



Wilson Shieh, *One Dollar Band*, 2008, ink and gouache on paper, 74 x 143 cm. Images: Courtesy of Grotto Fine Art Ltd.

# The Pivotal Decade

Many Hong Kong artists are concerned with local and urban issues and how they differ from their mainland Chinese counterparts. The changes among Hong Kong's artists during the past decade may be found more in the reinterpretation of ideas than in any dramatic break with tradition.

By Jonathan Thomson

In the past decade, the people of Hong Kong have witnessed some rather momentous events. At the stroke of midnight on June 30, 1997, the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong ceased to exist as British responsibility for the people of Hong Kong was handed over to communist China. Hong Kong's elected legislature was abolished, and a Beijing-appointed body of lawmakers took its place. A range of Hong Kong's civil liberties were rolled back as new constraints were placed on the right to protest and association. Democracy was further undermined in 1999 when the elected Municipal Councils were abolished and when a decision of the Court of Final Appeal, supposedly the highest court in Hong Kong and a keystone of the one-country two-systems policy, was effectively overturned by China's reinterpretation of the Basic Law. But things did not always go the government's way. In 2003, an attempt to introduce draconian anti-subversion legislation was greeted by more than half

a million people staging a massive demonstration that resulted in the legislation being withdrawn and the resignation of the minister responsible. Economically, the past decade has seen some of the worst moments in Hong Kong's history. Following the Asian currency crisis in 1997, Hong Kong recorded its first year of negative growth in more than 35 years. The Hong Kong Hang Seng Index plunged by 60 percent, unemployment tripled, and homes lost half their value. Before Hong Kong could recover, it recorded the first-ever cases of the deadly Influenza A/H5N1 virus, commonly known as bird flu. Only by slaughtering over one million birds, the entire poultry population of farms and markets, was Hong Kong able to avoid starting a global flu epidemic. Later, in the first half of 2003, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) infected more than 1,700 people and claimed 299 lives. The people of Hong Kong lived in fear and the economy ground to a halt.

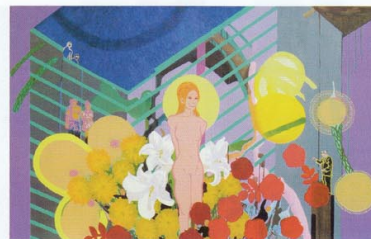
After all of this, the Beijing-ap-

pointed chief executive Tung Chee Wah was widely seen as being a lame duck. Its impotence in the face of these difficulties, even though many were the result of factors beyond its control, led to his resignation in March 2005. The opening of Hong Kong Disneyland, in September 2005, signposted a resurgence in tourism, along with the relaxation of controls on visitors from mainland China. Retail shopping and house prices began to improve. A spectacular attempt to boost Hong Kong's reputation as a world-class city with world-class cultural facilities through the construction of the West Kowloon Cultural District came unstuck as the government was seen to be too close to the biggest property developers and the "arts baby" was thrown out with the "property development dishwasher."

All of these things have impacted on the progress of arts development in Hong Kong. And while it may be argued that the pace of change on mainland China has been much faster and in many ways more consequential (not least in the extraordi-

ary growth in the market for contemporary Chinese art), they have made a difference to the way in which art is made, exhibited, and received in Hong Kong. When comparing the response to change among Hong Kong's artists with that of their mainland counterparts, the results may, at first glance, appear rather tepid. While the changes experienced in Hong Kong politics, economics, and health can confidently be described as momentous, the same can not be said of the art. Hong Kong art is much subtler than that. An excellent recent exhibition at the Hong Kong Art Center, curated by Henry Yu Yeung, from Grotto Fine Art, in Hong Kong, and Kwok Ying, from the Chinese Art Center, in Manchester, England, explores these subtleties with great sensitivity. The exhibition entitled *The Pivotal Decade* does not attempt to survey all of the art that was made during the past ten years or even a tiny fraction of it. Rather, it shows, by the careful selection of a few recent pieces by a small group of seven artists, how the spirit of art-making has changed.

