

HONGKONG NEW ARTISTS TO WATCH

A RANDOM SURVEY BY THE PEAK HAS COME UP WITH A TREASURE TROVE OF CREATIVES WHO FURTHER PROVE THAT THE SAR HAS ARRIVED AS A VISUAL ARTS HUB. COMING FROM VARIOUS BACKGROUNDS, DWELLING ON UNLIMITED THEMES, AND USING A MULTITUDE OF MEDIA AND TECHNIQUES, SOME OF THEM SHARE STUDIO SPACES IN OBSCURE CITY CORNERS JUST TO BE ABLE TO CREATE.

PHOTOGRAPHY GARETH GAY

THREE MEN AND A STUDIO

DAVID BOYCE

STORY: JOHN BATTEN COURTESY: DAVID BOYCE / BLINDSPOT GALLERY



It's an eclectic studio ringing of sensible maturity and – as the three artist-tenants all agree – brought together through serendipity. David Boyce and Kurt Tong previously sub-leased a studio together in Wong Chuk Hang and applied for a slot at the nearby Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) studios with Cheung Chau-based artist Joshua Thomson. Boyce and Tong predominantly work in photography, while Thomson is a musician, record-label owner and visual artist.

The HKADC studios, housed in a section of a former industrial building in Wong Chuk Hang, are part of the council's residency and studio programme for visual artists. Officially opened in January, these 17 studios are let at a competitive rent, and provide 33 artists with naturally lit and well-appointed workspaces for terms of one to two years. There are restrictions, though – sleeping overnight and sub-leasing are not allowed, both common practices in private artists' studios around Hong Kong. The future success of the programme will depend on a transparent and fair selection procedure for the next group of residents, strict time limits of occupation and a creative use of the time at the residency.

In 2013, Boyce completed an extensive photography and book project, *From the Shoulders of*



Untitled 01: From the Shoulders of Giants (2012)
by David Boyce, pigment print, edition of eight

THERE IS GREAT DECEPTION AND CONJECTURE IN EACH PHOTOGRAPH, ACCOMPANIED BY A VAGUE FEAR WE HAVE OF OURSELVES: THE POSSIBILITY OF A SCHIZOID OTHER



COURTESY/ IDENTITY ART GALLERY

Giants, which was shown at Hong Kong's Blindspot Gallery. These intriguing photographs combine two images: one of himself and one of a well-known artist (or, in Boyce's words, artist "giants" he admires). Scrutinising each photograph, it's not immediately clear which artist's face has been combined with Boyce's portrait, but the book provides a full list of these "giants" so viewers can get a rough idea. There's great deception and conjecture in each photograph, accompanied by a vague fear we have of ourselves – the possibility of a schizoid other.

Boyce is looking forward to a four-week residency later this year at the Vermont Artists' Studio in the US. This will give him a chance to further consider ideas around imprecise memories

and imagined variations on childhood – themes he has explored, and will again, through collected family photo albums found in second-hand shops.

The well-known Photographers' Gallery in London represents Tong's work in the UK, partly an offshoot of his English-Chinese background. His project *The Queen, The Chairman and I* is both a book and an elaborate installation – in the form of a teahouse. It explores "the story of Hong Kong of the last 100 years and the Asian diaspora" as seen through the lives of Tong's far-flung family, in a project seen on five continents.

In Hong Kong, Tong's work has been shown at Blindspot Gallery, while his latest full exhibition, the expansive *Echoed Visions*, was mounted at



Axis Mundi (2013-14) by Kurt Tong, an installation view from the "Echoed Visions" project



Identity Gallery. The project focused on the medium of photography itself and the fact that people, through the ease of new technology, now take more photographs than ever. Tong shows a series of "reduced" images and poses a slippery question:

"Does the overload of images change the way we perceive and view the world around us or, indeed, how we view the object of a photograph itself?"

This is also a question that Thomson obliquely critiques, with his interest in analogue – over digital – technology. His record label, Platinum Metres, releases actual vinyl records, all recorded by experimental musicians or sound artists. And his elaborate drawings are all slowly, painstakingly executed, without the aid of computers.

Thomson's studio desk is covered with careful drawings to accompany the full back-catalogue of 1970s English folk singer Shirley Collins, famed for her version of the Stephen Sondheim song *Send in the Clowns*. Thomson finds the project particularly exciting because Collins travelled with venerable musicologist Alan Lomax in the 1960s to record the endangered folk songs of communities in the Appalachian Mountains in eastern North America.

