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“Nice Painting” et al.—Different Kinds of Painting and Related Practices in Hong Kong



Tim Li, *All Together, Unfolding the Possible VIII—Dance with Lions*, April 2009, public performance in front of the HSBC headquarters in Central District, Hong Kong. Courtesy of the artist.

Painting and Other Forms of Art

As much as one can find important the kind of art that has recently been called “community-oriented,” often involving performances and group participation, it does not mean that the only way to address societal issues is to turn to these practices. Such artistic practices include the works of artists like Tim Li, who, in 2009, organized a series of community-based works involving groups of people performing a sort of “dragon dance” with the folding beds that were once used to measure available living space in government housing units in Hong Kong. As successful as it may be—and Tim Li made it a really festive event whose meaning was made even more explicit by the participation of large groups of people—it was not necessarily more successful than a more “traditional” form of art like painting. If a community-oriented art practice was the right choice for what Tim Li wanted to convey, a painting could be just as successful in translating ideas that could also be extremely evocative of our relationship with the past. These two forms of art do not function in the same way—one creates participatory circumstances for the viewer while the other’s requirements are more passive and reflective. They certainly cannot achieve either the same reactions or the same effects, but they can both be seen as trying to awaken in the viewers or participants ideas that might otherwise lay dormant.

The project Celia Ko undertook during her residency at Lingnan University, Hong Kong, titled *That Moment Now* (2008), was a series of paintings



Celia Ko, *Grandma at that Moment, Now*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 183 x 228.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Celia Ko, *Grandpa at that Moment, Now*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 183 x 228.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

exploring private and collective memories that, through the observation of the artist's past and family, allowed viewers to reminisce about their own past and family. In the catalogue for this exhibition, Celia Ko provides a recollection of her grandparents and their lives as well as comments on the motivation for each artwork "By cropping my grandparents' images in a contemporary style, I try to 'cast a modern gaze' on their formal photo-portrait to free them from their dated hairstyle and attire. I imagine how I can perhaps bring back to life a much younger couple, reconnecting myself to them in the moment long gone."¹ Of the paintings depicting lacquer objects that belonged to her family, she wrote: "I associate lacquer objects with my grandmother's narrative world of stories I know intimately that happened a long time ago. The darkness of their surface, both objects and paintings, embodied my impression of the past that lived vividly in my mind." The fact that the two most important images in the Lingnan

Celia Ko, *Narrative I*, 2008,
acrylic on paper, 122 x 128 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.



Celia Ko, *Narrative III*, 2008,
acrylic on paper, 122 x 152.4 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.



University show were made with acrylic paint also raised the question of what constitutes a “traditional” form of art, an issue I have raised in the context of Chinese painting in a previous article.²

“Nice Painting”

Celia Ko defends the idea that independent artists do not have to turn inward to find their own voice. Although every expression by each artist when faced with his or her own art practice is necessarily personal, it is not entirely private, while, on the other hand, something made in the mode of relational aesthetics, like the works of Tim Li, is not necessarily something personal although it is still art. Many artists making images in Hong Kong in recent years—let us say, starting around 2005—have taken as their subject matter certain experiences that no one else other than the artist has experienced. Some commentators have been quite critical of this kind of painting to the point of rejecting painting not because of any inherent weaknesses, but simply because it is painting and does not fit into the idea of the contemporary such as, for example, new media artwork does. On the Kunsthalle Kowloon Web site (now renamed Sammlung Saamlung), Robin

Peckham and Venus Lau refer to what they have termed “nice painting,” “a loose movement in mild-mannered and polite oil painting and drawing.”³ In a text originally posted on their Web site, Peckham and Lau rewrote in the form of an article an interview they made with Lee Kit on the subject of certain painting practices in Hong Kong. In his statement about Nice Painting, Lee Kit refuses to make any value judgment and defines it as “neither good nor bad”:

There is a turn now from a local politics toward a local aesthetics. The work of the majority of young Hong Kong artists tends to emphasize this so-called “local aesthetics,” involving the styles of the *chacanting*, the *jiulou* restaurant style, the old public buses, and childhood games. The artists of “nice painting” are the classical example of this category. In recent years this particular circle of artists has expanded from around a dozen artists to a more mainstream phenomenon. . . . The group of young artists that has appeared in recent years has observed the changes that have occurred within the Hong Kong art circle and know how to prepare themselves for success. Their visual language is relatively narrow. The concepts of their work should be able to go far, but in reality they all stay relatively close, lacking sufficient dynamism. . . .

