



# A PAINTER IN PROTEST: CHOW CHUN-FAI CONFRONTS HONG KONG'S UNREST

CHRISTIE LEE \* MARCH 26, 2020

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## A Painter in Protest: Chow Chun-Fai Confronts Hong Kong's Unrest

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### PREFACE

Best known for his ironic paintings based on classic Hong Kong films, Chow Chun-fai has turned his attention to Hong Kong's protests.

### TAGS

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### WRITER

Christie Lee

What can an artist do in an increasingly surreal world? "I surrender to reality," replies the painter Chow Chun-fai. "I mean, all jokes aside, it's true, you can't get a more bizarre scene than this."

He is standing in front of "Hong Kong International Airport II," a large oil painting depicting a protest at the Hong Kong International Airport in August 2019. "I wanted to paint the wo<sup>4</sup> lei<sup>5</sup> fei<sup>1</sup> (和理非)," he says, referring to non-violent protesters. "So it was either this or the two million people march, but I think a strike at the airport is rarer. There was a time when I tried to draw all sorts of fantastical scenarios, for example, plopping an elephant in the middle of Nathan Road. But I quickly dismissed that idea."

He laughs. "Who would have thought that one day, fire barricades would appear in the middle of Nathan Road, and universities would be engulfed in smoke."



"Hong Kong International Airport II" is on show at *Portraits from Behind*, Chow's solo exhibition at Gallery Exit in Tin Wan. The show's works are based on photos Chow took during last year's pro-democracy protests. When he first started working on them, in the middle of June, when the protests were just kicking off, he didn't intend to exhibit them so soon. But when Gallery Exit founder Anthony Tao rang him and said they wanted to "show works that aren't unrelated to what's happening in Hong Kong," Chow agreed to put them on display.

The result is a series of 80 artworks depicting a variety of scenes, from lunchtime protests at a mall to a Tsim Sha Tsui mosque being sprayed with blue-dyed pepper spray to the fiery scenes of last November's university sieges. Crucially, none of the figures in the paintings are showing their faces, a way to acknowledge that the ongoing protests are leaderless in nature. "During the Umbrella Movement [in 2014], you could still point to a few figure heads," says Chow. "This time, it's very decentralised."



Arranged around the starkly furnished gallery in a straight line, the paintings bring to mind a row of prints hanging in a darkroom. They seem a world away from Chow's most recognisable series, *Painting on Movies*. In that collection, he borrows scenes and subtitles from old Hong Kong movies to poke fun at the ludicrousness of life in modern-day Hong Kong. The satire is usually as clear as daylight. In contrast, *Portraits from Behind* is more ambiguous. It's not clear whether one should read the paintings as documentation, personal essay, or social satire.

At the heart of this difference, perhaps, is the artist's emotional attachment to the ongoing protests. Whereas *Paintings on Movies* comments on society with cool calculation, *Portraits from Behind* feels much more raw, as if the artist is still processing the events while painting them.

"I've always been quite a logical person," he says. "I thought that I'd be able to keep those negative thoughts away. But I've had nightmares, I've had tears roll down my eyes when I'm in front of the computer. When I'm on the streets and I hear anything that sounds like a gunshot, I feel the fear welling up inside me. It's not only the fear of dying, but fear of the unknown – you simply don't know what will happen if you get dragged to a dark spot, away from the journalists."



Chow says it's important that viewers feel he is present, even if he didn't physically paint himself into the art. "In my past works, the 'I' is never present, but in these paintings, the 'I' is obvious. I'm not trying to emphasise my own importance, but the importance of being there." The irony is that Chow can't confirm whether he was present at protests on any specific date, because that puts him at risk of being arrested for unlawful assembly.

