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“EDGE CONDITIONS: THE RESTLESS VIDEO ART OF HONG KONG’S ELLEN PAU”

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EDGE CONDITIONS: THE RESTLESS VIDEO ART OF HONG KONG’S ELLEN PAU

On four decades of moving-image experiments at the margins of empire

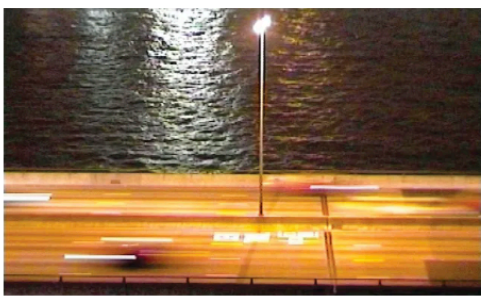
By Pauline J. Yao



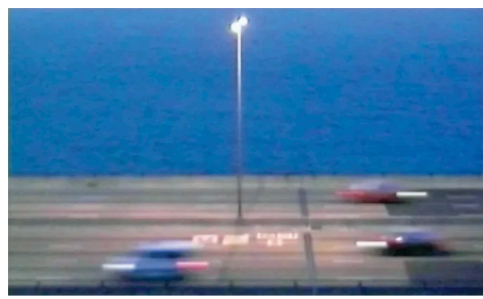
Ellen Pau, *The Shape of Light*, 2022, digital animation, color, silent, 14 minutes. Installation view, M+ Facade, Hong Kong.

HONG KONG IS AN IMPOSSIBLE CITY. Its tallest skyscrapers sit meters away from the sea, and a system of elevated moving walkways ferries pedestrians uphill and downhill, between office towers. In one of the most densely populated urban centers in the world, space is at a premium, and everything gets pushed to the edge. This includes multilane expressways where cars speed alongside, and in some cases above, the water.

One such stretch on Hong Kong Island, known as the Island Eastern Corridor, features prominently in [Ellen Pau’s](#) video installation *Recycling Cinema*, 1999–2000. Pau trained her camera on the roadway and zoomed in tight enough that all we see is a belt of concrete and the expanse of the sea above. A solitary lamppost bisects the scene. As the camera pans methodically right and left, it locks in on vehicles speeding east and then west, in a manner suggestive of surveillance. The framing captures the intensity of the city but also its evasiveness—these cars are neither here nor there but on their way somewhere else, underscoring Hong Kong’s historical identity as a transit hub, an entrepôt, a place intended for people to pass through, not to stay in.



Ellen Pau, *Recycling Cinema*, 1999/2018, digital video installation, color, sound, 14 minutes 16 seconds.



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Recycling Cinema was first exhibited at the inaugural Hong Kong pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2001. Displayed on a curved paper screen suspended from the ceiling, the installation employed a projector that pivoted nearly 180 degrees: As the camera in the video panned to the right, the projector would move left, and vice versa. This asynchrony was designed to leave viewers in a disoriented state of expectation. Pau was toying with the science of human perception and the emotional response to repeated episodes of anticipation and disappointment, two prevailing sentiments of the post-handover period—the years immediately following Hong Kong’s 1997 return to Chinese sovereignty after over 150 years of British rule. In Pau’s work, a sense of futuristic hypermobility and speed is tinged with melancholy, as if simply to ask: Where are we headed?

These questions have been haunting Hong Kong for over forty years, about as long as Pau has been making art. Pau was born and raised on Hong Kong Island, and her trajectory as a video artist overlaps with a dramatic arc of change for the city: from manufacturing hub to financial powerhouse to highly integrated yet politically polarized Special Autonomous Region of China. Pau’s videos, operating as both personal diaries and as layered social commentaries, reflect a territorial condition mired in uncertainty. The vacillating movements of *Recycling Cinema* feel especially apt here, with the road it depicts symbolizing the status of Hong Kong itself: once seen as a buffer between China and the West, now sitting precariously on the edge.