Of course their works are not merely good-looking. This isn’t a problem for individual artists, but, rather, one of their environments as a whole. The idea of “nice painting” touches upon the old refrain about Hong Kong art: that because spaces here are small, works produced can only be personal or narrow-minded. This kind of thinking influences the artists, causing them to think that, as Hong Kong residents, they have no way to resolve such aspects of their physical conditions. It’s just like saying that because spaces in Beijing are big and powerful, and because political and social pressures are enormous, works produced there can only be grandiose. “Nice painting” as a class is neither good nor bad—it is a phenomenon, or a condition. I look forward to seeing this kind of work bring forth from considerations of form within the face of the painting content on another level.⁴

Since the research Peckham and Lau are doing on this trend is still ongoing as I write these lines, I can only guess, with Lee Kit’s comment, which painters they have chosen to put into this category. Thanks to a recent critique of an exhibition by Choi Yuk Kuen by Peckham, who refers to her work as belonging to the “nice painting” movement,⁵ it is obvious that another artist, Elise Lai Yuen Shan, who I will discuss later and who was her classmate at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, falls under this category because of similar strategies in her choice of subject matter—what Lee

Kit calls “local aesthetics”—and the insertion into her painting of highly personal experience.

With Bouie Choi Yuk Kuen the personal becomes the subject matter and the material of her work. Having no fear that an understanding of her work might remain obscure for the viewer who is confronted with riddles. Bouie Choi Yuk Kuen presents in her canvases a multitude of insects and objects, all of them accompanied by other visual elements whose meaning remains opaque and painted with a subtlety of touch that seems to hover between scientific drawing and fine Chinese brush painting. One of the first things she mentions when asked to speak about her art is how she could never manage what she calls “heavy painting,” referring to the difficulties inherent in the proper use of oil or acrylic paint (one not familiar with these techniques would likely not understand how long and complicated a process it is to apply many layers of thin paint to obtain a properly modulated form). One of the reasons an early series of Bouie Choi Yuk Kuen’s paintings consisted of tiny canvases—each representing a solitary object like a shoe, a paint bucket, a book, etc.—was precisely that she did not like the thick impasto and the multi-layered demands of these mediums, a dislike that led her to explore how to use them in a watered-down, fluid state. It is these watery traces of paint that allow her to obtain the subtle effects in her current paintings.

Her dislike of “heavy painting” might also have something to do with her art education at the Fine Arts Department of the Chinese University of Hong Kong where a large portion of the program is dedicated to the practice of traditional Chinese painting. She might have seen in the use of the “erasing medium” of acrylic, as the art historian Norman Bryson used to say of oil paint, something unlike her own character as an artist, but she also might have been conditioned by the frequent use of more fluid media like Chinese ink and colour to which the delicate nature of her use of acrylic might be compared. But this can be said only of her own visual vocabulary and not of the surface of the canvas upon which her images are painted, which is sometimes so thick that it evokes metallic surfaces.

Very much like the animist cultures that were once dubbed “primitive,” Bouie Choi Yuk Kuen believes that there is a living spirit within all things that surround us, spirits that manifest themselves in either assisting or contradicting us. For example, the printed numbers next to many of these objects indicate, according to the artist, their power, but what kind of power she actually refers to, we will never know. And the ever-present insects, often central within her paintings, are related to the spirits of the deceased. Her first realization of the way spirits inhabit insects, something that comes almost naturally to the Chinese whose traditions relate insects to the spirits of the dead (especially during a period of mourning), happened when her own grandfather passed away. For the ancient Greeks, the soul was thought to come back in the form of a butterfly, but Bouie Choi Yuk Kuen could not bring herself to see sweetness in such absence and, concluding that there could not possibly be any butterfly involved, she was left with only a fly, an



Opposite page: Bouie Choi Yuk Kuen, *Removing Curse*, 2011, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 122 x 122 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

insect that for her came to represent the presence of a benevolent spirit. From that first conclusion, she came to believe that other insects could be used as a conduit by the spirits of the departed, a step that manifests itself in her painting with the addition of painted numbers reminiscent of automobile license plates in Hong Kong, but, once again, the meaning of these numbers is not apparent and is only available to those asking the artist directly.

