

Contemporary Art in Hong Kong

by Caroline Ha Thuc



The artists, their works, their paths

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the place, is it even possible? Artists are not in agreement on this question. Many refuse to think in terms of a Hong Kong identity, it being too limited and uncertain, and liable to restrict their artistic practices. For others, it nonetheless provides a means to take an overall look at current creation. The young generation is less concerned by the issue: the date 1997 means nothing to them, as for example to Roy Ng, who was aged 11 at the time of the handover.

This difference in outlook represents a dividing line between the generations, and what each attaches to the notion of identity is in constant flux. This division has been

perfectly illustrated by the video 'Drummer' (2008) by Yuk King Tan. In it we see a poor immigrant who has worked hard all his life compared with his son, who, ignorant of the sacrifices of his forebears, wants to become a musician. Yuk herself is the daughter of a Chinese family that settled in New Zealand; she was born in Australia in 1971 into a migrant Chinese culture and was raised squeezed between the frustrations caused by certain values and an open outlook on others.

Today settled in Hong Kong, working on the fringe of politics and stimulating a constant dialogue between the different actors in

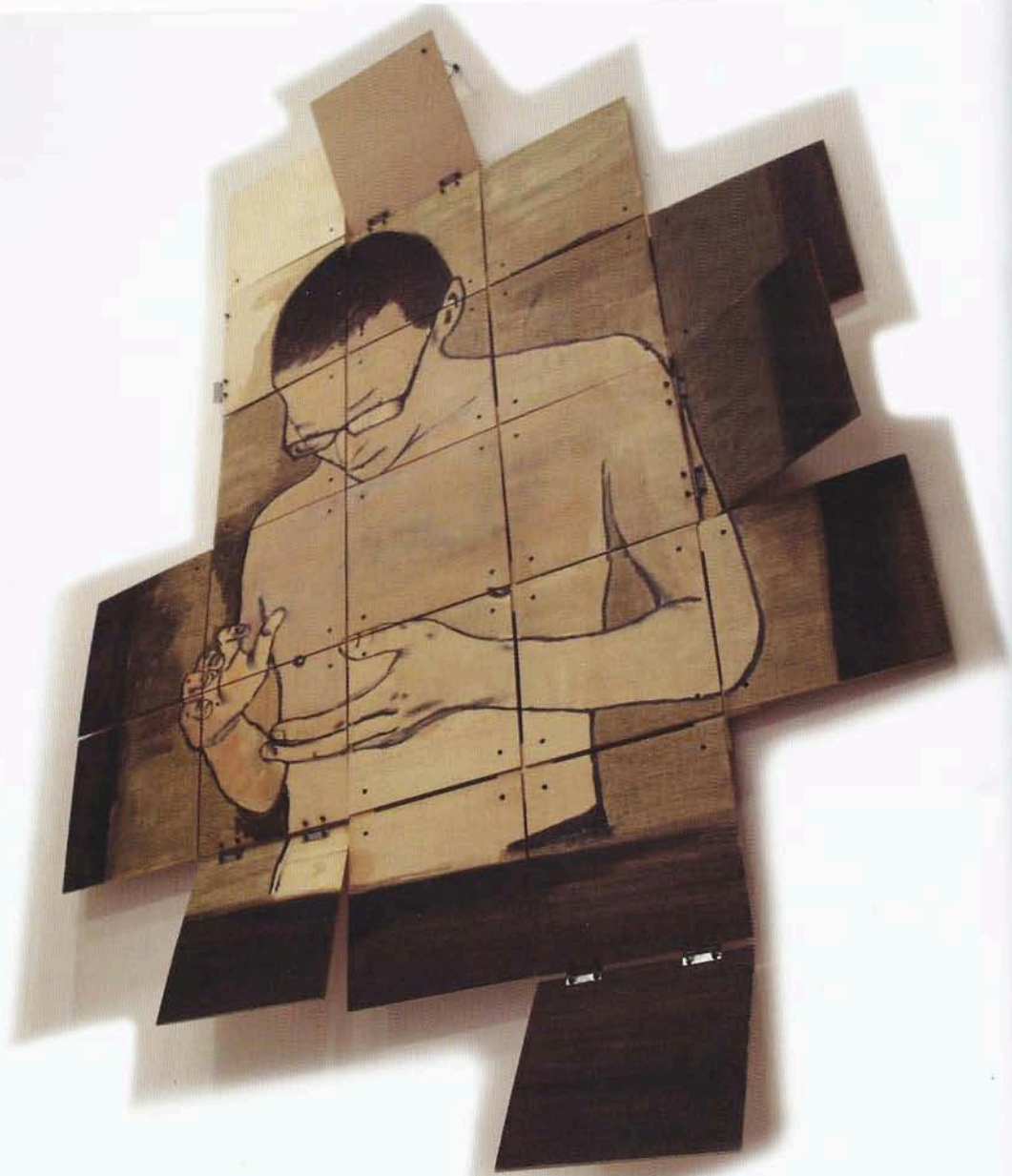


Lam Tung-pang, 'The Youngest and the Oldest', 2010. Acrylic, charcoal, pencil, clay and plastic models on plywood, 210x450 cm. Courtesy of the artist. Identity is like this boat advancing inexorably between buildings and passes through time and social, political and economic changes. It lies outside nationalisms: true identity is what each of us feels in our deepest being and what gives meaning to our life. It is passed from parent to child and generation to generation. The artist reflects on this passage of time and cultures and bases the notion of identity more on a sharing of values than on the placement of national boundaries.

Britain. Together they offer a particular identity of Hong Kong related to economics and materiality.

An interesting point is that an increasing number of Hong Kong artists are not from China but elsewhere in the world, like the Frenchman Cédric Maridet, the artists of Map Office, and Yuk King Tan. The city offers an alternative to the strictly Chinese universe. Moreover, many Hong Kongers have studied abroad, and in doing so have intermixed their cultural referents and issues of identity. Nadim Abbas is a good example: the son of a Chinese mother and a father of Indian and Islamic minority origin, he was raised in a Western culture, schooled in London, and does not read Chinese.

