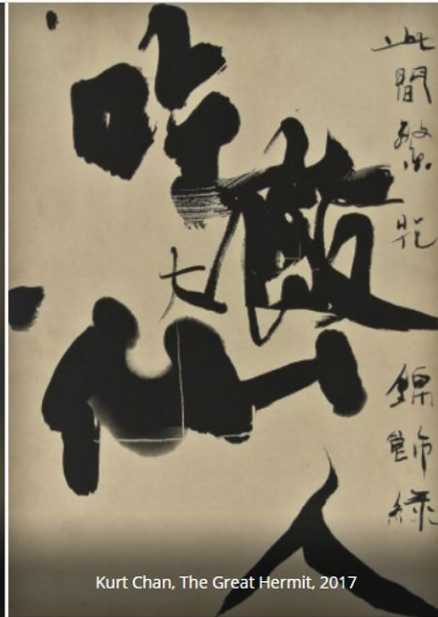


Composing Stories with Fragments of Time – Eight Hong Kong Artists' Intimate Response to 20 Years of Changes



Kurt Chan, The Great Hermit, 2017



Lau Chi Chung, Letter Without Words 1, 2 & 3, 2017

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Presented by Karin Weber Gallery, *Composing Stories with Fragments of Time: Works by Kurt Chan, Annie Wan, Francis Yu, Luke Ching, Angela Su, Lau Chi Chung, Carmen Ng, and Elva Lai* registers the 20th anniversary of Hong Kong coming under the rule of the People's Republic of China by sidelining grand narratives of history in favor of an intimate, all-too-human encounter.

TEXT : Yang Yeung

IMAGES : Courtesy of the artists & Karin Weber Gallery

The curation began from a hand written letter, set behind the title panel facing the street: a simple gesture that already brings forth both an open invitation to the present and to a mansion of an unknown past.

The letter and the handwritten are precious, but not necessarily because they go against the grain of digital prosthetics shooting everyday life forward. Resisting to fetishize the letter as an object, the exhibition suggests that it is in the light of the art that the meaning and materiality, together with the affective and symbolic qualities of the letter, that stories of its preciousness unfolds.

Lau Chi-chung's *Letter Without Words 1, 2, 3* (2017) shares the emotional trajectory evoked by the letter. It is a photographic collage; it could also be seen as a staging of anonymous memorabilia – perhaps an oxymoron. If the letter registers unspecified, past occurrences that evoke unease because of their inaccessibility, Lau's work develops the tension between the need of attachment and detachment.



Yang Yeung

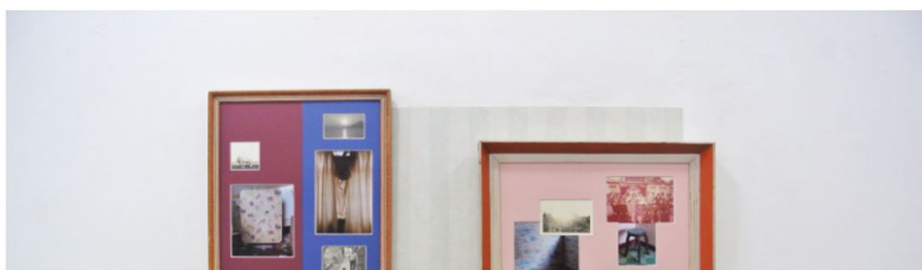
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Yang Yeung is a writer of art and an independent curator. She founded the non-profit soundpocket in 2008 and is...

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The title of Carmen Ng's work *Missing Words* (2017) is (perhaps by accident) in productive affinity with the title of Lau's work. The anonymous is similarly figured. Four watercolor drawings, individuated but brought together in one frame, could be read as the result of the artist deliberately taking away traces of what the hand can do to the literariness of a letter to keep the question of meaning unresolved. It could also be read as the artist inscribing a different way of writing that borders drawing, questioning the limit of language. A silent script shaped as regular units of blocks is composed. Are the blocks masks that hide, or do they serve as refuge for that which cannot be told? The blandness of the visual quality of the drawing is crowned with a palm-size box of metal type pieces used in letterpress printing, turned facedown, sealed as a secret. There is no word on display to decipher, only the suggestion of meaning having been at work or on strike.



Carmen Ng, *Missing Words*, 2017

Luke Ching and Angela Su's works are in a stark contrast. Layers of names and gestures of naming weave together narratives that mix the historical, fictional, and mythical. Angela Su's *Caspiar* (2017) engages with the illegibility of history by creating a fictive space for multi-layered social realities to co-exist. Narrated with an interview between a female voice and a male voice, the video tells of the male domestic servant originally from the legendary sunk island of Caspiar. He claims to be from North Point now and someone who can always fake he is a banker for the stereotypes of professions of white male in Hong Kong. He puzzles over why the question of origin has gotten the interviewer so worked up. *Caspiar* is a repository that anticipates. It seems plausible to regard *Caspiar* as "topian" (a term coined by Kenneth Olwig, which anthropologist Tim Ingold develops in *Lines: A Brief History*) that describes "practices of dwelling and the circuitous movements" as ways of connecting with the world, rather than utopian that suggests progress, or dystopian that suggests fragmentation.

