

Artist Sin Wai Kin in Kowloon Park. **Opposite page:** A still from the artist's *Today's Top Stories* (2020)



IMAGE COURTESY OF SIN WAI KIN AND BLINDSPOT GALLERY (VIDEO STILL)

SIN'S SKINS



The first openly non-binary individual artist to be nominated for the coveted Turner Prize, Sin Wai Kin tells *Tatler* why we need multiple narratives to coexist and fluidity to thrive

By Aaina Bhargava. Portraits by Kwannam Chu

Victoria Sin came to life making a sandwich in a London drag club. Artist Sin Wai Kin's first performance as what would become one of their best-known characters entailed wearing a sparkling, glamorous evening gown, blonde wig and dramatic make-up while putting a filling between slices of bread. In performing a seemingly banal task with

exaggerated and comedic gestures, Sin subverted expectations of femininity and ideas about female labour. Says the artist of their first work, *Sandwich* (2015), "It was a take on that insult to women when a man might say, 'Shut up and go make me a sandwich!'"

Sin was and is interested in exploring how we are conditioned to perform and comprehend societal roles, whether they be related to gender or culture, and in exposing the false binaries inherent in them. Their natural inclination towards performance is inherent in both the conception and execution of their work; they primarily create narrative-driven films, which they enact by assuming the role of one or multiple characters. Less frequently, they make sculptures or smaller works that retain remnants of their characters, such as wipes featuring marks from their heavy make-up, enclosed in glass. For each character Sin inhabits, they dress up in



drag, reflecting the art form's ability to showcase fluidity: with drag, an individual can assume as many identities as they want, and contain multitudes.

It was at drag clubs that Sin's art practice was born. "That's where I cut my teeth as a performer," the artist recalls, adding somewhat sheepishly, "I didn't have performing experience aside from my grandmother teaching me Cantonese opera songs and forcing me to perform them on stage in front of her friends at the community centre when I was eight years old."

Born to a Chinese father and British mother, Sin grew up in Canada and now lives in London. They have long been accustomed to navigating the ambiguous nature of diasporic and mixed-race identity. In 2021, the artist reclaimed their gender-neutral Cantonese name, Sin Wai Kin, and expanded the repertoire of characters in their from just Victoria Sin to inhabit newly formed ones. A host of their new characters are drawn from Cantonese and Peking Opera as well as drag, and made their debut at Sin's first solo exhibition in Asia, *It's Always You* at Hong Kong's Blindspot Gallery in November 2021.

One of them, The Universe, is the protagonist, recurring in works throughout the show including *A Dream of Wholeness in Parts* (2021). The character references the Zing (warrior) role in Peking and Cantonese Opera, as well as a more complex, sensitive male archetype channelling aspects of roles Leslie Cheung and Tony Leung have often played and those found in Wong Kar Wai's films.

Sin is also interested in and influenced by Canto-pop and boyband fandom. The title of the exhibition is also the title of a work at the show, a karaoke-style music video featuring the artist's latest drag personas, which take the form of four fictional boyband characters: the aforementioned Universe, also known as the "pretty boy"; The One, whom they describe as "the childish one"; The Storyteller, who is "the serious one"; and Wai King, "the heartthrob". As the

"It's [the media is] just become a tool for fear mongering and creating a lot of binaries and polarised positions"

four characters, all played by Sin, are performing a choreographed dance routine, the lyrics "I see myself in you reflected back in me/ It's always you—you're like infinity" appear across the screen, eerily reminiscent of Cantopop boyband sensation Mirror's tagline: "Together we reflect unlimited possibilities." In this work, Sin explores the allure of boybands and posits the appeal of an individual containing multitudes of identities, aptly demonstrated through another line from the video: "Together we're the one/And as one, I'm many." Although the artist was unaware of Mirror while making the work, *It's Always You* was a happy coincidence that resulted in the work having an even larger impact and resonance.

This March, Sin was back in Hong Kong for Art Basel, where they participated in the panel discussion *Mirror, Mirror: On the Transgressive Art of Cantopop and Performance*, along with artists Ming Wong and Rainbow Chan. Although they grew up overseas, Sin's father's family is originally from the city, and returning



Clockwise, from top: A still from Sin's *It's Always You* (2021); stills from Sin's new work *Dreaming the End* (2023) at Fondiazone Memo; the artist in character as The Universe in *The Dream of Wholeness in Parts* (2021)

to it helps the artist retain a non-western perspective. This viewpoint has been essential in shaping their practice, which was recently globally recognised with a nomination for the 2022 Turner Prize.

