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The ART ISSUE

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BORN TO BE



SOLD?

The art industry in Hong Kong is booming, but local artists aren't getting their share of the spoils. Just what is it that mainland artists have that ours don't, asks **Clare Morin**

Hong Kong is in the midst of a cultural renaissance. We have been named the third-largest art market in the world (by auction turnover), second only to New York and London. The total sales turnover for Sotheby's in Hong Kong has grown from US\$88 million in 2000 to US\$340 million in 2007, driven primarily by the exploding Chinese contemporary art market. We have emerged as a leading art market in Asia, excelling at what we do best – facilitating the exchange of money between hands.

Twice a year regional collectors swarm into the city for the spring and autumn sales of the auction houses attracted by our logistical set-up, the lack of censorship, the favorable taxation and the fact that we're geographically close to everywhere in Asia. Riding on this wave, the Art HK08: Hong Kong International Art Fair hits town this month with a showcase of more than 100 international galleries, while brand-name galleries like the Gagosian are flocking here to set up shop.

But there is something wrong with this picture. Where are the Hong Kong artists? Despite our savviness in wheeling and dealing, when it comes to art we obviously haven't done enough for our own artists. The business

of art is very different from the business of, say, real estate. There are deep roots that need to reach into the bedrock of our society and nurture future generations. We need better art education and more inspired government support, but in the meantime wouldn't it help if people actually knew some Hong Kong artists? In the almost 100 galleries in the city, only a handful represent local artists, and the only local artists appearing in the upcoming Christie's spring auctions are the late 1960s painters Ng Po Wan and Luis Chan. Both

*"The only thing visible
[in Hong Kong culture]
is the tabloid news about
film stars or pop stars"*

great talents, but why are our living artists not involved?

The problem, it seems, is not a lack of good artists in Hong Kong. Johnson Chang Tsong-zung is director of Hong Kong's Hanart TZ Gallery and one of the world's most prominent

Chinese art curators. He points out that Hong Kong artists were very well received at the first-ever group show of the city's artists in the mainland, at last year's landmark exhibition at the Shanghai Museum of Contemporary Art, *Reversing Horizons: Artist Reflections of the Hong Kong Handover 10th Anniversary*. "I discovered that the art world in Shanghai was very much impressed by Hong Kong art," says Chang. "Many artists went down very well. The monumental works of Amy Cheung and artists who make video installations had a very good presence; artists like Warren Leung Chi Wo and Chow Chun Fai were also well received."

On the mainland, hot art talents enjoy an almost rock-star status, but in Hong Kong artists remain exceedingly low profile. "They are not visible enough in the whole cultural landscape of Hong Kong," says Chang. "In China, the cultural world plays a very active part; they have a voice in politics, they are very visible. In Hong Kong the only thing visible is the tabloid news about film stars or pop stars."

If the problem isn't a lack of good artists, what if we were to apply our sharp business acumen and brand our artists? We took the concept to Victor Manggunio, Group Creative Director of Leo Burnett in Hong Kong, the advertising agency that markets some of the world's biggest brands, such as Procter & Gamble, McDonalds and CSL.

Manggunio suggests that a campaign of marketing on the level of very smart PR would inject glamour into the art scene and raise its value to local audiences. Referring to mature art markets such as London and New York, where the likes of the Gettys, Rockefeller and Lauder are permanent fixtures at art openings, he suggests glamorising art shows to generate local interest. "You can pick and choose some of the best and brightest; have high-profile shows and a very exclusive list of high-profile people. And you PR that," he says. "Make art shows part of the mix of what's 'in' to do. Right now it's always fashion shows or shop openings or car shows. Those are the norms. Maybe market art in that way."

Even Charles Saatchi, he points out, was an advertising talent who essentially branded the Young British Artists, thereby launching their careers. "It's all marketing," says Manggunio. ►



Blood brother Zhang Xiaogang's *Bloodline: The Big Family* which recently sold for HK\$47,367,500



Breakthrough The new Atting House space features over 100 works by contemporary Hong Kong artists

"They were just very savvy at pressing the buttons of the media. He knew what to say and when just to get a lot of reaction."

"It's not a bad thing to create some hype," suggests local conceptual artist Tozer Pak, currently in New York on a grant from the Asian Cultural Council. "Hong Kong artists are low profile, they are not interested in making relationships with the media or the press."