Ellen Pau, *Glove*, 1984, Super 8 converted to video, color, silent, 3 minutes 17 seconds.



Ellen Pau, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, 1989, video, color, sound, 4 minutes 16 seconds.

Today Pau is one of the most recognizable names in video art in Asia. Committed to the medium from the outset of her artistic practice, she makes work characterized by an expressionistic sensibility, combining indeterminate imagery with layered visual effects, textured sound with sonic distortion. In 1970, as a child, she had a formative encounter with the visionary displays at the Osaka World Expo, to which she traces her fascination with creative applications of new-media technologies. Yet she never studied video formally. Perhaps influenced by her parents, who both worked in the medical field, Pau pursued an education in the sciences, receiving her degree in radiography from Hong Kong Polytechnic in 1982. Soon after, she landed a full-time job as a radiographer at Queen Mary Hospital, a position she held until her retirement in 2021. Unlike many of her peers, Pau decided to maintain a professional day job while pursuing her artistic practice. Unburdened by the ambition to make art her career, she saw it as an outlet for experimentation, for surfacing and testing ideas.

Pau came of age as an artist during the 1980s, the so-called Golden Age of Hong Kong, when the city's commercial film industry was at its peak, and Cantonese pop music and television programs dominated Asian markets. The period was also marked by rapid economic growth, solidifying the city's reputation as a financial hub and a consumer's paradise. Yet looming over the era was the specter of the 1984 Sino-British Declaration, which sealed Hong Kong's fate as a future territory of China. Sandwiched between two hegemonic powers and facing an uncertain future, an emerging generation of artists, writers, and designers began exploring new areas of subjectivity. While an old guard of painters, mostly trained in Chinese ink painting, still held sway at the city's art institutions, this younger generation, inspired in part by developments abroad, found outlets in other disciplines, such as performance, theater, design, experimental cinema, and installation—basically anything that was outside the commercial mainstream or not readily categorized as “fine art.”



Ellen Pau (seated on floor) and Danny Yung in the Zuni Icosahedron offices, Hong Kong, ca. 1980s.

During Pau's student years she began attending screenings at the Phoenix Cine Club, a cinephile club founded in 1973 (one of several such organizations that existed in the city from the '50s on). She also became involved with Zuni Icosahedron, an experimental theater group established in Hong Kong in 1982. Yet even with the blossoming of the city's interdisciplinary, intermedia circles, video was often regarded with skepticism, seen as too closely aligned with broadcast television and consumer equipment to be considered a fully artistic medium.

Pau bought her first video camera in the mid-'80s. When the Phoenix Cine Club folded in 1986, she and three friends—May Fung, Comyn Mo, and Wong Chi-fai—cofounded Videotage, Hong Kong's first video-focused arts collective. Providing documentation of Zuni Icosahedron performances in exchange for desk space, they organized screenings and pooled resources for video equipment. Up to this point, Pau had made only one short film, on Super 8, titled *Glove*, 1984, a three-minute exploration of desire and touch featuring a male protagonist peering through windows and standing in a pool while donning rubber gloves. But she soon turned to a more experimental style that embraced—and amplified—the plasticity of video. Instead of hiring actors and scouting locations in which to shoot, Pau began to repurpose the footage she and other members of Videotage shot of Zuni Icosahedron's live performances as the basis for her own creative work. This highly economical approach enabled her to foreground editing techniques and video effects, as well as color and sound mixing. For *Love in the Time of Cholera*, 1989, for instance, Pau uses early Picture-in-Picture (PiP) technology to frame clips from Zuni's 1988 *October/Decameron* stage performance, which then float, rotate, and cascade across the screen. The choreographed movements of the performers, repeated and seen from different angles, fuse with the overdubbed soundtrack of Cantopop duo Tat Ming Pair's 1988 "Forbidden Colors," a song about overcoming the social stigma of same-sex relationships, here an oblique allusion to Pau's own attempts to come to terms with her sexuality.