Thomson has a keen interest in human behaviour. His recent *Raking the Moon* show was about (and exhibited on) the island of Cheung Chau. Drawings, including the large *Cheung Chau: A Phrenology of an Island*, map out emblematic island motifs, such as the moon, ships and lighthouses. The work explores how isolated communities are governed by physicality (such as the sea, in Cheung Chau's case) or by a mindset, psychology or ideology. It's an exploration always relevant in a changing world – particularly in a changing Hong Kong.



Pistacia (2014) by Joshua WF Thomson, gouache on paper, from the forthcoming Shirley Collins tribute album *Shirley Inspired*

A LIFE IN ART AND FOR ART

FUNG MING-CHIP

How far would you go for the sake of art? For Fung Ming-chip, it meant giving up absolutely everything – a series of decisions made when he turned 30 saw Fung abandoned by his family and wife. But what seemed like a dead end for the former truck driver eventually became a new path for the self-taught artist.

Born in 1951 in Guangdong, Fung moved to Hong Kong with his family when he was five. “When I was about seven, I learned about the Renaissance on the radio and Leonardo da Vinci became my hero,” he recalls. “I felt I was an artist. I just liked to paint on my textbooks. My father was really angry. ‘These things are useless,’ he used to say.”

Fung only finished primary school. He remembers doing odd jobs, mostly manual labour, from the age of 14. The family moved to New York in 1977 for a better shot at life, and Fung got married when he was 25, contributing to the family pot by working as a truck driver delivering Chinese goods.

But on the threshold of turning 30, Fung had a vision. “I knew a friend who was studying photography in Toronto, so I quit my job [to join my friend] – and had the biggest fight with my wife and my family. They thought, ‘Who do you think you are? You have nothing!’ That’s true, I was zero. But I didn’t want to waste my life. So I decided to fight for

my chance, my freedom to do something [I love].”

Hanging around with his creative friends in New York and Toronto in the 1980s, the mostly untrained artist soon impressed with his first collection of photographs, a selection that relied on a Contax camera to transform speeding vehicles into ribbons of light and colour. When one of his photos ended up on the cover of an art photography magazine in Hong Kong, word quickly spread. Fung soon held his first solo show, “Landscape”, at the American Library of the US consulate in Hong Kong, which inspired him to explore other art forms – seal-carving, sculpture, poetry, even playwriting – during his time spent in Hong Kong in 1982.

He says his eureka moment came after studying calligraphy for almost two decades. “In 1996, I finally broke through: I understood calligraphy and what’s behind it. It’s just like in a dark room – you light a candle and you see everything,” he says. “At that moment, I understood that calligraphy is not about lines – it’s about time. You can trace all the strokes and they have a sequence. Without it, it’s just like Abstract Expressionism. It opened up a whole new world to me.”

Fung is a modern conceptual calligrapher, without abandoning the traditional tools of brush, ink, water and paper. He deconstructs and reconstructs Chinese characters, injecting symbols and daily objects – such as planes, clocks or guitars – into his works to give calligraphy a new life, bridging the gap between East and West in the process. A lack of institutional training meant Fung was like a clean slate, unconfined by the creative boundaries seemingly limiting some of his contemporaries.

Some people see traces of Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell in Fung’s works, but the artist counts old movies as a fount of inspiration. His works are now in prestigious collections, such as those at Princeton and Harvard University’s art museums. He has shown at top institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. French luxury brand Hermès even came knocking on his door a few years ago, rendering his design on its Les Poèmes du Mandarin tableware collection.

Calling himself “socially inept”, Fung avoids the limelight and is hesitant to call himself successful. Asked about his greatest achievement so far, he says it’s probably his three-month artist residency at Jesus College at the University of Cambridge in



Purple Desire, Black on Black Swirl Script by Fung Ming-chip



I Am Who I Am, Change Me No One Can, Rubbing Script (right) by Fung Ming-chip

“IN 1996, I FINALLY BROKE THROUGH ... I UNDERSTOOD THAT CALLIGRAPHY IS NOT ABOUT LINES – IT’S ABOUT TIME”

2004. In a reconciliation of sorts, his parents (who both moved back to Hong Kong in 2007) visited him during his stay there. “They had opposed my original decision, but eventually came to accept my choice. That certainly has reinforced my self-esteem,” he says.

