

May - June 2019

Art Asia Pacific

"Hong Kong, Para Site, Ellen Pau, What about Home Affairs?"

HONG KONG

Para Site

ELLEN PAU

WHAT ABOUT HOME AFFAIRS?

In her 1990 article "Reflecting Media: 10 Notes on Video," Ellen Pau, one of Hong Kong's foremost video artists, wrote: "If we can compare film to a love relationship, video would be like sex life. Film requires one to fall into it, just like falling in love, and only then can you engage with it. With video, you hit it off immediately, and love comes after that."

It is telling that Pau would use an analogy of erotic relations to talk about video art. Looking at the video works in her retrospective at Para Site, "What About Home Affairs?," there was a palpable sense of intimacy that bordered on the erotic. For instance, the TV console of *Diversion* (1989), supported by a plinth, was positioned at about the same height as me, and the wire of the headphone pulled us together into what felt like a tête-à-tête. I was lured to move even closer by the pixelated imagery that I couldn't always make out; though after stepping forward, I was repelled by the screen's brightness, which proved too blinding. *Diversion* uses footage from a 1960s documentary, *Hong Kong Today*, along with archival images from the Public Records Office. Foregrounding the human body, its played-back and looped sequences show swimmers jumping in and out of Victoria Harbour. With a dose of humor and absurdity, Pau alludes to the hesitance of the people of Hong Kong as they faced the looming 1997 handover.

Elsewhere, more intimate settings enmeshing viewers' bodies pervaded the show. The environment constructed for *She Moves* (1988), one of the earliest works on view, replicated a living room, while visitors were invited to sit in armchairs to see *TV Game of the Year* (1989) and *Blue* (1989–90). Pau also highlights the intimacy and sensuousness of video as a material itself. Watching *She Moves*, which depicts rain falling against a window, it feels as if the moving water droplets are caressing the screen. When Pau made *Blue*, consisting of her video diary around the time of the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989, she bleached the film to achieve a nebulous effect. Accompanied by the haunting sound of Meredith Monk's music, disparate sequences of a lone dancer, an embryo, a skull, a moving train, welding sparks and more, were stitched together to convey unspeakable emotions.

Pau's sensitivity to the collective psyche of Hong Kong resulted in a nuanced twinning of humor and melancholy—the key tone of the show. In *Expiration* (1997–2000), Pau asks passersby in London, "What is your best-before date?" This evokes the famous line in Hong Kong auteur Wong Kar-wai's film *Chungking Express* (1994): "Somehow everything comes with an expiry date. [...] Is there anything in the world which doesn't?" In Pau's video, amused Londoners give

their personal responses. The work is generally lighthearted, but simmering underneath is the weight of the notion of an expiry date. For Hong Kong citizens, this gestures to the Sino-British One Country, Two Systems agreement that became effective in 1997, supposedly allowing Hong Kong to retain its status quo until 2047.

Similarly, the neuroses of Hong Kongers is subtly expressed in *Recycling Cinema* (2000/18), the frame of which pans sideways to follow certain cars on a highway, inevitably failing as the vehicles speed out of view. In *Bik Lai Chu* (1993/2018), the artist sits under a dressing table, banging her head each time she attempts to raise her head. The betrayal of the political "pledge" (the English name of the titular household cleaning product) by the English and Chinese governments is all the more painful as it is rendered tangible and corporeal both in the head-banging sound, which is distinctively similar to the ubiquitous noise of piling due to construction in the city, and in the claustrophobic setting of the work, enclosed in a small room with a tiny loft and clutters of household items.

In "What About Home Affairs?," intimacy, sensuality, humor and melancholy coalesced like a bittersweet cocktail, poetically capturing the intricacies and ambiguities of a questionably post-colonial subject, rooted, or trapped, in Hong Kong.

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