

The Factory: How 6 Hong Kong Artists Transformed Industrial Buildings Into A Buzzing Creative Community

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Hilarie Hon, South Ho Siu-nam, Chow Chun-fai, Sara Wong, Leung Chi-wo and Trevor Yeung (Photo: Amanda Kho for Tatler Hong Kong)

By Oliver Giles

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Artists have taken over former industrial buildings in Hong Kong's Fo Tan district, transforming the area from a manufacturing backwater into a buzzing creative community. Six of them—both long-term “Fotanians” and newcomers—open the doors to their studios

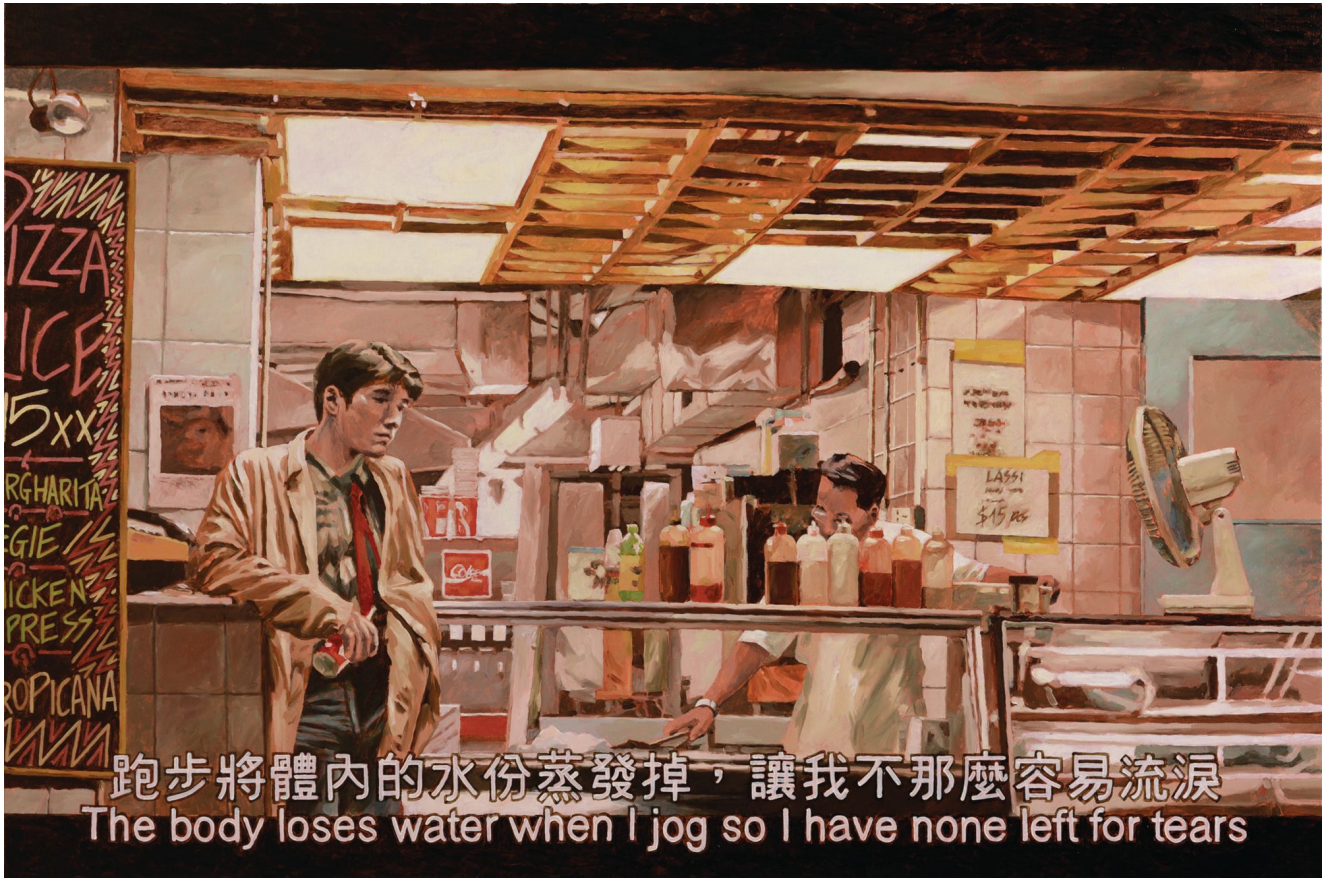


Chow Chun-fai in his studio (Photo: Amanda Kho for Tatler Hong Kong)

Painter Chow Chun-fai was one of the first artists to move into Fo Tan's factory buildings. "Having a studio in Hong Kong has always been a luxury," he says. "But when I graduated from Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2003, it was the middle of the Sars crisis, so it was very cheap."

