

# Hong Kong Now!

Robert Hobbs

While political pundits are making book on the common future of Hong Kong and China after the July 1 transfer of this 153-year-old British crown colony to the People's Republic of China, a small group of Hong Kong artists is involved in quiet but intense acts of self-definition. Their deadline is midnight, June 30, 1997. And their objective is to define the "way of life" that China's 1988 Basic Law agreement promises to maintain from the time of the takeover until 2047. The Basic Law is a constitution of sorts for the Special Administrative Region of China (SAR) that Hong Kong will become in 1997. Since the outburst of violence that culminated student protests at Tiananmen Square in 1989, this body of agreements has become increasingly important to both the People's Republic and citizens of this British crown colony as they move closer to unification.

Under the leadership of the British territorial governor Chris Patten, Hong Kongers in the 1990s have achieved greater representation and suffrage even though the Chinese in Beijing have wanted to maintain the colony's status at the time the Basic Law was formulated and thus have publicly denied the constitutionality of recently enacted democratic measures. Changes in the governance of Hong Kong since the formulation of the Basic Law have had the net effect of making the British appear liberal, just, and far less paternalistic than they have been during the past century and a half and of making the People's Republic seem reactionary. The Western press has judged Beijing's position negatively and found Great Britain's sunset laws praiseworthy rather than merely expedient. The press has failed to recognize Great Britain's new policy as a set of stopgap measures aimed at saving face after turning over to Mainland China not only the leased land making up the New Territories, but also the holdings of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon that had been ceded to the British "in perpetuity" as a result of the Opium Wars. The news media might weigh Beijing's reliance on the Basic Law as a possible step forward in which power is to be reconfigured in the form of written laws incumbent on all parties rather than merely subject to the personal whims of an autocrat, as it has been in the past.

Hong Kong's identity as a way station for refugees leaving China after the communist

takeover in 1949 has been subsumed under transactional imperatives: first as a manufacturing center, then a marketplace and duty-free port for goods made locally and abroad, recently a world-class banking and insurance center, and even more recently the gateway to the People's Republic of China. Considered less a community in its own right than a base of operations, this territory has been both British and Chinese, international and regional. As a result of the establishment of the Basic Law, followed by the events of Tiananmen Square, questions about the territory's future have become increasingly disturbing at the same time that the spectacular growth of its economic capabilities and surplus seem to ensure continued stability and prosperity after the transfer. The ambiguities ensuing from political vulnerability coupled with unheralded economic prosperity have made Hong Kongers feel both imperiled and invulnerable. Although savvy forecasters are wary of Chinese graft that is commonplace on the mainland and in the special capitalist economic zones that Deng Xiaoping succinctly acknowledged under the rubric "one country, two systems," and are deeply concerned about the possibility of an exponential increase in influxes of people from the mainland after the transfer, many prominent Hong Kong businesspersons appear to be ebullient about repatriation and predict greater opportunities as a result of their closer connections with China and its potential markets. But many of these same leaders keep their foreign passports handy and have already made arrangements for their imposing private collections of Chinese art to be placed on loan safely outside the country at the time of the takeover to avoid restrictions about exporting national treasures.

Working within the freedoms and constraints created by the opposing forces of possible totalitarian rule and the seemingly unlimited free-market economies already in place, Hong Kong artists have been developing a spectrum of possible identities that exhibit the common features of hybridity, contingency, and irony. These characteristics describe a constellation of complex and even contradictory values that are continually being negotiated as endemic to Hong Kong.

The recent Hong Kong art featured in this exhibition should be considered a series of ongoing proposals about this dynamic and nonhomologous identity, rather than definitive solutions to a set "way of life." At present Hong Kongers are beset by far too many varied and even contradictory forces to achieve even a momentary stasis that might lay claim to a unilateral personality. Given the territory's past and present mechanisms for success that

depend on a service economy and a willingness to be open to change and competition, an overriding identity would constitute a major threat to the teeming and diverse political, economic, and cultural conversations that the area has maintained and that have in turn supported it. The art now being made in Hong Kong should be considered part of a necessary and salutary process of discursive work in which separate realities are joined and offered as possible stabilizing or destabilizing forces, depending on whether the art in question is presented as a picture of ongoing reality or a vision of possible rifts in the future. Rather than succumbing to propaganda and telling people what to think, the art included in this exhibition poses questions, establishes intriguing new conjunctions, and offers opportunities for viewers to consider a range of possible responses. Instead of playing partisan politics, this art fashions new alliances between disparate realms and proposes a range of permutations that reconfigure established genres. This discursive work plays with symbols and artistic traditions, at times sustaining and deflecting traditional meanings by demanding that viewers look anew at the distinctive possibilities of being a Hong Konger.

