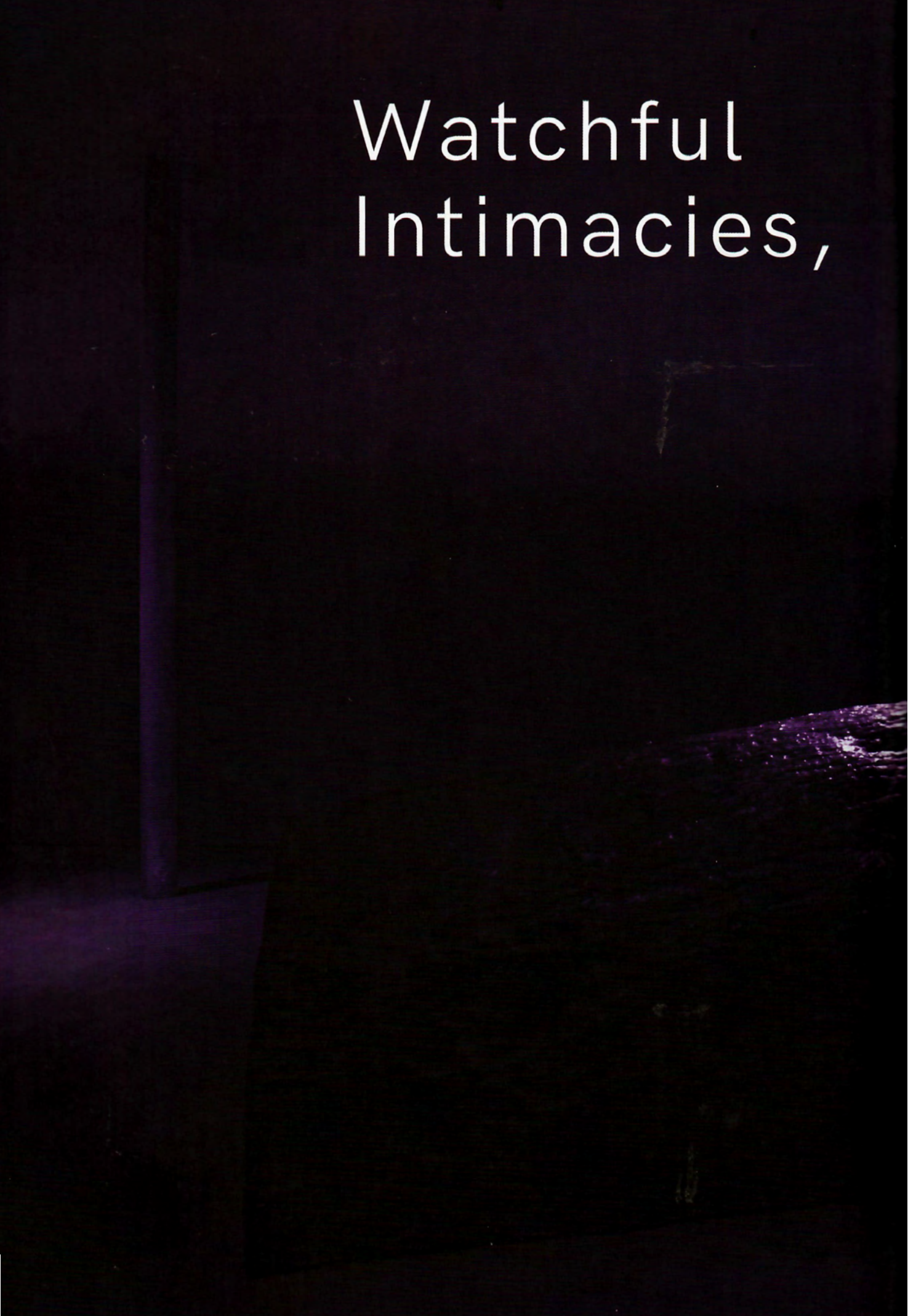




Watchful Intimacies,

The background of the page is a dark, atmospheric photograph. It appears to be a night sky or a very dark interior space. On the right side, there is a faint, glowing purple or magenta light source, possibly a star or a nebula, which creates a soft, ethereal glow. The overall mood is mysterious and contemplative.

