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Art Radar

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"A Room With A View": 6 female photographers in Hong Kong

Posted on 30/10/2015

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Six female artists search for Hong Kong's disappearing history and memory.

"A Room With A View" brings together six female artists from Hong Kong who use photography to address the city's "culture of disappearance". The post-1997 Handover phenomenon has led to the loss of physical and abstract spaces that shaped Hong Kong's history and identity.



Wong Wo Bik, 'Lai Yuen Amusement Park', 1997, photograph, 76 x 76 cm each, total: 4 pieces. Image courtesy the artist.

The photography exhibition "**A Room With A View**" runs at the Koo Ming Kown Exhibition Gallery, Hong Kong Baptist University's Academy of Visual Arts until 8 November 2015. Curated by Carol Chow Pui Ha, the show features works by six female artists who use photography and its unique ability to capture and even reconstruct presence to re-enliven their city's subsumed narratives.

Since the Handover, forces in Hong Kong society, including globalisation and the fight for democracy, have continued to muddle many aspects of the city's history and memory. Central to Chow's curatorial vision is Professor Ackbar Abbas's idea of Hong Kong's "culture of disappearance", which, in the 18 years since the Handover in 1997, has become increasingly visible through the loss of physical spaces or abstract entities that once marked the city's history. Through their subjective photographic narratives, the artists resist this ever-worsening "culture of disappearance" by using different strategies to affirm, capture and reconstitute the city's spaces and memories.

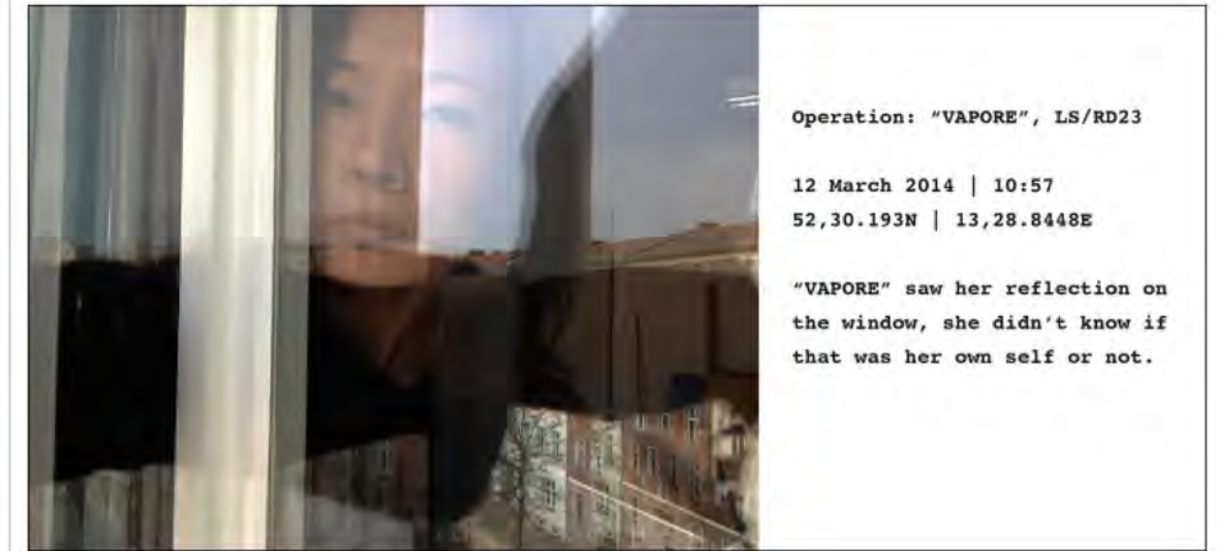


Wong Wo Bik, 'Euston Mansion', 1984 – 1985, photograph, 76 x 76 cm each, total: 4 pieces.
Image courtesy the artist.

Searching for "Her Story"

By presenting female artists' search for disappeared *kan* (間) – the character in the exhibition's title connoting both space and time – Chow interprets Hong Kong's "culture of disappearance" as a double-edged entity. While the works explore a collective Hong Kong identity caught in the interplay of past and present, they also foreground "her story" to address another layer of disappearance – that of women's perspectives and subjectivity subsumed by patriarchal historical narratives.

Art Radar explores the work of the six exhibited artists who resist Hong Kong's multi-layered "culture of disappearance".



Lam Wai Kit, 'Which Things Were (Are) Allowed and Which Were (Are) Not', 2014, photograph, 23.25 x 50 cm each, total: 4 photos. Image courtesy the artist.

1. Lam Wai Kit

Lam Wai Kit produced *Which Things Were (Are) Allowed and Which Were (Are) Not* (2014) after visiting the Stasi Museum during her residency in Berlin. By imposing Stasi surveillance tactics on herself, she produced photographs and accompanying written records – complete with code names – to document mundane moments of her daily life through a visual and grammatical "third person" that recalls the impersonal strategies of the East German secret police.

Lam's insistent self-scrutiny mirrors a police state's strategies for controlling its citizens, but her records also impart a fictional quality through their self-reflective tensions. As both the subject and imposer of surveillance, Lam examines how ideas of "allowed" and "not allowed" come to be dictated, shining a parallel light on the shrinking freedoms felt in Hong Kong today.

Passport Photos consists of 135 head shots of the artist taken around the world. These close-ups do not only record physical differences, such as changing hairstyles or the effects of aging. They also reflect subtler differences in facial expression and mood that are harder to articulate, suggesting how social and ideological frameworks can have subversive influences on individuals wherever they are.



Lau Wai, 'Here', 2012 – ongoing, photograph, various sizes, total: 5 photos. Image courtesy the artist.