The reasons why Hong Kong art has been overlooked in the past in favor of either contemporary Western or Chinese art are precisely those reasons why it is so important in the present and promises to be so in the future. Neither entirely Eastern nor definitively Western in its outlook, this art oscillates between these two traditional polarities and shows how postcolonial artistic production is an ongoing negotiation of differences, a tentative resolution of contradictions, and an ironic doubling of mainstream strategies that mimic and undermine the afflatus of established modes. Their discursive activity represents an offering of new possibilities. For example, Oscar Ho's drawings establish an ongoing conversation between the folklore of urban life in late twentieth-century Hong Kong and the Ching Dynasty illustrated newspapers of the preceding century. Gretchen So focuses on the dynamics of change in the British crown colony that at times conflate old and new worlds and that join documentary and fine art genres. Lucia Cheung establishes continuities between traditional conceptions of Chinese landscapes and the modern architecture of the Chung Wan (Central District), Wan Chai, and Tsim Sha Tsui areas of Hong Kong, that subtly underscore the enormous gulf between the past and the present. Ho Siu-kee joins aspects of traditional Zen Buddhist figures and modern technology, while Leung Chi Wo establishes a dialectics of seeing/nonseeing and past/present in his pinhole photographs that colonize aspects of the present-day city under the auspices of a style identifiable with early

photography and the first decade of the colony's existence. And Wong Shun-kit and Yu Tsz Man fuse the familial and the national in installations that play on the ambiguities of the color red which traditionally connotes good fortune (consequently its liberal use at weddings) and at the same time conveys the political connotations of Red China and the Red Guard.

This ongoing discursive work has been anticipated by one of the artists in the exhibition, Oscar Ho, who in his capacity as Exhibition Director of the Hong Kong Art Centre, has instituted a series of exhibitions that have researched and resurrected the little-known twentieth century artistic history of the region. Ho perceived the opening of the Centre in 1989 as a public ratification of the importance of territorial artistic forms and a clear mandate for open debate about the nature of local culture. Wishing to refute the popular misconception that no Hong Kong culture preexists the 1960s, Ho obtained a grant from the Hong Kong Polytechnic in 1993 to establish the Hong Kong Art History Project. Since there has been little if any writing on Hong Kong art history for the past 147 years, Ho initiated an oral history project in which he and a single assistant interviewed artists about the past. In addition, in 1991, he began a series of exhibitions focusing on a range of artistic traditions. The first exhibition featured the work of the painter, revolutionary, and poet Li Tiefert who was probably the first Chinese to go abroad to study oil painting in Canada and the United States where he came under the influence of John Singer Sargent and William Merritt Chase. Refusing to accept traditional definitions of fine art as his criteria for the history of this region, Oscar Ho dispensed with traditional high/low categories and created such exhibitions as *Comic in Revolt: The Shanghai Comics in the 30's and 40's*; *The Good and the Bad: Textbook and Comics in Hong Kong (1930s-1970s)*; and *Farewell "Kiddy Cheung": A Tribute to the Hong Kong Cartoonist Yuan Po Wan (1922-1995)*.

Together with David Clarke, an art history professor at the University of Hong Kong and an important local critic, Ho investigated ways that the citizens of Hong Kong determined objects in their homes to be art. In addition to traditional works of art, kitsch productions, watches, photographs, and memorabilia that were exhibited with statements about the object's specific meaning for its owner, the exhibition included a selection of postcards of China that Tang Ying Chi, a 34-year-old teacher, had received from her father. Her estimation of their importance dovetails the question of cultural allegiances:

*After the June 4 incident [at Tiananmen Square], we claimed that we were Chinese people, and yet China is so remote to us and her people are so very different from us. Our older generation, however, are related to this land because they once lived there. How shall we share their grief and pain evoked by the catastrophe that besets with China, and perceive their feelings for China where they find their origin? Perhaps, at the moment we receive the objects passed down from our older generation, the answer has already come.<sup>1</sup>*

Ho and Clarke's approach to the work constituting this exhibition builds on the policies of Group Material, an artists' group that opened a storefront art gallery on East 13th Street in New York City in the summer of 1980. Wishing to break away from restrictive definitions of art, Group Material members created such programs as "Alienation," a December 1980 group of events they conceived, including an installation dramatizing this subject, an Alienation Film Festival, a public lecture by political scientist Bertell Ollman of New York University (author of a book on estrangement), as well as an occasion to break down social barriers in the gallery's immediate neighborhood by issuing a blanket invitation to the community to bring personal treasures to the storefront space and share their feelings about these objects. A similar desire to break down metropolitan obstacles to community identity and to build a cultural identity from shared experiences informs Ho and Clarke's exhibition.

