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ART

A love letter to a schizophrenic neighbourhood in the heart of the city

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The Hong Kong Arts Centre is celebrating its 40th anniversary with an art exhibition that is a love letter to Wan Chai, its home.

The exhibition also serves as a broader reminder of why people develop such affection for the places where they live, even when those places are as cummud-goonly, ill-mannered and physically hostile as Hong Kong.

"Wan Chai Grammatica: Past, Present, Future Tense" features mostly new works from 18 artists and one artist duo from various generations and backgrounds.

Some of those artists have looked to history for inspiration. The duo, Laurent Gutierrez and Valerie Portefaix, also known as MAP Office, used as a starting point paintings by the late Luis Chan, who lived above a topless baron Lockhart Road. Chan often painted Hong Kong as a strange

island with anthropomorphic features and colourful, eccentric inhabitants. For their piece, the duo – residents in Hong Kong since 1996 – stacked fish tanks like high-rises and constructed several dioramas out of shells and figurines that as just as fantastical as Chan's creations.

Gaylord Chan, 93, made an abstract, digital work called *Carnival* as a birthday gift to the Arts Centre. It is in response to his own 1969 work, *Harbour*, also included here, which is still recognisably Victoria Harbour despite the extensive land reclamation that has taken place since.

Ho Sin-tung's *One Thousand and One Moons* is based on her research into the mission and orphanage set up by the Sisters of St Paul de Chartres in Wan Chai in the mid-19th century. The Catholic nuns rescued a thousand girls from the streets – many of whom had been abandoned or sold into the sex trade – for a silver dollar each. Ho's installation –

which includes paintings, personal objects and a floor scattered with dollar coins – is the only reference to Wan Chai's red light district in the exhibition and, fortunately, comes without any clichéd Suzie Wong imagery.

Choi Yan-chi, meanwhile, has provided an installation adapted from her own groundbreaking exhibition that was held in the Hong Kong Arts Centre in 1985, curated by the very same person behind today's show, Valerie Doran.

Other artists on show have focused on the here and now. South Ho's *Drunken Life Dying Dream* (2017) is shown here with a new video installation that is also about the trauma, disillusionment and rifts that followed the 2014 Occupy Central protests. In the video, Ho and another actor retrace their paths through Wan Chai to the now empty Tamar Park, once a major site of the 79-day street protests.

Xyza Cruz Bacani's *There Was*

and *There Will Be* is a series of street scenes shot in Wan Chai at night – the only time she could go out with her camera, apart from Sundays, when she was still working as a domestic helper.

These are striking scenes

taking place in familiar corners of Wan Chai: a drunk sleeping on a discarded mattress outside Coyote Bar on Lockhart Road; a young couple standing still and kissing in the middle of the busy street across from Southorn

Playground; and the owners of Wing Wah Noodle Shop closing up shop for the last time in August are among them.

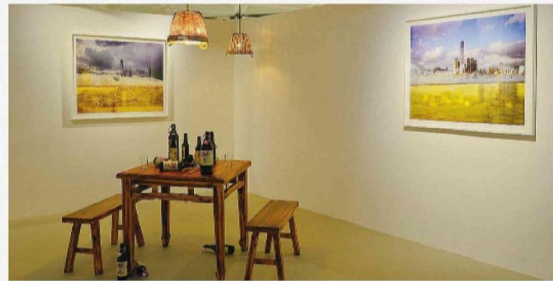
You may not recognise the sites of Frank Tang Kai-yiu's *Pocket Park Series* straight away,

but you may be familiar with the tiny tree-filled sitting-out areas in the middle of Wan Chai.

He turns these into delicate, Chinese *gongbi* ink paintings that are faithful recreations of each park, down to the recycling bins and the frighteningly numerous security cameras.

You do not have to know Wan Chai intimately to appreciate the exhibition. The schizophrenic neighbourhood of five-star hotels, international trade fairs, wet markets, girle bars and art (the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts is adjacent to the Arts Centre) epitomises the contrasts, the surprises and the syncopated rhythms that shape the most alluring of urban spaces. They hold us spellbound and, in turn, shape us.

"Wan Chai Grammatica: Past, Present, Future Tense", Pao Galleries, 4-5/F, Hong Kong Arts Centre, 2 Harbour Rd, Wan Chai, Mon-Sun, 10am-8pm. Until Nov 4



Drunken Life Dying Dream (2017) by South Ho is on display at the Arts Centre in Wan Chai. Photo: Handout