

This month, the spotlight is once again on Hong Kong's arts scene. It's a time for appreciating the achievements of a juggernaut industry, and it's a time for questions: what is Hong Kong art? Where are we going? What will we compromise? And more importantly,

# “WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE *a Hong Kong* ARTIST?”

It seems that everyone has an opinion on the topic, so we've indulged in a little social experiment for this feature. Over the last few weeks, we've asked this question to a number of people – anyone except those who call themselves artists. From student to shop owner, we've found responses that run the gamut from

## HOPEFUL CYNICISM TO CYNICAL HOPE.

Some have mentioned *money*, others have talked about

## ARTISTIC FREEDOM,

fame and legacy. In a place increasingly pressured by the need for financial security, people see the artist as a struggling outsider perpetually faced with extortionate rent costs, soul-crushing commercial projects, the challenge of gaining recognition abroad and the city's slow creative growth. But can that be fixed? Is an artist's life an entropic hamster wheel or a self-facilitating circle of creative freedom, the means to create and the right audience?

You'll be mulling these questions over as the month goes on. In the meantime, we thought we'd swing the spotlight back on to the creatives of the city, the artists themselves.

In these pages are the words and unique stories of nine individuals at different points in their careers, each committed to their discipline, whether it be street art, design, painting or drawing. Here are the narratives of William Lim, Angela Su, Adrian Wong, Trevor Yeung, MAP Office, Charles Munka, Caratoes and Lam Hoi-sin.

## Hong Kong, turn over to meet your artists...

# *The* ARTISTS *are* PRESENT

Make it or break it, being an artist doles out rewards and repercussions in equal measure. Ysabelle Cheung speaks to nine mercurial Hong Kong artists about their stories of struggle and success. Photography by Calvin Sit. Creative direction by Jeroen Brulez





# Trevor Yeung

Multimedia artist

For someone who claims to prefer the language-absent nature of amphibians and flora, Trevor Yeung is surprisingly astute when it comes to discussing the field he's in.

"Being an artist and working with people as subjects is very difficult," says Yeung. "I don't want to consume the person. I think artists need to know how to manage their subject matter and this means not abusing or using the person. I feel tired having to communicate with people, so I prefer going home to take care of my plants or looking after my fish." This personality quirk is threaded through his various projects, too—for his university work, he spent an uninhibited amount of time with his visually impaired subjects, riding bicycles with them and making sure he was at least somehow involved in their lives. An ongoing project documents sleeping hostel strangers at dawn or midnight and his upcoming installation at Art Basel (Blindspot Gallery booth) sees staggered rows of plants in a maze-like formation, which forces viewers to work hard to see the photographers exhibited behind. As with the management of an aquarium, Yeung likes to quietly control the expectations and experiences within his created worlds and visuals. Communication, or lack thereof, is intrinsic to his work.

Although he protests his own social awkwardness, Yeung is already making tracks in the incredibly small but growing local gallery scene, perhaps because of his positive outlook on Hong Kong. "I just have to find the best solution to solve problems and to keep doing what I'm doing. This is how society works," he says when prompted to speak on fall-backs in the industry. "Maybe the reality isn't that optimistic, but if you don't think better, it won't be better. Some of my friends don't even have studios, but they still find opportunities to make artwork. And some don't even host exhibitions but just make artwork for the community. There are different ways to contribute."

Yeung worked at Para Site ("I graduated from there", he jokes) for three years before focusing fully on his private artistic practice—a move, he says, which was necessary for him but incredibly taxing on his wallet. "There was a certain time when I literally just ate bread for a month," he says. "But I can't think about money too much at this point. I don't have a family to support yet and money will limit what I'm doing. I mean, I do plants and fish. Not a lot of people buy that as artwork. So... I would say that I'd like a pay cheque to do what I'm still doing. I think these are sometimes the simplest things but also the most difficult to maintain."



Natural habitat  
Maracujá Road, Shanghai Biennale, 2014



“  
Sometimes  
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difficult



# MAP Office

## Multidisciplinary duo

Pre-1997-handover, Valérie Portefaix (one half of MAP Office) remembers Hong Kong slightly differently. “At that time, the region was reaching full speed of urbanisation and Hong Kong felt like a very good base to work – there was a very good network and facilities, and we could publish and exhibit our work, participate in shows in Beijing, Singapore and Tokyo – but also places like Venice and Rotterdam. We weren’t ever expecting to be in Hong Kong and be fenced in 100 percent by Hong Kong.”

