

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2012
VOLUME 11, NUMBER 1
10TH ANNIVERSARY YEAR

Yishu

典 藏 國 際 版

Journal of
Contemporary
Chinese Art

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ISSN 1529-4100
US\$12.00 NTS\$350.00
PRINTED IN TAIWAN

Abby Chen

The Best of Times: Lam Tung-pang's Long View Under Scrutiny



What might be the subject of the exhibition Long View Under Scrutiny? For Hong Kong-based artist Lam Tung-pang, it is a fanciful landscape crossing over time and distance, filled with found images and objects on plywood accompanied by Lam Tung-pang's own painting. His work is poetic, humorous, allegorical, and full of surprises.

Lam Tung-pang, *The Youngest and the Oldest*, 2011, acrylic, pencil, charcoal, clay, plastic models, and image transfers on plywood, 214 x 455 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.

Developed as an extension of the *Diorama* series presented in 2010, Long View Under Scrutiny exhibits new work that continues Lam Tung-pang's reflection upon self and environment. Investigating a culturally acquired perception of memory in comparison to reality in this exhibition, Lam Tung-pang placed one of his most personal and iconic works, *Folding* (2006), a self-portrait within a hinged wood box created during his four years living in London, alongside his most recent creations, including *The Youngest and the Oldest* (2011), a five-panel work on plywood completed in his Fo Tan Studio.

The juxtaposition of these two artworks illustrates the arc of the artist's versatility and imagination, which is manifested within and beyond himself to society and its cultural context. The most intriguing aspect of this exhibition is witnessing how Lam Tung-pang illustrates this sense of identity through a conscious turn of mind and direction. If *Folding* exemplifies a curious but protective individual displaced from home, then *The Youngest and the Oldest* represents a harmonic disjunction in form and substance that maps out his anxiety about the present. The gulf between these two bodies of work indicates Lam Tung-pang's transformation from a



Lam Tung-pang, *Folding*, 2006, charcoal and acrylic on plywood, 210 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.

conceptual artist to a cultural translator who visualizes today's Hong Kong in a post-1997 and pre-2047 era, the latter year marking fifty years after the handover of Hong Kong to China.

Demonstrating an affinity for how nature—its mountains and water—is painted within the realm of Chinese classical aesthetics, Lam Tung-pang foregrounds *The Youngest and the Oldest* with images of bare, dormant trees; he directly photocopied and transferred images from books on ancient Chinese painting onto the plywood that served as his “canvas.” He tinted the sky in the background in varying shades of black, indicating nightfall or dusk, and dotted it with stars. Sporadically positioned across the image are small, three-dimensional appendages made of clay and miniature plastic trees. The fresh, green, artificial-looking colour against the more subdued tones of the painting might seem awkward to those not from Hong Kong, but these objects represent the last detritus left behind from Hong Kong's long-gone manufacturing base of things like toys and plastic flowers. As a reminder of things precious and fun, objects such as these are embedded in the consciousness of Hong Kong residents, offering a homey and familiar invitation to a region's history and the artist's own childhood. Even at such a miniscule scale, these objects not only communicate a sense of the sublime experience of nature, they also inject playfulness and humour that balances



Lam Tung-pang, *The Youngest and the Oldest* (detail), 2011, acrylic, pencil, charcoal, clay, plastic models, and image transfers on plywood, 214 x 455 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.



the solemn ambience Lam Tung-pang has created in the overall painting. The paint is absorbed into the plywood, with its vertical growth rings irregularly spreading out, some strong and some weak, infusing the entire work with an ambiguous and hazy sense of uncertainty.

Lam Tung-pang, *The Youngest and the Oldest* (detail), 2011, acrylic, pencil, charcoal, clay, plastic models, and image transfers on plywood, 214 x 455 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.



At the lower center of the artwork, tiny silhouettes of two people in contemporary dress are positioned in a small boat, which, according to Lam Tung-pang, is also an image that he copied from a magazine. While the people in the boat provide a focal point from which to visually wander through multiple elements in the work, what really draws one's attention is the contrast of the ultra dense highrise buildings placed towards the top of the composition, which are painted in a way

Lam Tung-pang, *The Youngest and the Oldest* (detail), 2011, acrylic, pencil, charcoal, clay, plastic models, and image transfers on plywood, 214 x 455 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.

that resembles renditions of metropolises in comic books. Most striking are the vibrant colour and flickering lights applied to the highrises that juxtapose a bright area with the rest of the painting, which Lam Tung-pang has purposely left neutral-toned. This disparity of shapes and hues that Lam Tung-pang developed presents not only a style that has its own physical characteristics but an experience, a passage into an imagined land that is both ancient and present at the same time.