Botanical Intricacies

TREVOR YEUNG

INTERVIEW BY ALEX YIU

Installation view of TREVOR YEUNG's
Soapy Fuck Tree, 2023, soap, oak
bark powder, mosses, selection of
essential oils, glitter, fiberglass,
metal, 250 × 102 × 113 cm, at "Soft
Ground," Gasworks, London, 2023.
Courtesy Gasworks.

Between artists and their work there exists a space where emotions and expressions transpire, like leaves giving off water vapor through the stomata. Yet, for many artists, such space ends when the artworks depart from the art-making process. For the Hong Kong-based artist Trevor Yeung the bonding between the artist and artworks never ends, as long as the plants in many of his works continue to exchange carbon dioxide for oxygen through photosynthesis.

Yeung gives the impression of being not only an artist but a lover of living things. And since graduating from Hong Kong Baptist University's Academy of Visual Arts in 2010 he has developed a unique practice incorporating botanic and aquatic elements into site-specific installations. He is known for his specimen-like and biomimetic collages of found objects and spatial presentations that consist of actual aquariums teeming with fish and plants.

Yeung's works have grown in proportion with the increasingly high-profile occasions he has been granted. The installation *Mr. Cuddles Under the Eave* (2021) of money trees (*pachira aquatica*) suspended in air featured prominently at Art Basel Hong Kong in the Encounters sector in 2023. As one of the six nominees of the Sigg Prize 2023, Yeung presented previous works at the prize exhibition organized by M+ in Hong Kong. In September 2023 Yeung opened the solo exhibition "Soft Ground" at Gasworks in London in which he explored the cruising culture of an infamous north London park. Yeung spoke to *ArtAsiaPacific* about his works and practice ahead of his representation of Hong Kong at the 60th Venice Biennale in April titled "Courtyard of Attachments," as well as the second iteration of "Soft Ground," which opens at the nonprofit Para Site in mid-March with the title "Soft Breath."



Portrait of TREVOR YEUNG. Photo by South Ho. Courtesy M+, Hong Kong.



Installation view of TREVOR YEUNG's *Lives in Hong Kong, Born in Dongguan*, 2015, aquarium system, with *Macropodus* (Black Paradisefish/Chinese Betta), *Mikrogeophagus ramirezi* (German Blue Ram), *Scleropages formosus* (Asian Arowana), *Cyphotilapia frontosa* (Frontosa), *Carassius auratus* (Ranchu, Gold Fish) and *Paracheirodon innesi* (Neon Tetra); styrofoam box, at "A Hundred Years of Shame - Songs of Resistance and Scenarios for Chinese Nations," Para Site, Hong Kong, 2015. Courtesy Para Site.

For your recent exhibition "Soft Ground" at Gasworks that looked at Hampstead Heath, how did you begin your research and what was your approach to creating artwork about this particular cruising area?

For my 2022 residency at the Delfina Foundation in London I had initially planned to work on a project centered on plant studies and immigration. However, as I spent more time in Hampstead Heath I became more interested in the dynamics of the place. I started conducting unplanned interviews and mapping the area. I hadn't planned to exhibit my work at Gasworks, but during a studio visit with the director of Gasworks I introduced my projects on the "fuck tree" in Hampstead Heath, which led to "Soft Ground."

