

# Seven wonders

In the lead up to the opening of the Louis Vuitton contemporary art exhibition at the Museum of Art, **Doretta Lau** visits the seven local artists selected be part of the prestigious show. Portraits by **Calvin Sit**

Hong Kong art lovers are rejoicing this fortnight as not one, but two major contemporary art events hit town. After the dust settles on the international Art Fair, the exhibition *Louis Vuitton: A Passion for Creation* opens at the Museum of Art on Friday 22. The exhibition is divided into three parts. The first features works selected from the Foundation Louis Vuitton pour la Création's collection, including pieces by Takashi Murakami, Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, Gilbert & George, and Yang Fudong. The second part is a presentation of the Frank Gehry building to be built at the Jardin d'Acclimatation on the outskirts of Paris to house the LV foundation. The third part is *Guests of the Foundation: The Hong Kong Seven*, featuring Nadim Abbas, Lee Kit, Leung Chi-wo, Tozer Pak Sheung-chuen, Tsang Kin-wah, Adrian Wong and Doris Wong Wai-yin.

Philip Tinari, an American curator and art critic based in Beijing, worked with Suzanne Pagé, artistic director of the Foundation Louis Vuitton pour la Création, to curate *The Hong Kong Seven*.



**The good fight** Gilbert & George's *Class War* (1986)

"I arrived at this idea of this group of artists who are already in dialogue with each other," he says. "There are all these lineages that connect them... shared studio spaces, studio buildings. In some cases, like with Lee Kit and Tozer, one single studio. If you go back further, a lot of them were in school together... they are all in an evolving conversation about the artistic practice."

*The Hong Kong Seven* is a snapshot of the city's contemporary art community, and can be

read through a relational aesthetics framework. We can view each artist's work as the product of an encounter with the city, its people and its art practices.

Though Louis Vuitton have asked that details of all seven works remain a secret until the exhibition's opening – a request we are honouring – we visited the artists at their studios in late April. As we viewed their works, we came to understand why Nicolas Bourriaud once wrote, "Art is a state of encounter."

## Tozer Pak Sheung-chuen



**New horizons** From Pak's NYPLP Project

When we asked to visit his studio, conceptual artist Tozer Pak Sheung-chuen suggested we convene in the Asia Art Archive (AAA), where he made his piece for the LV exhibition. He was AAA's 2008 local artist-in-residence, and it seemed like the archive was the perfect location to talk about his recent work. There was a slight difficulty, however, in making arrangements to meet: the Chinese University fine arts and theology

graduate was about to fly to Italy to install his show at the Hong Kong Pavilion for the 53rd Venice Biennale. He is Hong Kong's sole representative in Venice. Suffice to say, Pak is having a huge year, one that is propelling his career to greater heights. We met Pak, on the day he was boarding a plane for Venice, to discuss his recent work.

"Imagination plus an action allows you to create a new world," says Pak. He details one of his projects, *New York Public Library Project (NYPLP) 5: Measuring the Size of the Sea Storing in a Library*, a work in which he explores the question, "How vast is the ocean hidden within the library?" To answer the question, he looked at the cover of every book in the NYPL collection, selecting books picturing the sea for his project, and creating a new horizon by lining up all the book covers.

Pak's art practice goals are simpler than his complex approach to art making. "Objects are in the same situation as me," he says. "They have no lesser or greater value than me. We are in the same space. When I work, it's like making a 3-D action painting. I want to make it perfect for the audience." It seems, in 2009, perfection could be within his grasp.

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## Lee Kit

Lee Kit returned from a performance in Beijing to his Fo Tan studio, where he lives and works, to discover a mystery. "That towel appeared while I was gone," says the Chinese University fine arts graduate, pointing to a neon green cloth hanging from a bar on the wall. The towel is not one of his trademark minimalist hand-painted works; the colour is too bright and the surface too textured for Lee's aesthetic. Though we are peering at it with interest, it is simply a towel, not an artwork. It won't be gracing tables in a Swedish café as part of a Lee Kit exhibition.

"I don't think it's Tozer's," he remarks, referring to Pak Sheung-chuen, one of the artists with whom Lee shares the large space.

As we look at Lee's work in the studio, two things are apparent: he captures everyday occurrences with a studied grace, making the present nostalgic even as it unfolds. He also makes people interact with art outside a gallery or public art context, sometimes without their knowledge.

