

Why artist paints then-and-now scenes of Hong Kong? He could no longer recognise the city

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When Chow Chun-fai could not find a crossroads in Mong Kok, it led him to produce paintings of street views that combine present and past

There are a few standard images of Hong Kong that can be found over and over again on postcards, in online search results and in movies.

Shot from The Peak or from the Kowloon waterfront, these tend to be

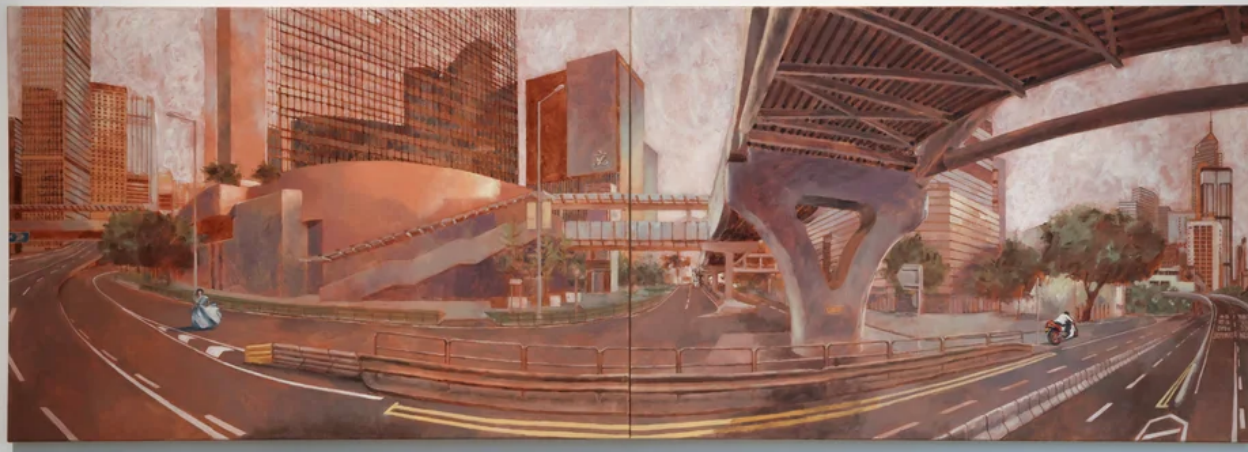
formulaic, unchanging views featuring a dense forest of skyscrapers that stand in dramatic contrast to the green hills behind them and Victoria Harbour in the foreground.

But zoom in closer and the city is in a state of constant flux, so much so that even long-term residents struggle to find once-familiar corners of home.

A few years ago, artist Chow Chun-fai took a friend to Mong Kok, one of Hong Kong's best known neighbourhoods, to show him one particular spot that he painted more than a decade ago – the intersection of Portland Street and Shandong Street.

He was so confident he could find it again that he did not bother checking Google Maps. As it happened, he could not locate the street corner.

"We ended up circling the block a few times and still couldn't find it. As it turned out, we had already walked past the spot but the large overhead signboards had all gone. I had got lost in a place I thought I knew really well," Chow says.



A Moment of Romance 1990 on Connaught Road Central (2024) by Chow Chun-fai, part of his solo exhibition "Map of Amnesia" in Central, Hong Kong. Photo: Jelly Tse

This episode of forgetfulness inspired his painting *As Tears Go By 1988 at Mahjong School Portland Street* (2024), one of 14 new works by Chow on show at Tang Contemporary Art gallery in Hong Kong in an exhibition titled "Map of Amnesia".

The painting, 2 metres (6ft 6 inches) wide and showing the crossroads that eluded Chow and friend years earlier, is named after an early film by the director Wong Kar-wai.

Chow, best known for works such as *I want my identity back* (2007), which was taken from a scene in the blockbuster 2002 film *Infernal Affairs*, shot in Hong Kong, says he likes to harness the collective memories movies create.

Films make his personal feelings about certain places more relatable, he says. "We all have our own impressions [as Hongkongers] of these places, but films act as a bridge for sharing our stories."



All About Ah Long 1989 at Shatin Inn Restaurant (2024) features in Chow Chun-fai's show of new paintings. Photo: Jelly Tse

The film the painting refers to is 1988's *As Tears Go By*, which starred [Andy Lau Tak-wah](#), [Maggie Cheung Man-yuk](#) and [Jacky Cheung Hok-yau](#) and featured several scenes shot in Mong Kok.

The painting is a fusion of how the intersection appears in the film, with all the neon signs still in place, and how it looks today.

Chow has seen the film more than 20 times. He explains that the "Mahjong School" in the title of the painting refers to the mahjong parlour at the crossroads where the character played by Jacky Cheung memorably loses

his temper in the film.

