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Prominent Hong Kong artist Jaffa Lam holds first commercial show – it only took 22 years

- Jaffa Lam is ‘very honoured’ to be showing a number of her evocative sculptures and installations at Axel Vervoordt Gallery in Wong Chuk Hang
- Gallery director Mariko Kawashima says Lam is part of a ‘lost generation’ of Hong Kong artists, many of whom were forced to leave the art market

Mabel Lui + FOLLOW
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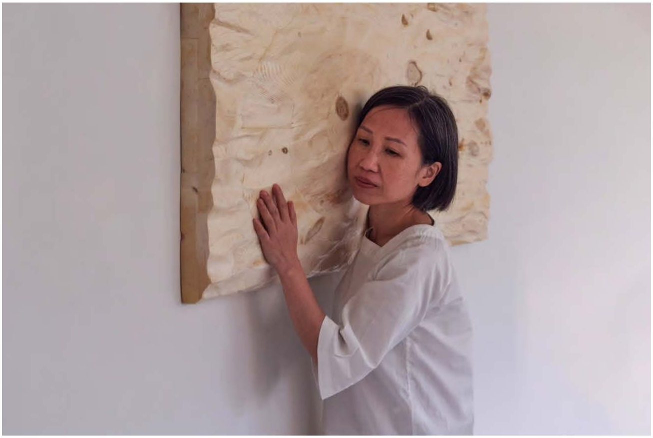

Hong Kong artist Jaffa Lam with her work “A Piece of Good Water III” (2017) at Axel Vervoordt Gallery in Wong Chuk Hang. Photo: Axel Vervoordt Gallery

Jaffa Lam is one of Hong Kong’s most established artists, whose evocative sculptures and installations regularly feature in exhibitions and museum collections.

She is also widely known as an art educator, having been the academic head of the Hong Kong Art School since 2018.

So it may come as a surprise that she is now showing in a commercial gallery for the very first time.

In “Chasing an Elusive Nature” at Axel Vervoordt Gallery in Hong Kong’s southern Wong Chuk Hang neighbourhood, Lam continues her exploration of Hong Kong heritage and history through new sculptural works and site-specific

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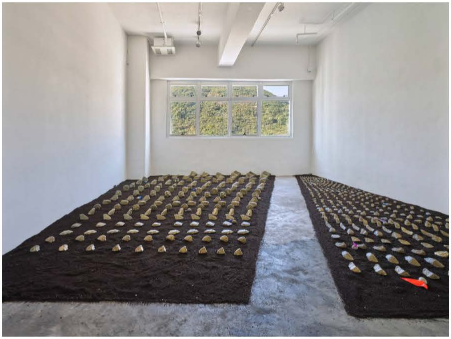
installations, displayed in dialogue with some of her earlier works.



"Taishang LaoJun's Furnace" (2022) by Jaffa Lam. Photo: Axel Vervoordt Gallery

The first major installation in the gallery, *Taishang LaoJun's Furnace* (2022), consists of 500 bronze, aluminium and concrete rock forms sand-casted by a master craftsman from 50 stones that Lam collected at five different locations on Hong Kong's coastline, including Sai Wan, Lei Yue Mun and Kwai Chung.

The piece, which the artist describes as an homage to Hong Kong's craftsmen and disappearing trades, pushes viewers to consider tensions between the past and present while considering the history and identity behind the rocks' shapes and textures.

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The next exhibition space, which Lam calls the "meditation room", presents pieces that encourage self-reflection in a dimmer, more intimate setting.

A Piece of Silence from Standing (2022) emulates a stained-glass window with its recycled umbrella fabric pieces (there's even one from 7-Eleven), which together form the pattern of a pine tree, a species that was widely planted by the

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A Piece of Silence from Standing (2022) emulates a stained-glass window with its recycled umbrella fabric pieces (there's even one from 7-Eleven), which together form the pattern of a pine tree, a species that was widely planted by the British in Hong Kong. The piece's portable nature – it is welded to a trolley – also alludes to the high levels of emigration from the city in recent years.

Created from natural and industrial recycled materials, *Lost Limb Chair* (2022) and *Lost Limb* (2022) continue the migrant conversation, with the wooden chair symbolising the heaviness of leaving one's place and past.

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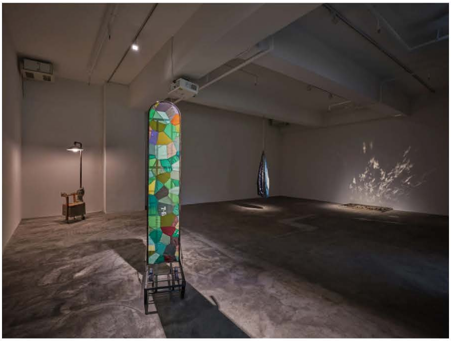

(From left) "Lost Limb Chair" (2022), "A Piece of Silence from Standing" (2022), "Meditation Tent" (2011) and "A Piece of Good Water II (Scattered / Integrating)" (2017), by Jaffa Lam. Photo: Axel Vervoordt Gallery

A Piece of Good Water II (Scattered / Integrating) (2017), now with new concrete-cast stones, plays with light and shadow to emulate the waves and depth of the ocean.