When asked about the domestic concerns that permeate his work, taking form as tablecloths, curtains, pillowcases and picnic sheets, Lee says, "The first time I wanted to



**Everyday** Lee's Hand-painted cloth as tablecloth

go on a picnic, I took a painted cloth with me. It wasn't for the sake of the work – I really wanted to go on a picnic... My work has slowly moved away from painting. Now it's an examination of daily life."

To highlight his latest preoccupations, Lee shows us selections from an hour-long video where he fills an ashtray with cigarette ash. "It's very boring," he says, laughing. "I haven't watched the whole thing myself." In order to shoot the video, he smoked hundreds of Mild Seven Sky Blues over the course of a day. "That night, as I crawled into bed, I was so high."

Before we photograph him, he's in need of a cigarette. His art has made him highly addicted to nicotine. In fact, the last time we met, he was standing outside Osage Soho, smoking.

## Doris Wong

Doris Wong Wai-yin has had so many visitors to her Fo Tan studio in recent weeks that she's unsure who we are, and what our business is, when we arrive. After making sure we're not serial killers, she lets us into the cosy space she shares with Otto Li Tin-lun and her boyfriend, Kwan Sheung-chi, both fellow Chinese University fine arts graduates. She turns off a small television set and we walk

around stacks and stacks of canvasses, some completed and others still blank, and sit next to the kitchen to chat.

"I usually avoid that question," she says, when asked why she makes art. "If I think about it too much, it seems like there's no reason for it." She laughs. "It's been really natural. Since I entered the program at Chinese University, I've had a lot of opportunities."

After she finished her BFA, she did an MA in fine art at Leeds University, on a British Chevening Postgraduate Scholarship. In 2008, she showed work in ten separate exhibitions.

Despite her rising star, she still has to contend with being treated as a girlfriend rather than an artist. Last year during the exhibition *Inside Looking Out* at Osage Beijing, she was introduced a number of times as Kwan's girlfriend. "It was as if I was an object, like a flowerpot," she says, laughing.

In response, she made a video, *Tribute to <Inside Looking Out> – For the male artists along my way*. In the video, she appears to be hitting each of the six artists – all friends from university, including Tozer Pak Sheung-chuen and Lee Kit – in the head with a stool. "It's the only time I've made art from a feminist perspective," she says. Ironically, *Tribute* is her most violent work.



Now showing at Wong Wai Wheel Art Space Two of Wong's 12 Posters for the shows in 2009

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# Leung Chi-wo



On the way to Leung Chi-wo's Fo Tan studio we make a wrong turn and encounter pig carcasses suspended from metal racks. The smell is overpowering. We retrace our steps and find our way to a spacious, orderly room with huge windows looking onto mountains. A dog (named Bebe, we later find out) greets us. The feng shui is so good that it no longer feels like we're in an industrial building.

It is in this tranquillity that Leung works, primarily in photography, with forays into installation, video, and painting. "I choose



**Baking** Leung's *The Spectacle of Space Consumption* (right after it's produced!), with Sara Wong Chi-hang

the medium according to the requirements of the project," says the Chinese University BA and MFA, who had his first solo exhibition in 1998. "But I'm very interested in working in photography. When I start a project, many times I'll begin by photographing. I've also found that if I'm at an artist residency outside the country, and I'm not sure what I want to work on, photography is a convenient starting point."

Many of Leung's projects are concerned with space. In *Invisible Domestica*, he explores how people adapt to the challenges presented by their home spaces in over 100 photographs; in *Work Space* he documents work spaces in

Asian art institutions like Asia Art Archive and Vitamin Creative Space in Guangzhou.

"I live in the city, so I'm quite concerned about landscape, and my relationship to space," he says. "I often examine urban spaces. I don't just think about physical spaces – sometimes it's a political space or a historical space." For his piece showing at the Museum of Art, he intertwines the personal, political and historical through landscapes and architecture, capturing our city's post-colonial condition in a thoughtful, yet matter-of-fact way.

# Adrian Wong

A Smiths record is playing on a black MacBook as we enter Roy Ng's studio, where Yale MFA-trained sculptor and installation artist Adrian Wong is at work on his piece for the exhibition. The smell of sawdust hangs in the air. A sheet of paper with mathematic equations and detailed measurements sits on a table in the main work area. It is apparent that Wong's latest endeavour is complex, and on a scale greater than any of his previous installations, including the multi-media piece *Sang Yat Fai Lok* (2008), a recreation of a live children's television show that starred one of his great uncles.