Born in 1978, Lam Tung-pang is part of a generation that grew up during the transition between two significant eras. He experienced the transition of Hong Kong from a colony of Britain to a postcolonial and supposedly autonomous region of China. Similar to how a generation of abstract artists emerged after World War II in America, the turmoil of Hong Kong after 1997 had a profound impact on Lam Tung-pang. His nationality shifted from British citizen to British National Overseas citizen to Chinese Special Administrative Region citizen, and, eventually, Chinese citizen. At least three

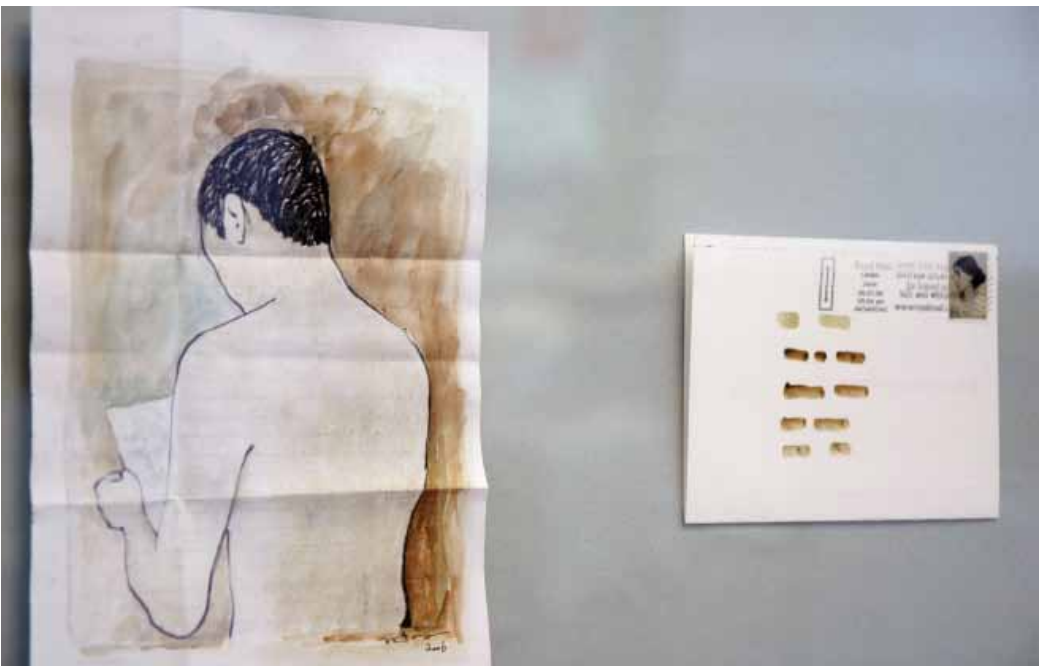
of these four identities existed in the short span of less than twenty years. Such a stretch of time dramatically carves out a sense of vicissitude that is portrayed in Lam Tung-pang's work, which encapsulates the changing cultural complexion of Hong Kong. Just as the title *The Youngest and the Oldest* suggests, aging and rebirth happen simultaneously: The young and the old meet to generate a transcendental experience acquired from Lam Tung-pang's combination of seemingly contradictory objects and images from various sources, resulting in the construction of an ambivalent environment.

This environment enunciates what one sees in Hong Kong from a distance: a booming city surrounded by water, stripped of noise, and transposed into a time tunnel with layers of memorable moments and fantasized escape. The brightly lit highrises in *The Youngest and the Oldest*, a signature component in this work, are also a signature of Hong Kong's cityscape, of which the love of light is an integral part. The work pictures Hong Kong's dreamy scenery at night as well as projecting a symbol of its prosperity, but the city here is muted and isolated in the ocean of a seemingly ancient time. This depiction of Hong Kong being trapped and cut off infuses a melancholic mood into Lam Tung-pang's constructed reality: It all seems so far away but also so close that we can taste it, touch it, and live it.



Lam Tung-pang, *Revenge of Nature*, 2010, charcoal and acrylic on plywood, 201 x 244 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