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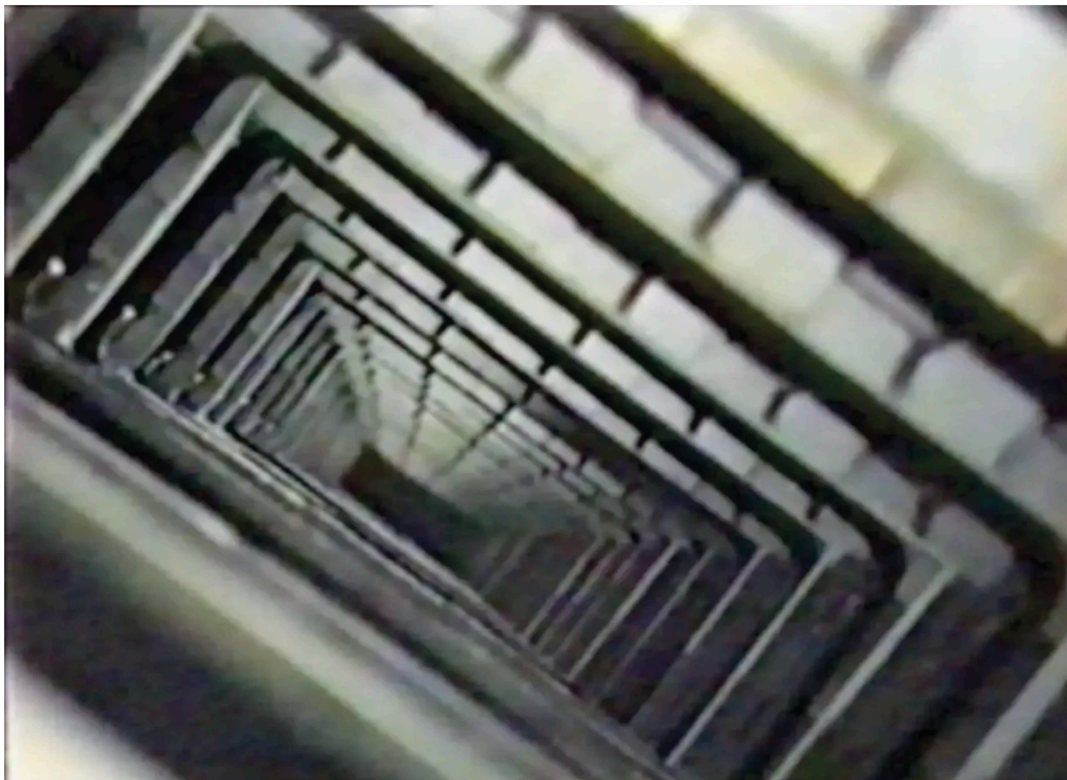
Ellen Pau, *Blue*, 1989–90, video, color, sound, 8 minutes.



Ellen Pau, *Drained II*, 1989, video, color, sound, 5 minutes 40 seconds.

Drained II, 1989, similarly works with a brief performance segment, isolating and replicating a scene in which a human figure walks past a curtained opening with a view of a dancer flailing her arms and then collapsing to the floor. Pau's treatment of the already enigmatic sequence amplifies its ominousness, the endlessly looped image multiplying to fill the screen like a wallpaper grid, augmented by a droning electronic soundscape as well as by visual effects that warp and reverse the image and overlay it on top of itself. As the frames stack and multiply, they bear a clear resemblance to the high-rise apartment blocks that dot Hong Kong's urban landscape; the subtle movements of figures in and out of each frame call to mind people pacing in front of their windows at night, as well as the endlessly circulating cars of *Recycling Cinema*.