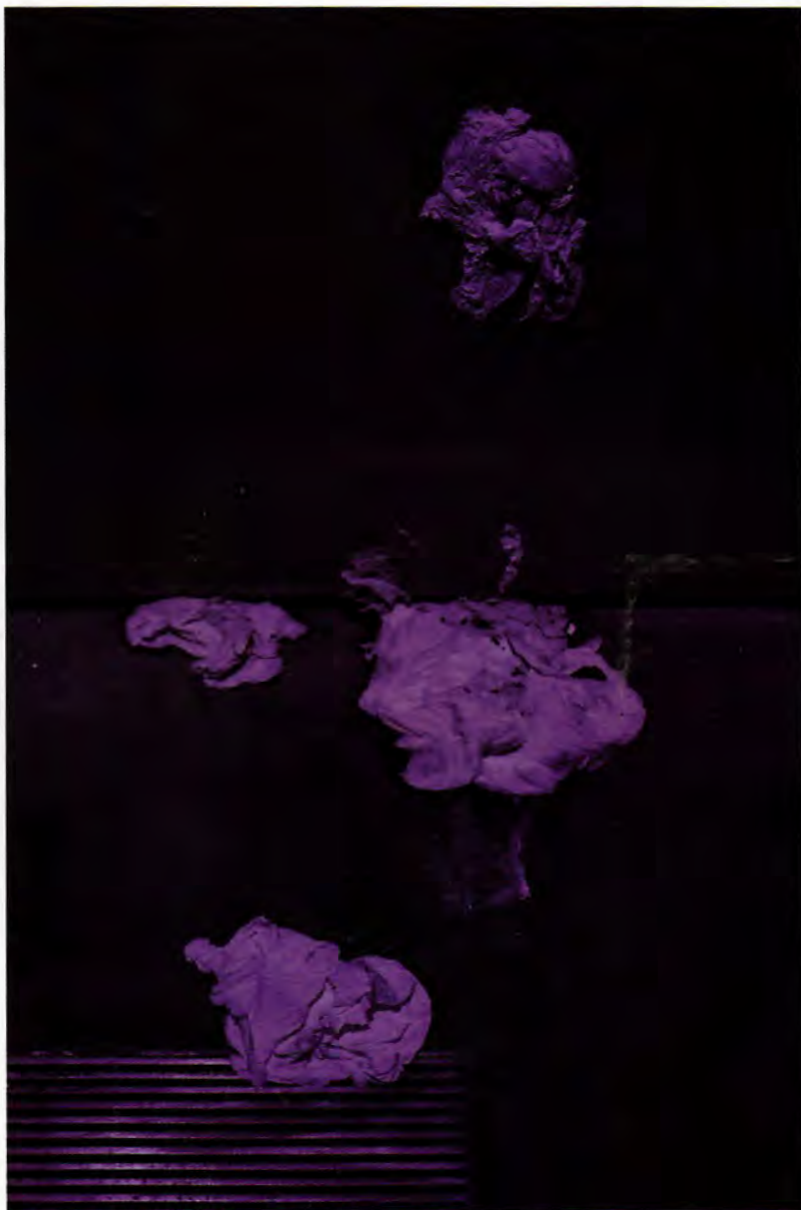
In the project I aimed to convey my unique experiences and observations highlighting their emotional resonances: the cold nights wrapped in down jackets; the solitary figures waiting in vain; and the profound impact of these encounters on one's sense of self. The lesser-known cruising area of Hampstead Heath, particularly around Jack Straw's Castle and the "fuck tree," is a nocturnal sanctuary for the queer community, hidden by its natural obscurity and only found with guidance. This space, bustling by day with typical park activities, transforms at night into a realm of intimacy, where the landscape itself has been subtly altered to facilitate private encounters.

The oak tree, central to this area, bears the physical evidence of its nocturnal role. Its worn bark—smooth from the touch of human interaction—parallels the worn stone of temples, shaped by the desires and actions of those who frequent it. My exhibition delves into the tangible imprints of desire on nature, showing how a tree—alive yet sculpted by human contact—can epitomize the physicality of longing. This living landmark, both damaged and revered, prompts reflection on our relationship with nature and the lasting marks we leave. It stands like a giant bonsai, shaped by the pressures of human touch, and its current state of health is a poignant reminder of its continuous and intense interactions with people. The dim light in the exhibition space is intentionally subdued to emulate the intimacy and anonymity of these encounters, demanding closeness and careful attention to see the details, much like the experience of cruising itself.

Why did you choose to use soap to mimic the tree?