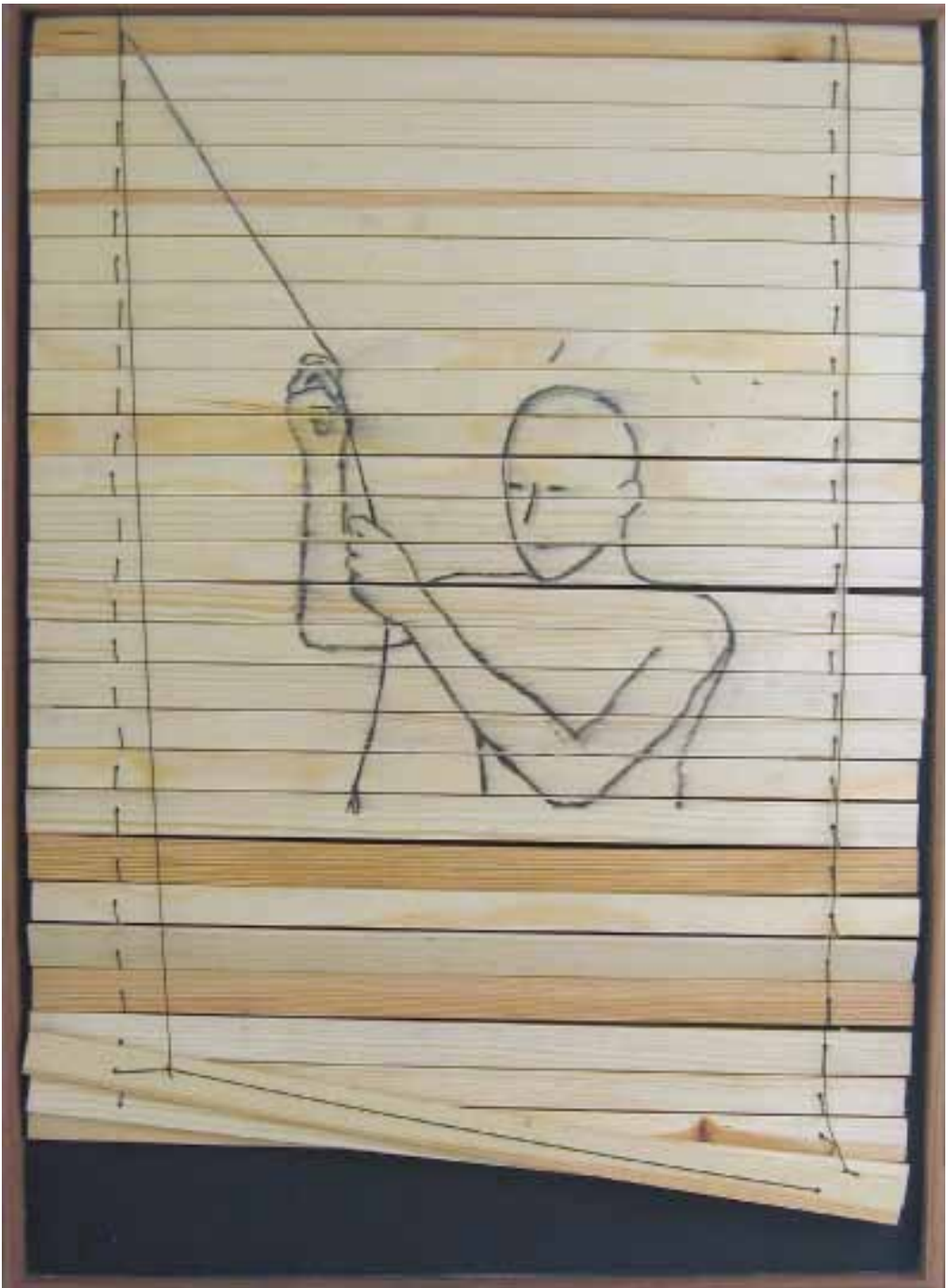
he has with himself in order to position himself within society. In fact, the idea of “self” has always been the center of Lam Tung-pang's work, except this more recent representation of the “self” has gradually expanded with his changing perception of his environment. This includes the huge figure in *Giant* (2001) assembled from discarded cardboard when he was still a college art student in Hong Kong; self-portraits on uneven surfaces such as unfolded



writing paper, squeezed Coke cans, wooden window blinds, and beach sand, all constructed during his stay in London during the mid-90s; and the two-dimensional silhouettes appearing in *The Youngest and the Oldest* with its tiny toy figurines. Attempting to get close to a culture when it seems to be fading away, Lam Tung-pang finds one part of himself becoming further removed from current society while the other part becomes more deeply engaged. As he tries to exist in both places, a tension in the work emerges that is both hopeful and pessimistic. *The Youngest and the Oldest* might be considered a scene of a dream that can only end in complete silence and darkness. Observing the two people on the boat as they look at the highrises, one feels that those two people are indeed the *self*, looking at a world full of splendour. Where the *self* sits is like a fairyland, beautiful but withered, poetic but bare.

Top: Lam Tung-pang, *Giant*, 2001, mixed media installation. Courtesy of the artist.

Bottom: Lam Tung-pang, *A Letter*, 2006, acrylic, charcoal, and postage stamp on paper, 59 x 87 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Lam Tung-pang, *Blinds*, 2005,
charcoal on wood, 44 x 60 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

The flickering buildings resemble a secular life, a life one desires from afar; yet why does that life seem so far away? The traces of this paradoxical state of being, of being neither withdrawn and alienated nor embracing and accepting, are the site for interpreting the distance between past and present for Lam Tung-pang.

2011 marks the tenth anniversary of Lam Tung-pang's professional career as an artist. When he started, in 2001, there was no infrastructure in place to become a full time artist in Hong Kong. He left for London in 2003 to pursue a master's degree and in hope of finding a new creative space. He finally returned to Hong Kong in 2007, and then he set up a temporary studio in Beijing for a short period of time. It had been exactly ten years

since the handover. It was also within those ten years that the contemporary Chinese art scene experienced tremendous change that affected Hong Kong's art and art market. In the vacuum of its cultural identity between two eras, Hong Kong inevitably finds itself at both the birth and the loss of its own voice, and this shift is evident in *Under Scrutiny From Afar*. For Lam Tung-pang, the four years he spent in London and the time he later spent in Beijing enticed him to confront cultural dislocation and its resulting angst. This trajectory provides insight into Lam Tung-pang's consciousness, as well as what invoked and redirected his later work on the choice of cultural context and the use of object, form, and material.

