

An Exhibition About Old News Aims to Make Sense of a Changed Hong Kong

A painter and a former journalist have teamed up to demonstrate the city's shift from relative openness to tighter controls on freedoms of expression.

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By **Tiffany May**

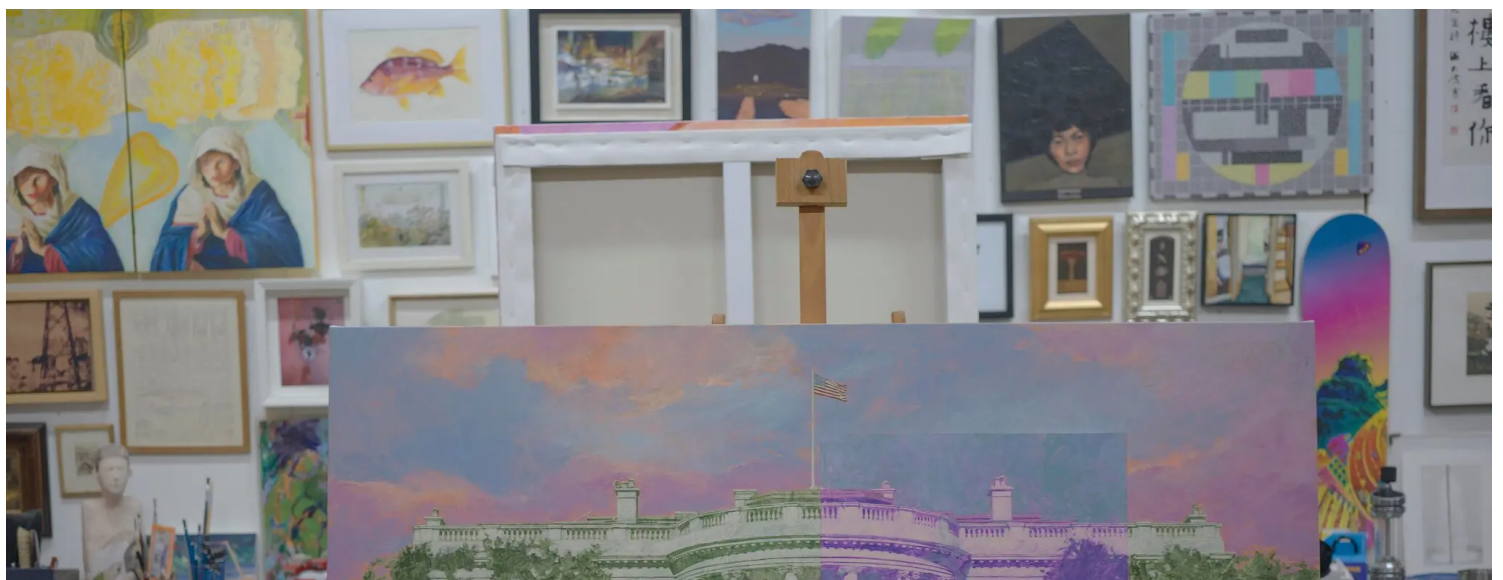
Reporting from Hong Kong

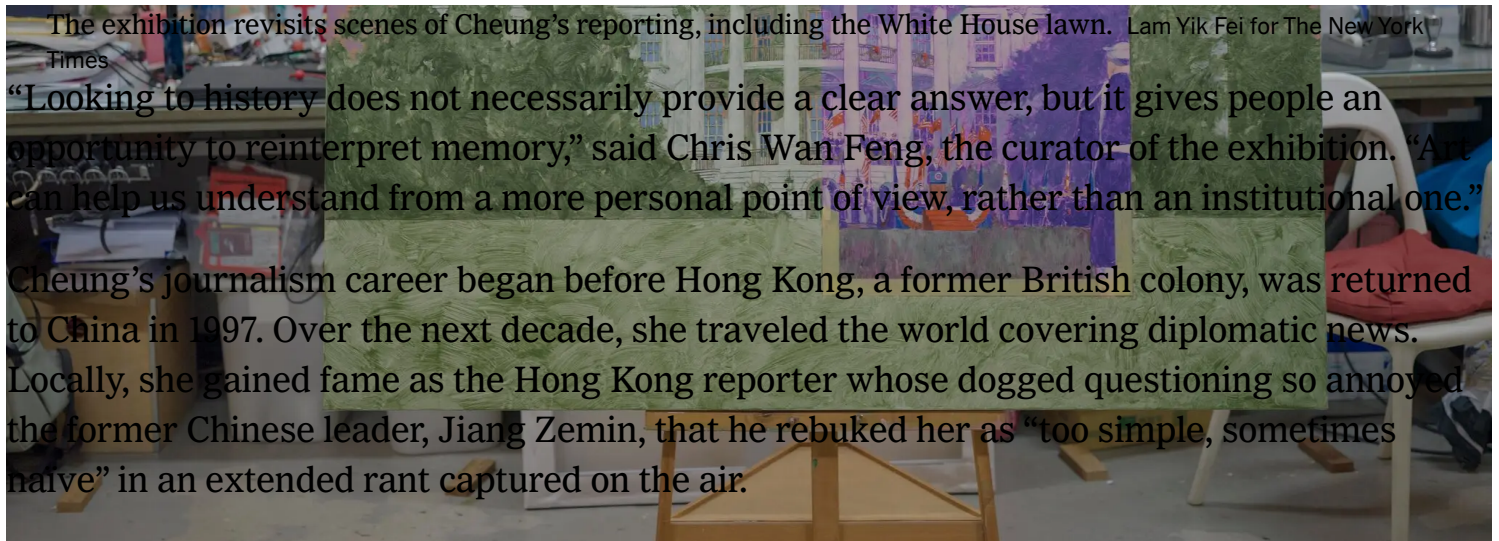
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As he pored over old news archives, the painter Chow Chun Fai was trying to work out what could be said about a transformed Hong Kong.

His exhibition, “Interview the Interviewer II,” is the second installment in several years of collaboration with Sharon Cheung, a former television journalist, who covered diplomatic news from 1995 to 2004 before setting up her namesake art space, SC Gallery. It will be displayed in March in the Insight sector at Art Basel Hong Kong.

The exhibition revisits scenes of her reporting, from the White House lawn to a Harvard auditorium where Chinese leaders gave speeches. It also includes the official moment when Hong Kong was handed over to China from the British. The paintings re-examine Hong Kong's tumultuous political transformation in recent years, and as it finds itself increasingly caught in the middle of tense U.S.-China relations.





The exhibition revisits scenes of Cheung's reporting, including the White House lawn. Lam Yik Fei for The New York Times

"Looking to history does not necessarily provide a clear answer, but it gives people an opportunity to reinterpret memory," said Chris Wan Feng, the curator of the exhibition. "Art can help us understand from a more personal point of view, rather than an institutional one."

Cheung's journalism career began before Hong Kong, a former British colony, was returned to China in 1997. Over the next decade, she traveled the world covering diplomatic news. Locally, she gained fame as the Hong Kong reporter whose dogged questioning so annoyed the former Chinese leader, Jiang Zemin, that he rebuked her as "too simple, sometimes naive" in an extended rant captured on the air.

That was a different time. Since the imposition of the national security law in 2020, press freedom in Hong Kong has fallen precipitously. Newspaper editors have been sentenced to prison over sedition charges. Local news outlets self-censor to survive.

Pressures on the art world have also increased. Films have been censored in screenings. Pro-Beijing newspapers have attacked artists, accusing them of using government funding to criticize the government. Independent bookstores have been forced to close.

While Chow did not set out to make political art, the topic was hard to avoid, he acknowledged, especially as it became more entrenched in everyday life.

"In Hong Kong, politics is already a part of life, and I really want my work to be grounded in reality," he said in an interview at his studio. "That's the only reason politics appears in my works."