One of the most prestigious awards in the visual arts fields, its purpose is to develop discourse around British contemporary art. Nominees must either be living and working in Britain or be British citizens based elsewhere in the world. Although they didn't win, Sin set many records by virtue of their nomination, as one of the youngest, the first of Chinese descent, and the first



“Escapism is also trying to come up with an alternative, and posits the possibility to create spaces where the rules are different”

openly non-binary individual artist to be nominated for the award. The 2022 edition set another precedent: it was the first time there were no male nominees; the other shortlisted artists were Heather Phillipson, Ingrid Pollard and winner Veronica Ryan.

Even before the Turner Prize nomination, Sin notes their work was recognised and supported in Hong Kong art circles. “To feel welcomed and celebrated means a lot, especially as my dad’s side of the family is from here [Hong Kong].” This support wasn’t consistent across the board, though; Kin says they often “fight to get [my] work taken seriously and seen, particularly in art spaces and institutional contexts. The same applies to their personal life. “I still do have to fight for people to use my correct pronouns. It’s an uphill battle, especially when I’m trying to deal with things that have to do with gender, and with people who are a lot older and don’t believe that non-binary gender is real.”

A lot of Sin’s motivation for their work comes from expanding the idea of what non-binary is, and



Sin as various iterations of The Storyteller in *The Breaking Story* (2022). **Opposite page, from top:** Sin in Kowloon Park; a still from *Dreaming the End* (2023), shot in Italy

PHOTOGRAPHY KWANNAM CHU (PORTRAIT) IMAGES COURTESY OF SIN WAI KIN AND BLINDSPOT GALLERY (ARTWORKS)

interrupting social narratives that create binaries. “I think a lot of people—definitely the trans community and Gen Z—are really ready for this kind of [work],” they say, recalling a recent statistic from LGBTQ+ charity Stonewall in October 2022 which concluded that only 71 per cent of Gen Z in the UK identify as straight, and 14 per cent identify as bi or pansexual. This is in comparison to 91 per cent and 2 per cent respectively of boomers.

The artist points to the media and the proliferation of fake news as their primary concern for the world’s future, citing examples from the rise of Trump to global political polarisation to the “extremely transphobic” mainstream UK media. “It’s the way information is being disseminated quickly and without the need or care for fact-checking; [the media has] just become a tool for fear-mongering and creating a lot of binaries and polarised positions.”

This concern is reflected in Sin’s work, which tackles how storytelling is used and misused as a tool in creating narratives that polarise public perspective. In particular, it’s the misrepresentation in the news and other media of transgender experiences which leaves Sin feeling helpless and as if their existence is under attack. It’s also what propels them to build their own narratives, an act in which they find freedom.

In creating new worlds, Sin invokes the influence that science fiction has had on how they try and create these new worlds. “Science fiction taught me how to use fantasy and fiction to make a new blueprint and find different ways of having relationships with other people, but also with yourself and the world.” Sin draws from a vast range of science fiction material, and references it in a myriad of ways, from quoting different books and texts to developing plot lines.

The boyband character The Storyteller, who Sin created during the pandemic, was inspired by sci-fi and is a key figure in their video work *Today’s Top Stories* (2020), which the artist debuted at *It’s Always You*. A new and expanded version of this work, *The Breaking Story* (2022), was most recently seen at Tai Kwun’s *Myth Makers* exhibition. In the glitchy video, The Storyteller portrays a news anchor reporting polarising perspectives. In the latest iteration, three different versions of The Storyteller from parallel universes, and another character, The Change, appear across six screens simultaneously showcasing six different news cycles.



The Storyteller and The Change are seen in Sin’s latest film, *Dreaming the End* (2023), which is the main work in the artist’s current exhibition at Fondazione Memo in Rome. In the work, both characters are again trapped in a cyclical narrative from which they’re trying to escape. “Escapism is also trying to come up with an alternative, and posits the possibility to create spaces where the rules are different.”

The work is intended to convey the idea that reality is constructed, as is our way of finding ourselves in designated narratives in which we go on to embody, perform and reproduce these pre-defined roles in a formulaic way that almost mirrors the way news cycles are constructed.

“We live in a world where there are many different realities coexisting together,” Sin explains. “Everything is an illusion, and people see and try to tell the story of this illusion. And it’s within this illusion that they try to decide what reality is and what fiction is—reality is created within the act of storytelling.”