The Hong Kong Arts Development Council was established a few years before the handover with pluralism and diversity, freedom of artistic expression, and development of the arts as a whole and development of local Hong Kong culture as its essential principles. In 2001, social cohesion became the Council's dominant policy objective. Social cohesion includes feelings



From the top: Yim-on, *Romance of the Three Kingdom (Born)*, *Romance of the Three Kingdom (Death)*, and *Romance of the Three Kingdom (Reborn)*, all 2008, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 160 cm.

of belonging, shared values, affinity, inclusion, attachment, and identity. It is manifest in shared-living conditions, institutions, and elements that enable a people to undertake concerted action. A cohesive society does not mean a homogenous society or one where members hold uniform values. Nor does it mean a society without conflict or dissent. Competing values and differing attitudes should be critical contributors to long-term social sustainability. A cohesive society is one that knows how to use its diversity as a source of energy for development. Cultural diversity in the arts is a powerful means of advancing a vision of a more inclusive society. Cultural participation exposes citizens to a diversity of people and ideas, encourages understanding, and creates linkages among community members.

Strident, politically charged art has never been prominent in Hong Kong and with this policy of social cohesiveness it was perhaps marginalized even further. In many ways, Hong Kong is a traditional hierarchical society and saving face, avoiding confrontation, and maintaining dignity are important societal values. Earlier in the 1990s, artists such as Danny Yung, Frog King Kwok Meng Ho, or Oscar Ho approached social and political issues obliquely. In contrast Wilson Shieh cloaks his incisive political commentary with wit and impeccable craftsmanship. Shieh delights in subverting Hong Kong mores



Luke Ching, *Folk Art Series: Donald Tsang is a cockroach only with digestive system*, 2008, mixed media installation, dimensions variable.





Tsang Chiu-mei, *The Spirit of a Mountain*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 122 x 122 cm.

and standards—and in particular the trappings of wealth and power. His technique is itself disarming. He employs a very fine brush technique—known as *gongbi*—that is distinguished by its meticulous detail. His work is an exquisite display of this method and is never marred by any evidence of preliminary drawing or *pentimento*.

Such subjects are drawn in such an entertaining way as to mask the sting of his criticism. In his brilliant *One Dollar Band* he depicts a group of Hong Kong billionaires as members of a rock-and-roll band. Run Run Shaw is on a double neck 4/6 string, Thomas Kwok is on drums, Stanley Ho performs vocals, Lee Shau Kee is on bass, Li Ka Shing plays a bright pink lead, and the late Nina Wang is on keyboard. Speech bubbles have them singing “All you need is love,” but of course for them, and their companies, love is definitely not all that they need. Profit and power figure in every aspect of their daily lives and in this regard they exemplify the Hong Kong entrepreneurial spirit. They would never play for one dollar. They play for keeps.

Fine detail and meticulous craftsmanship are also the backbone of Luke Chin Wai Ching's work. In addition, it is the head, thorax, abdomen, and legs of his work as he makes remarkably life-like parts of cockroaches out of plastic tape and assembles them into a variety of objects



Tsang Chiu-mei, *Flower in a Mirror - The Remotest Corner of the World*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 122 x 122 cm.

(including cockroaches.) Cockroaches are despised as vermin despite (or perhaps because) of their adaptability to the urban environment and their ability to survive. Cockroaches are vile creatures that spread bacteria that they pick up on the spines of their legs and bodies as they crawl through fetid, decaying matter or sewage and then carry into homes. The cockroach is also a potent symbol of alienation and pain. In Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* the protagonist Gregor Samsa is transformed into a “monstrous vermin” whose main failing is his inability to communicate. In David Cronenberg's nightmarish film adaptation of William S. Burroughs' classic 1959 novel *The Naked Lunch* the central character ends up taking orders from his typewriter which has transformed into a cockroach.

Ching's installation does not pull its punches. In his *Folk Art Series: Donald*



Joey Ka-yin Leung, *Flow* (detail), 2007, ink and colour on silk, 33 x 823 cm (scroll).

*Tsang is a cockroach only with digestive system* he depicts Donald Tsang (the current chief executive of Hong Kong) as a cockroach, with his head and trademark bow tie morphed onto the belly of the insect, and his guts ripped open and his intestines strewn about. In another version he depicts the chief executive as a tiny man made out of cockroach exoskeleton with his chest and abdomen ripped open. In both versions, neither the insect nor the man has a heart. We are led to conclude that both share the same characteristics. Just in case there were any doubt as to the identity of the insect, the installation includes business cards printed on the face with the chief executive's contact details, and on the reverse with a photo of a cockroach only with digestive system, with all of the parts labeled, including (in bold) the characteristic bow tie.