The situation is still very much the same today – MAP Office (Portefaix and Laurent Gutierrez) work out of a Chai Wan studio, showing all over the world – but 20 accumulated years of living in Hong Kong has given them a more pointedly ‘Hong Kong’ framework for their projects. “I’ve felt like a Hong Kong artist for a long time,” Portefaix says. “Because if we’re not – what are we? We barely showed anything in France. And we have been sponsored by the Hong Kong government here so many times.” For their most recent project at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) sponsored by Design Trust, a newly founded organisation that comes with a scholarship grant, MAP Office dissected the liquid territory of Hong Kong and identified eight possible artificial islands. In 2007, they represented Hong Kong at the Venice Art Biennale (‘so much pressure’) and they still struggle with funding, even after being established for over 20 years in the city. “For example, with the MoMA, we had to start funding out of our own pockets until Design Trust and ADC came through last minute,” Portefaix says. “Everyone is struggling for sponsorship.”

The way MAP Office sees it, it is actually the public that needs a little push. “I find that society has little knowledge of how to operate like artists – we’re working with a different time frame and because usually people here are always working and always on the run,” says Portefaix. “I mean, first you struggle to buy a pricy flat. Then you have nothing left. What space is left for art? However, the city is changing – thanks to the multiplication of new non-profit venues.”

For Portefaix and Gutierrez, this flux is part and parcel of their everyday narrative – the borders and their related economies are always shifting. This might explain why they never ‘complete’ a piece. “We always find an excuse to not completely finalise our Hong Kong project, so we can go back and add another layer or to tune up elements,” says Portefaix. In a laboratory that is ever-changing, MAP Office’s work is more relevant than ever in Hong Kong.



We weren’t ever expecting to be in Hong Kong and be fenced in 100 percent by Hong Kong

# Charles Munka

## Mixed-media artist

Up a few floors in an industrial building in Tai Kok Tsui, Charles Munka is exploring his own atelier: huge canvases exposed to sunlight and rain, materials that have been scratched, scribbled or printed on. From his homely upbringing in a tiny town in France to video game artist in Japan, Munka’s self-motivated path has led him to Hong Kong. We ask him about his journey from a one-way plane ticket to now.



All the signs Syracuseae, 2013

### From manga characters to here – explain your artistic journey...

One of the first things I started using were symbols, when I moved to abstract composition – I went straight to numbers, text, writing, abstract work with rap lyrics, graffiti style. Every time I get into something I study it – the Greek and Hebrew alphabets – and I reinterpret.

### Has life in Asia dictated your art?

It has everything to do with everything. When I moved to Japan from France, I had only a one-year visa, so I was in a very hectic state of mind. I anticipated this trip for a long time – after art school I got a job to pay for it. When I arrived I remember sitting on a train and seeing the scenery go by. I could see all these different things, the aesthetics, the shapes, how things were arranged. My mind was truly blown.

### There’s this idea of an outsider finding beauty in an alien world...

When you don’t really know the language fully, there is some magic to not

understanding what’s happening around you. I like not understanding people’s conversations, where I can’t read everything, including instructions and directions. You have a different way of seeing, looking between all these things.

### Have you ever compromised your work to put food on the table?

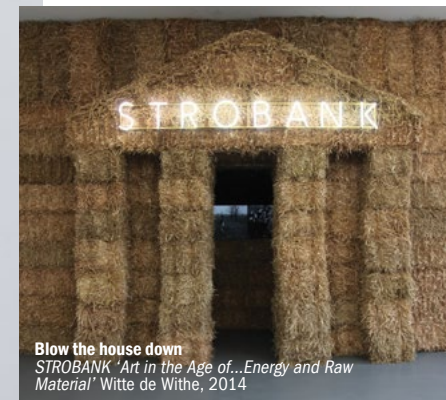
I tried to do these kinds of ‘market-trendy’ works with more colour but I always get a bit sad. Once you start thinking about paying the rent too much, it really corrupts what comes out. Sometimes I’ll pick up my paintbrush and ask ‘why am I doing this?’ It took me a few tries to figure this out. It isn’t what I want to do but some artists are very smart at balancing that.