"Whether it is high-class snob value or low-class snob value, that's how publicity propels anything," points out Johnson Chang in response to the idea. "If they can sell a pair of shoes, why not sell a piece of fine art?"

Not everybody agrees, however. Henry Au Yeung who previously worked for Sotheby's and now runs Grotto Fine Art – one of the few Hong Kong galleries that exclusively represents Hong Kong artists – suggests that the worlds of celebrities and artists don't mix well. "Even when you go to museum openings you don't see celebrities," he says. He points out that collectors in Hong Kong are very low profile and tend to see art buying as a cultivative practice among their peers. "I don't think the celebrity strategy would work. I think it would turn it into another fashion show, just a one-shot thing."

Perhaps the problem is at a curatorial level, suggests Pak. He argues that the lack of hype is due to a shortage of good curators who can push and promote artists in the right contexts. "Curators in Hong Kong can sell the Chinese artists very well, but they don't care about Hong Kong," says Pak. "If the level of curatorship can get stronger and they can bring Hong Kong artists to the international stage, I think Hong Kong would do well."

Nick Simunovic is managing director of Gagosian Asia, the New York gallery currently setting up a showroom in Hong Kong. Drawing upon his experience both with Gagosian and as Director of Corporate Development at the Guggenheim, he stresses that, in promoting artistic talent, "the key word is consensus, and a lot of different players have to agree at the same time. It's museums and critics, curators, collectors and galleries. If there are situations

where any of those elements don't exist then it becomes a lot harder."

"In Hong Kong we have the collectors, we have some galleries, but we are seriously lacking curators," agrees Henry Au Yeung. "The lack of really professional curators in Hong Kong contributes to the lack of hype about the whole art field. It's different from galleries – we do our own thing, we're commercial, so we have a conflict of interest when taking on a curator's role. A curator

"If they can sell a pair of shoes, why not sell a piece of fine art?"

with an academic background who is well connected: that's the curator's role. Maybe that is the root of the problem."

Tang Hoi Chiu, Chief Curator at the Hong Kong Museum of Art argues that the Hong Kong Art Biennale established in 1975 has been offering a steady stream of support for local artists. The museum's most recent *Open Dialogue* series is a promising new direction with guest curators invited to rework the museum's collection. Yet the curator says the galleries are still slow to promote home grown talent. "I think there need to be more



Unbalanced Works by Hong Kong's Ng Po Wan (left) and China's Yue Minjun (right)

channels to promote local artists. There are only one or two galleries that really focus on Hong Kong artists. We hope that other galleries will follow suit."

One of the key problems in Hong Kong is this weak primary market, argues Eric Leung Shiu Kee, one of Hong Kong's most active curators and director of the Artist Commune. "We are lacking the market mechanisms that you see in the mainland Chinese contemporary art scene," says Leung. "Hong Kong has a mature auction market but they only focus on top-end artists. We don't have a primary market so it's not easy to push them into the secondary market, such as auction houses. In China they have interest groups, including artists, including curators, including galleries and critics. They have a systematic system that is pushing them."

In response to this gaping hole in the market, this month Leung is curating *HK Unveiled* a vast show of more than 40 contemporary Hong Kong artists at the 10,000-sq-ft Quarry Bay space Atting House. The space is the brainchild of Johnson Chang and the Hong Kong-based art collector Jai Waney, and has been timed to attract the interest of Hong Kong-based and overseas collectors coming into the region for the auctions and Art Fair. On display are a wide variety of works from video art to installation, painting from masters such as Gaylord Chan and Wucius Wong to emerging artists such as Chow Chun Fai and Au Hoi Lam. "The best place to see Hong Kong art is in the Art Biennial, which is held at the Hong Kong Art Museum every two years," says Johnson Chang. "However, apart from that it is very difficult to see big shows of Hong Kong art. We hope that by having this show it fills a niche. Also putting [the artists] together shows the congealed cultural strength of the art scene. It has a collective power to it."

For some, however, the concept of how best to promote the "Hong Kong artist" is neither here nor there. Kevin Ching of Sotheby's suggests the key to promoting our city's artists beyond Hong Kong is to focus on them as individuals, and not as a regional collective.