Even so, he couldn't afford a space of his own, so shared his first studio with two friends. "We used to discuss how artists in Hong Kong had reversed western art history," he recalls. "In the west, artists would often work in a studio first, doing paintings and drawings, then [later in their career] would explore other media like installation and performance. In Hong Kong, having a studio was always too expensive, so in the '80s and '90s most artists were working outside of studios and not doing painting or other traditional studio art. We were really the first Hong Kong artists to have studios."

See also: [The New Asia: The Most Powerful, Influential & Stylish People To Know In 2020](#)



跑步將體內的水份蒸發掉，讓我不那麼容易流淚
The body loses water when I jog so I have none left for tears

Chungking Express—Tears (2016) (Image: Courtesy of Eli Klein Gallery, © Chow Chun-fai)

It's only because he had a studio that Chow could pursue his love of painting and develop the sumptuous style that has made him one of the city's most respected and successful artists. He's best known for his Paintings on Movies series, for which he reproduces subtitled stills from classic Hong Kong films that—removed from their original context—can be read as snappy comments on the city today.

These works take shape in Chow's latest studio, a bright, airy space that overlooks the green hills behind Fo Tan—and which Chow has all to himself. The walls are lined with paintings-in-progress ranging in size from A4 sheets to metres-long canvases—some of them his famous film stills, others more traditional paintings of Hong Kong's urban landscape. Some of these will be exhibited this month at [Gallery Exit](#), which is hosting a solo show of Chow's paintings from March 14 to May 16.

See also: [6 Hong Kong Artists On The Rise](#)



Chungking Express—Expiry date (2016) (Image: Courtesy of Eli Klein Gallery, © Chow Chun-fai)

In the nearly 20 years Chow has worked in Fo Tan, he's seen wave after wave of artists move in and make the district their own. But today, he's worried it's once again becoming harder for young artists to get a foot on the ladder. "It's expensive [to get a studio] again," he says. "It's not easy for young artists. In other cities—London, New York, Tokyo—artists can move into suburban areas. But in Hong Kong, Fo Tan is already the suburbs. There is nowhere else to go."

2/5 Leung Chi-Wo & Sara Wong



Leung Chi-wo and Sara Wong in their studio with their golden retriever, Kim (Photo: Amanda Kho for Tatler Hong Kong)

Husband and wife Leung Chi-wo and Sara Wong share a sprawling studio on the top floor of a factory building, where they have worked collaboratively and individually for nearly 20 years. “Our building is almost like a co-working space,” says Wong. “There are artists and set designers and a production house for TV shows—there’s even a very famous singer-songwriter who has a recording studio here.”

This idea of a community of creative people all influencing each other—whether knowingly or subliminally—ties in neatly with Wong’s latest series, which records the physical marks all of us unwittingly leave behind. “I ask people to let me into their house or office and I find traces of people’s activities—a scratch on the floor or on the wall, a tear in the wallpaper. Then I fill these gaps in with plaster mixed with a light-sensitive material,” says Wong. When night falls or lights are turned off, this material glows in the dark, revealing the smudge of a hand along the wall, the trail of chair legs repeatedly pushed along the floor or countless other signs of human activity. Wong then immortalises the scene in a photograph.



Photographer Squatting In A Colour-Striped T-Shirt And Blue Sweatpants (2019) (Image: Courtesy of Blindspot Gallery, Leung Chi-wo and Sara Wong)





Woman In A Black Skirt With A Red Handbag (2019) (Image: Courtesy of Blindspot Gallery, Leung Chi-wo and Sara Wong)

Leung is also working on a solo photography project. “I have been doing a lot of archival research about sites of violence,” he says. “Fifty years to the day after the event, I go back to the site. Normally the area has changed a lot, so I only photograph the sky—all you can see in the photo are the clouds.” Leung rarely finds any sign the event ever happened. Often businesses have closed, families have moved on and buildings have been pulled down. That slice of sky is all that remains the same.

An interest in history also sparked one of the couple’s ongoing collaborative series, for which they find intriguing anonymous figures in the background of photos in newspapers, magazines and old photo albums, then recreate these people’s poses and outfits for large-scale portraits. Leung models if the figure is a man; Wong if it’s a woman. “We always look for people who are impossible to identify,” says Leung. “And we create an identity and backstory for this person.” In Leung and Wong’s photos, these previously peripheral figures are put centre stage and, in the moment Leung and Wong pose, the past becomes the present.

See also: [The Man Behind The Mask: A Look Inside The Life Of Performance Artist Frog King](#)

3/5 Trevor Yeung



Trevor Yeung in his studio (Photo: Amanda Kho for Tatler Hong Kong)

Plants—rather than paints or pencils—occupy every available surface of [Trevor Yeung's](#) studio in Fo Tan, which he's had since 2015. "Last year I counted my plants and I had around 200," he says. "But now there are more because some of them have had babies." They aren't just for decoration. These plants play a crucial role in the theory and practice of Yeung's art, and often become a physical part of his multimedia installations. "My first love was animals," he recalls. "But I am interested in plants because you have a responsibility to care for the plant. Sometimes, plants give you hope. They keep you positive. But the relationship is indirect—they do not give you a direct response."