### What’s the most important aspect of your art?

To keep the integrity of my work. It’s very important. I think that if you do so long enough, the right people will recognise that you’re being sincere. Do you really need public success if you’re doing what you want? I’ll take whatever comes my way.

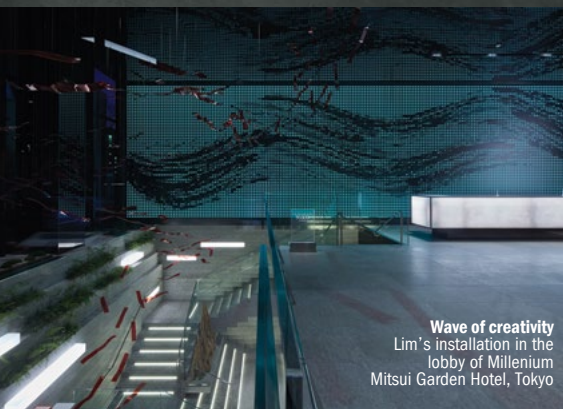


There’s some magic to not understanding what’s happening around you



Blow the house down  
STROBANK 'Art in the Age of...Energy and Raw Material' Witte de Witte, 2014





**Wave of creativity**  
Lim's installation in the lobby of Millennium Mitsui Garden Hotel, Tokyo

# William Lim

Architect and artist

Architect, designer, artist, collector, curator – whatever you call William Lim, one thing is unmistakable: he has played a myriad of important roles in shaping Hong Kong's contemporary art landscape throughout his life. Although by profession he draws up blueprints, his entire lifestyle revolves around art, from collection through to creation (he's also on the board of Para Site and Asia Art Archive). When we ask how he supports young artists he loves, he replies immediately and emphatically: "Just buy their work." It is this enthusiasm and ethos that has driven him. Ahead of his sky-high art installation at the Landmark atrium this month inspired by Renaissance masters, he tells us about his own struggles with being an artist.



I think it's always a struggle to be an artist, to create works that satisfy the artist himself and yet are still appreciated by the public. The two don't necessarily correlate. The worry might not even be monetary issues, but rather balancing what you want to produce and whether the public or critics enjoy it or think that it's 'good' art."

"There are two groups of people in Hong Kong. You have the general public – probably 99 percent of the population – then, of course, you have the more mature and international art circle. The artist's work is quite exposed to this latter group, and I think it is well appreciated by this group. The other 99 percent is starting to learn about art. I think there is

still a big misconception about what art really is. There is something that differentiates between art and some other bland production. That distinction isn't clear-cut."

"For me, I used to think being an architect and artist needed to be strictly separate. My biggest struggle was to be known as an artist; most people took me as an architect or art collector. It was frustrating, but more people are now seeing my designs as artistic creation. A lot of what I do crosses between art and architecture, and I hope the two fields eventually become one. That's what I'm moving towards – not so much being identified as either an artist or an architect but becoming the person who encompasses both things."

"Following on from that, in my discussions with other local artists, we looked at China where there isn't traditionally a role for artists either. You have poets, who are culturally inclined, in the bamboo forest – they drink, they chat, they write poems – the artwork they produce is just a by-product of who they actually are as a person. We are seeing artists here who live like that too, which might be because of the lack of an active art market. They work as graphic designers by day, and their conversations are always about art, but their artwork is almost a by-product of their livelihoods. Being an artist is a challenging career to work full-time. As long as art is your focus, it's alright – and sometimes healthy – to do other things in life as well."





Rainbow pop  
*Out*, 2014



As an artist I have to participate in this 'market' but, at the same time, I'm being sarcastic



# Lam Hoi-sin

Multimedia artist

The creative fantasies of Lam Hoi-sin often manifest in dicks – a lot of dicks. From Hawaii-patterned to solid black, the stuffed phallic sculptures are sent across the globe to Lam's 'collectors', aka Etsy buyers, friends and strangers who are essentially feeding the artist.