The most far-reaching of Ho's endeavors was his advocacy of *Hong Kong Sixties: Designing Identity*, guest-curated for the Hong Kong Art Centre by Matthew Turner in 1996. In the brochure accompanying this exhibition the show's overall intent is spelled out:

*Whether official or popular, capitalist or communist, Chinese or Western, the new representations of identity produced in the Sixties were for the most part consciously idealized images, designed to reshape not to reflect society. The exhibition does not attempt to recreate the Sixties, it reflects on the nature of representation and open[s] a dialogue on how we interpret representation of the Hong Kong way of life.<sup>2</sup>*

Viewing the 1960s as a time when the subject of a Hong Kong identity first began to be addressed, Turner contrasts the still prevailing narrative of Hong Kong origins as a diaspora of economic migrants with the territory's "autochthonous culture and identity" that he articulates in this exhibition catalogue.<sup>3</sup> In his essay, he highlights an important though

brief newspaper article on the subject of identity that journalist Ernie Pereira drafted for the February 28, 1965 edition of *Hong Kong Tiger Standards*:

*Hongkong has been called a railway station. People come and go through it, have a flirtation or romance with it, but never a love affair. They work here, make money here, raise families here, but still do not accept Hongkong as their home....Hongkong means more than just a port of call or a rendezvous with some Suzie Wong....For the idea of a Hongkong identity to grow and for its people to take pride in being identified with Hongkong, living standards have to go up. Otherwise it is like trying to give culture to hungry and needy people -- it simply just won't work. An idea, viewed in this sense, is more utopian than realistic: it is bound to fall before it even begins to take root.<sup>4</sup>*

Not surprisingly Turner uses this explication of cultural developments and sensitivity to a Hong Kong identity in the 1960s as a platform for the mounting concerns about the region's future in the 1990s and beyond, as the combative title of his essay "60's/90's: Dissolving the People" indicates. Still plagued by the question of an integral cohesiveness for the region at the time of this show which took place only two years before the transfer to Mainland China, Turner asks in a tone of ominous despair:

*Has Hong Kong evolved an independent "cultural identity," – or has prosperity merely overlaid Chinese society with the gloss of fashionable, western "lifestyles"?*<sup>5</sup>

The clock is ticking, the mandate for self-definition is set, and yet the question remains unanswered.

The same agenda crops up again and again in the administrative realm of the territory's incipient cultural industry. The effects of Oscar Ho's concern for a readily identifiable lifestyle on which to base Hong Kong's next half century can be seen in the way that he has recently crafted the 5-Year Strategic Plan for the Hong Kong Arts Development Council of which he is a member. Among the essential principles laid out in this plan are "development of local Hong Kong culture" including "the development of arts which contribute to Hong Kong's cultural identity [and the support of] arts of local significance which are under-developed due to earlier neglect or under threat of decline."<sup>6</sup> The goals are set, and the

public's need has been so clearly established that it has become bureaucratized. Still the question of the Hong Kong way of life remains open-ended.

Matthew Turner's subtle dialectics provide a glimpse of the flip side of the question: namely, what happens if Hong Kong frames a specific identity that it wishes later to reformulate and transform?

*Since no society could "remain unchanged for fifty years," how will social change be legitimized? At the heart of the agreements on Hong Kong's future lies a slippery neologism which may be interpreted to mean almost anything.<sup>7</sup>*

Because change might be interpreted as a cultural critique of the Mainland, stasis and consequent ossification might be the outcome of imposed coherency and rigidity. The clock is still set; yet the terms are changed so that the mission of formulating a Hong Kong lifestyle becomes a potential mine field.