Still, the question of identity continues to resurface while relationships with China remain a subject of heated debate. Beijing attempted to establish a sense of national



Lam Tung-pang, 'Folding', 2006. Charcoal, acrylics on plywood, 210x150 cm. Courtesy of the artist. This folding self-portrait was made by the artist after spending three years in London where he felt the need to define himself. It is one of the few self-portraits to exist in Hong Kong contemporary art, where artists rarely deal with subjective questions, or do so obliquely.

identity in Hong Kong by imposing a common educational programme on the territory that chooses to overlook the events of Tiananmen Square and praising the single party system. When this project was viewed by the citizens of Hong Kong as an attempt at brainwashing, it was rejected following protests in autumn 2012, thus reopening debates on the definition of 'Chinese spirit' and the place of Hong Kong in the China of tomorrow.

Passages with Lam Tung-pang

The special nature of the Hong Kong identity, if there is one, will expire in 2047. This passage is well illustrated by the works of painter Lam Tung-pang. Though he paints in the style of Chinese landscapes, he does not particularly try to embrace the classical cultural tradition. On the contrary, his oeuvre records the ease with which he slips from one gesture or aesthetic to another. It integrates the different and contradictory fluxes of a society in constant movement: journey and landscape are essential as links between places and times, memories and dreams.

On the first page of Lam's schoolbook, the pupils, who like him were mostly born in Hong Kong, had to fill in the box 'home province', which referred to the place of birth of the pupil's parents in China and to the place where a part of the family still lived. The artist (b 1978) has claimed he long remained baffled by this question. For him, China had always been both close and remote, and simultaneously a constant reference and an abstraction. In 2003 he

decided to leave for London, seeing no future in Hong Kong for himself as an artist. There, where most people do not know where Hong Kong is located, his art was categorised as Chinese, whereas in Hong Kong he was considered Western. This paradox sowed confusion in him as to his identity.

The London years were difficult for Lam Tung-pang. On his return to Hong Kong, he produced a series of self-portraits, and then, very rapidly, his search for himself took another turn, one that lay beyond his subjectivity: by turning towards traditional art, both Chinese and classical Greek, he finally discovered an intangible basis from which to work. Today, he attempts to grasp this archaic aspect of culture through a fluctuating and elusive reality of which identity is only one facet.