In *Soapy Fuck Tree* (2023), I created a 3D model of the one in Hampstead Heath to ensure its preservation, considering it might not be around in the future. This tree holds a deep cultural significance and represents how human desire profoundly shapes our natural environment. Soap's link to the human body and its natural erosion process made it an ideal material—echoing how humans have gradually worn down the textured bark on this particular tree. My choice also resonates with my personal perspective as an observer within cruising culture rather than an active participant—a “voyeur of voyeurs,” so to speak. Using specially crafted soap with oak powder, moss, and essential oils, I aimed to create a nuanced atmosphere that encourages intimate interactions, akin to hugging a tree to fully appreciate its fragrance.

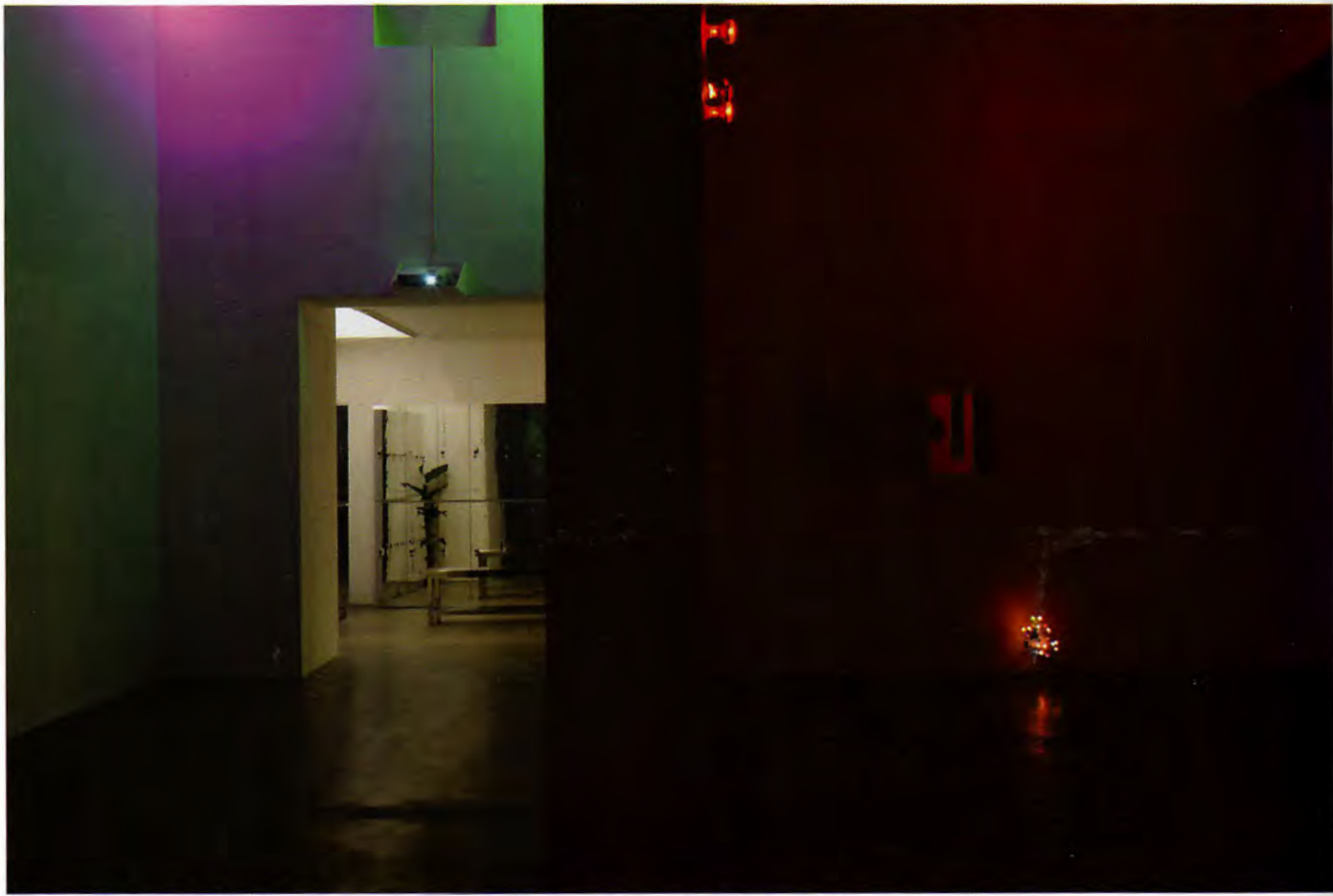
The choice of material is also deeply personal, reflecting my germaphobia (mysophobia) and my need for cleanliness after potential intimate encounters, which contrasts with the more uninhibited aspects of cruising. I'm fascinated by the mechanisms and emotional states involved in cruising, rather than the sexual acts themselves. My work is informed by past incidents, such as an eye condition that impairs my night vision, further shaping my outlook on the uncertain nature of nighttime cruising.



