

## OCULA CONVERSATION

# A conversation with Trevor Yeung

Artist, Hong Kong

---

Anna Dickie | Hong Kong | 28 Sept 2016

---



Image: Trevor Yeung. Photo: South Ho. Courtesy the artist.

---

Trevor Yeung is the first Hong Kong-based artist I met when I arrived to live in the city. Having graduated in 2010 from the Academy of Visual Arts, Hong Kong Baptist University, he was working at the non-profit Para Site when we were introduced. I would see him from time to time at art events, but it was some time before I saw his work. When I finally did, I found it conceptually intriguing, psychologically charged and somehow quietly emotional.

The first work by Yeung I encountered was a photograph in Hong Kong collector William Lim's home, *Sleepy Bed (Singapore Hostel 1)* (2011). It came from the artist's 'Sleepy Bed' series, an ongoing photography project he started in 2010 which comprises dimly lit images of individual men sleeping. The series suggests a familiarity between the photographer and the subjects, when in fact they are clandestine shots that the artist took of men he shared hostel rooms with. They embody voyeurism at

its most blatant; they are images of stolen intimacy which suggest both a longing for, and a fear of interaction. The work I saw in Lim's collection has ink-stained wood and engraved glass across its surface, partially covering the shadowy male figure; it is a reminder that in this work the body presents itself as an object, and any sense of intimacy is unilateral.

Yeung is a consummate observer of humans. In discussing the 'Sleepy Bed' series, he speaks of how emotionally secure people sleep with their body open, often with covers thrown back, while he himself feels less sure, sleeping fully dressed with the covers pulled tight. The series was presented at Art Basel in Hong Kong in 2015 in a solo exhibition at the booth of Blindspot Gallery. The exhibition, entitled *Garden Cruising: It's not that easy being green*, was selected as a standout presentation and Yeung was subsequently announced as one of the three shortlisted artists in the BMW Art Journey Award. Works from the 'Sleepy Bed' series were presented on the three walls of the booth, but in order to see them properly, fairgoers were required to weave through plants that formed a permeable barrier at the front of the booth. Yeung designed the arrangement having observed systems of visitor interaction at previous iterations of the fair. Characteristic of his work, the presentation explored a system of control insofar as his layout was intended to dissuade those less curious viewers from entering it.

An exploration of our social structures and the use of plants in Yeung's work is not unusual; he often uses vegetation and other living or natural forms as a pretext for describing human processes, systems and relations. For the 10th Shanghai Biennale (23 November 2014 - 31 March 2015), he presented *Maracujá Road* (2014), which consists of an elaborate bamboo and metal pergola-type structure situated above 80 potted passionfruit plants. The structure above the plants suggests an ultimate aspiration for their growth, yet an impossible one as they will never grow high enough. Catherine Shaw, writing for *Wallpaper\**, describes it as the standout work of the Biennale, and 'a striking metaphor of modern life'.

In this interview, Yeung speaks about his background as an immigrant to Hong Kong and about the ideas underlying his work. He also discusses a recent exhibition at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in Sydney, entitled *Sea Pearl White Cloud* (30 July - 24 September 2016). The show at 4A was the second stage of a project that was first presented at the Observation Society in Guangzhou, one of China's leading non-profit art spaces, from 2 June - 24 July 2016.

---

Tell me about your background?

I was born in Mainland China, and I moved to Hong Kong when I was very young. But we always travelled back to China. Every summer we spent in China (with my grandfather, or close to my father's restaurants). My grandparents were in a village; it wasn't fully developed.

When I was little there, was a great deal of what I refer to as leisure spaces. But then a great deal of development happened. My grandparents used to have a fish pond in front of their house, but later on due to construction, the pond started to become shallower and the fish disappeared. There were frogs.

I used to catch tadpoles there. My grandparents spoiled me. They had chickens and I kept the chicks as pets. I also had rabbits.

So I have always been interested in having pets. I had fish as pets. I ended up having an aquarium. We had a turtle.

And [laughs] ... where are we going with this?

This was the beginning of my interest in control! My art is always about control. When I went to high school, I had my own aquarium. I started to understand that to keep the fish alive you need to have a perfect system. You have to have the perfect oxygen system, and plant system and so on. You have to be careful that it runs well so the fish won't die.

So I became interested in this idea of making sure the system works well.

When I moved to university, I started to collect plants and found they were easier to handle. I was at [Hong Kong] Baptist University. It was good because they didn't require students to pick a major, so I could choose what I wanted to focus on. At this point, I started to include plants in my work.

