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Artists capture the changing face of Hong Kong

Our rapidly evolving city, with its unique east-west ambience, provides a rich cultural palette for its diverse pool of homegrown talent

Artists are chroniclers and interpreters of the realities around them, and this includes many contemporary Hong Kong artists. In their individual ways they are capturing the essence of life in this dynamic, evolving city and meditating on a unique culture that fuses east and west.

During a stroll in search of homegrown artistic talents, we dropped by at Grotto Fine Art on Wyndham Street, a gallery dedicated to contemporary Hong Kong art. It carries a diverse range of work, from oil and acrylic paintings to prints, photography, sculpture, mixed media and installation pieces.

Chow Chun-fai

Two paintings that caught our eye were outdoor scenes by artist Chow Chung-fai. *Tsim Sha Tsui Beachfront at Noon* depicts an expanse of waterfront promenade – tiled, spotless and devoid of any form of life; while not exactly uplifting, the grey canvas is eloquent as a statement about the growing presence of concrete and other building materials crowding around Victoria Harbour. *Cheung Sha Wan* is a street-level view of a cross-section of an apartment block; it could be a street scene anywhere in Hong Kong. Chow's work invites thoughts on the homogeneity of the local cityscape.

Fiona Wong

The sculpture of Fiona Wong, who works in porcelain, terracotta and black stone clay, is an exercise in bridging primitive and modern worlds. Her *Bird*, for example, is a pair of terracotta shoes bearing a repeat pattern of bird imprints, and makes a comment on modern branded consumerism.

At the nearby Plum Blossoms Gallery, Hong Kong artists join other artists from around the region. The gallery represents Victor Lai, one of Hong Kong's best known abstract artists.

Lai, whose most recent exhibition was titled "A Tale of Two Cities", studied art in Liverpool and divides his time between Hong Kong and England. His work reflects the tensions and confusions arising from living in two very different worlds. Lai says this is a predicament he shares with many Hong Kong artists who hail from an environment with western and eastern cultures.

Lai paints tight, tense and discomfiting studies of groups of people, landscapes and objects. In recent years, his work has become more spacious and abstract, often echoing contemporary Chinese art.

The artist explains the shift in his work as a move towards his Chinese heritage, adding that it is a trend he has noticed in the work of many other local Chinese artists. At last year's Hong Kong Biennial, upcoming artists such as Yan Wan-kei expressed in their work concerns about the rapidity at which old is being replaced by new in Hong Kong.

Landscape continues to inspire Hong Kong artists. Leung Sze-wan, marketing executive at Plum Blossoms, says old city streets, rural landscapes and local popular culture are themes that run through the work of many of Hong Kong's contemporary landscape artists.

To view the work of the more unfettered among local artists, you have to visit the galleries of the Hong Kong Arts Centre or step outside the commercial circuit and head for the government-funded "artist villages", where local artists rent space. There is the Cattle Depot Commune in central Kowloon, the Fo Tan Art studios near Sha Tin, and the Shanghai Street Art space in Tsim Sha Tsui. Para/Site in Sheung Wan is the closest to the commercial gallery circuit.

Ms Leung of Plum Blossoms says the environment plays a defining role in art and is what differentiates the art of one place from another.

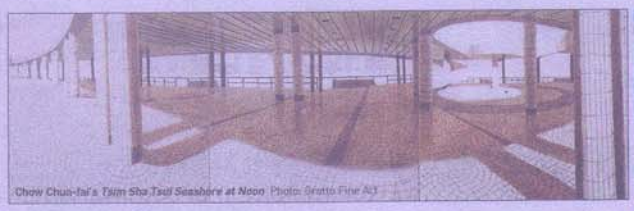
"You see this in the work of artists from different Chinese cities, such as Guangzhou, Chengdu and Shanghai," she said. "They display regional characteristics resulting from the effects of the local art training and the influence of fellow artists. Hong Kong art is influenced in the same way.

Fiona Wong's *Bird*, a pair of terracotta shoes with bird motifs

"In a larger sense, art is the essence of a culture. It refines and captures everyday experiences and the metaphysical aspects of life. Hong Kong art and mainland art both reflect individual cultural experiences and the artists' personal experience."

There are also a few overseas-born artists working here. British artist Robert O'Brien, who has lived in Hong Kong for more than 25 years, works in his studio on Cheung Chau island on weekends. The changing environment is a recurring theme in his work. His abstract cubist style landscapes usually comprise pieces that can be assembled and reassembled for different artistic results.

Although Hong Kong art is often seen as playing second fiddle to mainland art, a few local artists have made a name for themselves in the international art market.


Chow Chun-fai's *Tsim Sha Tsui Seashore at Noon*. Photo: Grotto Fine Art

Jeffrey du Vallier d'Aragon Aranita, a French-American artist who has been living here for close on a decade, was the 2004 winner of the Sovereign Asia Art Prize.

He has also been named artistic director of the upcoming Museum of Contemporary Art in Beijing.

Leung Chi-wo, an artist who works with a hand-made pinhole camera and who often exhibits at Para/Site, has had his work exhibited internationally.

"Getting more involved in international art fairs and biennales should bring more attention to Hong Kong artists in future," Leung said.

"I am confident Hong Kong will have its share of star artists in the near future. It takes only one or a couple of good artists to draw attention to the Hong Kong art scene." *Daleena Samara*

Victor Lai's *New Street III*. Photo: Plum Blossoms Gallery