The largest painting from the *Reversed Fortune* series, titled *Removing Curse*, represents a veritable battleground. Circumscribed by a series of Chinese characters simply meaning “enclosure,” four battalions led by insects are ready to attack spiders in the centre of the canvas. The spiders, representing the bad luck she wants the paintings to reject, are trying to repel these attacks (to make sure there is no doubt about that, they are surrounded by the Chinese character for “repel”) and protect the Chinese character for “fire” painted in an archaic calligraphic form. They are also accompanied by a series of antique Chinese tripods, objects usually associated with rituals in China but used here only because phonetically they can also mean “to stop” in Cantonese. The benevolent insects are accompanied by war planes for attacking, fans for providing fresh air, and bicycles for wandering around, all supported by chrysanthemums looking like the halos of the saints and Buddhas of yore.

Bouie Choi Yuk Kuen, *About Love*, 2011, video and installation. Courtesy of the artist.



Bouie Choi Yuk Kuen is not shy about the seeming absurdity of her explanations, and she believes an artist has to be sincere about her or his own creative process, sincere to the point of appearing to be almost naïve. In one of the video works in a March 2011 exhibition, she is eating a chrysanthemum, an act that easily could be read as the artist desiring to absorb the essence of the flower. The

video was initially shown alongside a kind of jewelry box one would expect to find in the bedroom of a young girl. In the drawer of the jewelry box was placed, proudly, the artist’s turd, not exactly what one would normally associate with the purity of the white flower. Salvador Dali once explained that a turd was the only thing produced by human beings that received the imprint of the human soul because of it being processed by the human body. Thinking about her work in that way, it makes more sense to see the turd as a product of the human soul, an embodied soul shaping the spirit of the flower into something that our human cultures have generally rejected as refuse (at least our non-agricultural cultures). There is no provocation in a second video either, where she indicates her desire for a good sex life by painting with cosmetics a mole on her chest; the Chinese, according to an interview I had with her at the time of the exhibition, believe that the presence of a real mole on the chest indicates a healthy libido.

As an art historian, I could not help relating her attitude of keeping the meaning of her work hermetic to a sort of anti-avant-garde philosophy—

not in the sense that she would be opposed to the European avant-garde of the period between the two World Wars (whose goal was to change everyone's life by making a new kind of art), but in the sense that her own strategies are not aimed at an elusive "public" who one might assume represents everybody. Instead, these strategies are aimed at herself, a single person whose destiny might be changed by these simple acts of representing, albeit cryptically, the events of her own life. In this respect, the work is so intensely personal that at times it feels like the viewer has become a voyeur and is taking a peep at something that was not meant to be so public.

So how can we respond when confronted with such works? Is an explanation by the artist necessary? Not so, according to my conversation with the artist, who is completely open to any other personal interpretations that might be formulated by the viewer. Here, too, we have a narrative, the return of "allegory" according to Craig Owens (who saw in its reappearance in the art of the late 1970s the end of modernism), but one that possesses a particular quality since Bouie Choi Yuk Kuen's allegories are exclusively personal and not related in any sense to the "universal." It is an attitude similar to what we find in the works of one of her classmates who I mentioned earlier, Elise Lai Yuen Shan.

As in the works of Bouie Choi Yuk kuen, the implied meaning (what would be called in French *non-dit*) in the book Elise Lai created on the occasion of her graduation show for an M.F.A. at the Chinese University of Hong Kong also stemmed from personal experience. Titled *Some Leisure, Treasure and Pleasure* (2010), this hand-bound book contains texts and photos the artist describes in the following way:

Most travelling guides in book stores are about entertainment or famous tourist spots. As a traveler, I have a desire to collect and make a travelling guide with some personally recommended places away from home from different peoples, we can see some relatively personal and intimate travelling recommendations in this book. This is a travelling guide of the collective memories of everyone I interviewed, the conversations between me and each of them were held in a usually comfortable and causal way like having a dinner, drinking coffee, and chatting in a private place. To hear, share, penetrate and substitute to their experiences in an interesting way to communicate, as if I was able to grasp a part of their memories as well. It is a kind of distant intimacy, reachable yet unreachable.

The same idea of "distant intimacy" also can be found in the series of framed images and texts whose authors were left anonymous, but the difference of tone in the language used in each set clearly shows that different individuals had written them. Whether it was the artist or the writers who made the images was not provided to visitors at the gallery, no doubt precisely to have the viewers imagine for themselves who may have produced them.