Cheung's journalism career began before Hong Kong, a former British colony, was returned to China in 1997. She traveled the world covering diplomatic news. Lam Yik Fei for The New York Times

Throughout his career, Chow has been known for his directness. His series “Paintings on Movies” recreated film stills with subtitled dialogue that doubled as acerbic social commentary. Some of his old paintings, including of Hong Kong politicians referencing the 1989 crackdown in Tiananmen Square in Beijing and scenes of protest, likely could not be exhibited in the city today.

The increasingly repressive atmosphere in Hong Kong has prompted him to be more subtle in his work. Many artists have chosen to leave the city, he said. To continue creating meaningful work without becoming overwhelmed by political pressure, he decided to take a new approach.

“On the one hand, I’m very connected with the world and what’s happening in Hong Kong, but I can also zoom out and have some distance from it to observe and do my work,” he said. “Being very immersed but also stepping back — this shift has helped me a lot. Leaving aside

art and everything else, even as a person, I realized this is what allowed me to survive until today.”

The new exhibition is part of Chow’s efforts to respond to the growing restrictions on creative expression, a process he likened to learning a new artistic language.



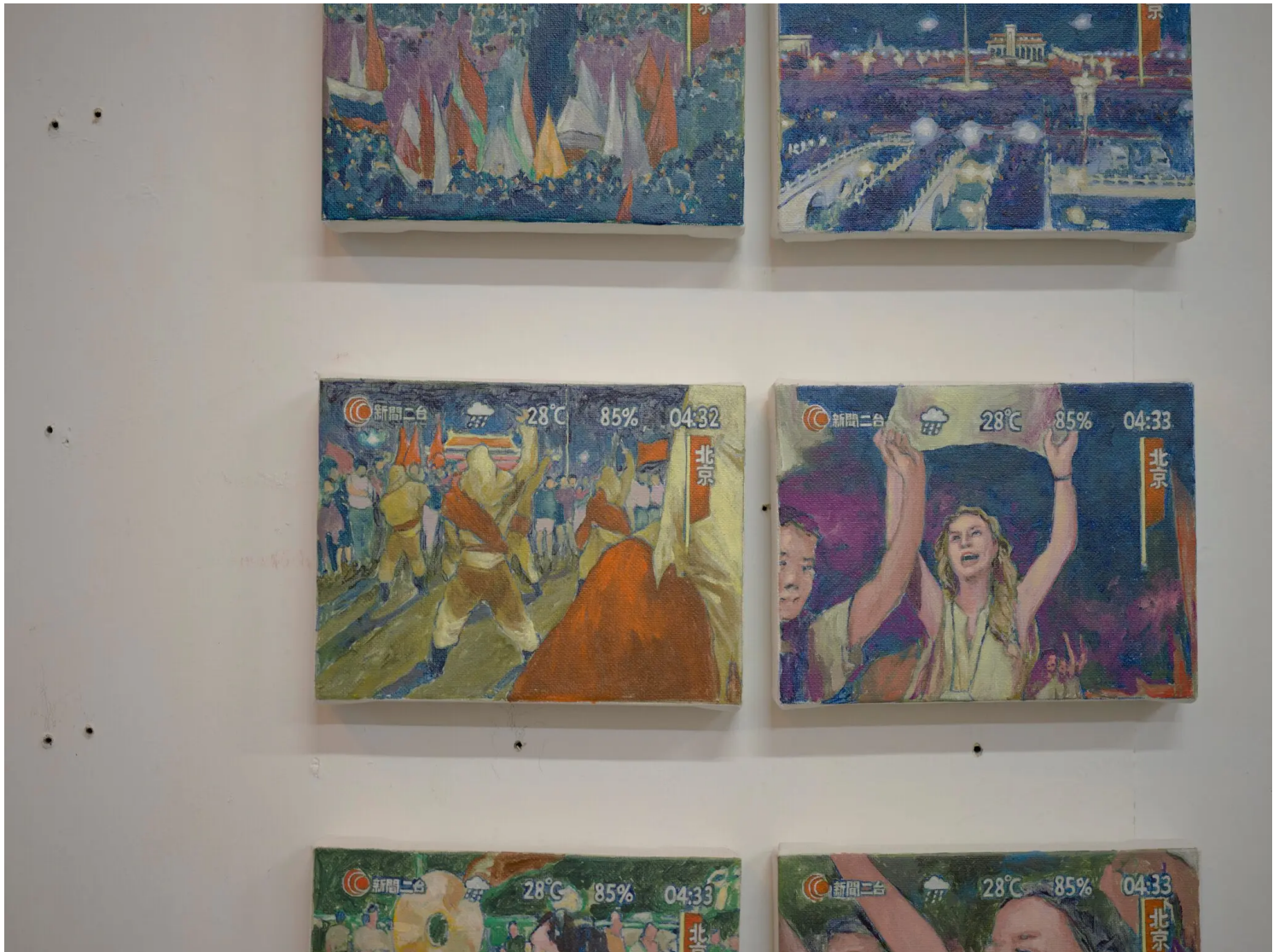
Chow, right, with Cheung, center, and Chris Wan Feng in the studio. Feng is the curator of “Interview the Interviewer II.” Lam Yik Fei for The New York Times