"I'm just so broke," Lam jokes several times during our interview at her Wan Chai-rented studio-cum-secondhand thrift store, Artist Fee. She has not been to London or New York, or presented a solo show in the past few years, but she has continued to make work and output an astonishing amount of curated material online, from her sarky text-based statements to readymades and collaged photographs, and, of course, those dicks. She has two Etsy stores (one NSFW) and three highly active Facebook profiles, all mired in humorous and faux-tortured tension between art creation and mockery of the art industry.

"How I set prices for artworks I sell [on Etsy] is pretty random sometimes. Sometimes I'd just see a number, like on a bank letter – 090501 – so maybe its \$9.05," she explains of the wildly fluctuating prices for her pieces, which range from single digits to triple. "I want it to be random because the market is so ridiculous – I have a series called 'affordable conceptual art' that concerns the idea of why contemporary art pieces are so expensive. As an artist myself, I have to participate in this 'market' but, at the same time, I'm being sarcastic."

Recently, Lam has focused her attention more on gender and identity diversity – for a 2014 group show, *Shampoo Everything*, she presented the installation *Out*, where empty canisters of party poppers clustered and crowded the rainbow threads of the popper material (see above). It's a commentary on the state of being out (in terms of sexual orientation) but in a closed political, authoritarian society. "Male and straight art, they are always the norm. They are accepted," she says. "As soon as it's anything different, they call it gay art, women art, female art."

Despite this view, Lam also comments that her position is still one of privilege. "In a way, it's good that art can never reach that high level of reaching people yet," she says. "If a homosexual kid was on an advert on TV, a large audience would be offended. But art never really gets serious attention and it stays within a circle – in a way, we are quite free because of that."





I ended up in Hong Kong by accident. I was here on an extended holiday and I just started fixating on elements of the city. There were a lot of really interesting things happening in the art community at the time, back in 2005."

"I have always been an artist who makes work that has a high degree of 'aboutness'. With my background in psychology, there's always a research component and I get inspired by subject matter. I was really fascinated by the subtle sociological differences between Hong Kong, which has a cultural environment shaped by different forces, and the one that I grew up in. A lot of that specifically circled around my first studio, which was supposed to be haunted. It wasn't so much the haunting that I found most interesting, though. It was the fact that it was so easily accepted by the security staff in the building and people in the area. I was given an entry point to explore those supernatural elements and influences of the belief structure in people's behaviour."

"From the standpoint of a professional working artist, I think there are a number of benefits to being here. One is that, as a sculptor and someone who works a lot in manufacturing with a high degree of fabrication, there's some very, very talented young fabricators here. There's a much more pragmatic approach to how those things are done. So you have an entrepreneurial spirit not only within the artists' community but also in the sort of art adjacent, in the fabrication community."

"I think just the ability to continue making work and living to a certain degree of comfort is success. And having access to a critical community to discuss what it is that I'm doing and to ask them for feedback, whether it's with museums, critics, gallerists or people coming into the studio. I honestly get excited to see my peers being placed in big exhibitions and see them grow. To me, that means greater opportunities for the expansion of the network that we form together as artists."

# Adrian Wong

Sculptor and installation artist

A plush animatronic jazz band. The artist French-kissing a chicken in a photograph. Hypnotic light 'sculptures' reminiscent of old Hong Kong barber signs. These are just a few of the many zany creations Adrian Wong has dreamed up. And linking all these works is Hong Kong, an endless source of inspiration for the Chicago-born artist.

Wong's educational background – a research psychology masters degree at Stanford University in the USA – explains his fascination with our city, which takes him down rabbit-holes of history, narratives and a culture rooted in superstition and tradition. For his latest project, he channelled his two pet rabbits via an animal psychic-communicator and created two domestic warrens. His research-based work led to him winning the Sovereign Asia Art Foundation prize last year, as well as a commissioned Art Basel pop-up bar in 2013 (see the animatronic musicians, a further exploration of Wong's ongoing interest in the internal-external language-based processes of human psychology). Wong tells us his story here.



**Hop art**  
Rabbit Warren,  
Platform China, 2014



# Caratoes

Graffiti artist and illustrator

Even if you haven't heard of or met Caratoes yet, you must have seen her tags and murals on the streets and on the walls of restaurants across Hong Kong. Having grown up in Europe, she originally hopped over to Hong Kong in pursuit of an animation job but ended up developing an artistic style – bold with lines, movement and shadow – that led to projects and exhibitions, from street art festival Pow Wow! Hawaii to commissions for Converse and Chachawan.