Top: Elise Lai Yuen Shan, *Some Leisure, Treasure and Pleasure* (pages 8 and 9), 2010, handbound book. Courtesy of the artist.

Right: Elise Lai Yuen Shan, *Some Leisure, Treasure and Pleasure*, 2010, photographs and text. Courtesy of the artist.



By presenting the work in the form of framed texts and referring to personal experiences, it is reminiscent of the work of Sophie Calle, an artist mentioned several times in the MFA thesis written by Elise Lai. This thesis also frequently references the philosophy of the

“everyday” as developed by Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre. Even though she approaches the idea of intimacy with a subtlety that might seem insipid to some viewers familiar with more trenchant forms of conceptual art, Elise Lai proved in her research that she took her artistic direction with full knowledge of what it implied; that is, that it could be seen as “cute” and even superficial. She thus chose to keep these texts and images at the level of a light-hearted game, but without the superficiality; they are reminiscent of what Italo Calvino once defined as “lightness”—that is, something located at the juncture between melancholia and sadness.

This lightness is also present in her painting. None of it addresses social or political issues, but, as with her other artworks, this is something she accepts and defends; here, too, there is no naiveté on her behalf when she paints. For the same exhibition she wanted to put forward her identity as a painter in a series of canvases representing what a traveler could see from an airplane window. I asked her why she chose painting in her attempt to communicate the notion of the everyday, something that is important to her, since painting is associated more generally with high art and does not necessarily possess the quality of “everydayness.” She responded, with a



Elise Lai Yuen Shan, left to right: *Strange Steps*, *Flow Sweetly*, *Hang Heavy*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 70 cm each. Courtesy of the artist.

hint of impatience, that she was a painter and that the practice of painting represented her own form of everyday. Like Lee Kit, who chooses to merely note the existence of “nice painting,” I am not so critical of its development, especially in light of the intensely private narratives that inform these artworks, and it is their very opaqueness that I personally find intriguing. In this respect, although there might appear to be some degree of superficiality in the works of some of these “nice painters,” a number of them manage—albeit sometimes just as an afterthought—to base their art practice within strong concepts obtained through well-disciplined academic research.

... and Its Counterpart

While the “nice painters” have developed entirely private narratives, Celia Ko has chosen another path and makes portraits whose function is to delve into the personality of the model she is representing, leaving a reading of the work much more transparent. Her strategy relies less on private stories and focuses more on how she represents other people through her own particular gaze. One could argue, however, that it is not really possible to reveal something of a person through an image, and twentieth-century psychology emphasized the fact that what gets revealed in a painting has a lot more to do with the painter than with the sitter.

The portraits of Celia Ko’s grandparents were based on old family photographs and not from life sketches, a technique she prefers to employ when painting portraits of people she knows personally. Since she is interested in representing people, she could be seen as affiliated with artists who would not necessarily use the medium of paint to produce portraits, that being photography. The portraits made by the Hong Kong photographer So Hing-keung, who now works in mainland China, for example, could exemplify the more “objective” relationship with the human face many art lovers expect from such a medium. In large glossy photos, the aloofness conveyed in the faces of these peasants from the Chaoyang district in Beijing⁶ seems to emphasize the idea that one cannot understand the Other, that the artist can never really communicate the mind of the sitter in spite of all his or her efforts. On the other hand, when one views the works of Celia Ko, it is hard to avoid the feeling that communication might be possible after all, that there is in her faces an openness, a dramatic intensity that reminds me of the faces in films by Ingmar Bergman or his Danish predecessor Carl Theodor Dreyer for whom the human face was the most startling, mysterious, and ultimately the most interesting subject of art. But, where Bergman offered a somber meditation on the ultimate

failure of art to truly translate reality, Celia Ko ignores such concerns, and her portraits are as much a reflection on the way images produce meaning, a manifestation of her love of past masters (especially the great painters of the seventeenth century, such as Velasquez), and a personal statement about her own friends and, ultimately, her own life.



