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## “Déjà Disparu,” Romanticizing the 1990s



Courtesy Ho Siu-Kee and Pearl Lam Gallery  
Siu-Kee Ho "Standing Above The Water Level" (2011)

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HONG KONG — “Déjà Disparu,” which opens today at **Pearl Lam Gallery Hong Kong**, is an exhibition of artworks from the 1980s and 1990s, but the pieces feel surprisingly contemporary. Early works by now established artists **Siu-Kee Ho**, **Ellen Pau**, **Sara Wong**, and **Vincent Yu** have a timelessness that makes them feel fresh and relevant after decades since they were made.

“Déjà Disparu” directly references the publication “Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance” a seminal work by cultural theorist **Ackbar Abbas** in the 1990s. The phenomenon of “Déjà Disparu” is a central concept in Hong Kong’s cultural theory, defined as “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.” From this academic perspective, curator **David Chan** has selected works that confront collective amnesia and the growing numbness of Hong Kongers towards their changing surroundings and living conditions.

“Actually I think we are now in a post-numb era,” says Chan half-jokingly. “We don’t even know how to be numb anymore. Who even cares what happens to the city? We see a lot of news about radical changes in our city, such as reading about how another old noodle shop has been forced to shut down in Causeway Bay, but what do we really feel about the news? We don’t feel anything. We seem to have totally accepted globalization.”

In the context of the Hong Kong art world, Chan observes that “the industry is getting more professionalized and people now believe in the system — it’s winning out.” The market and appetite for contemporary art has grown considerably since the 1990s, but the tendency for “crazy, experimental” art shows and works has diminished. The works at “Déjà Disparu” provokes artists and viewers to consider that what is being created today grew from a

history of struggling pioneers before them whose works today “look old, but also look new.”

Entering Pearl Lam Gallery we are first met with **Siu-Kee Ho**’s “Gravity Hoop,” a performance from 1996. The artist fabricated a large stainless steel hoop and suspended himself upside down from inside it. The piece pushes us to reconsider our physical experience of the world and confronts the force of gravity, which so defines our physical reality. The act required immense concentration by the artist in order to keep his balance. Similarly, “Standing Above The Water Level” (2011) sees the artist balancing on a stand in the middle of the ocean with no support.

“I like to put my body in unusual circumstances,” says Ho. “We are so used to our environment that we become numb to it. I want to heighten my physical experience of the world. For ‘Gravity Hoop,’ I had to force myself not to think about anything and to focus on my physical experience as even the slightest movement will tip over the hoop.”

The introspective nature of Ho’s work contrasts with **Sara Wong**’s “Local Orientation,” in which the artist directly engages with the physical reality of Hong Kong by navigating the city according to her own map.

As one of the founding members of **Para/Site Art Space**, Wong used the organization’s original headquarters in Sheung Wan as a focal point. From the art space, Wong drew four straight lines according to the cardinal points. She then embarked on four separate journeys along the lines that she drew on the map, filming her walk along the way. Instead of following the organically developed city streets, Wong forces herself to negotiate urban terrain according to the rather abstract compass points. Her first filming took place in 1998, and she subsequently revisited the journeys, and recorded new videos in 2002 and 2013, documenting

the changes in the city terrain.

Another work with a documentary nature and referencing urban planning is **Vincent Yu**'s series of black-and-white photographs of residents in the now mostly demolished Shek Kip Mei Estate. The images are laid out in a grid evoking the cookie-cutter apartments of public housing estates.

Meanwhile, **Ellen Pau** contributed several of her single-channel video works to the exhibition, including "Recycling Cinema" (1999), where a panning camera tracks moving vehicles on the Eastern Corridor highway, and "Drained" (1988), in which **Hiram To** performs as a "flame" burning in a thin corridor inspired by the narrow streets of Hong Kong.

Perhaps the one historically specific work that dates the exhibition is her video "Diversion" (1990), produced a year after the Tiananmen Square incident. Pau edited together archival footage from the 1960s of swimming contests and her original footage, resulting in an ominous reel evoking a city on the edge of political crisis.

*"Déjà Disparu: A multimedia exhibition of artworks of the 1990s by contemporary Hong Kong artists" is at Pearl Lam Galleries Hong Kong until September 4, [www.pearllam.com](http://www.pearllam.com)*