

14 November 2023

South China Morning Post

“Chinese artists in America explore feelings of displacement in solo exhibitions in Hong Kong”

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Lifestyle / Arts & Culture

Chinese artists in America explore feelings of displacement in solo exhibitions in Hong Kong

- A child of Hong Kong-born parents, Homer Shew thought he was painting portraits of Asian-Americans, but found some see themselves instead as Asians in America
- Huang Baoying, raised in China until she was 18 and still trying to engage with New York, paints deeply personal works to give herself ‘something to grasp’

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Published: 4:15am, 14 Nov, 2023 ▾

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Chinese-American artist Homer Shew at work. Like Shenzhen-born, New York-based artist Huang Baoying, he sees the issue of identity as being at the centre of his paintings. Both have solo exhibitions in Hong Kong, Photo: Kiang Malingue

Through its 156 years as a British colony to its status today as a special administrative region of China, Hong Kong has always been a place where identity is in flux.

That's something two ethnic Chinese artists living in America, Homer Shew and Huang Baoying, can relate to as they each hold solo exhibitions in Hong Kong.

Born and raised in Chicago, Illinois to Hong Kong-born parents who emigrated in the early 1970s, Shew says the environment of his upbringing was “not predominantly Asian”, and the anxiety he felt about being a member of an ethnic minority came and went over the years.

“At times, I felt like it was the best way to be. The race conflict in the US is often framed between black and white, and if you're neither you get to opt out of the conversation. You're not burdened by it, at least when you're young,” he says.



Although my paintings are not about Hong Kong objectively, they're almost an obscure, refracted vision of Hong Kong

Homer Shew



Years after moving to New York, Shew came across the portraiture of Alice Neel and Martin Wong, whose subjects included Asian-Americans. Deeply inspired, he saw “a thread I wanted to follow and pull on”. And so he began to paint portraits of Asians.



A highlight of “Meanwhile”, Shew's second solo exhibition in Hong Kong, is *Hua Hsu II* (2023).



"Hua Hsu II" (2023) by Homer Shew hangs in the Kiang Malingue gallery in Aberdeen. Photo: Kiang Malingue

Serving as an “update” to the artist’s first portrait of Pulitzer Prize-winning Asian-American writer Hua Hsu, the painting depicts Hsu in a Hawaiian shirt, blending in with the plants behind him as he sits casually, engaged in friendly conversation against the backdrop of a New York cityscape.

Similar second portraits in the show include *Charlie Mai II* (2023), *Brandon Blackwood II* (2023), *Simon II* (2023) and *Chantal II* (2023), which all serve to show Shew’s artistic development as well as the way their subjects have changed as they age.

“Initially, I thought I was painting people who saw each other as in a community. I’m gradually realising that some of the people I paint don’t necessarily think of themselves as Asian-American. They are just Asians who live in America,” Shew says.



"Karen and Tenn Joe" (2023), oil on canvas, by Homer Shew. He says he paints "Asians in America", not necessarily Asian-Americans. Photo: Kiang Malingue

He says the Asian-American identity is a political one, in that "you want the US to change on your behalf", whereas some people do not share this desire because they hold green cards or are students who do not attach the suffix "American" to whatever they call themselves.

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"They somewhat change the political landscape of the US simply by existing there. The focusing lens for my painting is Asians in America," Shew says.

He tells the Post that his mother, who left Hong Kong before its return to Chinese sovereignty and became a US citizen, sometimes says she is "emotionally a stateless person".

“She votes, but doesn’t feel very American; yet [with] the state of Hong Kong since 1997 [it] doesn’t feel like her birthplace, either.”

He adds: “I’m sure the people in my life who feel that [way] have had an almost subconscious influence on me. Although my paintings are not about Hong Kong objectively, they’re almost an obscure, refracted vision of Hong Kong – another way in which people live in a transitory place.”