In the past, I have tried to work with animals, but I don't really have the necessary understanding of how to look after them. I worked with koi. I wanted to work in relation to the movement of fish, but the fish would die. When you work with animals, you have to be very sensitive to moral issues.

Let's talk about an early work where you started to feel you had found your own voice.

I felt I started to find my own voice when I did my final year project. For that project I worked with visually impaired people. It was part of the Baptist University's course work.

Tell me about the work you created.

I worked with five visually impaired people. It was a work that used photography and sound. I presented pairs of images: one portrait of myself taken by the visually impaired person, and one image taken by me of the visually impaired person. I interviewed each collaborator, and in relation to the images, I also created a container with braille on it which contained a speaker that played a conversation between the collaborator and myself. The conversation was about how the collaborator felt about me. Only once you understand braille, can you read it. I don't want the audience to understand it though. I tried to learn to read braille (in Cantonese), and I had to translate and type it. I used nails to create the braille words.

The work related to my own fear of losing my sight. I wanted to trigger some thoughts about this in the audience.

Who were you most influenced by at that moment, and in relation to that work?

I was influenced by Sophie Calle. You might recall her 'The Blind' series (1986), in which she photographed people born without sight and asked them to describe their image of beauty. The works featured a portrait of a blind person and a portrait of what that person considered to be beautiful.

This was a seminal work for me because it was the beginning of me working out the type of artist I wanted to be. I wanted to create works that made people think, but I didn't want to direct the audience as to what to think. I wanted to trigger some memories or feelings.



Image: Trevor Yeung, *Live in Hong Kong, Born in Dongguan*, 2015. Courtesy the artist.

Para Site had a show called *A Hundred Years of Shame – Songs of Resistance and Scenarios for Chinese Nations* (2015). You did a work for that show, *Live in Hong Kong, Born in Dongguan* (2015), which used a fish tank. Tell me about this work?

To talk about my work, I have to first talk about a memory. When I was sitting the Hong Kong public exams, at that time, I had seven fish tanks. I worked with my fish tanks when I was trying to ignore the stress of my exams. Fish have nothing to worry about. I wanted to have that feeling. The fish cannot change anything, but they make me feel better. They help me escape from reality.

My room then was very small (about 3m x 4m). I shared the bedroom with my sister. My sister is very kind; she allowed me to have the fish. The sound of the fish tanks made it easier for me to sleep. Different people have different ways of relief, for me it is the fish tanks.

When Cosmin [Costinas] and Anthony [Yung] asked me to be in the exhibition, they said they wanted to talk about 'shame'. They wanted me to talk about experiences of being ashamed. I have had an experience of 'shame'. I was ashamed about my identity. I was ashamed about being an immigrant to

Hong Kong, ashamed I didn't belong to Hong Kong. But I was lucky because I came when I was in kindergarten, so I felt okay. I was lucky because I knew English and Cantonese. But some people come when they are in primary school, so they are behind in English and Cantonese. And so it is easy to identify them, and people in my class teased them about their accent.

When the children were teased in my class, I didn't say anything and I felt ashamed because of this. I didn't stand-up to the people teasing the immigrants. I was scared that I would get teased too. I didn't acknowledge that I was the same as them. My parents told me it was just a mistake that I was born in Mainland China; it was because I was born prematurely. So I felt it made me different from the other immigrants. I felt that while I didn't belong to Hong Kong, I also wasn't an immigrant. I was confused about who I was.

There is one way for people to know I was born in Mainland China, my identity card: the first letter of every identity card shows whether a person is born in Hong Kong or elsewhere. So every time I had to show my card or fill-out a form, I was very worried people would see that I wasn't born in Hong Kong.

When there are things that are hard to deal with, you always want to escape. You don't want to deal with difficult emotions.

So back to the fish tanks. I use them to escape, and I wanted the audience to have that feeling too. I wanted the audience to feel as though they were within the fish tank.





Image: Trevor Yeung, *Live in Hong Kong, Born in Dongguan*, 2015. Courtesy the artist.

---

I saw the work. It consisted of a chamber-like space that was created using fish tanks/aquariums. One could crouch down and enter a small enclosed space, and once in the space, one was surrounded by fish tanks and hidden from the world outside.

Yes. I wanted people to go into a space where they couldn't be seen. It was about being hidden.

I also chose fish farmed in China. Like me, they weren't originally born in Hong Kong. Those fish all came to Hong Kong in different ways, just like people in the 1960s and 1970s did, like my parents. In Hong Kong you can get different types of fish, the cheaper ones are farmed in China and shipped from China to Hong Kong. The better quality ones are wild caught, or they are the ones that are farmed in Germany. You can buy fish from the Internet, and you can get a certificate. But when I bought these fish, they didn't have a certificate, so they are second rate fish. I am intrigued by these fish. You know that everyone has their history that they don't want people to know. These fish—well, when you don't know about their actual background, well they just look like any other fish. But they are cheaper because they are bought off the Internet and they don't have a certificate.