Hong Kong, now positioned in a new era beyond its colonial past of one hundred years, has again become a passive site of transition and synthesis, shifting interstitially from a marginalized colonial British-Hong Kong-Chinese multiplicity to a new marginalized postcolonial Hong Kong-Chinese multiplicity. Yet this direction seems more controlled by, and unified with, mainland China.

This changing cultural multiplicity is also metaphorically reflected in Lam Tung-pang's work on plywood, solid within, but retaining breathing room to observe from a distance. A Hong Kong detached from its former colonial past is half floating before its total docking with mainland China. However, what could have been a prime example of a postcolonial state, one that could look forward to its independence from the reign of the British, is problematized by the handover and by mainland China's precarious ideology. Hong Kong artists' new milieu is becoming further complicated in the midst of a rapidly changing Asia and the global marketplace for art.

When closely examining Lam Tung-pang's work and learning about his process, one has to wonder how he manages to synchronize all the different components. The magazine cutouts, image transfers from antique painting, and little sculpture-like toy models are taken out of their initial contexts and intertwined organically in his work like visual poetry. Things that used to be independently unrelated to each other now breathe together within one ecosystem, suggesting a coherent spirit of freedom and openness. What Lam Tung-pang wants most to offer is an invitation to play in his reimagined landscape, pieced together by different memories—some borrowed, some lived, some recreated. As he tries to converse with the self he sees in society, he still remains the ultimate witness, observing and creating at the same time. His thinking becomes the reality of his world—which is an imagined world in the best of times.

Notes

¹ The exhibition was held between October 14 and November 30, 2011, at Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.

Abby Chen

A Conversation with Lam Tung-pang

Abby Chen: You seem to have a sense of cultural independence and a strong self-awareness.

Lam Tung-pang: I am aware of myself because of my own story. But my awareness right now also reaches to outside resources. It is a really big change. My artwork before was spontaneous, and it traversed multiple ideas. Now I have clearer idea of what I am targeting. I systematically filter such ideas through a process of research. In the past I wouldn't spend months reading books to search for information.

Abby Chen: Before, when you were in the UK, you were retreating back to the body, the inner world, the self. Now it feels like you are projecting an imagined landscape, mountains and water, so where is your body now?

Lam Tung-pang: This question reminds me of another question I once answered unclearly, but now I understand it. Why did I put these small people in my landscape? I feel that I made an exit. Two drawings, *Diorama* (2010) and *Looking Backward* (2010), were made for the exhibition *Diorama: Painting and Mixed Media*, at Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong, in 2010. These artworks truly distinguished the relationship between myself and my work—I am both the maker of the subject and the observer.

Abby Chen: How do you describe your recent 2011 exhibition *Long View Under Scrutiny*, also at Hanart TZ?

Lam Tung-pang: Writing because of observation. For me it means that if you are clear about something, you should be able to write it down.

Abby Chen: Is this an extension to the works in UK?

Lam Tung-pang: No, my previous work was about my position as an artist, which was as an observer who examines society. In recent years, however, my artwork has been in direct dialogue with society. It is a bit similar to the work about the self within, for example, *Faith Moves Mountain* (2008), but now I place myself within society so I can have a conversation with myself in that context. Actually I am attempting to talk to society. The series of paintings I did for the exhibition *Where is the White Crow?* conveys how society is according to the way I see it.



Abby Chen: I think your work *Selling My Soul* (2010) at the Tate Modern is a very important piece. It directly fits into what you once said earlier about the way you feel you are consumed within the work, and with a process of existence and disappearance. This work connected your previous work to your current work.



Lam Tung-pang: *Selling My Soul* probably did have aspects of existence and disappearance, given the process of erasing the image of the drawing.

Abby Chen: It is really obvious. *Selling My Soul* (2010) is time based, like a performance. You started on site at the Tate Turbine Hall with charcoal, drawing on large pieces of paper, and then rubbed on the drawing with an eraser. The time that you were given to

Top and Left: Lam Tung-pang, *Faith Moves Mountain*, 2008, drawing on wood, Lamda print on dibond, text, drawing, 180 x 840 cm, photo: 90 x 30 cm each. Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art.

Lam Tung-pang, *Selling My Soul*, 2010, charcoal and eraser on paper, four panels 2.4 x 1 m each. Performance at Tate Modern, London. Photo: Leung Chi-wo. Courtesy of the artist.



complete the piece was shortened by The Tate while you were working on it, which created pressure for you to finish in haste. It seems to me that you were trying to find and locate the uncapturable in the notion of deleting your drawings.

