

ART



Night Mushroom Colon – on display at Blindspot Gallery – features night lights and plug adaptors, and was inspired by the artist's fear of the dark.

Room to grow: my secret life with plants

Trevor Yeung uses flora as the canvas to channel his phobias and shyness

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Trevor Yeung's workspace in Fo Tan is so lush and green, it looks more like a botany lab than an artist's studio. Where you would expect to find traces of paint and an assortment of brushes, there is soil and rocks. In lieu of a canvas, there is an abundance of flora and fauna.

"Some artists spend 15 years studying colour. I've spent most of my life studying animals and plants; they are my medium," the 31-year-old says. "Sometimes, I think I'm just a grumpy old artist who likes to stay at home with his pets and plants."

Yeung describes himself as both shy and socially awkward. His plants, he says, help him connect better with humans. "When I learn how to deal with plants, I learn how to deal with people."

His connection, or lack of it, with others is a common theme that runs through his work. *Mr Butterflies at a waiting corridor* (2012), for instance, channels his acute sense of dread and unease when he is among strangers.

The piece has been recreated and is on show at Blindspot Gallery in Wong Chuk Hang, as part of solo exhibition titled "Anonymous Society for Magick", which closes on Saturday. The piece's title refers to both the butterfly palm (also known as the areca palm) Yeung used for the installation and the feeling of "butterflies in the stomach", which can be caused by social anxiety or nervousness.

The artist has lined a corridor in the gallery with precisely placed



Contemporary artist Trevor Yeung in his Fo Tan studio. Photos: Handout

plants lit with LED lights, symbolising people standing in the entrance area of a bar or nightclub. A kinetic element allows the plants to rotate ever so slightly as you walk by them, allowing for subtle engagement between plant and viewer – at a party, it is the sort of attention that Yeung can just about handle.

Yeung says he does not always attend parties, of which there are plenty in the art world.

"I feel nervous when I go, I'm super conscious about myself. I'm more like a voyeur, but not creepy. I prefer to be an observer or caretaker. I think about how people interact with each other; it's more of a social curiosity," he says.

For the Lyon Contemporary Art Biennale in France last year – Yeung created another incarnation of *Mr Butterflies* called *Mx Butterflies' Private Party*.

For that, he imagined yet another art world scenario in which people (represented by plants) hanging out on balconies

look down at those who might be looking up (represented by people attending the art event) and wishing they were invited to the party.

Sometimes, the connection between viewer and art is not so obvious. For *Cacti* (2016-19), he uses the husk of a dried blowfish to create a sculpture that looks like a cactus. Looks can be deceiving, though – it is only when you take the time to look deeper and for longer that you realise it is not a plant at all.

"I'm using illusion to show how I want people to approach me [and my work], but also how I want to approach them," he says.

He says the work was conceived because he wanted to create a worthy audience – one that would spend longer than five seconds looking at something, that would not just take the sculpture at face value.

"Sometimes the audience is spoiled. I don't want that unbalanced relationship," Yeung says. "You have to pay attention,

then you'll see something different. You get as much out of the experience as you put into it. That is the fairness I want my work to be about."

During this time of quarantine and lockdown, many have turned to calm, quiet hobbies such as gardening. Yeung says tending to his pet tortoises and lovebirds, and to his plants has always been a way for him to understand and come to terms with his anxiety.

When he was young, the artist was only allowed to keep small pets in the family's cramped living space. He kept fish at first and then switched to plants when he moved to university digs. His first plants were insect-eating plants, such as the Venus flytrap.

While plants help him better understand social interactions, he says fish allowed him to take control of an environment (his aquariums in this case), which helped him to battle his fear of uncertainty.

"I see the aquarium as a type of functioning system, but also an artificial landscape. I can create a maze for my fish ... which I control. The way that I decorate it, it's like guiding the fish through the tank, like how you would design a space in regards to how humans interact with it."

His desire for control is highlighted in his art through the topics of phobias and unfulfilled relationships.

Night Mushroom Colon (2020), which can be seen at Blindspot Gallery, was inspired by his fear of the dark. Yeung likens this installation, of mushroom-shaped night lights coming from a cluster of adaptors, to parents placing a night light in a room when children are scared of the dark. "It's a work that is standing with you, even in the darkest time," Yeung says.