There was a very special moment that came in relation to this work. A friend of mine visited the exhibition to see my work, and she went into the chamber and then came out and was very moved by it. She told me that she understood the feeling. She understood that feeling of being ashamed; she was also born in China, but she came later.

But of course, not everyone had the same experience. Another friend came to the exhibition. She finds social events very hard. She stayed inside the chamber for a while. It was a place to hide.

**You talked about control before. To what extent is your work about trying to control the audience?**

I know I cannot control the audience, but I try. I try and direct them towards a particular experience. You know it is like a Chinese garden, or a shopping mall in Hong Kong. There are lots of hidden messages that force you to follow a particular path. Exhibitions are like this, they are trying to direct you.

When I do an installation, I am focused on how to manage a space, and create an atmosphere. It is like a fish tank. I place things so the audience know how to move, but I don't control what they do exactly. I provide different choices, and when they leave maybe they see something, or maybe they see nothing. I try to retain a sense of flexibility.

My work is about creating a system. I am interested in creating systems.



Image: Trevor Yeung, *Garden Cruising: It's not that easy being green*, 2015, Art Basel in Hong Kong. Courtesy the artist.

You were one of the three shortlisted artists in the BMW Art Journey award with your solo exhibition *Garden Cruising: It's not that easy being green*, which was presented at Art Basel in Hong Kong in 2015. That exhibition seemed to me to be very much about exploring the system of viewing.

Yes. I tried to think about the 'system'. I was interested in how people engage with artwork or installation at an art fair. I previously worked at Para Site, and after I graduated I help co-ordinate the guided tours of Basel for Para Site. I understood the system of seeing a fair! I understood how people engage with the fair: how people are enticed to move into a space, into a booth. People always have a point outside a booth where they can stand to see the booth, without going in. Galleries are trying to create a booth so people can see the booth without going in, but equally there are galleries who choose not to show certain works, to entice you in or filter people out.

I wanted to design my installation to draw some people in, and filter others out. I didn't want those people who were not curious to come in. I used plants as a barrier that people had to pass around. Before this booth, I had a work in the Shanghai Biennale and had the chance to visit the [Yuyuan Garden]. I was very moved by how Chinese gardens deal with space. In these gardens, there are points created which force you to stop and stay. I was influenced by this.



This exhibition was about observing both the artwork and the space. This was my first attempt at trying to control the audience. This was a particular setting whereby I wanted people to follow a particular route.



Image: Trevor Yeung, *Garden Cruising: It's not that easy being green*, 2015, Art Basel in Hong Kong. Courtesy the artist.

At Art Basel, you showed works from your 'Sleepy Bed' series, in which you photographed people with whom you were sharing hostel rooms while they were sleeping. Tell me about creating these works.

Sleeping is a very private, intimate state. When I was young, I shared my room with my sister. When I went to a hostel, I would share the room with six to eight people. I would see all these people sleeping. I felt it was so weird to share this intimate space with these strangers. I felt insecure about people sleeping in the same room. When you meet people, you are always acting. But when you are sleeping, you are completely 'the real you'. When you watch someone sleeping, you can judge whether a person is secure or insecure. I have to wear clothes when I sleep because I am not confident about my body.

Other people don't care. I was interested in observing this.



Image: Trevor Yeung, *Sleepy Bed (New York Hostel 2)*. Courtesy the artist.

---

**Did you gain the permission to take the images you took?**

No, and I felt bad about this. When I took the image of people sleeping, I felt like I was observing an object. I etched over the body I photographed. Doing the etching was about reinforcing the idea of the body being presented as an object. It removed the image from being a documentation of a person

sleeping.



Image: Trevor Yeung, Sleepy Bed

Tell me about the show you will share with Lucas Ihlein at the 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, entitled *Sea Pearl White Cloud* (30 July – 24 September 2016). It is the second part of a project, with the first part having been presented at the Observation Society in Guangzhou.

I wanted to connect two art spaces, [4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in Sydney and Observation Society in Guangzhou], so when I started to think about the show, I thought about the two cities: Guangzhou and Sydney. The first thing I thought about was the climate: the temperature and the humidity. The humidity in Guangzhou is so high, and the feeling of being in this humidity is something that a person in Sydney cannot experience. When you move in Guangzhou, it is like you have a layer of moisture that moves with you. I wanted to re-create that feeling from Guangzhou for people who walked into the space in Sydney.