Pau's early work cohered around a nonnarrative approach to themes of alienation and isolation, rendered through obscure and richly textured visuals. *She Moves*, 1988, for instance, one of Pau's most formally restrained works, directs the camera at a bare white wall adorned with waves of light, like reflections from the sea. After about a minute, we see two droplets of water appear simultaneously, racing down the wall at different speeds, as Vera Lynn's voice croons, "We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when." Made in response to a difficult breakup, the work alludes to two lovers parting ways, but also to Pau's memories of isolation as a severely asthmatic child in a notoriously polluted city, lying in bed staring at the wall and inventing stories to distract herself from the difficulty of breathing.



Ellen Pau *Diversion*, 1990, video, color, sound, 5 minutes 30 seconds.



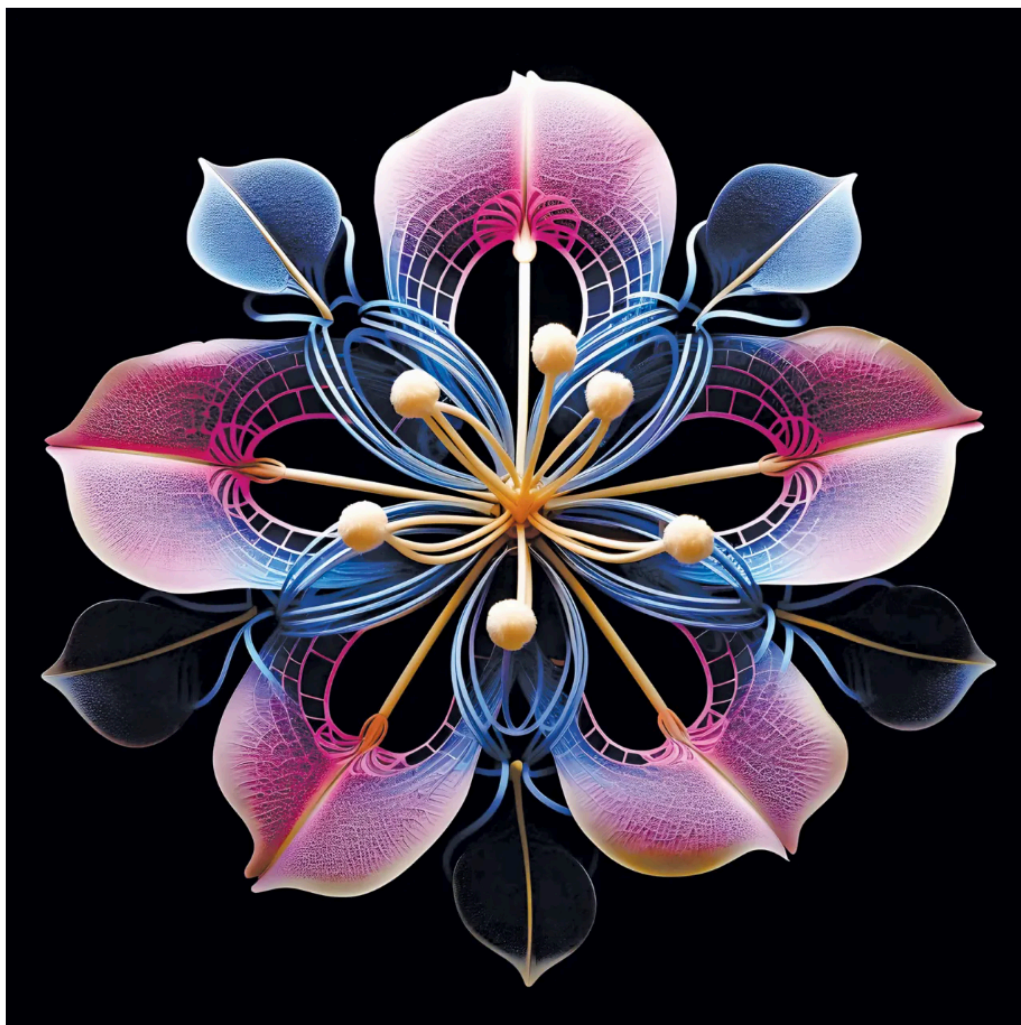
Ellen Pau *Diversion*, 1990, video, color, sound, 5 minutes 30 seconds.