Lam Tung-pang: Yes, indeed, like a performance. The erasing process itself further enhances the notion of existence because of the marks left on the paper. I kept this technique of erasing and used it on other artwork.

Abby Chen: You recently have done many works inspired by ancient Chinese ink paintings. What do you think about the concept of white space in these paintings?

Lam Tung-pang: To me, it's a space for breathing. In the beginning I used a lot of charcoal to draw the lines since lines are a major component of my painting. But in each piece I felt there needed to be breathing space. The quality I wanted, actually, can be achieved through a strong understanding of the history of Chinese painting. I discovered that there are the two aspects that I care about the most—the lines and the breathing space—so much so that I wanted to study it in order to deeply recognize the relationship or the method between my drawing and Chinese painting.

In traditional Chinese ink painting, I felt that both lines and breathing space existed inside of the paintings so I was searching to find how this was achieved. Through this whole process I was actually doing what I needed to do.

Abby Chen: You said before that you needed this breathing space in your work. Why could you not find it then, but now you can?

Lam Tung-pang: Because I was mainly following my instinct. I never directly connected it to a culture or knowledge. When I was in London, I felt that there were some things that I could not get in sync with in their culture. I think only when people become integrated can they use that culture as a genuine organic resource instead of it being something forced. In the meantime, I found what I have been searching for in classical Chinese painting.

Abby Chen: What do you wish for other than for this breathing space?



Lam Tung-pang, *Travel and Leisure 2506*, 2010, acrylic, charcoal, ink, pen, clay, plastic models, 195 x 122 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Lam Tung-pang: Serenity and distance—the distance that comes from being an observer. I was reading about how the life of an artist is segregated from society and community. What’s interesting to me is the distance between them. You know the concept of “escape” is a very important aspect of the Chinese literati. I want to study and research what happened to the literati at that time and how they created a distance from the everyday, especially in the late Ming dynasty to early Qing.

Abby Chen: This brings us to the consideration of the claim that Chinese culture originated from mainland China and is the source for all Chinese within and beyond China. People say that no matter how far you depart from your culture, you will eventually come back to find it.

Lam Tung-pang: The farther you go, the better it is when you return because culture and knowledge do not always stay the same; instead, they are constantly changing. They are always flowing. Because of this, things will always move forward. Just like ink. If one was to say that ink represents China, I would disagree because when you look at the rest of the world, well, think about how India has ink and India also has its own culture. So we cannot just say ink belongs to China. This is the perspective that arises when you look at things globally. The second thing is that even though the tradition is yours—take ink painting as an example—and you talk about the old times, yet without the ability to change, it’s meaningless. Creation is reinvention.

Abby Chen: The poet Bei Dao once said that if China were a traditional Chinese ink painting, Hong Kong would be the white space.

Lam Tung-pang: That does sounds like a poem.

Abby Chen: Although he is a poet, this makes a lot of sense with what you just said. If Chinese culture were indeed an ink painting, Hong Kong would be the space that provides the breathing room.

Lam Tung-pang: Hong Kong is not the only place. For me, anywhere other than mainland China provides that breathing room. I feel strongly about this. I remember looking at the magazine *Art in America*, whose cover read, “Made in China, Chinese Arts.” My question was why overseas Chinese, Taiwanese Chinese, and Hong Kong Chinese are not within this idea of “Chinese” as defined by the magazine.

Abby Chen: Why do you think some Chinese have this breathing room and some don’t? Why does it remain here in Hong Kong?

Lam Tung-pang: I can’t think of a reason other than the difference communist ideology can make to a society and its education. The New Asia College I attended was full of teachers who escaped from mainland China and migrated to Hong Kong. They brought the sinology before 1949 along with them. They were able to maintain and re-create the Chinese traditions in that kind of situation. In mainland China one would see only

the practices that came out of the art academies. The difference between the practices is not huge except in the case of the '85 New Wave Movement. That group did something very unique, while the rest were in socialist styles learned from Soviet Union.

Abby Chen: That situation is similar to what we just talked about, that unique outcome that happened exactly at the time society in mainland China shifted after the Cultural Revolution. The economic factor had not kicked in, while the political pressure was lessening. This interstice created some breathing room.



Lam Tung-pang: Yes, for example The Stars Group in Beijing during the late-1970s, and many others. But going back to your earlier question, if a lot of scholars had not migrated to a different society like Hong Kong, Hong Kong might not have been in the position of

Lam Tung-pang, *Far Away*, 2011, ink, acrylic and charcoal on plywood, 87 x 116 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

being the white space on the canvas. Mainland China itself exercises a very uniform control over its cultural system; the breathing room has no way to survive except on the outside. So that's why that breathing room migrated to Hong Kong or Taiwan with them. There are also traces of tradition of rituals and customs that are even stronger than those in mainland China that remain in Hong Kong.

Abby Chen: Hong Kong as a colony is therefore always in between two countries, mainland China and England. It's both connected to and detached from the mainstream. Hong Kong is a very prosperous economic entity without political sovereignty.