I was thinking about the way an art space often offers a contrasting temperature from the outside. When you are in hot places, it offers a cold climate. And when you are in places that are super cold, it provides a warm environment. They are places that offer comfort. So I was thinking about how the art space is a place meant to be comfortable for human beings, and they are also spaces that ensure the

protection of an artwork.

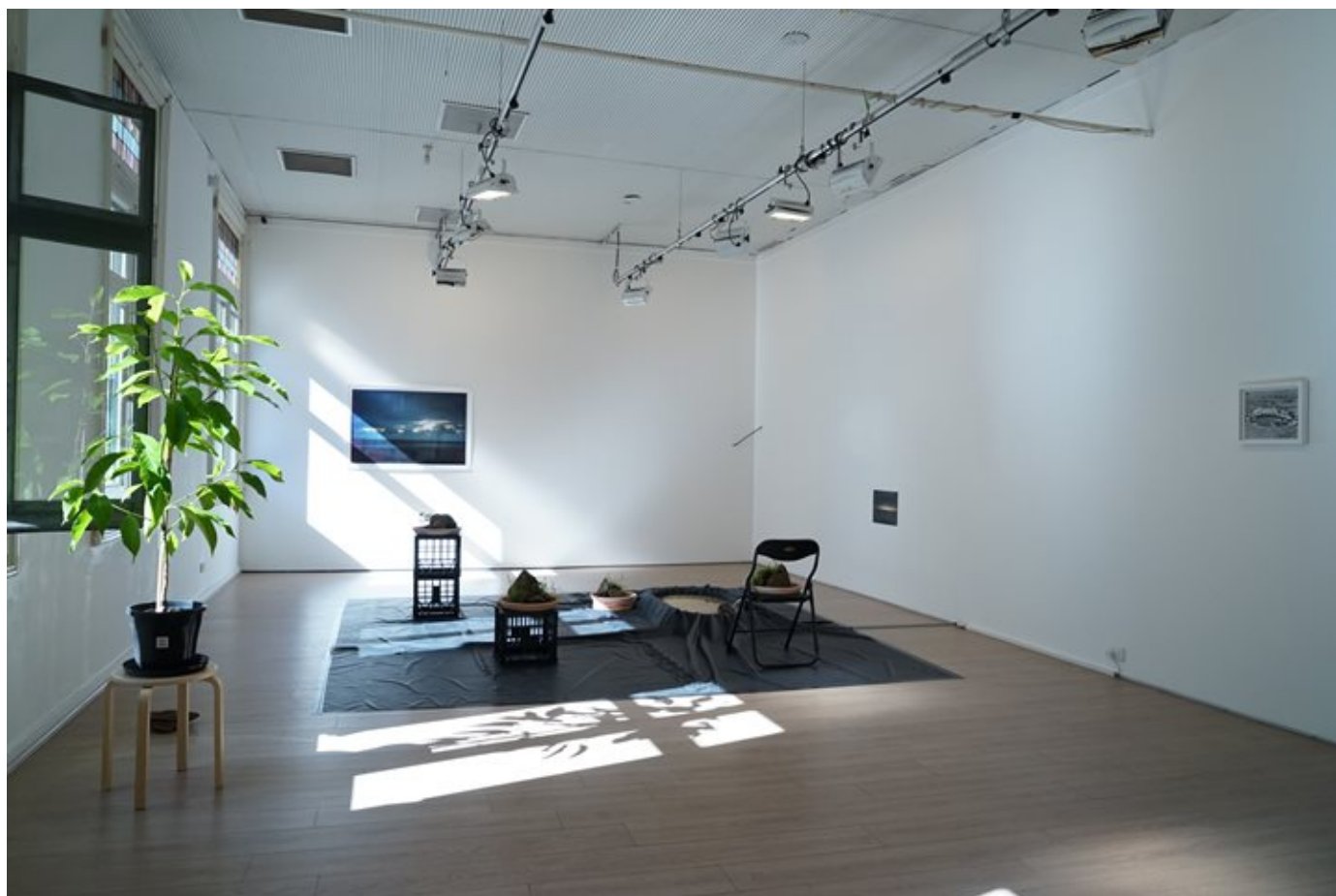


Image: Trevor Yeung, *Sea Pearl White Cloud* (30 July - 24 September 2016). Courtesy the artist.

---

So is this in some way connected to your previous work?

My work always deals with the physicality of the space it is shown in. I like to engage with the audience in terms of seeing how the work and the way it is presented impacts the audience. —[O]

*Yeung currently has an exhibition showing at Blind Spot Gallery in Hong Kong, 'The Sunset of Last Summer' (24 September – 19 November 2016).*