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Installation view of **ISAAC CHONG WAI**'s (left to right) *Haribo Wall – Gold (Under Construction)*, 2017–19, Haribo gummy bears, each 12 × 24 × 5 cm or 12 × 12 × 5 cm; and *Rehearsal of the Futures: Police Training Exercises*, 2018, two-channel video: 18 min 2 sec, at "Is the World Your Friend?", Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong, 2019. All images courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery.

IS THE WORLD YOUR FRIEND? ISAAC CHONG WAI

WEB REVIEW BY KAREN CHEUNG
BLINDSPOT GALLERY

HONG KONG GERMANY



At the entrance of Blindspot Gallery hangs a portrait of artist Isaac Chong Wai dressed in a black tank top, his face impassive. Next to his left ear is a plum-colored bruise with an outline that hints at the bottom of a glass bottle. *Self Portrait: The evening when I was beaten up by a stranger with a glass bottle* (2015) is the memento of an attack that occurred in Berlin—where the Hong Kong artist is based—and that prompted his friend to tell him, “The world is not your friend.” Chong’s solo exhibition, titled “Is the World Your Friend?”, transformed residues of violence from human history into art, asking: Could we dismantle these traumatic events and imbue them with new significance? Could they even perhaps be beautiful?

Such questions arise in *I Dated a Guy in Buchenwald* (2013), a framed piece of plain paper with just four lines of text. For this work, Chong asked a man known as “François” to write about their date at the site of the Nazi concentration camp. François describes how the pair shared a kiss, concluding: “Then I knew there was hope for I had just experienced human warmth where I least expected to.” In a similar act of redress, *The Silent Wall* (2014) depicts Chong’s attempts to cover up bullet holes in the walls of Sarajevo, a city that has been the site of violent conflict as recently as the Yugoslav Wars. In the performance/video, Chong engages in what resembles a game of whack-a-mole, but the exercise is both naïve and futile, for he has but two hands—every time he covers a new wound left by gunfire, he first has to remove a hand from another.

Another performance/video piece, *Rehearsal of the Futures: Police Training Exercises* (2018), sees police drills slowed down so that the moves recall dance steps, their unnatural grace jarring with the foreshadowed violence encapsulated within the performers’ black riot gear. In one segment, the performers whisper to each other neutral phrases such as “There is no protest.” However, considering the increasingly harsh crackdowns on dissent in Hong Kong and elsewhere, the phrase takes on the tone of a chilling, authoritarian imperative. The artwork description states that “Through such abstract and distorted motions, Chong asks whether beauty can be found in confrontation, and if such beauty can lead to reconciliation.” But this issue is moot when there is no sign of the violence inflicted by the baton, the victims of which are unlikely to ever see the moves as “poetic, gentle caresses.”



ISAAC CHONG WAI, *Self Portrait: The evening when I was beaten up by a stranger with a glass bottle*, 2015, archival inkjet print, 40 × 27 cm.



Still image from ISAAC CHONG WAI's *The Silent Wall*, 2014, HD single-channel video: 10 min 43 sec.

The potential of soft power—of persuasion and appeal over force and coercion—is explored in *Haribo Wall – Gold (Under Construction)* (2017–19). Built using bricks fashioned from melted-down Haribo gummy bears, the sticky barrier suggests that even a seemingly harmless element can be transformed into a sickly, menacing tool for separation. Still, there is an unsettling sense of childish delight as one probes the squishy wall with one’s fingertips, watching how any marks left behind are quickly erased as the material bounces back to its new melded form, resilient as ever.

The palpable absence looming over the exhibition was context and commentary on the events to which the works allude, from the Holocaust to current abuses, such as separations of migrant families at the United States border. This is not to say that Chong himself has not given these issues deeper thought, as indicated by the text on his website, but the exhibition

seemed to prioritize its ability to play on various senses as it implored us to observe the beauty in horrific acts. Yet aesthetics cannot be viewed in a vacuum. The question for our times is not whether or how violence can be beautiful, but how we can engage in a discussion on violence bearing in mind the lives at stake. By aestheticizing violence and accepting its occurrence as a matter of fact, whose voices are we erasing? While beauty could lead to reconciliation, more often it leads to distraction. Or was this the point—a thought experiment into the implications of separating art from the circumstances of its creation? By largely stripping the works of their historical and political contexts, Chong may have asked the most intriguing question yet.



Isaac Chong Wai's *"Is the World Your Friend?"* is on view at Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong, until March 9, 2019.

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