Lam Tung-pang: Funny you mention that. Your statement is correct in some ways, but according to what I know about Hong Kong, it is the opposite. Hong Kong thinks that it is mainstream and independent. It is not a nation or a city, but it has a strong sense of identity, as if it were a nation.

Abby Chen: This is the other half of what I wanted to discuss. Do you think it is because of this unique positioning that enables Hong Kong to gain the privilege of critiquing different cultures as both insiders and outsiders?

Lam Tung-pang: Yes. It's definitely an advantage to be both an insider and an outsider, but I don't think Hong Kong has ever used it to its advantage. This recognition of Hong Kong's positioning is really important if I think of it in terms of culture. In 2007, ten years after 1997, I felt that Hong Kong was somewhat lost. What I mean by lost is that it continued to argue about whether it wanted to become China or not and to argue that Hong Kong is small and is not even an important city. What I know is that Hong Kong has not done a lot of things it should have. I don't know if I would say that it wasted those ten years, but there have been a lot of arguments about it.

Abby Chen: How much of your work reflects that ability to critique other cultures?

Lam Tung-pang: I think I took a rather relaxed approach. The so-called tradition of materials or technique isn't a heavy burden, as I always freely use any materials around me. What differs from my generation and my professor Chan Yuk Keung's generation is that traditional Chinese culture was a really heavy burden for him. When he saw how we painted in our class, he felt a sense of lightness. The good thing was that we could pick up the traditions as we needed them and then let them go if we chose to.

Abby Chen: That's why I find there is a sense of freedom and playfulness in your work.

Lam Tung-pang: Cultural inheritance is always the term used when referring to Chinese culture, but not for my work. I simply start with some senses, like harmony and contradiction, a willingness to escape from a dusty world, flatness, and immaturity, etc. It is all about how I view and react to the world. Thereafter, I look around at what kind of culture and knowledge exist in those kinds of senses. Actually, at the beginning, I started with medieval painting as a reference, but now that I am back in Hong Kong, it's easier to look at actual traditional ink paintings rather than those you can find only printed in books.

Abby Chen: It is exactly because you don't have the burden of traditional culture that you don't need to feel you are attached to anything, and therefore it is easier for you to explore and identify what works for you.

Lam Tung-pang: Yes. The burden of cultural meaning is something that can make you suffer a lot once you begin to explore it. So when something like that does not mean everything to you, you are free to move around. I think this is the flexibility that I have.

Abby Chen: Once you begin to critique these different cultures, no matter if you are in Hong Kong or mainland China, or in disagreement with the contemporary or the past, do you feel that you might have a sense of superiority in culture then?

Lam Tung-pang: Actually, not superiority, but happiness and pride. Because a fifty-year guarantee on the "one country two systems" differentiates the 7.5 million people here in Hong Kong from the 1.6 billion Chinese from the mainland. There are some things we can do here but can't in mainland China, and in some way I think we deserve to be proud of that.

Abby Chen: Absolutely.

Lam Tung-pang: To enjoy a certain level of freedom might not only just create pride but also make one think about how valuable it is.

Abby Chen: That is also a privilege that can turn into a state of happiness and enjoyment.

Lam Tung-pang: One should treasure such privilege. To some degree, the infrastructure for art in Hong Kong, for example, is quite good, too. The Hong Kong art market is booming, although that has never been the driving force for local artists. On the other hand, local artists can find ways to get government grants or private funding for their projects even when they do not support the government's agendas or policies. Such an infrastructure allows freedom of artistic expression at a certain level. You also can find different kinds of audiences through partnering with businesses. These funders don't necessarily have to be related to the arts, but they can somehow support the arts.

Abby Chen: In London, you talked about how a city is not remembered by how much money it spends on establishing spectacular buildings, but by its history and culture.

Lam Tung-pang: Yes, this is a very important statement. When I went to London, I cared only about doing my artwork. It is actually kind of dumb because when people go to other places they should be looking around and having fun. But when I went, I didn't care about anything except my work.

Abby Chen: When people move to a different place, they can have two choices; they can integrate themselves into the new environment or they can re-create an environment to suit their own needs. You basically chose the latter.

Lam Tung-pang: Yes. While I was in London, there were a lot of things I didn't need to adjust to. The systems are quite similar. Like the red and green lights. And the streets have yellow markings on the surface, just like Hong Kong. There were aspects that I was familiar with and others that I wasn't.

Abby Chen: What was not familiar?

Lam Tung-pang: Surprisingly it was the change of four seasons. It inspired me in later works when dealing with the environment. It is really funny because I started to appreciate nature in London but I hadn't in Hong Kong, which is a tropical city throughout the year. But the supermarket, traffic, the queen-silhouetted coins, and the post office were similar. In terms of lifestyle, the change was just less than what I had expected.

Abby Chen: Probably if you went to the US or Japan, it would have been a big change.