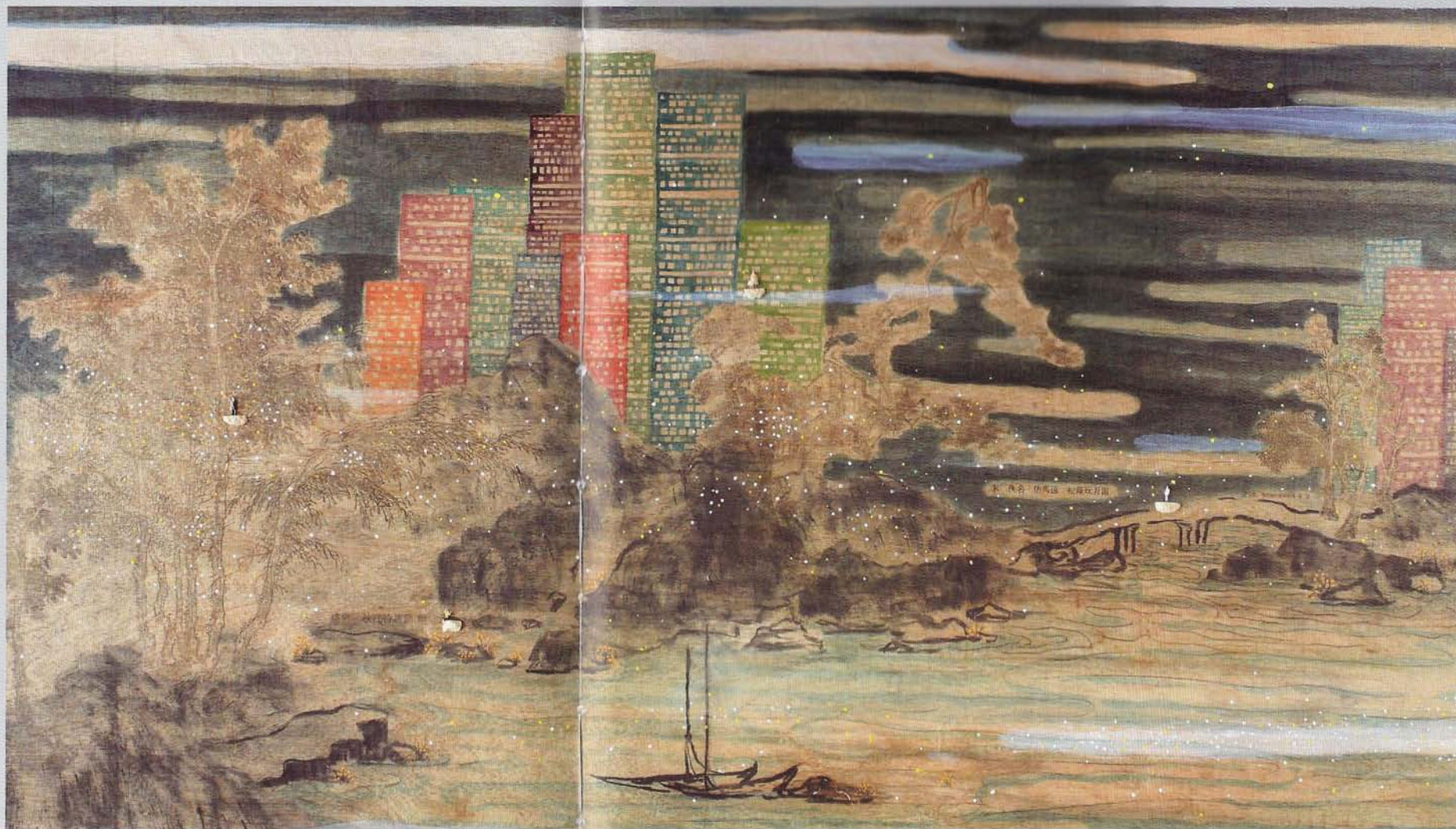
His self-portrait marks a change in his relationship with the world: from a distant observer turned in on himself, he has initiated a dialogue with the society in which he wants to become integrated. The fact that his depiction of himself is capable of unfolding is revelatory of his preoccupation with his personal desire to open up and establish a distance from his self. Actually, the fact that Lam Tung-pang feels as much Chinese as he does Hong Konger is not of importance. To him, the question of identity does not rest only on nationality: it is also an issue of his status in society. What is it to be an artist? Who am I as an artist? And who are we in this new global society, linked to both nature and civilisation?