"There is no point in going against the trend," says Ching. "The trend now is Chinese contemporary art. If you looked in China you would not find any effort to promote an artist of a certain province. Before, Hong Kong had a greater identity; but for now for a Hong Kong artist to succeed, in my view, he would have to be promoted as an individual. We should stop saying 'Hong Kong artists.'"



Words of art



"[Artists] are not visible enough in the whole cultural landscape of Hong Kong"

Johnson Chang (Director of Hong Kong Hanart TZ Gallery)



"We are lacking the market mechanisms that you see in the mainland art scene"

Eric Leung (Curator and Director of the Artist Commune)



"It's not a bad thing to create some hype"

Tozer Pak (one of Hong Kong's leading conceptual artists)



"The lack of really professional curators in Hong Kong contributes to the lack of hype about the whole art field"

Henry Au Yeung (Director of Grotto Fine Art)



"The key word is consensus and a lot of different players need to agree at the same time"

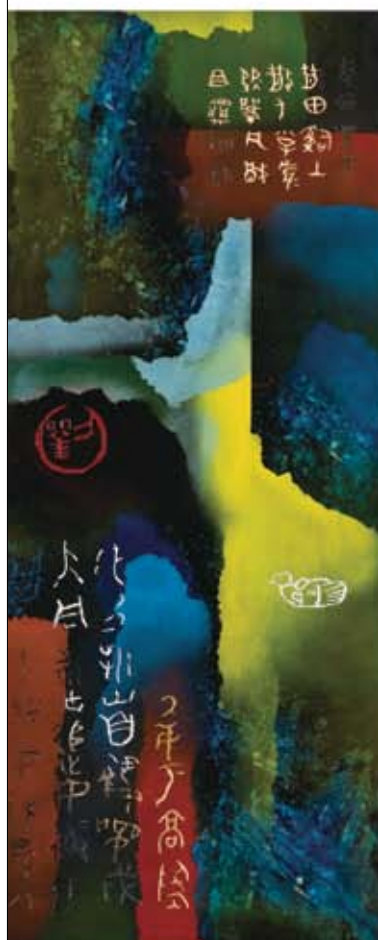
Nick Simunovic (Managing Director of Gagolian Asia)



"Make art shows part of the mix of what's 'in' to do"

Victor Manggunio (Group Creative Director of Leo Burnett HK)

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THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

Contrary to popular belief, Hong Kong's art scene has produced a raft of notable talents. **Clare Morin** takes her pick of the city's rising stars. Artist portraits by **Red Dog Studio**



The break through artist Stanley Wong Ping Pui with his muse

Another mountainman

"I named myself in '83," says Another-mountainman, eyes gleaming behind his trademark circular, black-rimmed glasses. "Everyone knew me as a creative person in advertising and graphic design, where they call me Stanley Wong. But that wasn't my ultimate goal in life, so I thought I would do something on my own agenda."

He is one of Hong Kong's most successful advertising creative minds, yet Stanley Wong Ping-Pui's double life as the artist

Another mountainman is gathering momentum. He is one of the few Hong Kong artists being included in international group shows of Chinese contemporary art, and he is doing it all under a pseudonym inspired by the renowned Ming and Qing dynasty ink painter Eight Great Mountains Man. "His paintings have two strong characteristics for me. The paintings are so infused with life; he lives life with such passion. Secondly, he's so creative, in terms of composition. The way he interprets what visual creativity is all about has inspired me."

Visual creativity is the driving force of Wong's work. He began his life as an artist designing posters for the likes of Wong Kar-wai's iconic movie *Chungking Express*. But his artist persona really kicked into gear during the winter of 1988 on a fateful trip to London. While in a trendy boutique the artist had a serendipitous moment with a bag made from Hong Kong's iconic red white and blue material. "I thought it belonged under the cashier," he remembers with a smile. "Then I saw a price tag on the bag and was amazed. They were selling this bag? We all follow trends here in Hong Kong. But they actually treasured this bag from Hong Kong in London; it made me think why couldn't we treasure it when we own it? That changed my life."

Since then Wong has adopted Hong Kong's iconic material as his greatest muse. His *Redwhiteblue* photography series captures the material in all walks of local life. "Hong Kong people are so clever. I found the story everywhere. It's so durable, so tough; it reminded me of Hong Kong people from the '60s and '70s." His photography morphed to award-winning posters *Building Hong Kong*, and he has moved into the realms of sculpture, using hundreds of layers of the material to mimic the minimalist aesthetics of Ming porcelain. In 2005 he represented Hong Kong at the Venice Biennale with a teahouse completely crafted out of the material.