Lam Tung-pang: When I went to Beijing I felt more of a change there. In London, the change is not so big; therefore it was easier to accept. But when I went to Beijing, I thought it would be the same because I was in China, and even though it is a different dialect I was still speaking Chinese. It ended up being really different, and it made me feel quite uncomfortable.

Lam Tung-pang, *Global Warming*, 2007, acrylic, charcoal, and wax on plywood, 248 x 160 cm. Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art.



Abby Chen: So which is the real “motherland?” [Laughter.]

Lam Tung-pang: When you buy something in Beijing, you have to bargain, and it is really tiring to do that. In Hong Kong and London, it is a set price and people will just pay it. When you have to bargain every day, you become fed up with it. When I came back to Hong Kong and then went to Beijing, I felt that Beijing was more foreign.

Abby Chen: What else was it about London that affected your work?

Lam Tung-pang: When I was in London, I was seriously thinking about why social issues were such an important matter in the UK. In Hong Kong arts education, social issues were never a focus. We were all under the same British education system. But in our schools here in Hong Kong, we only learned certain aspects of art, like the visual elements. We never learned about consumerism, political party differences, or what types of artwork can be created out of various kinds of discourse. Even in college, we never explored such perspectives.

Abby Chen: This is exactly why, as you said, Hong Kong is in a unique position that might have created a blind spot within its society—once it was a colony, and now it is a special district of China. It is somehow unable to project its voice because of a lack of sensitivity towards all social issues.

Lam Tung-pang: There is little direct relationship between my work and social issues. The change in Hong Kong from 1997 to 2007 is related to the new generation of young people. What I question is the education I had in high school and college. How many courses did we have for our generation that were actually about social issues?

Abby Chen: Yes, Hong Kong’s younger generation. I was quite moved by them when I saw their commitment to their city. They protested night after night to save the Star Ferry Station from being demolished. So now that more than a decade has passed since the handover, what does mainland China mean to you?

Lam Tung-pang: Funny, I have two very different impressions. One comes from my parents, where mainland China is a backward country with a lot of illegal bribery, and everything is fake but looks real. There is no freedom, and all the relatives in China are greedy. All of them will ask you for money, but when you have problems, no one will help you. Police will arrest you randomly; everything there for my parents is negative; they really hate going back to mainland China.

Abby Chen: That was the first perspective. What was the other perspective?

Lam Tung-pang: The second one is right now, when I go back to mainland China's art scene and meet new people. What's weird is that I always thought of China as a few thousand years old, but it is more like a newborn baby in that everything seems possible. I remembered how shocked I was when meeting a curator who was ten years younger than myself (I was born in 1978). I don't know what terms I can use to describe it.

Abby Chen: I would compare it to the cowboys of America or the prospectors during the Gold Rush era.

Lam Tung-pang: Each year I go back to Beijing, there is always something different. What I found positive is that a lot of things are possible, such as the egg-shaped opera house in Beijing and the CCTV Building. In Hong Kong the situation is you that can't build this or you can't build that. This also makes me question whether freedom can provide the diversity or the possibilities. One assumes that there is more freedom in Hong Kong than in China. But in Hong Kong, in the middle of this freedom, there lie bureaucracy and a system that make a lot of things not possible.

Abby Chen: Well, the possibility is also accompanied by the danger of going to extremes. There are a lot of issues about the safety of many of these spectacular buildings. When you learn more facts about what goes on behind the scenes in mainland China, I'd rather not have such possibilities. Hong Kong has a democratic system to scrutinize the process; at the same time, its development and planning are sort of handicapped by the real estate industry. This brings us to the next question. How do you see the connection between an intellectual and an artist?

Lam Tung-pang: There is some connection. Being an artist is just one of the ways a person can be. An intellectual, to me, is closer in meaning to how you can be as a whole. You can be an artist without knowing how to be a person, but I think you should know how to be a person first, before you become an artist. This can relate to a lot of things. Last year I painted a bunch of black crows and titled it *Where Is the White Crow?* I got the idea from a Chinese proverb saying "all crows are black," which means that something or someone (bad) is no different from all the others. This proverb could be understood as the collapse of one's utopianism towards relationships or careers. That was exactly my experience in 2010. For example, why did I go teach art in college? When I graduated, one of my first statements was that I did not want to teach. I made this statement because in Hong Kong, if you want to be an artist, you have to become a teacher first in order to get paid and financially



Lam Tung-pang, *Where is the White Crow?*, 2009–10, acrylic on canvas, 365 paintings, 30 x 30 cm each. Courtesy of the artist.

Next page: Lam Tung-pang, *Centuries of Hong Kong*, 2011, acrylic, charcoal, and pencil on plywood, 425 x 717 cm. Commissioned by the Hong Kong Legislative Council. Courtesy of the artist.

survive. Between me, the gallery, and other people, I found out that there are a lot of things I don't understand or appreciate. Johnson Chang Tsong-zung at Hanart TZ gives me a secure income, which, compared to the rest of Hong Kong, is ideal because he doesn't control what I do. It is really good because I get to follow my own interests, and it gives me a stable environment.