Ching presents four works that are iterations of one: *Rainy Day* (2017), *Imagine There's No Countries*, *Imagine There's No Heaven* (2017), *Victoria Harbour* (2017), and *Phrase* (2017) are stacks of unused and dysfunctional envelopes, punctuated by stamps printed during specific historical moments in Hong Kong, which the artist has turned into thumb-sized accordions. One common thread of these moments is the discrepancy between the government's policy imaginaries and the lived realities of the people implicated as senders or receivers of the now incapacitated letters. When letters are weighed down by iconography about its own glory, they fail their duties – to pass on love, loss, and longing, for instance.

I wonder, if the visitor had known nothing about what the idea of 1997 means for Hong Kong, would these voices of art have sounded different? I go back to the letter again, from which everything sprung.

The letter was salvaged by curator Kenneth Young, also co-director of Karin Weber Gallery, from a pile of old papers of a distant relative. The letter is intended for a Michael and a Margaret. It is not signed. It begins with noting the passing of days since the writer's migration to Australia. The letter brings Philip Larkin's poem *Home is so sad* to mind: "Home is so sad. It stays as it was left [...] bereft of anyone to please, it withers so..." But there is hope and humor in another – *Days*: "What are days for?/ Days are where we live./ They come, they wake us/ Time and time over./ They are to be happy in:/ Where can we live but days?/ Ah, solving that question/ Brings the priest and the doctor/ In their long coats/ Running over the fields." (Philip Larkin, *Whitsun Weddings*) It seems to me the fear of parting and, in a contradictory way, the possible liberation from intimate human bonding, is one aspect of the letter that Kurt Chan and Annie Wan's works respond to.

Kurt Chan presents three works that are iterations of the "rice-eating fairy", a phrase the letter writer uses as self-portrait. Chan calls his works experiments of the formal qualities of ink calligraphy. Drawn with Apple Pencil with the zen brush apps, *Great Hermit* (2017) is pregnant with movement: light, soft, free, and with turns of strokes as if bobbing up from its medium. The artist's playful adaptation of the imagery seems to share a wish, bear a self-mockery, and project a future all at once, so that the arrogance of apathetic time could be tamed.

Annie Wan's *(Lost) Art of Writing Letters / Hand-copy of Excerpts From Zhi Tingguangshu By Tang Junyi* (2017) is also interested in the correspondence of the emotional topography of the letter and of the artistic process of materialization. Wan picked an excerpt of Tang Junyi's letter to his wife, with emotions she could resonate with, and copied it by hand for two days. The aim, as Wan described it to me, was such that the flow of characters would be imbued with the right kind of energy in letter writing. She then transferred the script onto four, 1-mm-thin porcelain tablets. One of the tablets was intentionally mailed to the gallery and expected to be broken. It did and is shown as it is. In the entire process of transposition, I imagine the artist making an effort to maintain her composure with the help of the disciplined and steady movement of the hand, to place a turbulent past in equanimity.

Voices admitted by Elva Lai's installation *Voice Welcome* (2017) and Francis Yu's painting *Rice and Milk* (2017) give a different kind of vitality to the gallery. Lai's single screenprint on the wall and stack of stickers for free distribution employ the lightness of medium to convey a heavier message: Is the tag line "Voice Welcome", and the much smaller "Bring your good old days" a satire on how people have not spoken? In relation to the letter, *Voice Welcome* opens up the singular voice into the imagination of many; it imagines a public that is infinite. Yu's bold and expressive strokes depicting over-sized grains of rice give them a monstrous presence – monstrous for being strange, not to impart fear. The empty cans of condensed milk standing and leaning on the brims of the canvas are dwarfed, as if presenting the struggle between hunger and the hunger of seeing.

Obliquely engaging with the historical significance of the year 1997 for Hong Kong, "Composing Stories with Fragments of Time" as a title still seems to be laden (perhaps reluctantly) with the historically contingent and arguably outdated idea of Hong Kong as "borrowed time" and "borrowed place". The art has not complied. It works to knead deafening grand narratives into the right size, in the right amount of solitude.

Sometimes, one doesn't have to rely on knowledge to be touched; to know, however, is to be touched differently.

Composing Stories with Fragments of Time

Works by Kurt Chan, Annie Wan, Francis Yu, Luke Ching, Angela Su, Lau Chi Chung, Carmen Ng, and Elva Lai

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KARIN WEBER GALLERY CONTEMPORARY FINE ART

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