So Hing Keung, *Chaoyang, China*, 1996, colour photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

The large portraits of her young friends and the smaller paintings of other such friends in her studio provides the opportunity for her to make both ambitious images, ones destined for public spaces, as well as intimate ones, the sort of quick renderings that appear to have been made for herself. Where she differs the most from the “nice painters” and their opaque narratives is, however, in her large portraits such as the series of images of a young man in oil and pastel standing in front of what appears to be an abstract background, but what are in fact paintings made by Tony Ng Kwun Lu, with whom she shares a studio. There is even an allegory in which she represents Tony Ng painting one of his abstract paintings, which are so reminiscent of traditional forms of Chinese landscape, with a “muse” posing next to him complete with the drapery one would expect from such a character. While the relationship between artist and model makes clear reference to Gustave Courbet’s *The Artist’s Studio* (1855), the viewer might wonder why this draped figure is modeling for an artist painting a large



Celia Ko, *Boy Landscape I*,
2004, oil on linen, 122 x 183 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.



Celia Ko, *Boy Landscape II*, 2004,
pastel on paper, 82 x 118 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.



Celia Ko, *Boy Landscape III*, 2004,
oil on canvas, 122 x 183 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

Celia Ko, *Artist & Muse (aka Chai & Tony)*, 2006, oil on canvas, 25.6 x 30 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



abstract canvas before realizing that it's possible she is posing for another artist who is positioned outside the picture frame. Although the reference to a painter of the past is made through this interesting *mise-en-abyme*, one has to look at another series to really understand

Celia Ko's fascination with the most flamboyant forms of oil painting from Western art history.

Celia Ko, *Vikki, Sam, Chris*, 2010, oil on linen, 122 x 183. Courtesy of the artist.



When I first saw a triple portrait titled *Vikki, Sam, Chris* (2010) standing on an easel in the middle of their small studio, it was a startling image conceived with a sense of the medium that I have seldom seen in the work of any other painter in Hong Kong. There are many talented painters working in oil and acrylic in Hong Kong and I also find a number of what Peckham and Lau call “nice painters” very interesting, but it is seldom because of their technical prowess. I prefer not to use the term “technical” because that would be one of the last things on the mind of a viewer when looking at this kind of painting, but it remains that if painting is a form of language, it is more effective when the artist is fluent in its usage. Through its powerful composition, the strange blurry lines that seem to double the silhouettes of these unfamiliar faces, Celia Ko demonstrates an attention to the medium that can be accomplished only through years of practice. But, again, it is not her technical mastery that strikes the viewer when confronted with these large paintings, but more a sense of narrative and a deep psychological insight.

In a message sent by the artist with the image of *Vikki, Sam, Chris*, Celia Ko specified that her paintings “although a lot of times . . . are of humans, as subjects, deal with the idea/concept of painting/suggesting/image-making, ‘narrative’ hopefully being the job of the viewer.” Her technical fluency accompanies therefore a reflection on how the medium of paint has carried through the centuries as an ideal companion for “narrative.”

Even though she prefers to let viewers create their own stories, that strategy is very different from that of many “nice painters” who rely on an entirely private language. In other of Ko’s works, knowledge of the painting of the past allows for a great deal of information to be conveyed; not only in her interest in the tradition of portraiture but also by the many direct references she makes to art history in terms of iconography. For example, the pomegranates in *Red Fruit Rhapsody* are a frequent presence in European religious painting, and the way one of the figures pinches the nipple of another figure is reminiscent of a famous painting, *Gabrielle d’Estrées and One of Her Sisters* (late sixteenth century), from the Fontainebleau school during the French Renaissance.



Celia Ko, *Red Fruits Rhapsody*, 2010, oil on canvas, 53.35 x 249 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Of course, one might question why a Hong Kong artist (albeit one who grew up and received her art education in the USA) would fill her paintings with such references to Western art history. As much as I tend to be guilty of preferring signs of a Hong Kong identity in the works of local artists, it is necessary to remember that the themes of Hong Kong culture are not necessarily the subject matter in all art made in Hong Kong. Instead of labeling “Hong Kong art” as only that which revolves around issues of local identity, which would limit greatly the number of artists that would have to be considered in a survey of art practices in Hong Kong (if anything, this would ignore, for instance, the practitioners of more “traditional” forms of Chinese art), it is more accurate to consider all the practices present within the political borders defining the SAR territory. In any case, Celia Ko is just as much a Hong Kong artist as, simply because she has been working, teaching, and exhibiting here for many years. However, since she addresses her own background and the history of her Hong Kong family in types of work other than painting, Celia Ko could also fall under the category of those artists dealing with issues of local identity, an identity; as we will see, steeped in the relationship the territory always has had with the sea, merchant navigation, and the rest of the world.