Wong, who was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois, takes a break from his preparations to chat. He has just returned to Hong Kong from Los Angeles, where he has been teaching sculpture and theory at UCLA, to execute this installation. "My practice has been really involved with exploring this place," he says. "Even the work I've done that's outside has had relations to Hong Kong." The thread of Hong Kong and Chinese culture runs through his works like *Tuhng Gwai Wan* (*Playing with Ghosts*); *Sak Gai* (*Chicken Kiss*); and *Hak She Wuih Tuhng Mau Jai* (*Triads with Kitten*).

When asked about his early approach to sculpting, he replies, "I was really enamoured with objects. To be able to make a thing, as opposed to a representation of a thing, I found to be very appealing. The work that I tend to do is not so much abstract representational sculpture. I tend to make things as what they are. My first year in grad school, I spent a lot of time learning how to build boats."

In recent years, Wong's art practice has become more meticulously thought out, requiring greater resources and precise execution. For this show, he is embracing the opportunity to take a risk and attempt an ambitious project that exhausts the limits of his talent, skill, and research abilities.



**Animalistic** Wong's *Sang Yat Fai Lok*





## Nadim Abbas

In our only studio visit outside of Fo Tan, we journey to Kennedy Town to meet Nadim Abbas, who studied sculpture at London's Chelsea College of Art and Design. Abbas also holds an MPhil in comparative literature from Hong Kong University, and is a member of bands The Yours and A Roller Control.

"Watch out for the coral," he says as we enter the room, which is filled with books and instruments, as well as items that figure in his installation for the exhibition. "I spend a lot of time walking around looking for objects that strike my fancy, particularly in flea markets, ten-dollar shops, and household goods stores," he notes. We walk by his kitchen, where he has a number of toy models in progress.

Abbas leads us to his office. There's a framed still from Adrian Wong's video *Hak She Wuih Tuhng Mau Jai (Triads with Kitten)* in the room. As we sit down to look at images of his previous work, primarily installation and photography, it becomes apparent that his art practice is steeped in reading and research. "I am one of those people who like to read instruction manuals from cover to cover," he says. During our conversation, he mentions stories and books by Herman Melville and Philip K. Dick, and references the 1986 Derek Jarman film *Caravaggio*. The title of a 2008 piece, *In the Penal Colony*, which showed at 1a space, is a nod to the Franz Kafka short story.



**Crime & Punishment** Abbas' In the Penal Colony

Currently, his thematic preoccupations have shifted, centring on psychology and science. "Science in an aesthetic way," he clarifies. "For example, I love all these anatomical drawings and illustrations in textbooks."

When asked about our city's relationship to contemporary art, he says, "It would be great if more people in Hong Kong talked about art like they talk about last night's television program; that is, if art could become more engrained in our day-to-day existence."

## Tsang Kin-wah

Tsang Kin-wah has been rather elusive these past few months. The 2005 Sovereign Asian Art Prize winner and 2000 Chinese University Bachelor of Fine Arts graduate declined to be photographed or interviewed for this piece, preferring to remain sequestered as he completes a new piece for the exhibition at the Museum of Art. He's undergoing a period of philosophical self reflection, questioning his art practice and refining his approach.

His public shyness brings to mind the reclusive Thomas Pynchon, which made us pursue a story about him all the more. We wanted to know about his MA in Book Arts from Camberwell College of Arts in London, and to explore his relationship to writing, text and visual culture. Tsang is most famous for his silkscreen canvasses featuring intricate floral patterns comprised of foul language and offensive phrases. Each piece presents an aesthetically pleasing, elegant representation of complex underlying emotion.

We exchanged scores of e-mails with Tsang, but our powers of persuasion could not overcome his need to remain in seclusion until his latest work is complete.

"He hates being photographed more than I do," says Lee Kit, when told of our epic attempts to meet Tsang.

"He was a few years ahead of me in school,"



**The enigma** Tsang Kin-wah at work on a commission (left); He comes from the sky or maybe the sea (right)



says Doris Wong Wai-yin. "I heard that his classmates thought he was mute during his first year because he never spoke."

"I can't imagine that Kin-wah would want to meet anyone," says Nadim Abbas, who has seen an early version of Tsang's exhibition piece. "Especially not for an interview."

From all accounts, Tsang's new piece is a departure from his pattern painting and installation. Though we haven't yet seen the work, we predict that it will mark a major evolution in his career. It will bring us one step closer to understanding the enigma that is Tsang Kin-wah.