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# SOUTH HO SIU NAM

Forces of a city are traced in images around  
the artist's studio

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY YSABELLE CHEUNG



South Ho Siu Nam at his desk in his Fo Tan studio.

The roughly two-hour journey from Hong Kong Island up to the historic industrial area of Fo Tan requires venturing through a series of interconnecting routes by train, bus, and on foot. On my way there to see South Ho Siu Nam, I glimpsed fleeting slices of Hong Kong: passing Admiralty, where the city's main government offices are located, I remembered the neon-yellow umbrellas, spindly tents, and flapping banners brushed with calligraphic letters of past social uprisings; across the water in Kowloon, there were semi-built lots aching for the long-delayed West Kowloon Cultural District; and on the roads trickling down to the building where Ho's studio is situated, a thicket of healthy sprouting trees instantly recalled scenes of last summer, when a super cyclone uprooted and devastated much of the city's wildness.

These images were a fitting prelude to Ho's practice: The city and its people are the most enduring and intimately studied subjects in his works. Ho was born in 1984, the year Britain and China agreed to the terms for transferring the sovereignty of colonized Hong Kong to the People's Republic in 1997, and throughout his life he has been witness to the frequent social and political shifts in the special administrative region. In the 80-square-meter studio that Ho has shared with fellow artist and friend Trevor Yeung since 2009, I immediately noticed paraphernalia from the city's ongoing protests, which were galvanized by a proposed extradition bill that would allow those living in or passing through the city to be extradited to the mainland.

With his shiny tangle of hair bound in a single ponytail and clad in dark-blue jeans and a dark-blue chambray shirt, Ho led me through the narrow corridor into his part of the space where he keeps a desktop table, with a monitor, laptop, a cabinet for his cameras (including an iconic 6x6 film camera, used to take the square images of the city's landscapes that he is known for) and various other random bits and bobs, such as miniature toy dinosaurs, Shiba Inu dogs, and cats collected from vending







machines. Glancing around, I marveled at the ingenious storage solutions, such as the vertical stacks of boxes, books, and canvases, and the long, narrow pressed-wood-chip nook fitted between a low wall and the ceiling, which contained a mattress for sleeping. I anticipated that Ho might need to spend many nights at the studio in the coming weeks, as he was working on an upcoming September show at Blindspot Gallery, tentatively themed around the idea of *force majeure*: the unforeseeable or uncontrollable circumstances that free a person from a contractual obligation. He showed me several pieces that he is planning to exhibit, including freshly developed—Ho processes his images outside of the studio—black-and-white photographs of trees that had been torn apart by the storm the previous year, the white cores of trunks splintered and raw. “So many people rushed to get back to work,” he said. “And they removed all the wood so quickly. I thought: why? You didn’t even give the trees a chance to recover.” Looking at the theme from another angle, he played on his desktop recent color videos he had taken from various bridges and highways of recent protests, “a political storm” that has taken hold of the city since June. The protesters’ roar of unbroken chanting is what he wanted to focus on, he mentioned, as well as the presentation of a straightforward, chronological narrative, which can often be warped by partisan news media. “I want to show it as real, rather than edited,” he said.

Ho’s comment on photographic realism, in full color and untampered, is a temporary shift—perhaps fueled by the urgency of the political situation—from his signature black-and-white, non-figurative images, in which he deliberately eschews documentary-style compositions. For the grayscale *Umbrella Salad* series (2014),

for example, he picked out objects—a single slim tree in a park, a still life of tissue paper, water bottles and cling film—and half-empty street scenes around the student-led 2014 pro-democracy Umbrella Movement, threading together a series of humble symbols and signs, a direct antithesis to the spurts of violence and crowds of baby-faced youths voraciously produced by the media for international consumption. “Everyone already knows when they see these images, what it is, what it’s talking about,” Ho said. “But there is a saying in Cantonese: ‘Both the bad and good things, it’s all together.’ In these pictures I try to remember the good and the peaceful. I wanted to create a kind of different memory for myself, and also for others.”

Ho is always thinking about work “for others.” Above his computer screen (which, when dormant, plays a colorful screensaver video of his cats), I spotted a square, framed picture from his *Every Daily* series (2013), which he had hung on the wall along with various postcards, prints, and Polaroids by himself and other artists, including photographer Lai Lon Hin. The work depicts in its ashy lower half the largely residential Tin Shui Wai area in the New Territories, where he had moved to after his father’s death. The upper half, typically taken up by chunks of sky seen through gaps in the buildings, has been meditatively painted over by Ho in small, different-hued squares, using his father’s paintbrushes.

I reminded him that I had seen this series in his 2013 solo show at Blindspot’s old space in Central, and how moved I had been, at the time struggling similarly with loss, by these pictures—drained of color, the stacks of flats and isolated concrete highways appear dramatically dated, reminiscent of a Hong Kong and life past, yet the robin’s-egg and pale-pink blocks point to something like

The interior of Ho’s studio, through which one can spot the plants that inhabit studio-mate Trevor Yeung’s space, in the back.







Ho selecting images from the series *Whiteness of Trees* (2018) for his upcoming exhibition at Blindspot Gallery in Hong Kong.



Craft beer bottles that read *mong sei* ("dying dream"), brewed by Ho for *Drunken Life Dying Dream* (2018), with a label designed by Hong Kong illustrator Onion Peterman.

hope. "This is my story, but I also want to make my stories more abstract, so that other people can see them and relate to them. I want them to think about themselves when they see my work," he said, then chuckling as he realized aloud that this tendency toward human connection is the reason why he majored in social work at Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

Around the studio, there were hints of his collaborative and socially-engaged inclinations—projects he calls "More than Photography" on his website—which are also often subtle rejections of the straight-edged bureaucracies of the arts scene. He showed me the beer fridge and fermenter that he started using around 2017 when he and a group of friends, including artist Natalie Lo Lai Lai, decided to brew their own wines and beers as a tongue-in-cheek revolt against stereotypically "shit" beverages served at art openings. He developed a brew for the installation *Drunken Life Dying Dream* (2017), in which visitors can sit at a wooden table and select one of two beer bottles, labeled respectively "Drunken Life" and "Dying Dream"—a reference to the past events in the 20 years since the Handover and a nod to Wong Kar Wai's *Ashes of Time* (1994), in which memories can be wiped away simply by drinking a special wine. I saw leaflets for exhibitions at 100 ft PARK, a non-commercial mini art space in Kowloon, founded by Ho and two artist-friends in 2012; and he excitedly told me about his latest residency-exhibition project in which he will bring together Taiwanese and Hong Kong artists in the pleasant settings of Taitung, a bucolic area of southeastern Taiwan.

Toward the end of my visit, Ho exclaimed, "Rain!" It sounded like a deluge was occurring outside. He said he would accompany me downstairs with an umbrella; he had to eat anyway. I asked if he usually enjoyed the company of another artist in his studio (Yeung was away in Sri Lanka) and he nodded emphatically. "We will share ideas, eat lunch, dinner together . . . you know, stability is important. Especially for artists." He paused, solemn for a second. "Being an artist is like living in some lonely forest; sometimes you can see other animals, sometimes not. I'm really grateful when someone wants to come into my forest and talk to me, see my work." It was an unusual remark from the artist, who has always appeared social and neighborly, taking photos at small gatherings, extending invitations to others, banding together at protests, or just hanging out with a home-brewed beer. But within seconds he was back to joking, calling galleries "public parks or zoos," where artists are already tamed. As I left Ho's forest and walked out into the real-life overgrown greenery, now animated with rain, I felt a sudden surge of gratitude for the artist and others like him—people who have stood with the community, through the good and the bad.