

*Social Fabric: New Work by Marianna Hahn and Kwan Sheung Chi*

MILL6 Pop-up Space, The Annex, Nan Fung Place, Hong Kong 22 March – 21 April

A sense of beauty and cool subversion are found in this intriguing show that excavates Hong Kong's past and dissects its present. Presented by MILL6, formerly known as the Mills Gallery, the exhibition brings together new work by German artist Marianna Hahn and Hong Kong conceptual artist Kwan Sheung Chi. On paper, the two are not an obvious match. Hahn's performance-centric work involves straight-faced explorations of myth, ritual and poetry centred on female bodies and identities. Kwan, winner of the inaugural Hugo Boss Asia Art prize in 2013, is a conceptual prankster whose puckish back-catalogue takes on anything from the vicissitudes of his personal life to sociopolitical commentary. And yet their contrasting approaches reveal different faces of Hong Kong.

As the outsider doing virgin research into the territory, Hahn zeroes in on vanishing communities and ways of life. The resultant objects – sculptures, drawings and videos – are elliptical, meditative responses to these stories. Together, they have an elegiac romance that relies on old-fashioned handicraft and markmaking, with scrupulous attention to the material possibilities of silk, dye and paper. The artist had several sources of inspiration, the first being women silk-workers on Hong Kong's Lantau Island, many of whom renounce marriage in order to retain their personal independence. They are, like many other female workers in China and the Chinese diaspora, called *zishunü* in Mandarin (literally 'self-combed women', because they take their vow of chastity during a traditional hair-combing ceremony). Hahn also references *tankas*, historic boat-dwelling folk from the ethnic minorities in Southern China, some of whom drifted further south to live in and around the waters of Hong Kong.

These histories are shadowy elements in Hahn's wider mood board exploring a universal representation of womanhood and its connection to the sea. Most of the works look like they have been dredged from the ocean and hung up to dry. In *the state of grace* (all works 2016), 'frozen' dyed silk dresses, stiff as scarecrows, hang from walls and the ceiling. Twisted and ossified, these garments are closer to sculpture than cloth, and one is frosted over with salt

crystals, like the accidental leavings of an ancient sea goddess.

While the female body is absent in these works, it appears, in various iterations (among them kneeling figures with heavy breasts and hips, and earth-mother types with branches growing out of their heads), in a set of charcoal drawings. They are executed on flimsy yellow paper glazed with shellac, the effect of which is to objectify the drawings in the manner of brittle, water-crinkled relics. A different kind of ephemerality appears in four silk paintings of blue circles, two of which are burnt away in the centre, leaving charred edges like the remnants of a half-burnt Taoist paper amulet.

While Hahn mines fragile histories on the margins of Hong Kong's official narratives, Kwan explores a different kind of boundary: where does Hong Kong end and China begin? Following the 1997 handover of Hong Kong from British to Chinese rule, a 'one country, two systems' constitutional principle secures a certain level of autonomy for the Special Administrative Region. That's on paper. In practice, things are murkier, given Beijing's interventions in Hong Kong politics, as well as blatant violations of civil liberties, most recently seen in the notorious disappearances of five Hong Kong booksellers associated with publications critical of the Communist government.

Kwan channels the contradictions into an ambivalent installation that plays on the notion, familiar to anyone who has worked or lived in Hong Kong, that the place is simultaneously China and not China. The show begins with *Hong Kongese* (all works 2016), comprising thousands of red, metal lapel-badges lying like a pile of autumn leaves on the ground. All of them depict the Hong Kong regional flag, a close cousin of the PRC flag. Both have the same shade of red; the difference between the two being that instead of a gold star (and four satellite stars) in the corner, the Hong Kong flag has a white five-petalled flower, a native orchid, at its centre. Kwan's badges were sourced from the online seller Taobao – China's super-cheap equivalent of Amazon – and in addition to representing the HK flag, they have the Chinese characters meaning 'Hong Konger' written on them. Here's another difference between the PRC and Hong

Kong: most mainlanders would read the words as *xiānggānggrén* in Mandarin. In Cantonese, it's *hēunggóngyáhn*.

Crunching through these fork-tongued badges, you enter a dark room that flickers to life when an LED pillar lights up. This is the part that gets tiresome. To enter or leave, you have to wait for a set of prissy automated doors that open when they please according to some secret timer. Eventually you enter a final room and reach the *pièce de résistance*: a city map of Hong Kong, folded into a globe and set on a plinth.

Planet Hong Kong, arrived at only after wading through a sea of lamely derivative flags, produced by cheap labour of the PRC. Is this Kwan's arch version of the 'one country, two systems' principle? It is a work pulled in two directions: on one hand, it suggests a merged Hong Kong/China identity driven by economic complicity and intersecting national symbols; on the other hand, it posits territorial sovereignty so extreme that Hong Kong has its own planetary separation. I'm not quite sure if it all adds up – and I hate the doors – but this is arguably the most elaborate articulation of a complicated patriotism for an artist who, so far, has stuck mainly to creating interesting one-offs about local politics. In 2007, on the tenth anniversary of the historic handover, he made a video called *A Flags-Raising-Lowering Ceremony at my home's clothes drying rack*, where three flags – Hong Kong's regional flag, the British flag and the Chinese flag – were raised and lowered arbitrarily by his parents outside their flat. Then, his vision of Hong Kong identity was of harmless schizophrenia, but over the years his stance has hardened to a more active, socially conscious pushback. In 2008's *Ask the Hong Kong Museum of Art to borrow 'Iron Horse' barriers: I want to collect all of the 'Iron Horse' barriers in Hong Kong here*, he exhibited 100 'iron horses', the metal barriers police use to contain protest routes; and in 2013 he made *Water Barrier (Maotai: Water, 1999)*, comprising heavy, plastic, liquid-filled antiriot barriers that visitors were encouraged to push over. In his latest exhibition, he seems to have kicked down some of his own barricades, progressing from short riffs to a sustained construction of a fuller, braver new world. *Adeline Chia*

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Marianna Hahn, *i divided myself thousands of time*, 2016, silk and shellac, 160 × 60 cm. Courtesy MILL6, Hong Kong

facing page, bottom

Kwan Sheung Chi, *Hong Kongese*, 2016, metal badges, dimensions variable. Courtesy MILL6, Hong Kong