When he began collaborating with Cheung, Chow pored over photographs and mementos she collected from the road, spending hours enlarging old film and rewatching clips of her reportage and other news conferences from that era. Beyond scrutinizing history and context, he said he was also trying to analyze the aesthetics of the low-resolution footage, including dated color grading.

“I discovered some colors I haven’t seen before: new composition, lines, scales,” he said. “This is all because I’m trying to make a new painting out of old materials. It is all part of the new language I’m learning to figure out what I can say in this new era.”

In earlier works, he had tried to stay true to the composition and colors of his film references, but in the new exhibition, he gave himself more freedom to reinterpret. He emphasized the cinematic drama that spotlights cast onstage. He also diverged from the classic journalistic framing of news footage, cropping the faces of the speaker and allowing the viewer's eye to stray to other details, such as the colorful patterns of a tie and the ghostlike overexposure of a former Hong Kong leader as he rustled through pages of prepared remarks.

Cheung said she used to judge the material only for its news value, not its artistic potential. Chow appreciated details that took her by surprise, she said, including outtake images that she had initially thought were poorly framed or had bad lighting.



Paintings by Chow that captured Cheung's news coverage of celebrations in Tiananmen Square in 2001 after Beijing won its bid to host the 2008 Summer Olympics. Lam Yik Fei for The New York Times

“At first I wondered if old news would be very boring, but at the hands of an artist, the works get a new life and a new meaning,” she said.

The exhibition includes snapshots from a different era, when Chinese leaders declared their love for the American people.

In one sequence of palm-size drawings, Chow depicted a moment in 2002 when an American reporter asked Jiang, China's leader at the time, what China had done for panda conservation lately. "I'm sorry, I'm an electrical power engineer," Jiang quipped in English before breaking into a Confucius quote about the wisdom of admitting what one does not know, then pointing to the expertise of Chinese conservationists.

In another, Chow conjured the midnight scenes of celebrations Cheung captured at Tiananmen Square in July 2001, right after Beijing won the bid to host the 2008 Olympics. (At the time, Cheung was inadvertently separated from the videographer and had to ask a bystander to help film her as she held the microphone. By the time she was able to wire the images back to Hong Kong, it was 4:30 a.m., a time lag that Chow made sure to include in time stamps superimposed over the paintings.)

The largest piece of the show is a 2.4-by-3.7-meter scene (7.9 feet by 12 feet) depicting the pomp and ceremony of the moment when the British government handed Hong Kong over to China in 1997. Under the glare of many spotlights, the Chinese flag and the Union Jack were suspended in midair at center stage, as officials applauded and soldiers from both countries stood stiffly.

The handover ceremony, as it was called, was held at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center, where Art Basel will take place. To have that scene return to the place nearly three decades later, in such a different context, was significant to Chow.

"When I paint this scene, I am not recounting that moment in 1997, but everything it has come to mean," he said. "Time is the final judge of what the work is about."

Tiffany May is a reporter based in Hong Kong, covering the politics, business and culture of the city and the broader region. [More about Tiffany May](#)

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