

# SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

BY JOHN BATTEN

Angela Su and Yim Sui-fong break away from Hong Kong art's preoccupation with identity to tackle a wider range of social issues



Angela Su



Yim Sui-fong

Portrait: Dicky Lee



Yim Sui-fong's video was a finalist in the Human Rights Arts Prize

**Y**im Sui-fong was awarded the prestigious WMA Masters Award 2017/18 along with HK\$250,000 for her photography and a personal story, *The Unlocked Space*, about her family, historical artefacts and Hong Kong's co-operative housing. A recent video by her was a finalist in the Human Rights Arts Prize 2017; it is the symbolic story of pigeons released during the celebrations of Hong Kong's return to the mainland in 1997, supposedly to then fly back to the mainland, but staying because of that week's terrible weather. In between her artist life, Yim is one of the founders of the non-profit artist initiative Rooftop Institute, located in the creative community of Art & Culture Outreach (ACO) in Wanchai. With a commitment to community and Asian engagement, Rooftop has over the last two years organised residencies for Hong Kong artists and secondary-school students paired with artists from Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, Taiwan and Vietnam to build Hong Kong's regional Asian art links – in contrast to the more usual official travel and residency opportunities with Europe, the USA and China.

Yim's latest project is *The man who attends to the times* that continues an aspect of her WMA project. It is, initially, a book of photographs and text, following research and interviews with work colleagues and relatives, about her father. Yim unearths his "very ordinary life" and "teases out tales which were typical of those who lived through the 1940s and 1950s as a migrant here – just like how we could easily discover a rags-to-riches story in nearly every family in a city (built) on migration."



ABOVE & BELOW Part of Yim Sui-fong's *The man who attends to the times*



Angela Su's biochemistry degree has influenced her art

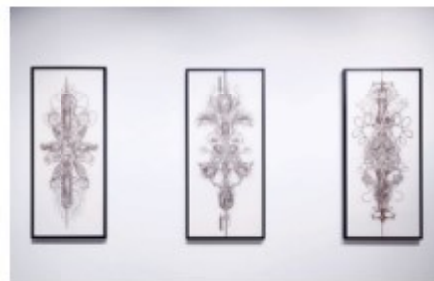
Her father worked for 29 years, between 1971 and 2000, at the old Government Supply Depot on Oil Street in North Point, now a large Cheung Kong development, with a small corner of heritage buildings devoted to the Leisure & Cultural Services Department's Oil! art space. Yim tracks her father's life, from the squatter area in Tai Hang where he first lived, his jobs as an usher at the old New York cinema, as a tram driver and restaurant waiter. And then, his permanent government job as a watchman at the Oil Street depot. She presents historic photographs of the "transitory nature of Hong Kong's colonial existence" focusing on Oil Street as a cog in the British administrative machine, and as an example of the (generally) efficient development of Hong Kong and her father's social activities. In the second half of the project she walks the same routes her father took from their later home in Chai Wan to work. These documentary photographs are an overlay of the past, a contemporary record of similar scenery and people whom her father may have seen and met.

The old Oil Street depot is a significant place for Hong Kong's arts community. After its closure as government warehouses in 1998, these spaces were cheaply rented out on short-term leases. Immediately, many artists and arts organisations saw an opportunity to set-up studios and gallery spaces. An organic arts community quickly evolved that included architect Gary Chang and artists Kwok Mang-ho (aka Frog King), Almond Chu and Stanley Wong Ping-pui. It was also the first exhibition space for Iaspace, now relocated to Oil Street's successor, the Cattle Depot in To Kwa Wan. Remarkably, Yim's father and his "very ordinary life" and workplace straddled both Hong Kong's change in sovereignty and late-1990s renaissance of Hong Kong's art scene – the precursor of what it is today.

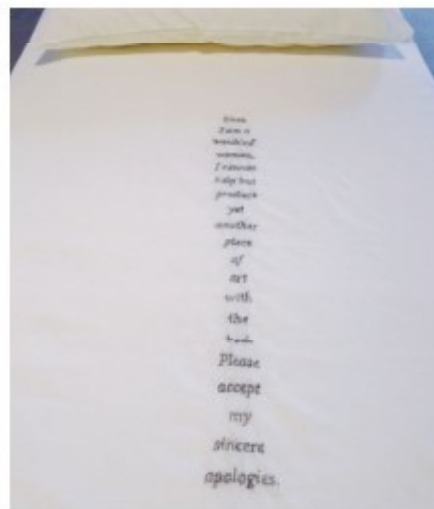
Angela Su's unique artwork has taken many years to be accepted in the city, but ironically now reflects Hong Kong's exposure to mainstream international art trends, regularly seen in the city's international art galleries, contemporary art auctions and Hong Kong's edition of Art Basel. Su's break-through solo exhibition, *The Afterlife of Rosy Leavers*, at Blindspot Gallery in 2017 saw her distinctive drawings exhibited alongside photography, installation and a challenging set of fictional videos featuring the artist



Su's video for *Contagious Cities: Far Away, Too Close*



Su's *Chmeric-Antibodies* series of drawings



From Su's breakthrough exhibition *The Afterlife of Rosy Leavers*

PHOTOS: BOTTOM: DIKHY LIU. ALL ARTWORKS COURTESY OF YIM SUI-FONG AND ANGELA SU

herself. In 2018, she was chosen for a significant commission by London-based charity the Wellcome Trust, to make a new video for the Hong Kong leg of *Contagious Cities: Far Away, Too Close*, a multi-city focus on diseases around the world. The Hong Kong edition is currently showing at the Tai Kwun Contemporary galleries (see page 110).

Much of what Su does is inspired by science, the human body and the fantastic, particularly science-fiction. Her drawings give the immediate impression of being pure anatomical/biological renderings on paper, but on closer inspection the imagery is often built-up with layers of translucent drafting paper. The subject matter is not what it seems. Her drawings appear to be old-fashioned collages, but are actually intricately combined drawn renditions of parts of machinery, parts of plants and parts of anatomy: a (flower) stamen may link to a (engine) piston that links to a sinewy (human) muscle. The resulting drawings will appear, at times, as sexual organs, sado-masochistic implements, or just beautiful flowers.

Su's work intentionally questions, as she terms it, our "perception of reality". Her work is an exploration of psychology, expectations and society's responses. The current issues highlighted by #MeToo are topical, but Su has long anticipated the same level of concern for exploitation of women and the vulnerable, especially those in psychiatric and medical institutions. The artist is sceptical of medicine's chemical-based treatment of mental illness and proposes a more holistic and social approach to 'treatment' that she expresses through her creative artwork. That may sound terribly clinical, but her art is otherwise: often funky, witty and satirical. Proof: you will see some of her drawings prominently displayed at the entrance of Dai Bing, the new bar on Bonham Strand designed by architect Hugh Zimmerman, which opened last month.

Yim and Su don't readily fit into any decorative category of art. That is a blessing: Hong Kong's best art, rightly and increasingly seen in curated exhibitions around the world, is that requiring more than a cursory glance or just offering a feel-good appearance. ■

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