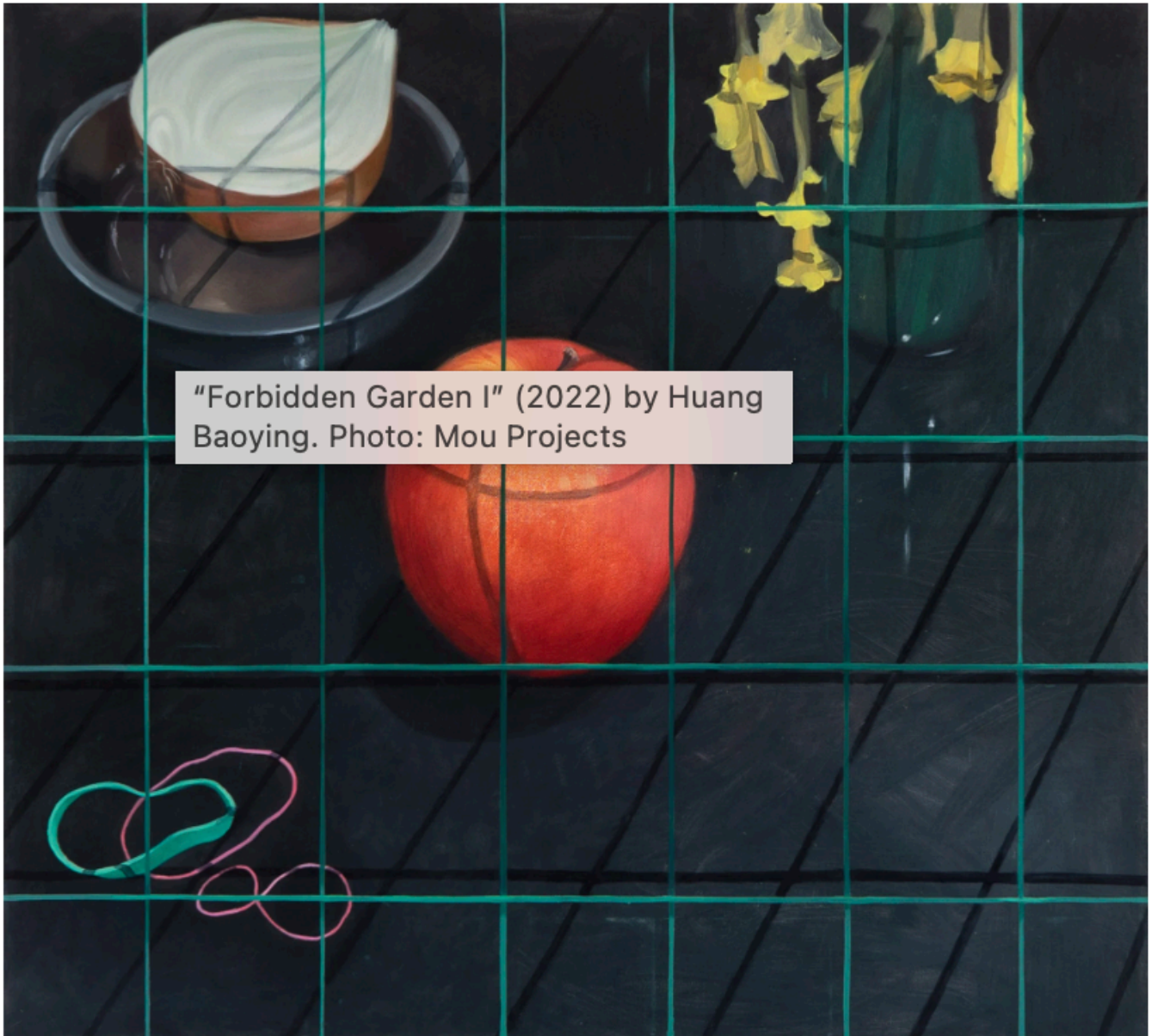


“A common exiled state of being” (2023) by Huang Baoying. Photo: Mou Projects

Huang’s work also explores feelings of displacement and being unsettled, but from another perspective.

Born and raised in Shenzhen, southern China, Huang does not fully identify as American. She and her family moved to New Jersey when she was 18, too late for her to reshape her understanding of herself, she feels.

“Even though I’ve lived in the States for nine years now, I consider myself more Chinese than American,” she says, “because I still carry a huge part of my background with me.” In her first few years living in the US, Huang often travelled to Shenzhen for extended holidays.



"Forbidden Garden I" (2022) by Huang Baoying. Photo: Mou Projects

"Forbidden Garden I" (2022) by Huang Baoying. Photo: Mou Projects

She always thought that she would move back to China after graduation. It was the Covid-19 pandemic that altered her idea of where home was.

"Those two years of the pandemic, a lot of unexpected, miserable events happened in China, in Hong Kong and in the States, which made me reflect and realise I couldn't consider China as a place to return to any more," she says.

Huang adds that often when walking in New York, where she went to university and now lives, she feels like she is abroad in a strange place. However, for the past couple of years, she has been attempting to change her mindset, to "push myself to really engage with the city".



Huang Baoying at her solo exhibition at Mou Projects in Wong Chuk Hang. She started to feel at home in New York when she bought some indoor plants, she says. Photo: Xiaomei Chen

“Back in my undergrad years, I would never get furniture that cost over US\$200, because I would have to get rid of or resell it one day. I just knew that I wouldn’t keep it.”

This nomadic lifestyle changed last year, when Huang finally got some plants for her New York apartment. Seeing her indoor plants grow day by day, she says, is very reassuring. “It’s like a mirror to see things grow inside of you.”



Huang Baoying’s “Mother Tongue” (2023), a diptych of two similar bouquets of lilies, one in her New York home, the other in her Shenzhen home. Photo: Mou Projects

The centrepiece of her first solo exhibition in Hong Kong, “Choice of Oblivion and Remembrance”, *Mother Tongue* (2023) is a diptych of two bouquets of lilies, one in Huang’s home in New York and the other in her Shenzhen home.

In portraying the subtle differences in these seemingly similar scenes, she tells a personal story. The bouquet in New York travelled with Huang from China – a nod to the artist’s life.

She finds this diptych “very metaphorical”, since she feels she carried “a part of myself from my birthplace to my current life in New York”.

“What I’ve been constantly doing in my work is to register myself in the world and set up anchor points, whether it’s my living room, my bookshelves, my plants or a flower bouquet gifted by a friend. These are the moments that are visceral to me,” Huang says.

“I’m very sensitive and aware of how I feel. By keeping my work very close to my personal life, I have something to grasp, especially when I feel unsettled in between those two worlds which are polar opposites.”

Homer Shew: “Meanwhile”. Kiang Malingue, 12/F, Blue Box Factory Building, 25 Hing Wo Street, Aberdeen. Until December 2.

Huang Baoying: “Choice of Oblivion and Remembrance”. Mou Projects, 202, The Factory, 1 Yip Fat Street, Wong Chuk Hang. Until November 25.

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CONVERSATIONS



Ashlyn Chak

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Ashlyn Chak joined the Post in late 2022, after freelancing for local and international publications and art institutions. Driven by creativity and curiosity, she finds pleasure in the arts, film, travel, and writing about the culture of it all. Ashlyn holds a BA in Media and Cultural Studies alongside an MA in Publishing from the University of the Arts London.