Abandonment Lanwei 5/ *Big Business*



But it is Wong's latest work that is now pushing the artist onto the international stage. His photography series *Lanwei* was last year included in the ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art's large show *New Asian Waves* – the only Hong Kong artist represented. The series captures the “lan wei

lou” or abandoned property projects in China that resulted from the foreign investments in the '80s that were then abandoned. Wong enters these derelict spaces and places people and furniture amid the rubble, like ghosts. “When you build something it's a dream. You're looking forward, you're never building to die or to have it aborted,” he explains. “This project is about corruption; architecture can be aborted but so can plans, relationships.”

“His new work really speaks to people,” explains Katie de Tilly of 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, who represent the artist. “He's always been a strong artist and a purist. But the new work people get right away, it's very strong.” Perhaps it is the strong mainland Chinese imagery that is capturing the world's interest, or perhaps it is Wong's advertising background that makes him agile at spotting trends.

Amy Cheung Wan-Man

If anyone can overcome Hong Kong's bureaucratic laws and bring confrontational art into public spaces, it's Amy Cheung Wan-Man. The fiery and ambitious Cheung fights the good fight against a sea of red tape to allow her large projects to see the light of day.

“I am a cross between a conceptual artist and a filmmaker,” explains Cheung, who often works with a team to realise her grand visions. In 2006, she was invited to take part in the Hong Kong Heritage Museum's exhibition of

contemporary art, MEGartSTORE, which was intended to mimic a shopping-mall experience. Inspired by a recent trip to Vietnam, where she saw toy tanks being sold as souvenirs, Cheung masterminded *A Bleeding Toy from Childhood*, a life-sized wooden sculpture of a Russian tank. Within the large tank she installed a video game rigged to screens in the windows, allowing audiences to climb inside and virtually shoot and bomb the rest of the exhibition. “We had sound effects and smoke machines,” she explains. After three days the- ▶



The visionary Amy Cheung creates some of the city's most ambitious large-scale artworks



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audience was banned from climbing inside the installation, as the smoke machine repeatedly set off the fire alarm.

In 2007 Cheung was invited to be one of three artists to represent Hong Kong at the Venice Biennale in the Norman Ford-curated show *Star Ferry*. Cheung created *Devil's Advocate: A Song and a Landscape*, an installation of frozen sculptures of elderly beings suspended in Plexiglass balls. The balls are slowly turned in a Ferris wheel illuminated in the darkness of a refrigerated meat locker. "It was about a desire to preserve our history," says Cheung. "Are you just going to unplug it? How do we preserve something so vulnerable?"

She professes to be concerned with the darker aspects of the city. "I think Hong Kong is a city of contrasts. It is a beautiful

"It was about a desire to preserve our history"

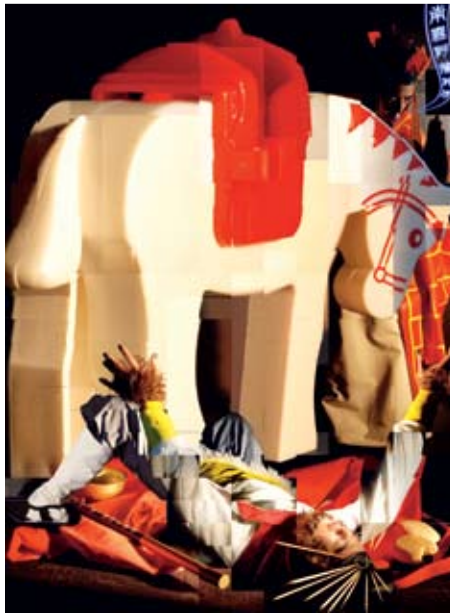
façade but there are some not so nice things happening underneath." In 2005 she created *Ivory Parables amid an Amnesiac's Skin*, a house made from reflective glass that was staged in the Cattle Depot. During the day the glass was reflective, so passersby could not see in. But with the twilight the glass reversed and the image of the artist lying on a bed was revealed. To add to the drama Cheung wore a beast-like mask. "I lived there for three days," she explains. "I had been inspired by *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*. Walking through Central I was wondering how many beasts are there? They dress well in suits, but inside they may be beasts."