Ellen Pau *Diversion*, 1990, video, color, sound, 5 minutes 30 seconds.

Other works in Pau's repertoire deal with thorny subjects via more oblique and disjointed imagery. *Blue*, 1989–90, weaves together images of violence with fleeting moments of daily life: plumes of light exploding against a dark sky (filmed from televised images of the Gulf War and World War II), the shadowy movements of a stage performer, welding sparks on a train platform. In *Blue*'s handwritten credits Pau explains that she began making the video in March 1989, stopped in May of that year, and then completed it in January 1990. The events that unfolded in Tiananmen Square during those intervening months—which reached a violent crescendo on the night of June 3, 1989—form the work's painful subtext. The pro-democracy protests in China and their suppression preoccupied nearly everyone in Hong Kong, including Pau, who was following the protests on a daily basis. When she ultimately returned, several months later, to the work she had set aside, she added new footage, recasting it as an expression of the personal and collective angst prompted by the June 4 crackdown, which irrevocably changed Hong Kongers' view of the impending handover, ushering in an era of unease and mistrust.

With *Diversion*, 1990, Pau again attempted to contend with the aftershocks of June 4 on her home city. In the five-minute work, Pau employs snippets lifted from government newsreels, most notably footage of a swimming contest held at Victoria Harbor in the 1960s showing throngs of Hong Kong citizens launching themselves into the ocean and paddling enthusiastically. These clips are intercut with staged scenes of a person slamming their body against a stone wall. For Pau, the idea to turn to historical footage came from a workshop held by German media artist Hartmut Jahn at the Goethe-Institut Hongkong in late 1989. (This same workshop yielded the groundbreaking video *She Said Why Me*, 1989, by Pau's Videotage cofounder May Fung, interspersing staged scenes of a blindfolded woman feeling her way through the urban landscape with archival footage of women in the city.) Incorporating moments from Hong Kong's past introduced new layers of self-reflexivity: Watching Pau's swimmers, it's almost impossible not to project onto the work an awareness of the wave of mass emigration in the wake of June 4, as Hong Kong residents looked for a way out before the handover. While the work's English title might indicate a sense of amusement or distraction, the Chinese title is an idiom that refers to being caught in a dilemma, like a boat that has left one shore but has not yet reached the other. Such drift was the plight of Pau and her fellow Hong Kongers.



Ellen Pau, *Speculative Generations of Flora 0*, 2023, two-channel 4K generative video, LED panel, color, sound, indefinite duration.

In 1992, Pau spent a year traveling to New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles on an Asian Cultural Council grant. The experience exposed her to the work of American video artists Gary Hill and Bill Viola, who offered influential examples of new videomaking approaches. She began in her work to more overtly articulate her politics, and express her identity, in the realms of gender and sexuality. *Song of the Goddess*, 1992, which Pau made while living in New York, is a tribute to the secret real-life romance between two female Cantonese opera stars, Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin. Stitching together clips from the 1968 film *The Emperor Lee*, in which they play a heterosexual couple (in Cantonese opera, female actors commonly perform male roles), Pau investigates the curious codes of publicity and permissibility that enabled the pair to appear as lovers on screen for a mass audience while their private relationship remained taboo. In the video installation *Bik Lai Chu*, part of a series first presented in 1993, Pau directly performs for the camera for the first time: Shown simultaneously from the back and the front on a split screen, she sits crouched under a table against which she repeatedly bumps her head as she attempts to sit up straight. Titled after the Chinese name for the cleaning product Pledge, the video simultaneously conjures the stultifying expectations of women's confinement to the domestic sphere and the Chinese government's pledge to uphold the "one country, two systems" in Hong Kong for fifty years after the handover.

