

**In an argument over the last piece of toast at breakfast ... change things up by putting the toast in your mouth and saying, 'You want this piece, baby? Come and get it!'**

THE NAKED TRUTH &gt; PAGE 14

## LIFE

## Cool new places to hang

**Independent art is finding room to flourish in Hong Kong as young artists and creatives grab retail spaces left empty by the pandemic**

Aaina Bhargava  
life@cmp.com

Small independent art spaces and pop-up exhibitions have been sprouting up with more frequency all over Hong Kong in the past year. The reason? Many younger artists and creatives are moving into retail spaces left empty by the pandemic.

They are taking the opportunity to collaborate and experiment on their own terms, free of the creative confines of commercial galleries, international art fairs and cultural institutions that have long defined the local art scene. Alberto Gerosa, director of Thy Lab, an experimental art space in Sham Shui Po, notes that the textile industry, which was heavily affected by the pandemic, has left many vacant spaces in the area, contributing to the influx of new cafes and eateries.

"I haven't seen any fall in rents in Sham Shui Po, but it really depends on the single landlord. Our landlord agreed to keep the rent stable, which was helpful," he says.

One property agent in the area confirms rents have fallen slightly, in part owing to the increase in vacant spaces seen amid the pandemic from businesses that could not afford to sustain themselves.

This new trend is being welcomed by many budding young local artists who lack the infrastructure and support "to go crazy and do experimental shows," says Eunice Tsang, curator and manager of Present Projects gallery, which opened in Sham Shui Po in January.

"You have to go through a lot to get funding, or be noticed by institutions and galleries. But there is this regenerative energy that exists here – we always find a way to work around things," she says.

Present Projects is an experimental art space with a small retail section that was founded by famed photographer Wing Shya.

Nestled in a three-storey renovated *tong lau* (old-style walk-up building), the space is above trendy coffee shop Colour Brown x PHVLO Hatch, better known for its green spiral staircase than its coffee. Shya wanted to open the space to provide new cultural material for the public.

Present Projects' current exhibition, "Surviving Natality," is a rare collaboration between artists Chan Ho-lok and Chan Bee featuring a series of the latter's paintings inspired by the former's writing. While not blatantly experimental, this sort of cross-disciplinary collaboration allows each artist to widen their horizons and explore unfamiliar territory.

Tsang had to convince Bee to participate as she rarely exhibits her work. "There are a lot of artists and creatives who fall between the cracks," Tsang says. For an upcoming show, "Only a Joke Can Save Us," co-curated with Tiffany Leung, Tsang will be exposing how artists use satire and humour in their works.

This kind of exhibition format has become more common over the past six months, as spaces come vacant and opportunities once linked to big events such as



Clockwise from above: Eunice Tsang at Present Projects gallery in Sham Shui Po; the interior at RnH space in Tai Kok Tsui; artist Joseph Leung at Negative Space in the Foo Tak Building in Wan Chai; experimental art at Floating Projects in the Jockey Club Creative Art Centre at Shek Kip Mei. Photos: Jonathan Wong, Dickson Lee, K.Y. Cheng, Edmond So



**There are not enough independent artist-run spaces here ... Sometimes I just want to see really gritty DIY stuff**

EUNICE TSANG, CURATOR OF PRESENT PROJECTS GALLERY

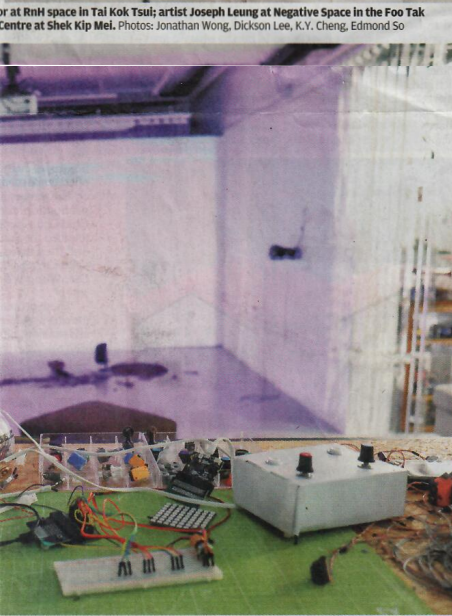
Art Basel Hong Kong are now scarce. The pandemic has jolted artists, curators and other creative professionals to self-initiate shows and projects locally. This has afforded them a certain amount of creative independence and freedom to produce the kind of work and exhibitions that they want to.

"There are not enough independent artist-run spaces here," Tsang says. "We are sometimes bored with certain shows that we see here, either in commercial galleries or publicly-funded institutions. Sometimes I just want to see really gritty DIY stuff."