Public art *Ivory Parables amid an Amnesiac's Skin*



Deadly toy Wooden tank at the Heritage Museum



Last Supper (top) and Conversion of Monkey King

Chow Chun Fai

Chow Chun Fai is an artist whose star is on the rise. He has been one of the ring-leaders of the Fokan movement, rallying the artists of the Fo Tan arts community organising their annual open days since 2003. This year Chow is no longer just a local lad, he's gone regional, and his twin studios in Hong Kong and Beijing now forms an axis of thrilling creativity. Having been picked up by Hong Kong's acclaimed Hanart TZ Gallery, the artist is actually running out of paintings to fuel the growing demand for his work. "I suddenly have two shows at the same time," he says. "I have done some shows in Europe before but this year I'm having more important, solo shows."

Chow creates iconic works that merge mediums – he paints scenes from Hong Kong movies, videos his paintings and makes photographic installations based on Renaissance paintings. "The jump from media to media is what I'm working at," he explains. He is perhaps best known for his paintings of stills of Chinese movies. Rendering the images in thick enamel paint, the subtitles imply themes of Hong Kong's hybrid identity. One painting titled *Fist of Fury, 1991, We are Chinese?* depicts a scene from Stephen Chow's film with a scene of Hong Kong police facing gangsters. "I'm trying to capture Hong Kong from the movies. It shows in all the



The medium master Chow Chun Fai

works. Sometimes I show how Hong Kong is, sometimes how Hong Kong thinks.

It is Chow's recent Renaissance Series that shows the artist's leaping mediums yet further, with impressive results. In *Last Supper* Leonardo Da Vinci's fifteenth century mural is adapted to photographs. Chow has recreated the classic work in a large photographic work with himself figured 13 times. "It is about the position of an artist in his work," suggests Chow. "From time to time artists start to disappear from their work, maybe because of the art market. I wanted to show that the importance of the artist, the creator."

"I'm trying to capture Hong Kong from the movies"

Conversion of Monkey King is an equally captivating work, a reworking of Caravaggio's *The Conversion of St Paul*. Capturing the moment when Levite Saul is struck blind by a brilliant light and falls from his horse hearing Christ's voice – Chow has replaced the horse with a toy horse, and dressed himself as the Monkey King. "Maybe it shows Hong Kong culture," says Chow. "I chose a European classical painting to tell a Chinese story. Yet the Monkey King is also in many Japanese stories. I wanted to show how complicated the origin of knowledge is. There are so many perspectives." ►



The introvert Painter Au Hoi Lam

Au Hoi Lam

Au Hoi Lam is one of the few emerging artists in Hong Kong to be focused exclusively on painting. She is also typical of the trend of Hong Kong artists to be introspective, covering personal themes in contrast to the grand narratives of our mainland contemporaries. Currently nearing her second masters degree, this time in philosophy, the painter explains: "most of my work is not concerned with social issues or politics. It starts from my own little stories and my experiences of everyday life."

Au's early works bordered on pure abstraction: she depicted geometric forms on large works, continually experimenting with the process of making art. She would chip the wood, layer it with playful pastels and polish the final work with sandpaper. In *Chasing the Moon*, named after the day following Mid-Autumn Festival, Au created a grid of masking tape on the wooden base before painting over. "My visual style and composition is always changing," she admits. "I enjoy the experimentation."

Her more recent works have seen her veer towards words and conversations. *When Words Are Sweet*, exhibited at the Central Library last year, was inspired by the *Poem of You and I* written by the Yuen Dynasty poet Guan Daosheng to his wife.

A Poem of You and I: Cellphones includes a transcript of a phone conversation between two people, with fragments of dialogue written onto the works. "People always ask me why I changed my style so dramatically," she says. "Suddenly I want to tell more stories."



Headcase The geometric forms of "Window 05"

Luke Ching Chin Wai

Luke Ching Chin Wai is following in Tozer Pak's footsteps as one of Hong Kong's most active conceptual artists. Ching currently reaches a large audience through his regular column in the Sunday edition of the *Ming Pao* newspaper. The column documents his public artworks in the city and critical essays.