These days, Fung – who’s been based in Hong

Kong since 2006 after years of wandering between Hong Kong, the US and Taiwan – does his small-scale works at his home studio in Sai Ying Pun, where he and his “muse” reside. For his large works, Fung finds sanctuary in his much bigger Shenzhen atelier, where he can disappear into his calligraphy’s own time and space.

STILL LIFE WITH A CAT

KITTY KO & KONG CHUN-HEI

Kitty Ko Sin-tung and Kong Chun-hei studied fine arts together at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, graduating in 2009. Their Fo Tan studio is quietly organised and modest, possibly reflecting their approaches to art formulation, from a tentative initial idea to a considered execution. Their cat, which arrived as a local stray, wanders around, adding a domestic and loved intrusion – and a tempting playful diversion from work.

Kong uses very fine technical pens to studiously work on his drawings, which replicate the physicality of objects, laboriously reproducing their surfaces and contours. A wooden door is copied exactly, its depth expertly defined despite the two-dimensionality of the paper on which he works. Kong's art-making, he says, is similar to the sculpture of the English artist Rachel Whiteread, who makes her pieces by first taking a cast or mould of entire buildings or smaller domestic objects. The mould is then filled with concrete or plastic to produce an exact fabricated replica in inverse, as a negative of the original object.

His work is repetitive, but Kong has a simple explanation: "It's my character; I like repetitive work." Recently, his drawing has taken a slightly new direction. A common clay builder's brick sits on his worktable and he has minutely copied all six sides of this brick onto paper. Later, by folding the paper, he will construct a model: a reconstructed three-dimensional black-and-white paper brick. The process is then repeated, using the same original brick. The brick is again copied – and then again. The result is a series of similarly reproduced pen-constructed "bricks" that are all ostensibly the same.

However, the vagaries of the eye, the hand, the pen and the paper make each brick slightly different. Despite the differences from one brick to another, Kong's art attempts to replicate reality. A series of real bricks made from clay or terracotta, each pulled from the same mould and then baked in a kiln, would result in similar-looking bricks, but none identical – each will have slight differences in pattern or texture. However imprecise, they're the "same" bricks.

Kong exhibits his work through Hong Kong's Gallery Exit, which recently took a new series to the Artissima art fair in Torino, Italy. In a similar Dadaist tradition of "non-meaning", Kong's work is as it appears. His drawings have no strong message and there is no contrived artifice; they just surprise



THEIR FO TAN STUDIO IS QUIETLY ORGANISED AND MODEST, POSSIBLY REFLECTING THEIR APPROACHES TO ART FORMULATION – FROM A TENTATIVE INITIAL IDEA TO A CONSIDERED EXECUTION

by their precision. "I'm not an emotional person," he explains. "I have no story to tell."

At the opposite end of the studio, Ko has placed her desk strategically next to the large windows. While Kong may happily work methodically with his static replication, Ko needs the quirks and stimuli of the outside world for inspiration. I imagine she sits at her desk, most often daydreaming or surfing the internet, but also concentrating on an idea that becomes a problem – one requiring a solution in art. This will be conceptually resolved and tested on paper or on her computer.

Ko is at an exciting period as an artist; she is not pigeonholed into expressing herself through only one medium, style or genre. She works in painting, drawing, photography, video and installation, and continues to experiment. During Hong Kong ArtWalk 2014, Ko set up a TV on the street to show a short video that captured six different scenes of daily objects, each lopsided. By slowly tilting the video camera, each object became horizontal and thus, to the eye, correctly positioned. For example, a ladder leaning against a wall becomes "safe" after the camera tilts it straight. This silly, amusing video was successful and brought a lot of laughs.

In 2012, Ko had a short artist residency in the small village of Ålvik, near Bergen in Norway. "The experience was eye-opening, because I realised that big news was relative. The front page of the local newspaper could simply show a photograph of schoolchildren going on an outing," she says.

Ko's work at the time was small-scale, including collages of local newspaper clippings of the news as seen by a small local community. But Ko has set her sights higher now; she has just started exhibiting with the Edouard Malingue Gallery and her latest work is on display from January 15 to March 7 at the gallery's new Central space.



