

DÉJÀ DISPARU

In his book *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (1997), cultural theorist Ackbar Abbas suggests that a “culture of disappearance” governed the Hong Kong art scene in the 1980s and ’90s. He claims that, during this period, locals and expatriates regarded Hong Kong as a “cultural desert”—bemoaning the lack of exposure to international high art—while related studies often centered on mystification or disavowal toward the local culture. Abbas’ theory is based on phenomena that he called *déjà disparu*—“the feeling that what is new and unique about the situation is always already gone, and we are left holding a handful of clichés, or a cluster of memories of what has never been”—and “reverse hallucination,” or the inability to see what is really there.

This exhibition, for which curator David Ho-yeung Chan used the concept of *déjà disparu* as a starting point, featured important local art that went largely unseen by an international audience when first shown in the 1990s. Four artists—Ho Siu-kee, Sara Wong, Ellen Pau and Vincent Yu—presented 23 works at Pearl Lam Galleries, Hong Kong, with a central theme of disappearance. The show, which embodied a sense of *déjà vu*, provided a dreamlike documentary of Hong Kong’s recent history.

Ho Siu-kee’s *Standing Above the Water Level* (2012) is a photograph documenting a performance in which the artist balances on a tiny platform jutting up from the ocean. His skin is tinted with a bluish tone, allowing the artist’s body to fade into the background as his synthetic, bright-white garment stands out against the surrounding currents. The calmness in the photograph, reminiscent of that often found in Chinese ink painting, is sublime.

In the video *Local Orientation* (1998/2013), Sara Wong attempts to walk a straight line across the densely populated Hong Kong Island. The footage is edited to make Wong appear as though she is walking through walls, giving an ephemeral feel to the buildings and settlements that she passes. Two attempts at the walk, in 1998 and in 2013, were on display—one projected onto a sidewall and the other onto the ceiling. The work distorts our visual and physical perceptions of everyday surroundings in an allegory of the ever-changing cityscape of Hong Kong.

Also in the exhibition was Ellen Pau’s *Diversion* (1990), a video installation combining footage of government documentaries and films she took of herself performing repetitious actions (such as walking up stairs or bumping into a wall). Created in response to the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident in Beijing, this work discusses the uncertainty and fear among Hong Kong citizens in the years leading up to the city-state’s reunification with

the mainland. Hong Kong remains in this odd identity limbo even today—in pursuit of a better future, people have been flocking from place to place, compelled to belong “neither here nor there” (which, incidentally, is the translation of the Chinese title for this work).

“Our Home: Shek Kip Mei” (2006) is a photographic series by Vincent Yu capturing a now-demolished 1950s public housing estate in an old district of Kowloon. On display were 20 photographs that show portraits of residents within their cramped homes. The series is a typological study of the housing estate unit and a poignant record of the individuals and their many belongings accumulated over decades, which documents how a community, once a living relic, has become compressed and flattened into mere photographic record.

The artists of “Déjà Disparu” have all made significant contributions to Hong Kong’s art scene. Since their emergence in the 1980s and ’90s, they have not only critically expanded their practices but have also established themselves as curators, educators and founders of art organizations, inspiring younger generations of artists. Yet this exhibition was presented at another pivotal moment in Hong Kong’s art history, as the influx of internationally acclaimed work is currently threatening to outshine local development. The show provided viewers with an opportunity to reflect on artworks from the recent past that are no less relevant today—a chance that was missed back when Hong Kong was considered culturally desolate.

KATHERINE TONG