Not only artists, but cultural workers in the realms of fashion and antique dealing are involved in defining the culture. One remarkable example of discursive activity in the commercial sector is the contributions of the art collector, restaurateur, and fashion impresario David Tang who has developed the exclusive China Club that occupies three floors of the Old Bank of China Building and who has opened a few blocks away in the Pedder Building the flagship store for a chain of high-end clothing emporiums called "Shanghai Tang." Both ventures play with viable definitions of Mainland China in its most flamboyantly sophisticated and internationally modern guise. Featuring black hardwood furniture liberally decorated with inset pieces of marble, a deliberate cluttering of crocheted antimacassars on the arms and backs of overstuffed chairs and sofas covered in rich brocades, an array of twentieth-century Chinese paintings, all set off by intense colors evocative of Ralph Lauren's palette, both the China Club and Shanghai Tang are immensely appealing stage sets, fantasies actually, of what China was and what it still might be if the "Hong Kongization" of Shenzhen, the special economic zone adjoining this British colony, is permitted to infiltrate the People's Republic. Recalling the Shanghai deco style of the 1930s that was favored by some of the wealthy families that moved to Hong Kong to escape Communist rule, including the family of Beijing's choice for SAR chief Tung Chee-hwa, this style is both modern and retrograde: it appears promising and even optimistic in its decadence. This Shanghai revival

suggests a liberal vision of a laissez-faire China that might replace the haunting specters of the militant, Maoist-inspired Red Guard and the violent resolution of the Chinese student movement's petitions in Beijing in 1989.

Discursive activity is also evident in the way that China's past has recently been reconfigured by the antique gallery China Art in its groundbreaking exhibition *Antiques in the Raw* that presents late Qing dynasty softwood furniture in the condition in which it was found. According to Hannah Chiang, one of the authors of the lavish catalogue for this exhibition:

*Each [piece in the exhibition] has a private history. Each has lived through various owners. Each has shared in the nation's glories. Each has weathered its storms. Each has been cherished. Each has been mistreated. By showing each in its untouched state, we celebrate the passage of time and remind you of the history that defines antiques.*<sup>8</sup>

If one considers that furniture has an indexical relationship to its previous owners and culture of origin, one might reconceive Chiang's statement as a transmutation of China's hardships and injustices into a rich patina indicative of character. Not only a paean to age, but also an enduring testament to patience and pertinacity, these unvarnished and unrepaired pieces offer collectors an opportunity not only to purchase furniture but also to acquire an ideological reinscription of the type of individuality that an uncertain alliance with Mainland China might offer. It is no wonder that this exhibition was a tremendous success! It provided useful and beautiful objects for interiors, and at the same time constituted a soothing role model for weathering the difficulties that might lie ahead.

The discussion thus far has emphasized the crucial need for a viable and yet flexible identity that can sustain Hong Kong for the next fifty years and that can work in tandem with the Mainland's optimistic desire to maintain a government predicated on the contradictions inherent in "one country, two systems." As has been pointed out, this identity can be neither monolithic nor static. Key to Hong Kong's success is its ability to sustain continued economic prosperity without threatening Beijing's authority. Already this essay has pointed to one of Hong Kong's chief traits: its ongoing transactional viability that necessitates the negotiation of a wide range of differences, including problems ensuing from a diverse population, as well as the polarities inherent in East/West interactions, and now socialist/

capitalist concerns. One can buttress this transactional personality with a transcultural identity that is inherently international and that necessitates subsuming differences under a managerial style capable of moving with ease across ethnic and national borders. One might describe this category mathematically as “A over X and Y,” where A represents the negotiated culture and X and Y the independent terms that are finessed. This style can be used to characterize economic, political, and cultural areas, and it can be seen in the work of Gretchen So in which opposing values between the past and the present are given equal weight.

Differing from the openness and urbanity of a transcultural identity is a competitive one that erects barriers and becomes entrenched (“X versus Y”). One might say that Hong Kong’s greatest challenge is dealing with the competitiveness of the Mainland’s ensconced bureaucracies. Lucia Cheung provides images of competitive identities in which differences are emphasized and held in suspension. In her work the West is reinscribed within the constraints of a traditional painting style.

A hegemonic identity occurs when differences are negated, when one term is superimposed over another (“X over Y”). Leung Chi Wo’s pinhole photographs that trap Hong Kong’s present in the guise of its colonized past and that suggest by implication that its future will be similarly negated are a case in point. In this grouping, a term might be recognized contradictorily by its absence or negation.

An open-ended identity would be constituted by the enumeration of a number of possible candidates (“X is not confined to Y or Z; it can be A,B, or C”). Irony is particularly important to this category as evidenced by Wong Shun-kit’s *Basic Space* that can be formulated as a shrine to the Basic Law or an indictment of it.

An incipient identity is one that is being defined in the process of its being formed. Contingent, even tentative, this type of group character (signified by “X may be X”) can be seen in Oscar Ho’s drawings that frame ephemeral stories being circulated in the city and offer them as possible evidence of an ongoing, distinctly Hong Kong consciousness.