Installation view of **TREVOR YEUNG's** *Scented Wonton*, 2023, toilet paper, deodorant, dimensions variable, at "Soft Ground," Gasworks, London, 2023. Courtesy Gasworks.

The exhibition functioned as a multisensory installation: what were the other components that one might easily miss?

My artwork *Scented Wonton* (2023), scattered in a corner of the gallery, is comprised of deodorant-infused tissues, intentionally designed to stand out. This piece reflects on the necessity for cleanliness in public spaces, especially in cruising areas where events necessitating such tissues occur frequently. I included this to touch upon the contrast between the perceived purity of nature and the reality of human activities within it. I chose not to focus on the unsightly, but to acknowledge its existence. For instance, *Silent Sweat* (2023) is an installation of worn sports shirts soaked with sweat. Once dried, these shirts were folded and placed in the ventilation system, an invisible yet integral part of the exhibition, akin to the unseen yet ever-present pheromones in nature.



Installation view of TREVOR YEUNG's "The Darkroom That is Not Dark," 2016, at Magician Space, Beijing, 2016. Courtesy Magician Space.

Other artworks are barely visible, such as *Shy Fountain* (2023), which is sensor-activated and trickles water only when a presence is detected, reflecting the cruising experience of engagement and withdrawal. This fountain represents the nuanced interactions and discretion often sought in cruising, paralleling the choices we make in public spaces for privacy, like using restrooms unnoticed. *Seeds of Fuck Tree* (2023) is a work consisting of seeds suspended with two rope types, reflective and water-soluble, creating an anticipatory state of potential falling.

The color gradation painted on the walls, called *Soft Gaslighting (Twilight)* (2023), creates a unique atmosphere that changes perception over time. Just as the forest feels different at night, so does the exhibition space, with the darkest artworks appearing more profound against the lighter backdrop. It is meant to be bright and inviting, encouraging visitors to sit and discover the exhibition's subtleties over 20 to 30 minutes, like slowly becoming accustomed to the darkness of a forest under the night sky.

Could you elaborate on the role of the gaze and themes of LGBTQ+ experiences, particularly the concept of looking in your Gasworks exhibition and past exhibitions like "The Darkroom That Is Not Dark"? How does that exhibition compare the "system of a gay sauna" with the "system of the art world"?

My work isn't exclusively about queer issues; it uses the system of gay cruising as a metaphor to critique various systems, including the art world. For me, the gaze is a first step in both observation and communication, offering a safe space for imagination and self-protection, as interpretations are personal and subjective. Observation plays a significant role in my work, influenced by my interest in interpersonal relationships and experiences with keeping pets and growing plants. Understanding these living things requires careful observation and sensitivity, as they can't communicate their needs in human ways. I view control as an extension of care, not domination. In my practice of fishkeeping and plant care, control is about providing the best environment for growth and well-being as an expression of genuine care and attention to detail.