Collecting Light (2014) by Ko Sin-tung, in acrylic, archival inkjet on canvas

COURTESY KO SIN-TUNG / EDOUARD MALINGUE GALLERY

COURTESY ARTIST & GALLERY EXIT



Bricks (2015) by Kong Chun-hei, ink on paper mounted on board, six pieces

FROM HUIZHOU TO WAN CHAI

ELVA LAI



At only 25 years of age, Elva Lai has found her footing in the Hong Kong arts scene, a sizable distance from her birthplace of Huizhou in Guangdong province. Having already scooped up 10 local arts-related awards, Lai is no stranger to exhibitions, with more than 10 group and solo shows at various venues in Hong Kong and in Taipei. Her mixed-media project was also recently shown for two months at Spain's La Casa China gallery as part of the "Uncertainties. Asian Digital Art Exhibition (First Edition)".

Lai shares her studio in Wan Chai with another painter friend; they're among the fortunate few who have been able to secure a space run by the Art and Culture Outreach, a non-profit group funded by the Dawei Charitable Foundation that provides art spaces at low rents. Of course, if she could afford it, Lai would love to get her own studio – and that may have to happen soon, as she is set to graduate this year with a Master of Fine Arts from the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Lai came to Hong Kong with her mother when she was only eight years old. She's the epitome of a high-achieving migrant child who strives hard to defy stereotypes. Her father fled to Hong Kong

from mainland China in the 1970s, so a border separated them during her formative years. Lai says her mother has been an inspiration in her work, while her father was a distant figure in her upbringing, an emotional state that plays a pivotal role in her works. For example, her pencil, charcoal and inkjet-on-paper series, *Family Photo Album: Washing*, tells the stories of migrants who came to Hong Kong from the mainland in the 1960s. It won the 2013 Hong Kong Human Rights Art Prize, which led to an opportunity for an artist residency in Provence, France, last year.

In 2009, Lai's father died, prompting her to explore emotions and themes she wasn't even aware of then. "At the time, I needed something to ease my feelings – to let things come out. Distance is a notion that I wanted to explore because of the distance between my father and me. So my father's death was very crucial in shifting the issues I'm exploring," she says.

Migration is a politically sensitive topic everywhere, especially when it comes to the waves of mainland migrants that have constantly washed up in Hong Kong throughout its history. For Lai, it can be frustrating as she attempts to touch on such



From the *Family Photo Album: Washing Series* (2013) by Elva Lai, in pencil, charcoal and inkjet on paper



About Poem I (2014) photography by Elva Lai



About Poem II (2014) photography by Elva Lai

"THERE IS NO RIGHT AND WRONG IN TRYING TO UNDERSTAND CONTEMPORARY ART"

a delicate topic. She has chosen to adopt a plain and direct narrative approach, hoping to inspire audiences without being didactic or resorting to propaganda. At a 2014 joint exhibition called "Our Beautiful Days", Lai presented her inkjet-on-package-paper work, *The Colour of Silver*. It featured four Chinese characters that translate as "very fragile", reflecting the frustrations faced by new immigrants and their vulnerability in an unfamiliar environment.

Lai sometime thinks of herself as an installation artist, but she also wants to explore as much as she can, so her projects have included mixed-media, video and photography. "For a fresh graduate, the first task is to be a good local artist before you can pursue something else. When we see international artists, they are very good at expressing their own cultures, such as Germany's Martin Honert," she says.

But people could be sceptical of contemporary art, and as M+ chief curator Doryun Chong once said: "There's a gap between contemporary art and its audience. You have to understand the development of contemporary art and it takes time." Lai agrees, and cites Damien Hirst's 1993 work, *Mother and Child (Divided)*, which shows a cow and calf bisected and preserved in four tanks of formaldehyde. "There is no right and wrong in trying to understand contemporary art," Lai says. "Maybe we artists should have more confidence in ourselves, while viewers should also have the courage to trust their judgment in terms of what they think is good or not."

It's a belief that will be challenged again in Lai's solo exhibition this month at the Artify Gallery in Chai Wan. Featuring memorabilia scoured from the long history of immigration in Hong Kong, it will address an issue that many locals may find too close for comfort – but one that must be faced if our society is to find a certain level of acceptance of its past and future.

CELLULAR SPACES

LING PUI-SZE & BOSCO LAW KA-MAN



Ling Pui-sze (known to her friends as CC) and Bosco Law Ka-nam recently moved to Tsuen Wan into a spacious, separate studio inside the larger premises of a trading company. After their respective graduations in 2012 and 2013, they shared a studio in Fo Tan with other fine arts friends from the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Their move to Tsuen Wan reinforces the increasing popularity of the district as a destination for art studios and spaces as Kwun Tong, San Po Kong, Chai Wan and Wong Chuk Hang evolve from their industrial origins into mainstream commercial districts, following recent government land policies to reduce industrial zonings.