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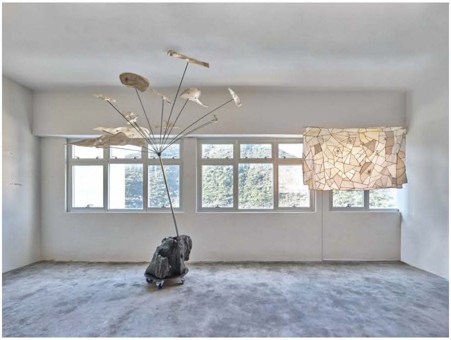
Meanwhile, *Starry Day* (2015/2022), stitched from recycled umbrella fabric, was previously displayed stretched on a canvas; here, it hangs loose and free.

The stainless steel *A Piece of Good Water I (Peaceful / Surging)* (2016) and the wooden, womblike *A Piece of Good Water III* (2017) invoke the resilience and flexibility of water. The latter in particular considers water as a source of life, and features the sound of a soft but persistent heartbeat.



(From left) "Somersault Cloud" (2022) and "Starry Day" (2015/2022), by Jaffa Lam. Photo: Axel Vervoordt Gallery

Lam hopes that people will be able to find comfort in her installations, given the difficulties of the past few years.

"We have to survive. We have to keep going," she says. "That is what I feel like I want to share with the people – [to] still always [have] hope there, even if you think you are invisible. You are visible. You are important."

In addition to being Lam's first solo exhibition at a commercial gallery, "Chasing an Elusive Nature" also marks the first time that Axel Vervoordt is representing a Hong Kong artist.

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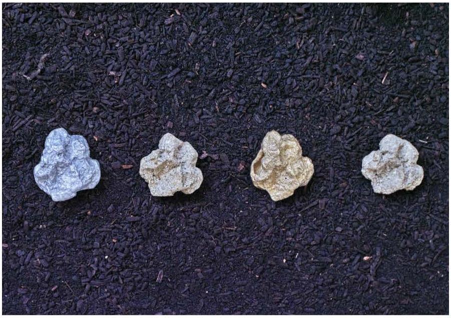
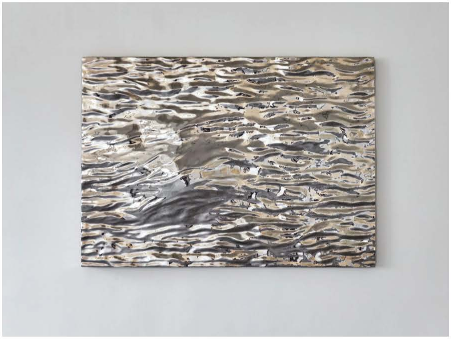


Rock forms from "Taishang LaoJun's Furnace" (2022), by Jaffa Lam. Photo: Axel Vervoordt Gallery

The collaboration was "organic", says Mariko Kawashima, gallery director of Axel Vervoordt Gallery Hong Kong. Lam had taken part in a 2021 group exhibition at the gallery called "Residual Heat", curated by Chris Wan Feng, during which Kawashima was struck by Lam's subtle but beautiful works, the gallery director says.

Now in her late 40s, Lam never expected to be approached for commercial representation, and she never sent her portfolio to galleries.

"I feel very honoured," she says. "I [have been] waiting for the opportunity of being seen and being represented, for – how many years – 22 years."



"A Piece of Good Water I (Peaceful / Surging)" (2016), by Jaffa Lam. Photo: Axel Vervoordt Gallery

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Income should be predictable even when markets aren't.

"A Piece of Good Water II (Scattered / Integrating)" (2017), by Jaffa Lam. Photo: Axel Vervoordt Gallery

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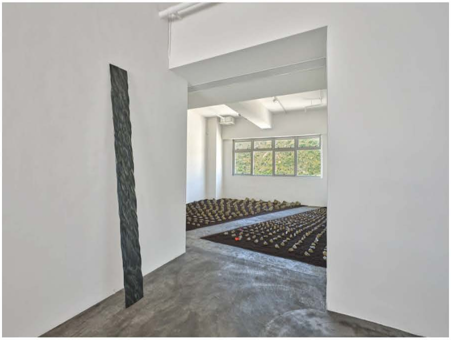
Kawashima says Lam is part of a "lost generation of local artists".

"When she was in [the] early stage of her career in her 20s, there were no local or international galleries to represent her and show her works. Now the Hong Kong art scene has developed, but international galleries prefer to work with young Hong Kong artists."

As a result, many artists in Lam's generation turned to teaching, and have been out of the art market, Kawashima says. But Lam's works were a natural fit for the European gallery, which in turn gave her the freedom to display works that aren't traditionally as commercially viable, like her site-specific *Taishang LaoJun's Furnace*.

"Her work is not only about herself. She's trying to make the work for the people," Kawashima says. "She's trying to make the world a better place."



(From left) "A Piece of Silence from Lying (standing mode)" (2022) and "Taishang LaoJun's Furnace" (2022), by Jaffa Lam. Photo: Axel Vervoordt Gallery

"Chasing an Elusive Nature", Axel Vervoordt Gallery, 21/F, Coda Designer Building, 62 Wong Chuk Hang Road, Wong Chuk Hang, 11am-7pm, Tue-Sat. Until January 7, 2023.

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Mabel Lui is a reporter on the Culture desk. She previously wrote for Time Out Hong Kong and graduated from Scripps College in Claremont, California with a Bachelor of Arts in Media Studies and Art. A bright-eyed kid at heart, she loves the feeling of discovering something new and finding underrated restaurants in her beloved home city of Hong Kong.

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