When Pau returned to Hong Kong, she found a rapidly maturing art scene, with more art spaces and an established government funding body for art, culminating in the city's first official presentation at the Venice Biennale in 2001, where Pau's *Recycling Cinema* was exhibited alongside Ho Siu-kee and Leung Chi-wo. Yet just as she achieved major international recognition for her video art for the first time, Pau seemed to turn away from making it, increasingly focusing her creative energies on the development of a media-arts infrastructure in Hong Kong. In 1996, Videotage founded the annual Microwave Video Festival (now Microwave International New Media Arts Festival), the first such event in Hong Kong, with Pau taking on a leading curatorial role; Videotage itself transitioned from an artist-run collective to a nonprofit devoted to the promotion and preservation of media art, organizing exhibitions, screenings, and residencies at a dedicated space in Kowloon, where Pau served for many years as artistic director. In 2008 she received a master's degree in visual studies from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, which she had pursued while still working full-time as a radiographer.

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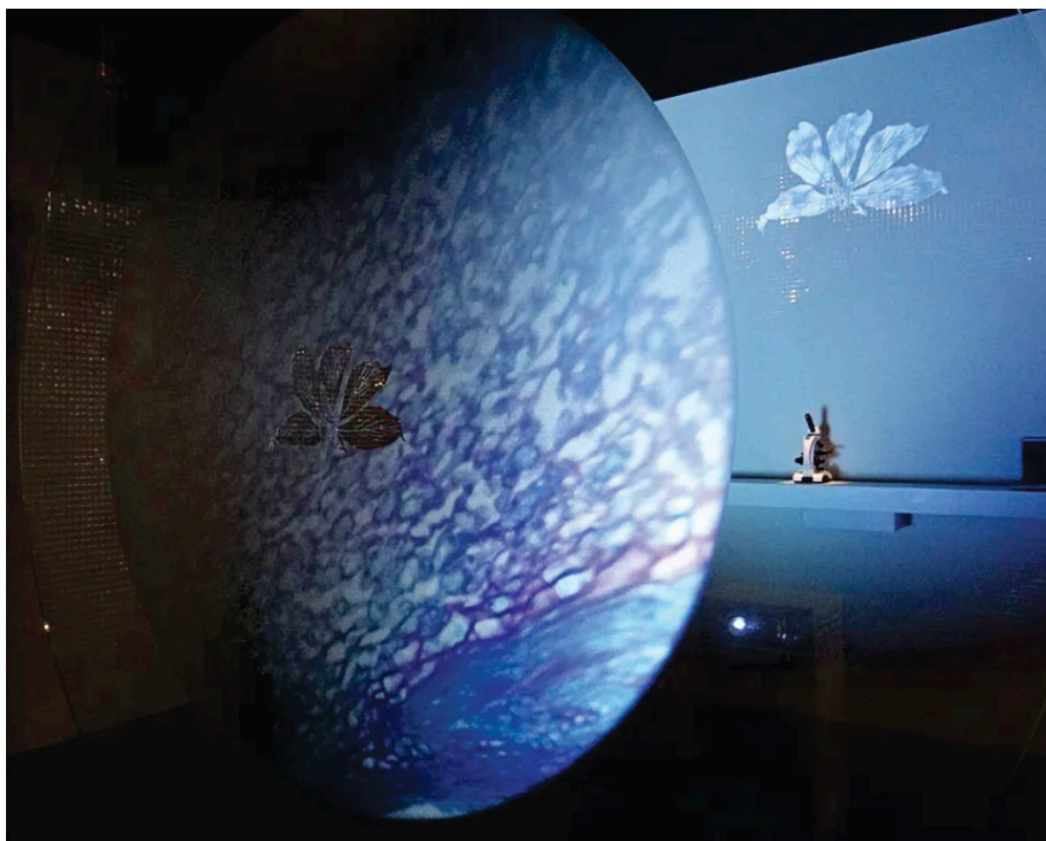
PAU'S 2018 RETROSPECTIVE "What About Home Affairs?" at the leading Hong Kong nonprofit space Para Site returned her work to the spotlight, and prompted her own process of revitalizing her practice. Her most recent body of work takes up a symbol of Hong Kong: the bauhinia flower. In 2016 Pau began collaborating with the Bauhinia Genome Project, a self-funded Hong Kong-based research team dedicated to decoding the DNA sequence of the flower of the native orchid tree known as *Bauhinia blakeana*. Commonly known as the "Hong Kong orchid," the species was first discovered in Hong Kong in 1880, and subsequently cultivated at the city's botanical gardens. It was chosen as the city's official floral emblem in 1965, but it wasn't until Hong Kong returned to Chinese sovereignty that the flower gained prominence, appearing on Hong Kong's currency and flag and in its coat of arms. Notably, *Bauhinia blakeana* is a sterile hybrid, resulting from the cross-pollination of two different plant varieties. If this is fitting for a city known for its "East meets West" cultural hybridity, the species' inability to produce seeds and reproduce on its own portends a bleak outcome for that experiment.