From One Practice to Another

Although Celia Ko often identifies herself as a painter, she by no means limits herself to that medium. Her installation, *Crated Memories* (2009), is about personal family memories, but it is also about a desire to preserve her past within the narrative of Hong Kong’s past, a clear orientation toward the idea of “collective memory” that has become so essential in Hong Kong around the turn of the twenty-first century. Painting still occupies an important place in *Crated Memories*, but it is presented in conjunction with old photographs of her family, with none of them shown in the “traditional” format of being displayed on a wall. She rejected the format of wall display for this piece for two reasons; first, it was a statement on the activities of her family’s past, in which the large wooden crates used in the shipping industry



Left: Celia Ko, *Crated Memories*, 2010, mixed-media images on crates, approx. 582.5 x 975 x 213.3 cm, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

Right: Celia Ko, *Crated Memories*, 2010, mixed-media images on crates, approx. 582.5 x 975 x 213.3 cm, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

was an appropriate component, and, second, it was an adjustment to the circumstances of the group exhibition it was designed for. In her original proposal, Celia Ko played with the idea of “parking” because the original idea for this group exhibition, which took place in Fotan in 2009, was to put all the works on display in a parkade for cars and trucks, a strategy that was later abandoned. Celia Ko says of *Crated Memories*:

I grew up by the shore of Hong Kong harbour and my family history is woven tightly to this place. For generations we have sailed and shipped across far seas, but always our roots remained here. I grew up enchanted by the tales of my elders, taking it for granted that one day I too would live a vision of worlds far away. I see my family’s complex history as vivid threads running through the tapestry of Hong Kong’s history.

Crated Memories comprises eight wooden crates of the type commonly used for packing and shipping goods. The crates are piled to merely hint at the outline of a ship. Here we see the cargo on a commercial vessel, the lifeblood of Hong Kong’s shipping business, the trade that has for so long contributed to Hong Kong’s status as a vital international port. This is a consignment of personal thoughts, memories, imagination and reflections inspired by family stories. The walls of the crates reveal an older Hong Kong: here is the Whampoa Dock in Hunghom where my grandfather and grand-uncles forged careers as chief engineers in commercial vessels; here are views of the old harbour, maps, images of antique lacquer items and snapshots of past generations from family photo albums, here are paintings that reflect a wondering mind. Thus are time and events reconstructed, connecting and layering past lives, culture, places and memories.⁷

Celia Ko has also been engaged in the creation of wearables, a form of art that challenges the limits between art and craft. By juxtaposing images from the artist’s past, the cultural past she lived in, and the many signs of her loves and interests—ranging from literature to visual culture and even



Celia Ko, *Conception*, 2005, wearable. Courtesy of the artist.

Chinese medicine and stones—these wearables, blending clothing and ornament, deal with memory and culture much the same way as *Crated Memories*. Celia Ko’s statement about the wearables is as follows:

I am always being fascinated by sages [the scholars of the past who wore ornaments on their belts] and dangling ornaments women and men in old times hung from their waist. My “belt/sage-like” piece was inspired by such fascination. It was supposed to move while the user walks around. I chose to use this traditional fabric which is made of raw silk, and which also used to be very popular among the Southern Cantonese area for centuries, but instead of the usual common black tough shiny silk, this one appears to be darker, more ancient, golden, and hence more solemn and nostalgic, carrying a sense of an accumulation of dust in history. I am trying to suggest the atmosphere that I remember at the beginning of my existence.

1. My first image (the first one has the photo of Mom and me in her lap when I was two weeks old) accompanied by a small “palm-reading” diagram on the left and a “face-reading” diagram on the right. The flowered-heads bearing numbers of my day of birth.