## So, Caratoes – would you call yourself an artist?

That's the thing – I don't know because I don't do a lot of gallery shows. I'm also so fresh at what I'm doing now, so I'm still figuring it out.

## How do you manage opportunities here?

I do a lot of commissioned work, so I have to adjust and think 50-50 or 60-40 about what the client



wants. At the same time, the other 50 percent is thinking about which direction I want to take and what I want to try out. Every time I go abroad, mostly my project managers say you can do whatever you want. When I'm in Asia, I feel like I need to adjust. I can't go too wild.

## We heard that people are a bit scared of the way you draw eyes...

Yes. I think my work is kind of dark and people in China don't really like that. It's a challenge. At the end of the day, I started doing street art because I wanted to make people think different but in a happy direction, not in a 'holy shit I'll go kill myself' way. It's more about changing something a little bit in the environment so that they see that anything is possible.

## Are you happy with the outdoor walls you've done?

Well, first of all, I rarely have the opportunity to do any in Hong Kong because there are hardly any legal walls. But I'm never happy. Travelling and meeting other people opens my eyes and makes me think 'what the hell am I doing?' In the States I did some work that was too dark. I was too selfish when I was doing those murals because I just painted something that I wanted to paint, but I forgot that there are people around it who have to look at it every day. I was just too obsessed with doing whatever I want.

## What's the best reaction to your work?

I'm lucky to have met the best construction people on my projects. When they love my work, I am so happy. I've met some real assholes here and they get so lost in their own illusion – they live to be loved by people they don't even know. Hong Kong is a place where a lot of things are about hype. I'm very against that. I'm not a hype person. But when I hang out with the sincere people, it feels pure. Hong Kong is so contrasted in that way.



I don't think being happy and content is a good thing for creation



I'm so fresh at what I'm doing, so I'm still figuring it out



# Angela Su

Illustrator and performance artist

The biomorphic illustrations of Angela Su are what she's best known for – they hang in collectors' homes as well as in public spaces such as The Pawn restaurant in Wan Chai. But the Hong Kong-born, Canada-educated Su has long been experimenting with the human body, its physical limitations and its reactions in various multimedia forms, such as self-mutilation with 39 inkless tattoos. She currently works at Asia Art Archive to 'pay the rent' and is conjuring up new ways to experiment with the self and the body – a new video work, *Methods of Art*, in which she is bound and gagged, is shown at North Point's Connecting Space this month.

## Hi Angela – we first encountered your name through your drawings...

Those works are, you could say, commercial. The drawings are totally sellable. In that respect, I have been lucky so far. At the very beginning of my career I continuously had commercial shows. It's a good thing and a bad thing as well. I'm not the best-selling artist in Hong Kong but I don't have any complaints.

## You think you just got lucky?

I'm happy. I'm content. But I think the infrastructure here has issues. There are a lot of commercial galleries but practically no alternative art spaces. I think the art market sort of marginalised the work of artists such as performance artists. But in terms of funding, if you know how to play the game, fill out the forms at the right time, it's not that difficult, I think. I mean, it takes a lot of factors to be 'successful' here.

## You mentioned happiness earlier – does that equate to success for you?

Well, actually, I don't think being happy and content is a good thing for creation, for me. If you're too happy or satisfied with everything you don't get that kind of emotional drive. Because it's about struggle – that struggle that makes you continue and evolve.

## Are you quite critical of your own work?

I would believe so. I try to do different things. A lot of the work I did before, I'm not satisfied with. Like for example my drawings, I know they're different in every show, but it's almost the same thing. So I'm constantly questioning what I'm doing. I mean, if I want to do more conceptual work, can I do it? Do I have the right temperament to do it? This questioning doesn't necessarily mean my work will improve but it drives me and makes me depressed – which again drives me to do more [laughs]. Sorry, that's very confusing.

## You're struggling and yet grateful?

There are always disadvantages and advantages. Hong Kong has a good geographical position, so perhaps it might be an advantage for some people. There are always two sides to everything: it might be good, it might be bad.