

# WING PO SO

BY ANNETTE MEIER

## The Universe in a Cabinet

Portrait of WING PO SO,  
2024. Photo by  
Annabel Preston for  
ArtAsiaPacific.



In the late afternoon sun, the streets of To Kwa Wan are bustling with life. Making my way to Wing Po So's studio in Hong Kong's Kowloon district, I pass car repair workshops, florists, hawker stalls, fruit and vegetable vendors, and watch as several butchers hack away at large chunks of fresh meat which appear lucent underneath the plastic red lamps. It's mid-January, and Chinese New Year is right around the corner. This buzz of excitement follows me into a more secluded area filled with grungy, low-rise industrial buildings, one of which houses So's studio. A rickety elevator takes me up to her floor, where she emerges from behind hefty metalworking machines to greet me.

Born in 1985 in Hong Kong into a family of Chinese doctors and herbalists, So spent most of her childhood at her parents' pharmaceutical shop, helping to categorize and process the raw medicinal ingredients. Intrigued by the sundry materials and their morphology, So now merges them with everyday objects to create large-scale installations and sculptures that explore our simultaneous alienation from and connection to the natural world. With a research-driven approach that she often intertwines with science fiction concepts, So makes work that is heavily informed by the slow, meticulous observations and sensitivities of traditional Chinese medicine, philosophy, and spirituality.

So's studio is small and square, tucked away in a far-back corner of the communal workshop. For five years now, she has shared this floor with a handful of people, including fellow artists

who occasionally help with her projects. "It's just the right amount of space," she tells me as we settle into her area which, at first impression, resembles a physician's office. Everything is neatly and systematically organized, despite (or perhaps because of) the limited space, with rows upon rows of medical and scientific books lining the walls, and the life-size model of a human spine perched atop an apothecary cabinet where So keeps her tools.

Upon closer inspection, the methodically organized miscellanea give way to traces of familial warmth: her children's books and toys are strewn haphazardly throughout the room, and colorful drawings taped on the cupboard panels soften the otherwise clinical ambience. But the studio's focal point, arguably, is a towering glass-door cabinet of curiosities with everything ranging from trinkets to 3D-printing models and organic items like dried plants, shells, and even insects—countless microcosms of *artificialia* and *naturalia*, all stored in their designated containers.

So pulls one such container out to show me a collection of dehydrated rhizome wafers speckled with root-eating beetles. "I like insects and the 'writings' they create through eating these plants," she tells me. Although these tiny arthropods are unwanted inhabitants at her parents' pharmacy, they were So's artistic "collaborators" for her 2023 hanging installation *The Bookmaking Habits of Select Species*, initially shown at the 13th Taipei Biennial that same year. Referencing Ken Liu's 2012 eponymous short story about the various reading and writing systems of extraterrestrials,

WING PO SO's apothecary cabinet at her studio in To Kwa Wan, Hong Kong. Photo by Annabel Preston for ArtAsiaPacific.



Detail of WING PO SO's *The Bookmaking Habits of Select Species*, 2023, chewed plant parts, dimensions variable, at the 13th Taipei Biennial, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei. Photo by Taipei Biennial. Courtesy the artist; Taipei Biennial; and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.





Installation view of  
**WING PO SO's** *Invisible Island*, 2021/23, mixed media, dimensions variable, at "Lamma Mia" Public Art Project, Lamma Island, Hong Kong, 2021. Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.

the work is a constellation of desiccated plant materials commonly used in traditional Chinese medicine, which also serve as food and habitats for insects and their larvae. Perforated scraps of hyacinth beans, pomelo skin, and prickly waterlilies—to name a few—are suspended in the air, the chew marks denoting what So calls "imprints of consciousness and language."

Another striking display in So's cabinet includes the many shells she gathered during her trips to Hong Kong's outlying islands. An abalone shell brings to mind an earlier mechanical work, *Sea Ear Hi-hat* (2020), featuring over a dozen abalone shells with built-in motors opening and closing gently, in a rhythm akin to erratic breathing patterns. While the strange percussion and the shells' spiral structure simulate the shape and function of the human inner ear—So's attempt to blur interspecies boundaries—the clattering abalones recall an essay by French poet Paul Valéry who, upon finding a seashell, was overwhelmed by an "entire innate treasure of responses ... in the presence of a thing that arrests and questions me."

