

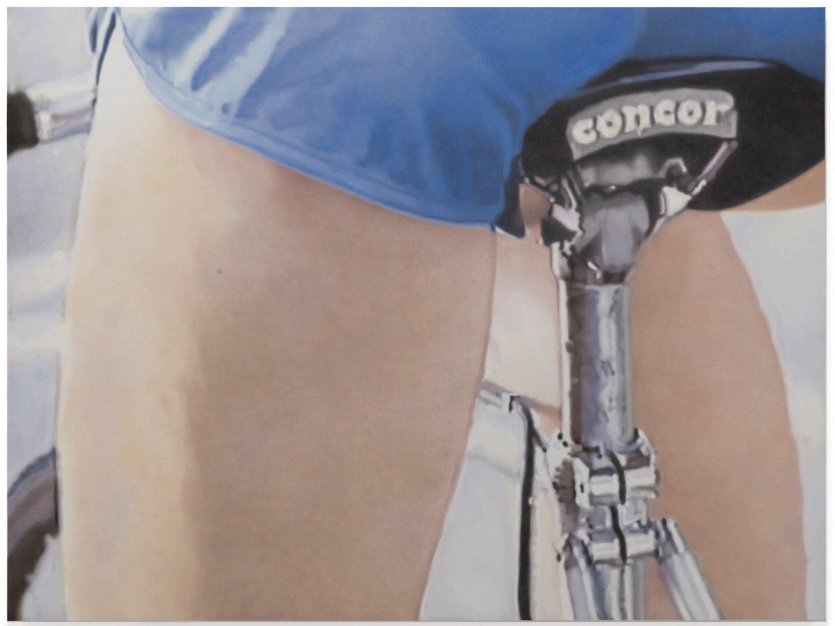
**For Immediate Release****Sarah Lai: *Pure Heart Shopping Street***

26 March, 2022 - 7 May, 2022

Venue: Blindspot Gallery (15/F, Po Chai Industrial Building, 28 Wong Chuk Hang Road, Wong Chuk Hang, Hong Kong)

Opening Hours: Tuesday to Saturday, 10:30am to 6:30pm (Sunday and Monday, by appointment only); closed on public holidays

Blindspot Gallery is pleased to present Sarah Lai's solo exhibition *Pure Heart Shopping Street*. Presenting a brand-new installation which unfolds into a collection of light boxes, videos, oil paintings and other sourced objects, these works position themselves within a fabricated scene of a shopping street in 80s and 90s Japan. Interested in the emotional responses conjured from visual language, Lai sources her visual references from vintage archives of mass media on the internet, carrying the power of sentiment and imagination for a bygone era. Against the chaotic overabundance of visual imagery in the age of digital content, Lai creates rarified moments and distanced spaces to encounter images in a new light via the possibilities of figurative painting installations. The intervening gesture of art could ever so lightly shift and transform our relationality to the found image, and subsequently our relationality to the World.



Sarah Lai, *Blue Shorty Shorts*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 92 x 123 x 3 cm.  
(Image courtesy of artist and Blindspot Gallery.)

*Pure Heart Shopping Street* is a continuation of the artist's practice of the appropriation, aestheticization, and reactivation of contemporary visual culture. The artist meticulously chooses and orchestrates found images, facsimile, props, interior design, and architectural forms, to recreate the impression of a scene with minimum visual elements. This is a follow up on previous projects such as the *Gang Killer* (Seoul Mediacity Biennale, 2021), *Kyusekkin! (Love SOS)* (Art021, Shanghai, 2018), *(In)tangible Reminiscence* (Mill6, Hong Kong, 2017), which sources materials and visual language from the pop culture of manga, anime, and TV and print commercials respectively. The artist holds dear to these materials as formative influences and ingrained mnemonics in her teenage years growing up in Hong Kong, as Japanese popular and material culture holds sway across emerging economies in Asia. Hyper conscious of its fungible subjectivity, Lai's project is altogether a representation of deliberate representations, an abstraction of untruthful abstractions.

Lai's exhibition greets with a series of stimuli and selective visual signs. A pink telephone booth brings us to a setting predating portable mobile phones, whilst a video of women fiddling with electronic products loop on a grainy CRT television below a store canopy. Lamps from the 90s dot the space alongside illuminated large-scale spinning cassette tapes on the wall of a video store, next to a backdrop of quaint storefronts. A light box at eye level reads as a street name sign – "Pure Heart Shopping Street", pinpointing our whereabouts. Full of considered elements that vie for our attention, *Pure Heart Shopping Street* equally restrains from offering excess information. Longing to be seduced with contingency and surprises, we ourselves as observers craft an embodied experience that straddles between public entertainment and personal delight.

Gracing the gallery walls and the built elements of *Pure Heart Shopping Street* are Lai's painted photorealistic depictions of found imagery rendered in a deliberately cropped close-up. *Blue Sporty Shorts* (2022) depicts a woman in blue shorts riding a bicycle saddle, her athletic thighs and round buttocks dominating the picture frame. Another painting renders curled toes underneath nude stockings, whilst farther ahead we spot a shy face being shielded from view with a cassette box. Lai excels in executing pure, pale-palette images that are modest and risqué, exuding palpable sensitivity as they reveal the in-betweenness of a female body straddling coy adulthood and naive adolescence. The painter taps into the obsessive desire to idealize and sexualize the woman's body, mobilized by a relentless image culture to exploit and profiteer.

Lai's shopping street harks back to the Parisian arcades from the 1840s, the genesis of modern bourgeois visuality luminously elaborated in Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* (1927-1940). Lai brilliantly turns the figure of the Baudelairean flâneur, the leisurely young man who saunters in the city in search of desire and pleasure, into the nuanced feminine protagonists frequenting the *Pure Heart Shopping Street*. They are reflexive about the ire of consumer culture, critical of the sexualizing identification of womanhood, yet not too cynical to partake in the seduction of images and representations, their own or others'. The artist's alienation and fetishization of cutely anachronistic signifiers are aptly analogized in Roland Barthes' *The Empire of Signs* (1970), where the French semiotician, after three visits to Tokyo, attempts to "'entertain' the idea of an unheard-of symbolic system" without "lovingly gazing toward an Oriental essence." Like the close up of Lai's sheer underwear painting *This kind of feeling* (2022), overlaid by Japanese hiragana and kanji text, of which Lai is illiterate, the artist boldly utilizes these empty signifiers in the Barthesian. It is exactly this emptiness and meaninglessness, for both Barthes and Lai, which regenerate the possibility of sheer jouissance and wonder in encountering a visual culture anew.

#### **About Sarah Lai**

Born 1983 in Hong Kong, Sarah Lai's paintings depict objects from daily lives, represented by her signature pale palette and a particular stillness imbued with material memories. In her most recent practice, Lai uses as inspiration images from films, TV and advertisement of the 1980s-90s, capturing the aesthetics of sensuality presented by the media of a bygone era, and articulating a delicate subtlety in personal experiences and memories. Lai has exhibited at Seoul Museum of Art (2021), Para Site, Hong Kong (2018), Center for Heritage Arts & Textiles, Hong Kong (2018), CFCCA, Manchester (2017) amongst other institutions.

#### **About Blindspot Gallery**

Set up in 2010, Blindspot Gallery is a Hong Kong-based contemporary art gallery. The gallery began with a primary focus on contemporary photography and image-based art, and has evolved to include diverse media in contemporary art. The gallery represents both emerging and established artists, mainly from Hong Kong and the region but also beyond.

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