2. Lau Wai

In *Here* (2012), *Album* (2014) and *18 Folgate Street* (2007), **Lau Wai** probes history and memory with a visual ambivalence that challenges “presumed discourses” both as related to her personal identity and her broader identity as a Hong Kong citizen.

In the adjacent works *Here* and *Album*, Lau juxtaposes photographs of her parents interacting with the intimate spaces of their daily life, with cropped details from her family album showing torsos and legs – even negative spaces, but no faces. This act of probing history by revisiting the spaces central to her identity – but from which she was absent – and digging through traces of the family’s recorded past allows Lau to weave a “family visual lineage” that transcends time and space.



Lau Wai, '18 Folgate Street', 2007 – ongoing, photograph, various sizes, total: 5 photos. Image courtesy the artist. © Lau Wai

18 Folgate Street is a series of photographs taken at a restored Georgian/Victorian residence in London. The anachronistic scenes of modern visitors interacting with the 19th-century space highlight the staged nature of mannequins “inhabiting” the various rooms decorated with fake historical objects. By bringing out these contradictions in her own visual “staging”, Lau presents a wholly subjective, even critical, imagery to challenge a representative space of her former coloniser country.



Law Yuk Mui, 'Yellow Portrait', photograph, 32 x 22 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

3. Law Yuk Mui

Law Yuk Mui's work *The Yellow Portrait* (2014), a black and white photograph featuring herself in a field of snow with an umbrella, is a "footnote" to the Occupy Movement in 2014. Late last year, Law travelled to Japan with her yellow umbrella to test out photographer **Eikoh Hosoe's** idea that yellow produces a higher contrast than white in a monochrome world. She found in her experiment that yellow did not come out brighter; and in an unrelated misfortune, she lost 17 photos in the series when her film broke. These broken films and lost images are presented together with the portrait in which the yellow umbrella does not stand out, as if to suggest that failed attempts at something elusive could also be powerful symbols of resistance.

On Junk Bay, King Lam Est., The Plant (1990) is a mixed-media work about Junk Bay, the former name of the artist's home Tseung Kwan O, and the plant life that thrives there. Although Junk Bay was reclaimed, plants – some even tropical species from overseas – have taken root around the old King Lam housing estate. By presenting real plant samples and cyanotypes of different species found on the estate, Law comments poetically and in a timely way on the increasingly threatened co-existence between humans and nature in a city where century-old trees could be cut down without warning.



Yvonne Lo Yuen Man, 'Hong Kong Stories', 2009 – 2015, various sizes, total: 6 photos. Image courtesy the artist.

4. Yvonne Lo Yuen Man

With "imagination is larger than life" as her philosophy, **Yvonne Lo** resists "disappearance" by fragmenting and re-assembling moments, images and spaces to reflect personal memories as well as Hong Kong's broader historical trajectory.

As a flâneur-photographer, Lo captures disparate snippets of the city's mundane and iconic spaces and reconstitutes them into compositionally rich collages where personal and socio-political history intertwine. Prominent crosses on building façades are juxtaposed with twisting tree roots outside temples in a re-imagination of the city's changes over the years – one that is both "larger" and more intimate than reality.



Wong Wo Bik, 'Lai Yuen Amusement Park', 1997, photograph, 76 x 76 cm each, total: 4 pieces. Image courtesy the artist.

5. Wong Wo Bik

Wong Wo Bik's work *Identity—Sight and Sound, Now and Then* (1980s – ongoing) presents poignant images of three representative spaces in Hong Kong: businessman Eu Tong Sen's castle-like mansion, Lai Yuen amusement park and the Central Police Station. These places were significant throughout the city's colonial history, but have now disappeared along with other traces of collective memory.

In the images, the once grand gardens of the Eu Mansion are overgrown with tall grass, and its ornate exterior and interior, which once symbolised a confluence of Chinese and foreign cultures, are demolished, leaving only dirt and dust. The colourful castles and trains in Lai Yuen are left desolate next to uprooted railings, and the

cells in the Central Police Station, accommodating visitors instead of prisoners now, lose their former authority in being “revitalised” as an arts hub. Wong captures these Foucauldian heterotopias – spaces of otherness in Hong Kong – in illusory images to salvage their memory before their imminent erasure from the city.



Joe Yiu Miu Lai, 'Gift, 2010, photograph, 91 x 137 cm each, total: 3 pieces. Image courtesy the artist.

6. Joe Yiu Miu Lai

Joe Yiu's *Gift* (2010) is a participatory work that addresses the disappearance of Hong Kong's living spaces in humorous ways. In order to highlight the negative effects of property developer hegemony on ordinary citizens, Yiu devises several “hands-on” ways of combating problems including cramped living conditions and the blockage of wind by high-rises.

In *Gift I: Invincible sea view*, a large print of a sea view from an expensive apartment is held up next to an old couple as they dine in their cramped home. In *Gift II: Mobile wind*, Yiu uses hand-held electronic fans to bring a breeze to a man living in a windless building. These absurd actions bring about positive reactions, prompting viewers to consider how Hong Kong people are impacted by consistently lowering living standards.

In *Returning Home*, Yiu searches for her childhood home in the now demolished North Point Housing Estate by digging meticulously through old photographs, letters and even the application form her family filed to get the apartment. With help from floor plans of the former estate and a crane, Yiu visits the construction site in an attempt to identify the exact location where her family once lived. This physical exercise of searching for a no longer existent space, literally in mid-air, allows the artist to reconstruct her personal history and memory subjectively, even as old buildings inevitably get replaced by ever newer developments.

Charlotte Chang