This is the sense of astonishment that So aims to inspire in anyone who encounters her artwork. Take *Scent of Raindrop* (2024), a mixed-media installation commissioned by the Hong Kong Museum of Art that comprises several glass jars, each containing a slab of rock onto which waterdrops fall and evaporate; So compares the multisensory experience of hearing rain droplets collide with the ground, be it soil or concrete, and smelling the resulting sweet petrichor, to humanity's discovery of fire. By recreating these euphoric everyday delights, she hopes to awaken the oft-forgotten childlike wonder in audiences and highlight our intrinsic connection to the environment—a much-needed reminder for the urban dwellers of Hong Kong.

Along with traditional Chinese medicine and philosophy, Hong Kong—its history, cultural identity, and sociopolitical transformation—is another linchpin of So's practice. In her early

20s she spent time in the US, earning a bachelor's degree in fine arts at Washington University in Saint Louis. This academic stint abroad was enriching for So, who had never ventured much outside of her home city before that, though she reveals that it paradoxically impelled her to return to Hong Kong: "I have a very strong sense of identity, so I wanted to come back here to explore and strengthen it further." Even as the special administrative region became afflicted with turbulent anti-government protests and an ensuing wave of emigration, So never thought about leaving because, in her words, "I can only truly be myself here. Especially when I'm creating artworks, they only have meaning in this specific context."

One of So's most prolific series, *Invisible Island* (2021–), perfectly captures her devotion to a city in constant flux. Made during the precarious early stages of Covid-19 and later showcased at the 14th Shanghai Biennale in 2023, she collected various algae, fungi, plants, and insects from the lush environs of Hong Kong's Lamma Island, subjecting these samples to a biochemical process called decellularization which strips away proteins and living cells. What remains are frost-like, hollow forms floating in clear liquid. The "voids," as So calls them, seem to harbor an undercurrent of violence, destruction, and desolation—alluding to the ruinous impacts of social unrest and the pandemic. Yet rather than falling into a despairing narrative, she views these "empty spaces" as a chance to renew our understanding, to "recreate or reimagine the reality and essence of the city and its people." And as the artist's hopeful outlook persists, so does the project, if the slew of new liquid-filled containers on her shelves is any indication.

Despite the wide range of plants used throughout her practice, So admits that her knowledge of botany is rather limited, compared to that of her parents, who can easily recognize diverse specimens during their hikes. She, on the other hand, is more accustomed to the withered, dried-out, burnt, worm-bitten, and chopped



fragments of these plants which, in their living form, appear alien to her instead.

Perusing all the other paraphernalia in the studio, I spot what looks like a wrinkly piece of paper, all mottled and beige, hanging by the door. So explains that it is made of seeds from the tree of Damocles, which have thin, papery wings that she flattened and fused together to form a sheet. The seeds are a prevalent feature in her recent sculptures: *Body Part: Park* (2024), for example—exhibited at last year's Shanghai Jing'an International Sculpture Project—is a monumental structure of glowing red-orange tubes covered with these papery seeds, and seemingly twists and wriggles through the meadow in a process of germination.

Family hikes are no longer a weekly occurrence at the moment, as So is busy preparing for her upcoming exhibition at Para Site in mid-March. Here, she will present *Take Turns* (2025), a newly commissioned project that probes the everchanging dynamics between nature, materiality, and the human body through the motif of Chinese medicine drawers. Leading me to an adjacent storage room, So unveils an assortment of detached cubic drawers—all salvaged from now-defunct pharmacies throughout Hong Kong—which she will transform into a central wooden structure incorporating Chinese herbs, rocks, and kinetic sculptures, among other things. This work is inspired by John Conway's Game of Life, a mathematical game that demonstrates how simple components can develop into complex systems, with the drawers acting as archival remnants bearing witness to the interconnected cycles of life, change, and regeneration. Further vessels, no doubt, for So's enchanting microcosms.



Sheet made from seeds of the tree of Damocles, hanging on the wall of **WING PO SO**'s studio in To Kwa Wan, Hong Kong. Photo by Annabel Preston for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

Detail of **WING PO SO**'s *Body Part: Park*, 2024, tree of Damocles seeds, resin, LED lights, dimensions variable, at the Shanghai Jing'an International Sculpture Project, 2024. Photo by UCCA Lab. Courtesy UCCA Lab, Beijing; and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.