The recent "gritty" and intimate exhibition "A fair", involving the four-day takeover of what used to be a Japanese restaurant by a group of artists in November 2020, proved to be a refreshing hit.

Artist Trevor Yeung installed a series of his artworks in an old studio flat in Prince Edward in December 2020 for his exhibition, "There's Something Missing". An established local artist, Yeung wanted the opportunity to express himself outside gallery and museum walls.

"I do have good relationships with my galleries and institutions I have worked with," he says. "But sometimes you just want to do something without explanation, concerns and negotiations."



Yeung chanced on the Prince Edward rental and decided to create a more intimate viewing experience with a domestic room.

"I needed a strong sense of intimacy for building up the relationship between the artworks and audiences, and the trust between the audiences and the artist," he says.

Also intimate in size and appealing in concept, the 9.2 square metre RnH art space, in Tai Kok Tsui, popped up on the local art scene in October 2020. It was founded by Yang Jiang who wanted to open her own art space with a distinct curatorial vision after working at a commercial gallery.

"I wanted to talk about love," she reflects. "It seems cheesy, but I want to talk about emotions, because I never felt like I had a safe space to be vulnerable, especially as a female. So I wanted to have this platform for artists to freely express themselves," the 29-year-old artist says.

The inauguration of RnH was an exhibition by artist Wu Jian, whose silver, shiny, and reflective spray-painted collage sculptures often include beauty products, high-heeled shoes, and other girly, domestic items, which Jiang refers to as "hyper-feminine".

Staging a highly conceptual

**It's the experimental we want to support; it's hard to find a space where you can try these things out**

KATIE HO, HIDDEN SPACE



From left: Kay Mei Ling Beadman, Isabella Ng and Katie Ho at Hidden Space in Kwai Hing.

show like that in a commercial gallery would have been extremely difficult given the high operating costs. Artists would have been under pressure to create works that sell, resulting in a compromise in their creative expression.

While RnH is small, financial sustainability remains a challenge. Jiang, who was able to rent the space for less than HK\$10,000 a month, largely because of Covid-19, is paying to keep it going and plans to continue for as long as she can.

The longevity of art space is constantly challenged in Hong Kong, with many spaces, such as Bedroom, Tai Kok Tsui, and Things that Can Happen, in Sham Shui Po, closing down after a couple of years, largely because of rising rents.

Adaptation, reinvention, and consistent funding have been crucial for long-standing independent spaces such as Videotage (founded in 1986) and 1A space (founded in 1988), which are both now in Cattle Depot, the latter having moved from its original spot on North Point's Oil Street.

Para Site, considered an institution, began as an artist-run space in the 1990s in Sheung Wan, and is now located in Quarry Bay.

Independent art spaces, though few in number, have played a key role in contributing to a more rigorous art scene.

**I wanted to have this platform for artists to freely express themselves**

YANG JIANG, RnH

When writer and artist Linda Chiu-Han Lai, associate professor in intermedia arts and critical theory at City University of Hong Kong's School of Creative Media, launched Floating Projects in 2015, she was able to rent the art space using her own money, thanks to her stable teaching job.

In 2018, she moved Floating Projects, initially located in Wong Chuk Hang, to the Jockey Club Creative Art Centre (JCCAC), which offered her a better rental deal (which is now around HK\$16,000 a month).

"It's very naive not to think about survival," she says.

"Each location has its benefits. While the physical space in Wong Chuk Hang was more impressive and great to experiment with, there's more traffic at JCCAC, and Sham Shui Po is an interesting area with a stimulating history."

Joseph Leung, 25, Lai's former student, had similar ideas when he opened Negative Space in Foo Tak Building in Wan Chai in early 2019, with co-founders and fellow artists Chan Ting, Sing Lau, Owen Wong and Andy Li.

"We wanted something that's more substantial and sustainable, that impacts an artist's career," he says.

With only low rent to pay, less than HK\$10,000 a month, they created a space where artists could show their work to other artists and build a solid community.

"It's important to have a space where you can experiment and be afraid to critically engage with the work and the artist," Leung says.

Isabella Ng, an artist and one of the co-founders of Hidden Space, stresses the importance of engagement and art criticism.

"Critical feedback is an important part of an artist's practice," she says. "Maybe here [Hong Kong] it takes on a different form, but there does not seem to be enough conversation among artists."

Set up in 2017 and located in Kwai Hing, Hidden Space – run by Ng, Kay Mei Ling Beadman and Katie Ho – the space has been gaining exposure through a strong presence in social media.

"It's really the experimental we want to support; it's hard to find a space where you can try these things out," Ho says.

Beadman says they want to operate on their own terms and not be beholden to anyone or any entity.

"We want to be a space where generosity and support are important," she says.



Artworks from Trevor Yeung's "There's Something Missing" exhibition. Photo: South Ho