There is still a mahjong parlour there today, but there is no telling whether it has survived from the 1980s or is the one featured in the film.



A Moment of Romance 1990 on Granville Road (2024) by Chow Chun-fai, featured in his solo exhibition "Map of Amnesia". Photo: Jelly Tse

The paintings in the exhibition are all based partly on Hong Kong films and on photos Chow has taken while wandering the city in the past 20 years.

They depict easily recognised landmarks, such as the Hong Kong Museum of Art in Tsim Sha Tsui, [Mido Café](#) in Yau Ma Tei, and the [Lin Heung Tea House](#) in Central – places that have either been transformed or are threatened by redevelopment.

Chow has painstakingly portrayed details such as window grilles, scaffolding and reflections of neon lights, encouraging the viewer to savour and absorb each scene slowly.

His blending of fiction and reality changes the way we see familiar places.



The Lucky Guy 1998 at Lucky Café (2024) by Chow Chun-fai, part of the exhibition "Map of Amnesia" in Hong Kong. Photo: Jelly Tse

"There are many things in this city that we tend to forget or mix up, hence the exhibition title 'Map of Amnesia'. It is a concept that I have worked on for quite a few years now and in a way, this exhibition can be seen as a continuation of my 2023 exhibition ['A Mirage of a Shining City'](#) with [Stephen Wong Chun-hei](#)."

The theme of both shows was a collective amnesia in Hong Kong that has

been accelerated by the dramatic changes the city has witnessed, he said.

Chow is concerned that the past is rapidly being forgotten.



The Longest Summer 1998 at Lin Heung Tea House (2024) is among the Chow Chun-fai paintings on show at Tang Contemporary Art. Photo: Jelly Tse

City War 1988 at Star Ferry Multi-storey Car Park (2024) refers to a scene from another 1988 film, called *City War*, in which characters played by [Chow Yun-fat](#) and [Ti Lung](#) are arguing with each other on top of the Star Ferry Multi-storey Car Park in Central.

There is no time-shifting element in this image, which seems to depict a scene entirely from 1988, judging by the cars parked there (all are old models) and the unfinished state of the Bank of China building, whose construction the architect [I. M. Pei](#) was still overseeing at that time.

The artist says the Star Ferry Multi-storey Car Park, built in 1957, was the

first of its kind in Hong Kong but is now set to be demolished. This is the kind of Hong Kong heritage he wants to document in his work, he says.



City War 1988 at Star Ferry Multi-storey Car Park (2024) by Chow Chun-fai is part of his "Map of Amnesia" show. Photo: Jelly Tse

Among the most eye-catching works in the exhibition is a large, six-panel work titled *Chicken and Duck Talk 1988 at Tai Po Man Mo Temple (2024)*.

Growing up, Chow lived just a stone's throw from this temple and, as a child, would walk past it all the time, he says. One day, he noticed a film crew building a set for the 1988 film *Chicken and Duck Talk*, starring [Michael Hui Koon-man](#) and his brother Ricky Hui Koon-ying.

The film was a massive hit in the year it came out, and Chow's whole family went to see it in the cinema. "Going to the cinema was rare when I was little,

and this film really made a strong impression on me," he says.



A visitor to Tang Contemporary Art views Chow Chun-fai's painting *Chicken and Duck Talk* 1988 at Tai Po Man Mo Temple (2024). Photo: Jelly Tse

Chow believes his personal memory of such innocent pleasures is shared by many others in Hong Kong.

Another deeply personal painting is *Hong Kong Museum of Art 2014* (2014–2024), which does not make any reference to a film. The museum appears in its old guise before it closed for a complete makeover in 2015.

Chow has inserted himself into the painting – as a small character standing outside the museum and painting in the open air.



Hong Kong Museum of Art 2014 (2014-2024) is among the new paintings by Chow Chun-fai on show at Tang Contemporary Art. Photo: Jelly Tse

Having spent 10 years on this triptych, Chow says it documents the growth in his understanding of materials and storytelling, as well as a change in his style, skills and technique.

What is the significance of 1988 in this series of paintings? Chow would not explain, saying simply that the 1980s and 1990s “were a significant period” – perhaps a reference to it being the era when Hong Kong’s return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 was negotiated and finalised.

As the artist says, the paintings in the new show are part fantasy, part reality and part personal feelings. Just how true they feel to a viewer will depend on their own history and relationship with the city.

“Chow Chun Fai: Map of Amnesia”, Tang Contemporary Art, 10/F, H Queen’s, 80 Queen’s Road Central, Central. Tuesday to Saturday, 11am to 7pm. Until October 15.