Yeung's art is often indirect, too—his photographs, sculptures and installations use images and objects from the natural world to obliquely explore human interactions. For *Cacti*, a series he debuted last year, Yeung 'planted' dried puffer fish in terracotta pots, then painted the spiky fish green to make them indistinguishable from real succulents.

See also: [10 Hong Kong Art Exhibitions To See In March 2020](#)



Cacti (9cm) (2019) (Image: Courtesy of Blindspot Gallery and Trevor Yeung)

Appearances, Yeung seemed to be saying, can be deceptive. Maracuja Road, an installation Yeung made for the Shanghai Biennale in 2010, featured rows of passionfruit plants positioned beneath a hanging latticework canopy. The famously fast-growing plants shot up bamboo support poles, but couldn't bridge the gap of just a few centimetres that Yeung left between the top of the posts and the frames above. The installation can be read as a metaphor for a relationship that didn't quite make it, or a desire that is never fulfilled.

When Yeung's away, which is fairly often—last year alone he had residencies in Panama, Finland and France—his plants are watered by photographer South Ho Siunam, a close friend who shares Yeung's studio and is also represented by Blindspot Gallery, which has championed them both for years. "And when Leung Chi-wo and Sara Wong go away, I look after their plants," says Yeung. "Fo Tan is a community—it's not huge, but I like it that way. It's a small group of close friends."

4/5 South Ho Siu-nam





South Ho Siu-nam in his studio (Photo: Amanda Kho for Tatler Hong Kong)



Whiteness of Trees IV (2018) (Image: Courtesy of Blindspot Gallery and South Ho Siu-nam)

A darkroom dominates South Ho Siu-nam's half of the studio he shares with Trevor Yeung. It's here that he develops the black-and-white photos he's most famous for, which feature everything from Hong Kong's public housing developments to political protests. A recent

series, *The Whiteness of Trees*, documents the aftermath of super typhoon Mangkhut, the storm that tore through Hong Kong in September 2018, causing widespread flooding and uprooting thousands of trees. The latter fascinated Ho—he spent days traipsing around the city after the storm photographing torn branches and trunks before they were swept away. “It was quite sad because, to me, the trees are like our friends—they’re also living in the city,” says Ho. “And they’re very old—sometimes much older than me.”









Whiteness of Trees III (2018) (Image: Courtesy of Blindspot Gallery and South Ho Siu-nam)

Most of Ho's work takes place on the streets rather than in his Fo Tan studio, but he still uses the space regularly as a place to research, and plan books and exhibitions once he has developed his images. It's also the base for another of his creative projects. "In Hong Kong, gallery openings are [among] the important gatherings for artists—we go to socialise, not just see the work. But at the openings, wine and beer are mostly bad quality, so my friend [Natalie Lo Lai Lai] and I decided to learn how to brew beer." And micro-brewery [BVA Project](#) was born.

"We started in 2017 and we're still going—we serve BVA Project at exhibition openings and other events," says Ho, who brews all the beer in a corner of his studio. "We don't produce much, and it doesn't make us much money, but it's OK—we do it for the community."

See also: [*The Tatler Guide To Art Galleries In Sheung Wan*](#)

5/5 Hilarie Hon



Hilarie Hon in her studio (Photo: Amanda Kho for Tatler Hong Kong)

A relative newcomer to Fo Tan, [Hilarie Hon](#) moved her studio—and her pet guinea pig, Phoebe—to the district in 2018. “I liked the bigger spaces here and the higher ceilings, and many of my friends also have studios here,” she says. “We don’t organise lots of official events for artists; it’s more informal. Like, ‘Do you want to meet my guinea pig?’ ‘OK!’”

Hon works in her studio every day from about noon “until I’m exhausted, so tired I go almost straight to sleep,” [making ceramics](#) and her signature colourful paintings. “I love really bright colours,” says Hon. “I go to a lot of effort to make the colour as bright as possible. When I start painting, I have the colour in my mind, and sometimes a feeling, but I don’t know the composition until I start.”









Hon's desk (Photo: Amanda Kho for Tatler Hong Kong)

Multiple paintings in progress are always propped against the walls of Hon's studio. "I work at two or three at a time, and when I've finished one, I hang it on a wall for one more month just to look at it. Is it finished? Is it what I want?"

Hon is currently preparing for a solo show at Gallery Exit later this year. "I'm working on a new set of works—they are paintings in cabinets," says Hon. "Painting is very personal, very private. Sometimes it doesn't feel necessary to me to show it to anyone. It actually bothers me a lot. So, with the cabinets, the viewer has the option to not look at the painting." Hon may have given them the option, but it's hard to imagine collectors closing the doors on her vivid, vibrant canvases.

See also: [Asia's 50 Biggest Art Collectors: 2019 Edition](#)