An ignored, overlooked, or uninscribed component of a society would be formulated as

“X should include Y as an essential factor but doesn’t.” Simon Go’s photographs of the so-called “cagepeople” exemplify the need for art to reclaim the unacknowledged and unredeemed aspects of a particular culture in order to help it come to terms with itself, with its inequities, and its blind spots.

While this brief outline of possible identities has presented artists as illustrating particular types, many of them on reflection can be categorized in a number of ways. For example, Cheung’s depictions of Chinese and Hong Kong characteristics can be identified as both competitive and hegemonic. And Yu Tsz Man’s *All Are Invited* (page 63) can be considered transactional and competitive. The most important point to be concluded from this enumeration of possibilities is that, through the exploration of the range of options available to these artists, different possible scenarios for Hong Kong’s future are envisioned and considered. These choices include the continuation of the region’s limited autonomy, repatriation tantamount to a radical reconfiguration of the territory and a submerging of its distinctness, possible stalemate with the People’s Republic in which both become rigid about their respective turfs, and a mutually reinforcing redefinition of values and goals based on the common good and a dynamic view of the future and its potentials.

There are of course other possibilities, and perhaps the clock will not stop on July 1, 1997, when the Hong Kong “way of life,” that is ensured in the Basic Law, is expected to be fully established through consensus. Perhaps Hong Kongers will be permitted to continue to develop viable and dynamic options for themselves. But the sheer size of the People’s Republic and the traditional difficulties of administering such an enormous territory with its two systems, many provinces, and competing regional affiliations militate against such freedom and flexibility. In such a vast and populous country, with its self-imposed mandate to modernize, politics have often become a matter of expediency; bureaucracy a tool of homogenization and too often a means of graft; and identity a shorthand cipher replacing the enmeshed web of disparate realities, uncertainties, and sheer bravura occasioned by dynamic growth.

## Endnotes

1. Oscar Ho Hing-kay and David Clarke, *In Search of Art: A community exhibition project enabling you to show your personal "art" collection* (Hong Kong: Pao Galleries, Hong Kong Arts Centre, 1990).  
For those who would like to investigate the politics and history of Hong Kong, there is a growing amount of material that is being augmented daily by the mass media. In order to gain some perspective on the debates, one might begin by consulting the following books that have been helpful to this writer. Chang Tsong-zung (Johnson), *Reckoning with the Past: Contemporary Chinese Painting* (Edinburgh: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 1996) is an overview provided by the director of Hanart TZ Gallery in Hong Kong. In Frank Ching, ed., *China in Transition* (Hong Kong: Review Publishing Company Limited, 1994), *Far Eastern Economic Review* correspondents report on the ways China has changed in recent years. Denis Brulet, ed., *Hong Kong 1997: City on the Edge* (Hong Kong: Agence France-Presse Asia-Pacific, 1997) is a thoughtful and timely overview, written in the style of news reports. Since the film industry has formed a significant aspect of Hong Kong's culture, Stefan Hammond and Mike Wilkins, *Sex and Zen and a Bullet in the Head: The Essential Guide to Hong Kong's Mind-Bending Films* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) is a helpful reference. Considering its importance, it is surprising that few of the artists in *Hong Kong Now!* have incorporated aspects of this popular art form in their work. Although somewhat dated, Gerald Segal, *The Fate of Hong Kong* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1993) is still required reading for anyone wishing to develop a working relationship with the problems and their history. Barbara-Sue White, ed., *Hong Kong: Somewhere between Heaven and Earth* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1996) is an anthology of sixty extracts that provide a wide range of literary observations on this British colony from its beginnings to the present. Although a popular account of the life of several decades spent in the People's Republic, Jan Wong, *Red China Blues: My Long March from Mao to Now* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1996) provides a balanced eyewitness view of the Tiananmen Square standoff between students and government officials that points out problems developing on both sides that led to the horrendous massacre.
2. "Hong Kong Sixties: Designing Identity," exhibition brochure (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Arts Centre, 1996).
3. Matthew Turner, "60's/90's: Dissolving the People," in *Hong Kong Sixties: Designing Identity*, ed. Matthew Turner and Irene Ngan (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Arts Centre, 1996), p. 25.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
6. *5-Year Strategic Plan* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Arts Development Council, 1997), p.13.
7. Turner, "60's/90's Dissolving the People," p. 25.
8. Brad Davis and Hannah Chiang, preface to *Antiques in the Raw* (Hong Kong: China Art, 1997).
9. See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
10. Simon Go, interview by author, Hong Kong, 25 March 1997.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*