Bosco Law executes intricate drawings, usually of subjects dealing with a psychological or socio-psycho content. However, as a young and thoughtful artist, he works across a variety of media and has also experimented with video, installation and computer graphics.

Law works slowly and methodically, producing drawings that are almost made-to-order on notification of his participation in a group exhibition or art fair. This spurs the start of a new drawing: slowly dotted, in an almost pointillist style, and

slowly completed, just in time for framing and eventual exhibition. "I need to improve my technical skills; my previous training at Chinese University was a general art education," Law says. He believes he needs specialist advice to become more technically competent. "I want to be mentored and pushed; I want to draw better," he says.

Recently, there has been a resurgence in the graphic qualities of drawing as art in Hong Kong, with a number of young artists devoted to drawing as their main focus, including Ho Sin-tung, Kong Chun-hei, Elva Lai and Wai Pong-yu. Bosco Law is grouped with these artists, whose artwork ranges from conceptual to narrative drawing. This rising interest could also be related to the city's strong cartoon tradition as well as an interest in animation and Japanese manga – this can be seen in such crossover artists as Kong Kee, Chihoi and Justin Wong, whose cartoons and graphic-novel drawings strike a balance between popular culture and fine art.

To develop his skills, Law recently decided to apply for overseas university arts courses with a focus on drawing. Hong Kong's small and vibrant economy can offer local artists good employment opportunities – for example, if they live at home,

“THE MOVE BY THESE TWO ARTISTS TO TSUEN WAN REINFORCES THE INCREASING POPULARITY OF THIS DISTRICT AS A DESTINATION FOR STUDIOS AND ART SPACES”

they don't need to work as restaurant dishwashers as in many other countries. But the city's overt commercial environment and pressured living conditions can promote mediocrity, complacency and stress. "I need to be challenged as an artist. Being overseas – say, in Taiwan – will allow greater time and energy in an artist-friendly arts scene to improve my skills," he says.

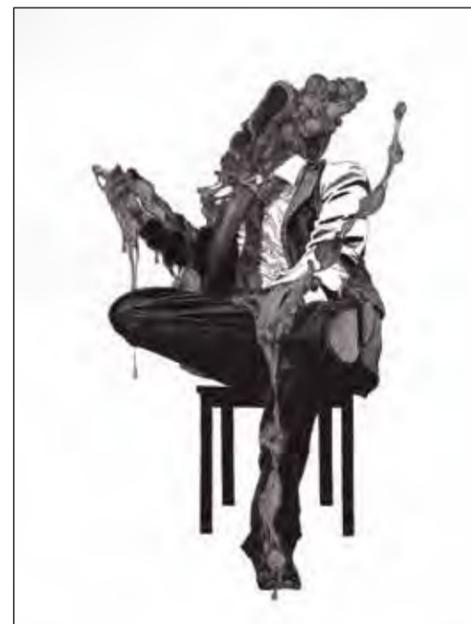
Studio-mate Ling's work is completely different and emanates from Hong Kong's strong ink-

painting tradition. With teachers including Wucius Wong, her work seemingly has a similar aesthetic at times. "I draw inspiration from the natural world," she explains.

Ling is fascinated by small, intricate and oddly shaped insects, and over the past 18 months has been inspired by life's building blocks: cells, water and earth. Her latest *Reproducibility* series continues her use of layers of inkjet-printed paper, collaged in pieces, adhered to stretched canvas or wood, and then further reworked by adding Chinese ink or watercolour. The result is a complex, abstract, diaphanous cell-like patterning resembling life under a microscope – Ling calls them "new organisms on canvas." If this were the 1960s, her work could be at the serious end of graphic-design psychedelia with her inspired, heady, whirling, magma-esque formations.

Ling's interest in ink painting prompted a performance piece produced while she was a student. Her *Strings Drawing* video records her playing a traditional tune on the stringed zheng. While she plucks, she also places ink on the strings; with each finger movement, she flicks ink onto strategically placed paper. This action-based performance produces a freeform painting, but it is the slow-paced music as a visual art that is particularly mesmerising, hinting at another inner tension in her artwork.

