks tied up and wrapped in sheets of gold that are, in fact, emergency blankets.

One of the most radical works in the show, by the Congolese collective KOKOKO!, is *Live Loop*, 2018, a twenty-minute video of performers moving with giant puppets through the streets of Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to the sound of hand-made percussion instruments. We witness extraordinary dancing by differently abled folk who might previously have been regarded as freaks. The occult meets the ordinary in expressions of hysteria and pleasure, moments of collective resilience, references to ancestral ritual, and a desire to disrupt with new narratives. The messy complexity of such works offers other, intangible possibilities, making "Material Insanity" a deeply moving expression of the interpenetrability of matter and spirit.

—Himali Singh Soin

HONG KONG

Ellen Pau

PARA SITE

Curated by Freya Chou, "What about Home Affairs?—A Retrospective," Ellen Pau's first retrospective in Hong Kong, surveyed eighteen major works, dating from 1987 to the present. At the entrance to the exhibition, a wall-spanning time line situated Pau's work within a spectrum of personal, cultural, and political developments. It started with the year 1982, when Pau was a Hong Kong Polytechnic University radiology student, followed by 1984, when the Sino-British Joint Declaration established Hong Kong's 1997 handover to China, and then by 1986, when Pau cofounded new media arts organization Videotage. A selection of videos augmented this chronology. They included a trailer for Barbara Wong Chun-chun's 2000 sex documentary, *Women's Private Parts* (for which Pau was cinematographer), and *Fanfare for the Common People*, 2010, a montage of computer-generated animations used by local television channels to illustrate incidents in the news—a door falling on a woman, for example—edited to Aaron Copland's 1942 wartime score, "Fanfare for the Common Man." Three of the listed installations were restaged for the exhibition. For *Recycling Cinema*, 2000/2018, Pau trained a camera on traffic moving along a Hong Kong expressway. The footage plays at changeable speeds and in various

directions, as the camera's lens tracks specific vehicles. The entire projection itself is kinetic, designed to shift back and forth horizontally across a long, curved paper screen. The work was recently shown in the blockbuster exhibition "Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World" at New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, where it was installed in the middle of a time line that progressed from the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989 to the 2008 Olympic Games.

Hong Kong's handover loomed large over the gallery, just as it had loomed over the city in the decade preceding the transition, when Pau parlayed the political tensions into affective texture for her films. The witty *TV Game of the Year*, 1989, featured Arthur Chiang, Yau Ching, May Fung, and Alice Poon mirroring the gestures made by Chinese Premier Li Peng in a televised address after the events of Tiananmen Square. English subtitles occasionally roll across the screen, emphasizing phrases such as A STABLE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT IS NEEDED FOR REFORM. The installation *Bik Lai Chu*, 1993/2018, coupled two perspectives of a seated woman slamming her head against a table on a loop; the piece is an expression of the political uncertainty in Hong Kong and the constraints of gender identity that Pau felt at the time. The staccato sound of a pile driver that punctuates the meeting of head and desk here bled into a curtained-off space nearby, where it was softened by the melody of plucked strings that accompanied the stunning 1991–92 single-channel video *Song of the Goddess*. This epic love story between female opera singers Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin, retold through edited scenes from their film *The Emperor Lee*, 1968, was inspired by Pak's lament at Yam's 1989 funeral—that she would die one hundred times to bring her back. The installation led to another room located behind a curtained door, where *She Moves*, 1988, offered a kind of afterimage of this dramatized union, with a projection showing condensation dripping down a white wall as a radio played Vera Lynn's 1939 war anthem, "We'll Meet Again."

Throughout the exhibition, Pau's attention to form emerged as a tactic to process complex perspectives. *Drained II*, 1989, applied the reductive geometries of modernist abstraction to video, filling the screen with a grid of repeated footage of a performer walking past a doorway, as another performer whirls and inevitably collapses to the floor. In *For Some Reasons*, 2003, Chinese phrases centered on formulations of "cannot"—such as "can't afford to lose" and "can't fly"—sail up and across a photographic slideshow of Berlin city scenes, whose forms stretch into a trail of colored lines as each image glides out of the frame. Pau made *For Some Reasons* in response to the ominous and ambiguous wording of Article 23, a prohibition of subversive acts against the Chinese government, whose implementation was abandoned in 2003 after citywide protests. The work highlighted Pau's ability to distill the emotional registers that layer collective experience into abstraction.

—Stephanie Bailey



Ellen Pau, *Bik Lai Chu* (detail), 1993/2018, still from the 1-minute color video component of a mixed-media installation additionally comprising a selection of the artist's personal belongings.