But some of the details in his works couldn't have been painted if he wasn't emotionally invested in the scene: the honeyed hue of a bus stop stand, cast by a fire barricade lit nearby; a black-shirted pedestrian taking a selfie, no doubt trying to include the few firemen behind him in the frame; the row of umbrellas hanging on the railings. For the artist, the emphasis on being present is a way to avoid exploiting a socio-political movement for self gain, something he is particularly sensitive to after having run unsuccessfully for a seat on the Hong Kong Legislative Council in 2012.

"When I ran, I heard all the bad things that were said about my competitors, so I'm pretty sure the other teams dug up all the dirt they had on me," he says. "I'm very careful – I mean, I know I'm not exploiting others." He looks at his feet. "But that is a terrible answer, isn't it? Whatever does 'as long as I know' means? I think you should still be able to tell if I'm invested in this or not. I'm not just flipping through the newspapers, picking a few images and putting them to canvas. You need to be mindful during times like this, but if you feel you're prudent by not touching on what's happening in Hong Kong at all? That's a worse situation."



What does the artist choose to paint? "Scenes that are most surreal, but a lot of the decisions were made subconsciously," he says. He points to a painting depicting a police officer standing with his hands on his hips in front of Government House, where the Chief Executive lives and works. "It was only afterwards did I realise how ridiculous the image was. I can't think of another city where you'd find a police in such [an antagonistic] manner in front of a government residence."

It's also worthwhile to note that Chow saved the smallest canvases for the most fiery scenes – namely the sieges at Chinese University and Polytechnic University. "I wanted to do something different from what the media was doing," says Chow. "Instead of blowing up the most visually shocking scenes, I made them small."

Does he find comfort in painting? He chuckles. "No, not really. I mean, I had to relive it. I felt worse, especially when painting the smaller canvas. I was burrowing my head into [the work]."

Look at one too long and one recalls helplessly watching horrific scenes of fire and smoke going up in the universities. Some might look away, others might try to peer at the details, trying to make sense of the many arrests and the lives lost in the past nine months. Details like the yellow hue of a photojournalist's vest that seems to meld with the fire he is pointing his lens at, or the outline of two protestors trying to shield themselves from a raging fire with pastel and rainbow-coloured umbrellas.



Chow sometimes wonders if it's too soon to depict the protests. "With [*Painting on Movies*], my approach was, if I pick an old movie, and somehow infuse it with events and sentiments of the intervening years, then the audience would come with this rich trove of things," he says. "For [*Portraits from Behind*], however, the impact is still unknown. In the future, when the protest is over, who knows? I suppose that's the dilemma."

What *Portraits from Behind* does accomplish is to ground time in an accelerated age. A parent pushing a baby stroller through a march; the airport protest; even the more recent university sieges – these images seem eerily distant in a world now embattled by the Covid-19 coronavirus.

The only exceptions to Chow's rule of omitting faces from his work are three self-portraits mounted at the tail end of the exhibition. Chow has painted himself wearing a mask, accompanied by dates: 2019.6.12 on the first; 2020.02.12 on the third. "I can't portray anyone who was there, so I'm offering myself up," he says. "I also thought, how should I continue to tell the story? I started painting this series on June 12th last year. My studio is located next to Chun Yeung Estate, the site of an anti-government protest on February 12th. I feel I could draw a line between those two dates."



It is Chow's way of keeping the conversation about the pro-democracy protests going – even as, or perhaps because, of all the anxieties surrounding the city's battle against Covid-19. The larger fights for universal suffrage and freedom of speech have morphed into more concrete battles for one's life, as with the hospital strike, or future home, as with the protest at Chun Yeung Estate protest, which erupted in response to government plans to turn the estate into a quarantine centre.

Chow says some of the marches and events from last year are becoming hazy. He fears that the fundamental fight for the city's freedoms is going to eventually fade from the collective imagination. "What will the reaction be when I show these images when the protest is over?" he asks. "By then, we might have won, or there'd be more violent political oppression."

It's a sobering thought. If the latter comes to pass, would Chow leave the city? "I'll stay until the city's light has completely turned out," he says decisively. "By then, I'll be fleeing, not emigrating."