"The Darkroom That Is Not Dark" was an exhibition aimed at exploring identity issues by drawing parallels between the art world's hierarchy and the more egalitarian nature of a gay sauna. In the art world, identities are varied—interns, artists, curators—and with each role comes a different perception of the scene and the need to continually learn and adapt. Comparatively, a gay sauna superficially strips away societal hierarchies, as everyone is reduced to minimal attire, making physical desire the primary mode of interaction. Though nuances like age, race, and body type can influence these encounters, the explicit social stratifications seem less pronounced.

In your works, I see an abundance of living entities like plants that assert their presence effortlessly. It seems they don't require intervention to exist or hold meaning—their mere existence feels sufficient. How does this self-sufficiency influence your artistic process?

What you have said suggests a nuanced appreciation, seeing them as both significant in our cultural context and as reflections of our own perspectives. Plants act as vessels for these projections, providing a rich context for the artwork. For example, in the work *Mr. Butterflies at a Waiting Corridor* (2020), the presence of the butterfly palms is central, yet the dynamic shadows they cast as the posts turn amplify their existence and create a magnified interaction, much like the relationships between people.



Installation view of TREVOR YEUNG's *The Pavilion of Regret*, 2022, greenhouse, planter, old clay pots, and plants, 5 × 5 × 3.5 m, at "Natasha," Singapore Biennale, 2022.



Installation view of TREVOR YEUNG's *Mr. Cuddles (double falling)*, 2022, Pachira plant, straps (set of two), dimensions variable, at "Not everything is about you," Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong, 2022. Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery.

The artwork can capture fleeting moments, like the accidental touch between leaves or the play of light and shadow, similar to a photograph freezing a moment in time. The concept extends in works like the *Mr. Cuddles* series (2019–), where the natural tension between individual money trees is highlighted and transformed into art by physical straps that extend this tension into the space, turning independent plants into a cohesive art piece. This transformation of ordinary plants into artistic expressions is a fascinating process.

In your works, such as *The Pavilion of Regret* (2022) and *Mr. Cuddles* series (2019–), is there an intentional balance between the overt emotion and a sense of ambiguity that leaves room for interpretation?

My works like *Pavilion of Regret* subtly encourage viewers to engage with emotions by providing experiences such as adopting plants for healing. While my art has deliberate themes, I intentionally leave ambiguity for personal interpretation. Rather than conveying overt, data-driven messages, I prefer to focus on evoking sensibility and indirect emotions. If the audience can extract the essence of the work, that suffices; extensive explanations during presentations aren't essential. The audience's personal reflections on the details are what truly matter, not their knowledge of every story behind the piece.

How do you conceptualize the theme of animating the inanimate, as seen with your *Night Mushroom Colon* series (2015–) and *Cacti* series (2016–), and what inspires you about this interplay between life, death, and resurrection in your work?

My work is deeply rooted in anthropomorphism and personification, where I project emotions onto objects and explore the narrative transformation from the inanimate to the animate. This process is intriguing to me, creating layers of concepts within my art that move beyond mere objects to represent broader messages and viewpoints.

I don't let artistic stereotypes influence me; whether labeled a "plant artist" or a "queer artist," I focus on the thematic essence rather than the medium. I adapt the medium to serve the message, ensuring the two are in harmony.

In your lecture at Asymmetry Foundation in 2023 you mentioned early works showcased in private spaces like your bedroom. Could you elaborate on the intimate nature of these exhibitions, particularly "there's something missing"?

My early exhibitions, such as the 2012 "the bedroom show," were deeply personal, inviting audiences into my own space. The 2020 exhibition "there's something missing" took this intimacy further, being a private, by-invitation-only event in a rented unit in Sham Shui Po. It was a subdued affair, relying on word-of-mouth and personal connections for visitor engagement. This intimate setting allowed for a contemplative and personal experience, away from the performative pressures of public spaces, enabling audiences to connect with the art on a more emotional level. Exhibitions are open invitations, but I can't dictate the attendees, much like public gallery showings. However, I do curate my guest list, typically consisting of friends, collaborators, and selective media with whom I've previously communicated. While I manage visitation with scheduled time slots, controlling early arrivals or those who receive keys from others is not always possible. I prefer to personally oversee who attends but it's a complex process.