The reason I went to England was that if I couldn't find people or institutions to support my work in Hong Kong, why not try other places? For example, I have done at least one hundred interviews during the past five years. Some of them just pissed me off, and others were meaningless. But I also hoped that I would meet someone like you one day, to discuss issues in an articulate way.

So to go back to the relationship between an intellectual and an artist, I would say the identity of an artist is important in the art scene of Hong Kong. Within these ten years, my striving to be a full time artist in Hong Kong is already a kind of performance. And I consider it a political statement. It is against the general sentiment of "There are no full time artists in Hong Kong." This is also the push and pull that one experiences in being an artist.





Abby Chen: Do you think such a statement is important?

Lam Tung-pang: This is indeed very important. Some of my classmates and I want to validate that being a full-time artist is actually possible. From that perspective, it is a political statement.

Abby Chen: Do you also feel privileged as a Hong Kong artist?

Lam Tung-pang: We have the privilege to approach a lot of things firsthand. No matter if it is resources or information.

Abby Chen: Based on your experience, is this the best time in terms of artistic development for Hong Kong artists?

Lam Tung-pang: Yes. It is the right timing for artists in Hong Kong, because the market is becoming mature, and, as you were saying, we have freedom.

Abby Chen: But you always have had freedom.

Lam Tung-pang: Not just the freedom; it is also the attention we are receiving, and the market contributes to that. The energy or power of these three—the freedom, the attention, the market—are balanced right now. It won't suddenly explode with one having more influence than the other. It's a good balance and the options you choose will depend on what type of artist you are. It is also based on what project you want to propose to the galleries and institutions in Hong Kong. The future of the art scene is also getting better, more positive, and brighter.

Abby Chen: Why are you so optimistic?

Lam Tung-pang: Because these three aspects are growing. I can feel it. You can be doing good artwork at home, but if you do not know how to expose or present it then the effort will just be wasted. You can't say that Hong Kong's market is really good, but it does exist, and even though it doesn't result in a lavish life style, at least it is enough to live on. That is why this is a good balance.

Abby Chen: Have you ever experienced this kind of balance before?

Lam Tung-pang: Never. Before I went to the UK, Hong Kong didn't have this type of market. And I never met curators and people who I could have a dialogue with like I am having with you. When I came back, I wondered whether it was the art scene or me that had changed. I couldn't figure out the difference.

Abby Chen: While it was very difficult before, now you can be a full-time artist.

Lam Tung-pang: There is also more media coverage, like news or interviews with visual artists. These aspects of bringing attention to art are expanding, and it is affecting society. The change is very obvious for me and for some

people I know. From 1997 to 2007, Hong Kong had been searching for its identity. What's funny is that Hong Kong does not belong to China. but at the same time, it does. I don't know if this is like the 1.5 generation immigrant you talked about, a state of being that is not a native but no longer a foreigner. This does seem like us—those who are living here in Hong Kong.

Abby Chen: Absolutely.

Lam Tung-pang: Administratively, much of Hong Kong has returned to the way it was mandated by China, but its culture and lifestyle won't return for at least fifty years. These fifty years are probably the most exciting. This environment is very unique; you can trace 2,000 years back and then predict 2,000 years into the future, and you might not find many moments like this. But these moments will exist in these fifty years, and already we have witnessed change with our own eyes. Those who were born after 1997 now go to school and sing mainland China's national anthem, but when I was younger, we didn't have it. We are exactly in the moment of the shift.

Abby Chen: But your generation is also ephemeral. Once it is gone, it's gone.

Lam Tung-pang: That is why I said that this period is so interesting. It is a unique period that will appear only in this era. After one hundred years, if we become fully integrated into China, there may no longer be a Hong Kong dollar bill, and our identity will not be found anywhere. Perhaps that's why so many possibilities could happen at this moment.

In these past few years, the feedback all the foreign curators I have talked with gives me hope for Hong Kong because they think that Hong Kong itself is amazing and interesting. It's like your having such an interest in Hong Kong. It is starting to get easier to meet such people. It used to be very hard for me because many curators didn't have the time to stay in Hong Kong for very long.

Abby Chen: It's indeed interesting when I look at your work. I always say that you cannot know only how to fight, but you also need to know how to dream. It takes us to a different place, not just to reality, but to a level above it. After talking with you, I can see possibilities exist for Hong Kong's artists. This period of Hong Kong provides opportunity for them to dream and play. Tsang Tsou Choi, the "King of Kowloon," who was exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2003, was one of those who has the ability to reimagine himself and the environment. Through his temporary occupation of making claims on the street of Kowloon, he ultimately transformed the everyday environment. One thing you said was quite memorable to me: "Open up the possibility of communication and imagination to let people freely come and go." I hope artists in Hong Kong can always achieve that by creating an in-between space that allows both sides to come in and play.

This interview was conducted in Cantonese and English in Lam's Fo Tan Studio in Hong Kong on June 9, 2011. Transcribed and translated by Claudia Chau.