Lam Tung-pang,
'Travel and Leisure'

Lam Tung-pang, 'Travel and Leisure', 2012. Charcoal and scale-model on plywood, 160x90 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Lam Tung-pang's works hover between paintings and installations and start with find their development in the matter he uses. More instinctive than meditated, his practice involves the artist in a physical dialogue with his materials, which is itself a metaphor for his relationship with the world and himself. When he started out, he painted with oils and canvas but found himself unsatisfied

with these materials. One day he picked out an enormous cardboard box he found in a waste bin and used it as a support to paint on. It was then that he understood how important the matter is, both as a tool and as a support. He gradually became more aware of the delicacy of the materials he used, the grain of the wood, the feel of sand, and so on. His works always comprise



several layers of matter and the possibility of dialogue between them. Wood can absorb colour, which in turn reacts to contact with the wood, sometimes conflictly. In the end, everything finds its place. This approach to reality is very Taoist, being based on a pre-existent order that ends by re-emerging. When he employs this course, Lam feels at peace. Sometimes he burns the wood, as he

did in 'Past Continuous Tense', a landscape of pine trees drawn with charcoal, but the violence of this act is well assimilated into the rest of the painting – as when inner conflicts we suffer become appeased. Although he makes no attempt to identify himself through his Chinese heritage, his work has its roots in the tradition of classical Chinese painting. His ink drawings in

particular are reminiscent of those of the great masters like Xia Gui (active circa 1180-1230), who was known for his 'axe blow', when the brush cuts diagonally across the surface of the support, and for skimming the paper with an uncharged brush. In this work, Lam uses hatching to represent rocks whose mass becomes lost in the twilight, and a precise line drawing to depict the leaves on the trees.

The format of the second painting represented is particularly unusual, being a long rectangle that lies between the form of a traditional roll and the classical format. Produced in 2012, this work is part of the first series the artist worked on in this format. Its horizontality gives the work a sense of narrative: the eye runs from left to right, rising unconsciously towards the horizon, a mysterious point situated at the end of the unconventional and disproportionate bridge. Like the artists of the Northern Song tradition (960-1127), Lam invites the observer's gaze to pass from the foreground into the distance without defining the spaces, and thus allowing the eye to roam around the landscape. Lam Tung-pang includes points of colour in his works, like airborne specks that counterbalance the black brushstrokes and the dark brown of the wood on which he works. These points, called *dian*, are traditionally used to create atmosphere and light in a painting, and are seen in particular in the work of Shi Tao (1630-1707), who uses

small spots of pale pink or blue to suggest a hazy light. The recycled wood on which he works accentuates the impression of the movement of nature and blends in with his forms. On the left of the painting, sinuous vertical lines help to suggest the rustling of the trees, while aureoles form strange waves on the surface of the water.

Two worlds seem to confront one another: the trees and rocks amassed at the bottom of the painting and the pair of boats on the water versus the forest of skyscrapers attempting to insert themselves into the landscape. Painted in colour and without contour, the style with which the skyscrapers are represented conflicts with the rest of the work: standing there, they give the impression that one day they might dissolve into the sky around them.

In Lam's work, the city is as though attenuated. We do not hear its sounds or feel its frenzied energy, so it is as though it is seen through the veil of a nostalgic dream. The bright colours of the added elements jar with the rest of the landscape and are like the vestiges of the industrial buildings that spread throughout Hong Kong before manufacturing was delocalised to China. They correspond to another stratum of the territory's history and memory. The figures, small in size, are there as though to offer some sort of escape. Modelled most of the time in plastic, they are markers in time, reference points for the observer to identify with.

Lam Tung-pang, 'Past Continuous Tense' (detail), 2012. Charcoal, image-transfer and acrylic on wood, 244x1560x5 cm. Courtesy of l'artiste.