Your recent installation at the M+ Sigg Prize exhibition continued the immersive themes from your past works, requiring visitors to wait before entering a space that felt like a cage. What was your intention behind that combination of works?

My exhibition delves into the solitary nature of the pandemic by replicating the exact size of my quarantine hotel room, casting visitors as a mouse trapped in isolation. *Wall of a Hamster Cage (Mira Moon)* (2022) illustrates the disconnection from the world that quarantine enforced. Visitors were immersed in the small, monotonous space, highlighting the duality of quarantine as both a struggle and a privilege—not everyone could afford to isolate or travel to places like Hong Kong during the pandemic. The work was crafted to evoke the emotional landscape of this period, aiming to document feelings more vividly than conventional news, capturing the essence of our collective experience.

The queue outside the room represented the tedious cycle of quarantine and the choices we faced during the pandemic, whether out of necessity or precaution. Ultimately, the exhibition seeks to capture the physical, psychological, and societal effects of quarantine, reflecting the complex reality of our experiences with Covid-19.



Installation view of TREVOR YEUNG's *Night Mushroom Colon (Eight)*, 2020, night lamp, plug adaptors, 30 × 22 × 16 cm, at "Anonymous Society for Magick," Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong, 2020. Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery.

Does the meaning of *Mr. Cuddles in a Hotel Room* (2023) in the M+ exhibition differ from *Mr. Cuddles (double falling)* (2022) at Blindspot Gallery? And why is the poster work *Red Brighter* (2019) in such low pixel density?

The *Mr. Cuddles in a Hotel Room* (2023) work in this exhibition, while sharing a name with a previous work, differs in its emotional texture. The experience of helplessness and lack of control was amplified in a room or environment through the hanging tree.

The *Red Brighter* (2019) poster work at the door symbolized hope for the future, contrasting with the often-hollow reality of grand slogans. It questions the sincerity of welcoming messages like those seen upon returning to Hong Kong. Without large printers, I sometimes resort to simple methods for bigger displays. Viewing the posters from afar offered one image, but up close, you encountered roughness and distortion. This choice reflects the notion that each person's perspective is unique in the queue. Enlarged analogue photos lose detail, creating "noise" that I find significant. Although I could use a large-format camera for a perfect image, I prefer the authenticity of the flaws, which add character to the work.

Could you share where your artistic journey is headed, particularly regarding the shift from object-oriented artworks to a focus on spatial arrangements? What can we expect next in your creative evolution, and will you maintain this emphasis on space, as seen in your Gasworks exhibition?

“Soft Ground” was a deep dive into spatial perception, yet packed with easily overlooked details—much like missing the forest for the trees. My future projects will continue to weave in these nuanced elements, exploring various directions both in practice and concept. Emotion and sentiment—those subtle, often unspoken elements—will take center stage, akin to the proverbial elephant in the room.

My approach remains consistent, focusing on meticulous control over the finer aspects of my work, from the ambiance of space to the subtle glow of a mushroom lamp. Growing up in a confined environment has shaped my artistic philosophy. It’s not about creating larger works to fill bigger spaces but about harnessing the intrinsic power of small artworks to transform a space. The aim is not to dominate through size but to captivate with detail and finesse, regardless of the physical scale of the work.



Installation view of TREVOR YEUNG's (left) *Red Brighter*, 2019, posters on wall, dimensions variable; (right) *The Queue*, 2023, retractable queue barriers, dimensions variable; at M+ Sigg Prize 2023, Hong Kong. Photo by Dan Leung. Courtesy M+, Hong Kong.



Installation view of TREVOR YEUNG's (left) *Wall of a Hamster Cage (Mira Moon)*, 2022, pencil and tea on Xuan paper, 145×367 cm; and (right) *Mr. Cuddles in a Hotel Room*, 2023, Pachira plant, straps, dimensions variable, at M+ Sigg Prize 2023 exhibition, 2023, Hong Kong. Photo by Dan Leung. Courtesy M+.