In another work, *Folk Art Series: Birds Nest* he makes an incredibly detailed model of the Beijing Olympic Stadium out of what appear to be hundreds of cockroach legs. No matter how much you may loath the insect, this appears to be a brutal work. In Shakespeare's *King Lear* the Duke of Gloucester expressed similar sentiments scene after scene of abject cruelty and senseless brutality: “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, They kill us for their sport.” Ching may be making a comment on the hidden costs of the Beijing Olympics and his work is given an ex-

tra touch of pathos by his placement of a dead bird (fabricated out of what appears to be plastic straws) on the outside of the window sill.

The Yim On's critique of Hong Kong politics is wrapped up in bright, colorful paintings that draw inspiration from comic books (or the darker, and perhaps more literary genre known as graphic novels.) His series of three paintings *Romance of the Three Dynasties* (the title possibly referencing the classic Chinese historical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*) depict the last three leaders of Hong Kong in three separate panels. His *Death* depicts the last Governor Chris Patten's popular and attractive daughter Alice nude in a field of flowers. Patten himself appears, but on a much smaller scale and pushed to the edge of the composition. The death of the title may refer to British rule, but Alice's youthful beauty and the abundant floral display suggest that for the British at least, life will go on towards a bright future. In a similar vein, the title and image of *Born* appear to be reversed. *Born* depicts Tung Chee Wah as a gigantic robotic creature (with extreme foreshortening) rampaging through a burning city. The third panel *Reborn* does not offer much in the way of salvation as it depicts Donald Tsang wearing the upturned high collar of a blood-sucking vampire.

The subtleties of Hong Kong art are also its strengths. Many Hong Kong artists are concerned with local and urban issues and how they differ from their mainland counterparts. Joey Leung Ka Yin's *Flow* is a long scroll painting that reveals portions of human and animal figures that appear to be floating, semi-submerged against a murky grey ground. Humans, chickens, rats, and pigs share this same environment but are isolated within it. Speech bubbles in Chinese, English, and Chinese pinyin allude to how language helps complicate Hong Kong identity.

Both Tsang Chui Mei and Ho Siu Kee are concerned with space. For Ho Siu Kee it is his own physical space as defined by his body that concerns him whereas for Tsang Chui Mei it is a more metaphysical space. She does not attempt to provide answers but instead to suggest the relationships between the things that already exist. In her work, scale becomes a rather fluid concept. Space is subjective and inside and outside are interchangeable. In Hong Kong, where physical space is at



Left to Right: Chow Chun-fai, *Conversion of Monkey King*, 2007, photo collage installation, 240 x 177 cm. Chow Chun-fai, *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon Disc 2*, 0' 26" 16, 2007, enamel paint on canvas, 100 x 150 cm. Chow Chun-fai, *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon Disc 1*, 0' 51" 42, 2007, enamel paint on canvas, 100 x 150 cm. Chow Chun-fai, *Rides on a Solitary Journey*, 2008, photo collage installation, 66 1/7, 240 x 203 cm.



Ho Siu-kee, *Aureola #1*, 2008, steel sculpture and light installation, 101.5 x 127 x 20.5 cm.

may have the entire universe in your mind.

There was a time when the label “Made in Hong Kong” was synonymous with cheap, tawdry knock-knacks and poor copies of Western manufactured goods. Hong Kong has since reinvented itself many times and Chow Chun Fai's appropriation of images from famous Western masterpieces and contemporary Chinese films such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* may be seen as a metaphor for Hong Kong.

Appropriation raises questions of originality, authenticity, and authorship, all of which are pertinent as Hong Kong continues to grapple with notions of identity. But Hong Kong is not static and never has been and its identity cannot therefore be neatly pigeon-holed. The past ten years have been pivotal in that they have required Hong Kong to deal with many trials and tribulations, and the artists of Hong Kong have responded to all of those challenges with one of the most effective weapons of all—change. The changes in the art are not necessarily as momentous as the events that spawn them, because after all Hong Kong is an Asian city and in the East creativity is more about the authenticity of the discovery process than the output of innovative product. In Hong Kong the changes in the arts may be found more in the reinterpretation of ideas than in any dramatic break with tradition. Δ

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