2. An old drawing from *Tung Shing* (Cantonese almanac) describing the growth of a fetus in the womb within nine months.
3. A little decoration with a traditional jade pendent very similar to the one that was given to me when I was born.
4. A small metal doll of “Buddha,” these metal dolls are a traditional ornament for newborns’ head bands in Old China.
5. A photo of me age three or four under a tree in front of Victoria harbor, dated 1970s.
6. A photo of Queen’s Road West in Hong Kong with a rickshaw dated 1874.
7. Another photo of the Hong Kong Central District, depicting the once Supreme Court (now House of the Legislative Council), dated 1910.
8. On the both sides, there are Chinese phrases dangling. Famous words come from the Neo-Confucius Doctrine by Chu Tzu the scholar (Ming Dynasty, sixteenth century). The right side reads, “Although Ancestors are distanced, and although the descendants not clever,” the left side reads, “One must always remember the source of our daily meals with gratitude.” Such teaching represents the value passed down to me from my family.
9. Consists of jadeite, agates, crystals, a couple of computer chips, electronic parts, beads of different materials and various ornaments.⁸

Within the specific themes of each object, the list of books, things, and images arranged by Celia Ko in these wearables represent a selective array of what any Chinese in Hong Kong would carry within themselves as their own cultural baggage, but she chose to make of these constitutive elements of the mind and memory something to adorn the body, putting quite literally on the skin what is usually seen as pertaining to something internal. Among them, three examples are particularly interesting for those looking for signs of cultural identity in her work. The pictures from the Cantonese almanac *Tung Shing*, published in Hong Kong, still convey today a strong sense of what the past might have been and maybe still is; every year, many of the pages from the twentieth century editions of the almanac are simply being reprinted, indicating an enduring set of concepts in the form of images and texts shared by the participants of this culture. This is not so much “Hong Kong-oriented,” since it could just as much belong to mainland Chinese or Taiwanese culture, and the reference to the famous Confucian maxims of Zhu Bolu (1617–1688), or Chu Tzu, that regulate the relationship of family life (*Zhijia Geyana*) also occupy pride of place. From the most personal photographs to profoundly political statements, from painting to installation and body ornaments, Celia Ko is also an artist whose reflection on present art strategies has led her to multiply her roles and identities in the art field.

Painting as Part of Multiple Strategies

It is tempting to tie some of the tendencies of “nice painting” to the expectations of the “post 80s” movement in Hong Kong, a generation of cultural and political activists who are trying to preserve their birth place from the destructive impact of “big business,” such as the land developers of Hong Kong who have been responsible for the destruction of a large part of the architectural heritage of the former colony, as well as the growing influence of mainland China in the political affairs of the SAR. In that sense, there is no pursuit of a cultural identity in “nice painting,” its practitioners having no doubt as to who they are and what their role must be in society. On the other hand, some of choices made by a more mature artist like Celia Ko could be related, with little effort, to the quest for cultural identity many practitioners who lived parts of their lives outside Hong Kong have been pursuing. Donning the identity of a painter is still a viable strategy for many Hong Kong artists, even though it is often seen as a strange, old-fashioned one by artists outside Hong Kong and China at large. Many European artists visiting or residing in Hong Kong often exhibit disdain for painting and are quite startled by the presence of so much of it. Even Choi Yuk-Kuen, mentioned at the beginning of this text and studying for a Master of Fine Arts in London as I write these lines, has resolutely turned towards video and body art and no longer understands what she considers the conservatism of the students in her alma mater. How much the approach of artists is conditioned by the choices available in their early art education is obviously the subject of intense deliberation, and all the more important because of questions around the very notion of individuality and originality that is still the foundation of art education in many institutions around the world.

All the same, there are many artists in Hong Kong who are still so attached to the identity of being a painter that they restrict all their activities to it, while others are no longer satisfied with the mere practice of painting, as we have just seen exemplified. The struggle to keep a viable art practice in the domain of painting for artists using Chinese media, like the brush and ink used by the literati of the past, one that could be identified as contemporary, is not as pressing an issue as for those using media like oil or acrylic.

The question of whether it is viable for contemporary artists to restrict themselves to the practice of painting becomes even more urgent at a time when Hong Kong artists are starting to enjoy much wider recognition. The three painters discussed in this article have chosen, in the end, not to restrict themselves to painting. All motivations to explore new ways to be an artist are beneficial, and they come from conflicting desires; that is, the desire for more visibility in the new internationalized art market of Hong Kong and the desire to explore personal or public issues.