Ling is a smiling, enthusiastic and positive person – this attitude, and much latent confidence, will undoubtedly grow over time. We should see, cell-by-cell, other significant projects from her.



Conversation (2013) by Bosco Law, ink on paper



Form 7 (2013) by Ling Pui-sze, mixed media on canvas

THE ART OF EXPERIMENTATION

TREVOR YEUNG



Affordable art spaces in the New Territories are ideal for artists such as Trevor Yeung, 26, whose works include painting, photography, installation, video – and horticulture. His Fo Tan studio, which he shares with a friend, is teeming with potted plants, ferns, bonsai and molten rocks. There are also bunk beds for weary souls.

At Baptist University, Yeung always knew what he wanted to pursue: the visual arts. Upon graduation in 2010, a friend referred him to local independent art space Para Site, where he started as a production assistant, helping artists with all kinds of tasks from installation to technical problem-solving. The experience helped transform him from an anonymous artist's sidekick to a rising experimental-art star, as some art writers and curators have called him. But with his spectacles and bookish demeanour, Yeung remains boyish, giggling and constantly expressing his gratitude for a myriad of things.

"I was so lucky to be able to work [at Para Site]. I met so many people, curators and artists. But one of the best things was in 2011, after working there for six months, I went to the Singapore Biennale as an exhibition intern to assist four artists. They were

so generous to teach me," he says.

An urge to create finally couldn't be contained, prompting Yeung to quit his full-time job after three years at Para Site. "I wanted to have a breakthrough. It's very difficult to juggle time doing art and working at a full-time job. I was surviving on sandwiches and sometimes skipping meals for a month," he says.

Tightening his belt for six months was quite an experience for Yeung, but he believes it was worth it. "It's like a point of no return. You start being very focused on creating art because it's all you have," he says.

In December 2013, Yeung unveiled *Seven Gentlemen*, a horticulture installation that plays with the notions of proximity and distance at the experimental Hardneck.hk gallery in Wan Chai. After nights of toiling away, Yeung was so absorbed in his work that he didn't even have time to shower or change his clothes for the exhibition opening. "What the audiences saw in me at that moment was really raw. They saw everything that I had been working for out there. The sense of achievement was overwhelming," he says. "One of the reasons I studied art is I don't like expressing myself directly –

it's too naked. I'm a control freak. So when I have my installation, I want to control all the feelings, visuals, sounds and scents in the space it's confined to."

Yeung says his art is fed by his relationships with his family, friends and lovers, but things aren't always so transparent. "Sometimes my work is like a riddle; if you follow the clues, you could find something that relates to yourself. The bonding [I have with you] will be deeper than any other thing you would have seen," he says.

An early work, *Sleepybed* – which features photos of fellow guests sleeping at various hostels – points to intimacy and alienation, reflecting the artist's desire to be in control even as he tenderly captures his subjects. Yeung, however, doesn't want to be pigeonholed. "I won't just call myself a photographer, a painter or an installation artist, because it would be so boring to focus on just one medium. When I have an idea, I just go and find the best way to achieve that. I would be happy if people get my message. Even if they don't, I don't mind. The good thing about it is that you find more like-minded people."

Yeung also wants to break boundaries. "I wouldn't create something that only the Chinese will understand. I want to create an artwork that connects with the memory of the audience. If I can do that, I would be very happy," he says.

Yeung's works are usually thematic, such as *Piranha Department* from 2013 – an installation of seemingly disconnected objects such as red-bellied piranha and peanuts scattered around a single-seat sofa, placed in front of a TV screen that plays a 21-minute video loop. "I've been hearing friends talking about dog-eat-dog politics in the office. Piranhas hunt in schools. But once any of them is injured, they will start devouring each other – which is exactly the message I want to convey."

Since 2008, Yeung has already chalked up eight solo and 23 group exhibitions in Hong Kong, mainland China, Taiwan and the Netherlands. In November 2014, his work was shown at the Shanghai Biennale, and this month, he will have his first solo exhibition at Art Basel. Not bad for a former art-space production assistant. ☺

"I WOULDN'T CREATE SOMETHING THAT ONLY THE CHINESE WILL UNDERSTAND. I WANT TO CREATE AN ARTWORK THAT CONNECTS WITH THE MEMORY OF THE AUDIENCE"



Maracujá Road (2014) by Trevor Yeung

COURTESY TREVOR YEUNG