



Welcome to the Factory

They may be young and they may be struggling, but they're hardly living in garrets. **Geoffrey Han** finds out why Fo Tan is fast becoming Hong Kong's hottest artists' community

FIRST, THERE WAS Oil Street in North Point. Then, the Cattle Depot at To Kwa Wan. Now, Hong Kong's latest unofficial art community is emerging in and around an industrial complex that formerly housed the likes of roasted pork stores and woodwork shops.

"I was the first to arrive here," says Chester Chu, a painter and architect who once worked in Sir Norman Foster's local Hong Kong office. He's since been joined at the Wah Luen Industrial Centre in Fo Tan by about 60 other young, independent artists – many of whom are quickly making names for themselves.

Most are graduates of the fine arts department at the nearby Chinese University (CU) in Sha Tin, and are attracted by the huge spaces and the cheap rents – particularly important, given the paucity of government support and funding.

Chu's studio is an 800 sq ft loft with a four-metre-high ceiling, and a view of the green Fo Tan mountainside. "The advantages of having a studio in Fo Tan are the rent and the art community here," he says. "The direction of my work has been

greatly affected by other artists within the building."

The first artists began moving into the cheaper, unused spaces within Blocks A and B of the centre back in 2001. Since then, the numbers have grown and artists have spread into neighbouring complexes: the Goldfield Industrial Centre and the Yue Cheung Centre.

"I pay \$800 a month for my share of the total rent, which is shared among six people," says Lee Kit, a 2001 graduate of the CU fine arts department. His painted canvases of vernacular patterns for household use were selected for the highly acclaimed 2003 Hong Kong Art Biennial. "My studio is close to the woodshops and industrial supply stores, as well as being close to Sha Tin, which is important for me," he says.

Like many young graduates in Hong Kong, Lee has had a hard time getting enough funding to sustain himself as an independent, practising artist. And like most of the occupants of the Wah Luen Industrial Centre, he has his own workspace: a 1,200 sq ft studio he shares with

three others. He says it's the only thing that keeps him motivated.

"Hong Kong doesn't have much funding for independent artists," says Lee. "Most government funding for the arts goes to established art groups or collectives. As a result, I have a full-time job as an art tutor in an art academy in Tai Po so that I can get by. But I still come to my studio every day."

Another artist, Wai Kit Lam, says that "compared with other local artist communities like Ngau Pang or the former Oil Street studios, the artists in Fo Tan are younger, less established and receive less funding. They're forced to be more independent."

Lam is a graduate of CU as well as the fine arts programme at Goldsmiths College in London – the training ground for British artists made famous by the likes of Damien Hirst. Her studio is a 1,500 sq ft space, with two walls of windows that face the mountainside, that she shares with three painters. It's been her artistic base for the past year.

Her photographs are striking self-portraits

in the form of diptychs, taken in mirrors in China, Japan, the United Arab Emirates, England, France and Germany.

"The atmosphere in here is like being in the studio at school," Lam says. "I rent from a former professor. There is a lot of discussion and criticism between the artists who rent within this studio."

Another artist, Sara Tse, says most of those at the centre have to work at full-time jobs to earn a living. "It's hard to find time to create new work when working full-time," she says.

Tse is doing a "commuter" doctoral degree in fine arts at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. Her delicate white porcelain clothes were an Exhibition Award Winner at the 2003 Hong Kong Art Biennial.

Tse spends 20 hours a week in her own 1,200 sq ft studio, and says that the advantage of Fo Tan is that "it's near my living place and working place. I like the view of a small village in a mountain in my studio, and early mornings remind me of scenes from the Taiwanese film *The City of Sadness*."

"Life is hard when you have to make money," says Chow Chun-fai, a painter and another recent graduate of the CU fine arts programme. He supports himself by running weekly art classes for children in his shared 1,200 sq ft studio and by doing freelance work. He says he found it natural to move into the Fo Tan studios after graduation.

"There were already so many people that I knew here, and because I live in Sha Tin, it's a very convenient location. The industrial setting is also convenient. There have been a number of times when carpenters have borrowed tools and materials from me or when I have borrowed from them."

Not all the Fo Tan artists are young and starting out, though. Around the corner from the Wah Luen centre is Winnie Lo, a graduate of Hong Kong Polytechnic University who has worked in ceramics for more than 20 years and specialises in Raku firing. She runs a non-profit ceramics studio, I-Kiln, in the more upscale Goldfield Industrial Centre.

"We moved here in 1998," she says. "The location is a bit further out, which means fewer clients, but the rent is much more affordable."

I-Kiln, which has offered a ceramicist-in-residence programme since 1999, is sponsored by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council and promotes the art of ceramics in Hong Kong.

There are rumblings of change in Fo Tan, a sleepy industrial village in the countryside that is slowly awakening. With the growing number of artist communities gaining recognition in Hong Kong and spreading even further out (look out for Kwun Tong as an up-and-coming artistic hub), it seems likely that this talented new generation of artists will build something that will last.

"The advantages of having a studio in Fo Tan are the rent and the art community here. The direction of my work has been greatly affected by other artists"

Chester Chu

We are young, we are free ... (from left) Wai Kit Lam, Lee Kit, Chester Chu, Winnie Lo and Chow Chun-fai. Photos: Ann Woo