In Hong Kong, where painters from mainland China in many mediums, from ink to acrylic to oil, have been visible for a long time (let us remember that Chang Tsong-Zung at the Hong Kong-based gallery Hanart TZ was already promoting this art in the middle of the 1980s), there is still a strong attraction to painting by local artists, an attraction that might eventually be reinforced by the active art market that has descended upon the territory in the last few years. As the history of any booming art market has shown repeatedly, painting is always attractive, since its commodification is so easy

to establish. This is not a criticism of the choice to paint or of the choices made by collectors, gallery managers, and auction houses: painting is just as good a choice as any other, and supporting it is a matter of personal taste.

All the same, the recent becoming of Hong Kong as the third largest art auction market in the world, the establishment in the Central district of commercial galleries from New York (Gagosian), London (Ben Brown Gallery, White Cube) and Paris (Galerie Perrotin)—where painting generally occupies a very prominent place as the most accessible kind of commodity—has not influenced local artists into submitting to anything else other than the internal requirements of their own art practice. Of course, the fact that these galleries are more interested in showing mainland China painters than local artists, with only a few exceptions like Chow Chun Fai and Lam Tung Pang, might also very well be another reason why local artists do not feel the need to adapt to the demands of these important art exhibitors by limiting their production only to painting. Most of these galleries, and the departments of auction houses specializing in contemporary art, were drawn to the SAR for two reasons: Chinese and local collectors are starting to buy contemporary art from around the world and exports of artworks are not taxable from Hong Kong. But these institutions can also be active promoters of forms of art creation other than just the non-perishable, easy to commodify, objects they have been exhibiting over the last three to four years in their Hong Kong branches. When they are not obsessively selling commodities, we can hope that they will start looking at local practitioners and the variety of their art practices to present them as individuals just as worthy of attention as their mainland counterparts.

Notes

¹ E-mail message sent to the author, August 15, 2011.

² Frank Vigneron, "Mining or Undermining 'Tradition': Shifts in the Work of Tony Ng Kwun Lun," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 10, no. 4 (July/August 2011), 6–20.

³ "Lee Kit on Nice Painting, text by Lee Kit as told to Venus Lau and Robin Peckham," <http://saamlung.com/blog/575/> (posted on December 27, 2010). Robin Peckham and Venus Lau also describe Lee Kit (and other artists of about the same age in Hong Kong, like Chow Chun Fai 周俊輝, born 1980; Kwan Sheung Chi 關尚智, born 1980; Pak Sheung-Chuen 白雙全, born 1977; and Lam Tung Pang 林東鵬, born 1978; all educated at the Chinese University and all very active in the Fotan community) as exerting a profound influence on younger artists.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ "A core member of the movement in nice painting, young artist Bouie Choi demonstrates the possibilities of pattern derivation and the role of superstition in a recent set of attractive if unengaging works on board. Influenced by the delicate line drawings of insects associated with Angela Su and the colorful patterns and borders of Au Hoi Lam, Choi unites these elements in configurations that combine the textures of drawing, painting, textile, and rubber stamps; her strongest contribution to this conversation comes in the form of geometry, organizing her compositions around the unifying principles of totems and talismans that become, graphically speaking, much more interesting than the subject matter involved. The most impressive piece, *Blessings* (2011) involves 17 distinct panels, each with a natural wood border and colored corners framing a treated central surface, all arranged in a fascinating spatial relationship that points ambiguously to a totemic or talismanic function of imagery; the images themselves, however, fail to impress. Depicted on the boards are geometric insect drawings, stickers, stamps, and scribbled text—though the placement is alluring, something fails to add up. The same could be said for *Peace on Earth* (2011), in which an eye-catching orange field frames a geometric abstraction of the basic human form literally underlined by lines of text. Ultimately, the work defeats itself in its attempt to pack in layer upon layer of meaning." Robin Peckham, "Entomology for Aesthetes" (<http://www.artslant.com/cn/articles/show/22185/>), article about Comfort Terrace, Choi Yuk Kuen's exhibition at Grotto Fine Art, Hong Kong, March 2 to 26, 2011.

⁶ A number of photos of this series are visible on the Hong Kong Art Archive Web site, created by David Clarke, at the University of Hong Kong: http://www.fa.hku.hk/hkaa/artists.php?artist_id=049.

⁷ From the artist's statement sent in November 2009 to the curator of the exhibition 'If you park here' (Fotanian Open Studios 2010, January 16 to 31, 2010), where *Crated Memories* was on display.

⁸ Caption written for the group exhibition Guan Guan—Observing the Senses, Counihan Gallery, Moreland City Council, Melbourne, Australia, April 2005.