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.

Over the past decade, Pau has created a series of media installations about the bauhinia, exploring different methods of rendering scientific data as sound and light. The most ambitious of these, *Speculative Generations of Flora Zero*, 2023, is a generative video work based on the data from the Bauhinia Genome Project. Vividly rendered in purple and pink hues, with petals progressively expanding and morphing in color and shape, Pau's non-biological evolution of the *Bauhinia blakeana* was realized with help from a suite of AI-powered programs, including ChatGPT 3, Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, TouchDesigner, and Arena. In Pau's words, hers is a hybridization propagated from images and sounds, planted in the proverbial soil of large language models.

In the wake of the Para Site retrospective came a wave of new opportunities and invitations to work at an increasingly ambitious scale, including a commission for the M+ Facade, a 360-foot-wide harbor-facing LED screen on the side of the Hong Kong museum. Earlier this year, Pau's project, *The Shape of Light*, 2022, filled the screen with pulsing digital animations based on natural phenomena, which variously surround and support a silhouetted figure using sign language to recite the words of a famous Buddhist text known as the Heart Sutra: "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form."



Ellen Pau, *Emergence*, 2016, mixed media. Installation view, Hong Kong Heritage Discovery Center. Photo: Ellen Pau.

The work foregrounds a preoccupation with light that has shaped Pau's understanding of the medium from the outset. Light, she has always been quick to point out, constitutes the key distinction between film and video; film absorbs light, whereas video emits it. Shaping light is also what unites her video practice with her long career in medical imaging. Radiography is essentially about the manipulation of light emission, requiring careful attention to how and where light is projected onto a body in order to capture the most accurate image, a skill set Pau deploys toward more experimental and expressive ends in her video installations, which likewise hinge on the placement of the viewer's body in relation to the projected image. Her M+ commission, launched while Hong Kong was still in the throes of the pandemic, treats the museum's facade like a beacon of light, with Pau likening it to a lighthouse overlooking the sea.

In the last minute of *Recycling Cinema*, six words appear on the screen, overlaying the circuit of highway traffic: LOVE IS REAL, REAL IS LOVE. This elliptical, enigmatic sentence, with its palindromic form (not unlike that of the Heart Sutra), signals the main thrust of Pau's work, which employs structures of looping, repetition, and recursion to explore the space of ambiguity and uncertainty. It might equally encapsulate her home city of Hong Kong, aptly described by the scholar Hung Ho-fung as a city on the edge—"on the edge of great powers, on the edge of being annihilated, and on the edge of breaking free."

Pauline J. Yao is an independent curator and writer based in Hong Kong. From 2017 to 2024, she was lead curator for visual art at the city's M+ museum.

A version of this article appears in the May 2026 issue of Artforum under the title "Edge Conditions: The Art of Ellen Pau."