"Most of my work is public," explains Ching. "I don't get permission, I just go there by myself, and also make activities for other people." You might have spotted the artist in early March when he gathered a group of fellow artists to stage a picnic in Times Square's "public space", during the height of the controversy over the hotly disputed area.

"It's an ongoing project to document the cityscape of Hong Kong"

The afternoon was documented in Ching's column along with an advert by the artist promoting a competition encouraging the public to head to Times Square and devise ways to attract large audiences through artworks. One innovative group named FM Theatre Power responded by bring a cast of 100 performers dressed as office workers who stood frozen in the space one afternoon (see hijackpublicspace.wordpress.com).

Ching also delves into photography,



Off the wall The Pinhole Camera project

although by no means in a traditional way. In his stunning ongoing project *Pinhole Camera*, Ching transforms the rooms of buildings into pinhole cameras. "In 1998, a photo gallery asked me to do a photography exhibition but I didn't know how to use a camera," says Ching. So he decided to make one himself. He found rooms in the city and boarded them up to only allow a pinhole of light in. On the opposite wall to the hole he attached photo paper. After processing the paper, the image of the street outside would emerge. Because of the long exposure time required – sometimes up to 24 hours – the images only capture stationary objects. The cityscapes are thus devoid of humans, cars and any type of movement. It is as though the artist is allowing the building to take photos of its neighbours. The meaning is powerful in a city that is rapidly losing its heritage to the developer's wrecking ball. "It's an ongoing project to document the cityscape of Hong Kong," says Ching.



The Thinker Conceptual artist Luke Ching



The Prolific Painter Wilson Shieh is emerging as one of Hong Kong's bestselling artists

Wilson Shieh

Wilson Shieh is arguably Hong Kong's best-selling contemporary artist. His three solo shows in the city since 2001 have completely sold out, and there is a waiting list for his new work. "I always think I'm the lucky one," says the softly spoken artist in his immaculate studio in Fo Tan. "When I started working in this style 14 years ago, I never dreamed I could sell my work and make a living."

Shieh paints in the ancient Chinese *gongbi* (fine brush) technique – an art form that flourished during the Song and Tong dynasties. He learned the technique while studying his Masters of Fine Art at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and has since applied the technique to cutting-edge contemporary themes.

It was these themes, coupled with the exquisite rendering of the ancient technique that caught the attention of collectors in Shieh's first sell-out exhibition at Grotto Fine Art Gallery in 2001. His figurative works

focus on fantastical subjects with subtle historical and political undertones. In 2007, his *Architecture Series* – delicate watercolour and gouache works on white silk – depicted the buildings of the Hong Kong skyline as women. "People often think architecture is masculine," muses the artist. "I studied the buildings and noticed that many of the glass ones became transparent in the evenings. I had the idea of creating dresses out of the buildings."

"I never dreamed I could sell my work and make a living"

Shieh is having a busy year. His works were showcased at the ACRO Lisbon contemporary art fair in February and June sees him taking a two-week residency in Singapore's Print Institute, with more shows scheduled for the UK, Taiwan and Shanghai. "Artists can do their bit working in their studios, but we need help from others in the art field, the galleries and curators," suggests Shieh of the current Hong Kong art scene. "Right now we're lacking curators who can bring our work to an international platform, and galleries who can promote our work."



Bonding buildings The Architecture Series



The sculptor Ceramic artist Fiona Wong

Fiona Wong Lai Ching

Fiona Wong Lai Ching has been quietly making her mark on the ceramics scene in Hong Kong for the past decade, creating intricately crafted large-scale works. "I don't have a clear image of what ceramics should be. I just use it very naturally," says the artist, who teaches at the Hong Kong Art School "Clay to me is a way to make things three dimensional."

A sense of magic permeates Wong's work, which is more ceramic sculpture than pottery. She creates large-scale sculptures that weave porcelain fragments together. In her most recent exhibition, *Earthly Wings* at Grotto Fine Art last year, the artist showcased her medieval-inspired winged costumes. *Blue Wings* is a metre-wide porcelain sculpture, with a remarkable three-dimensional effect created by the pieces being woven together with silver wire. It's reminiscent of traditional Chinese burial suits – ceremonial suits of woven jade that adorned the departed nobles of the Han dynasty. "It was a coincidence," says the artist. "I must have been influenced by it, but the original idea came from problem solving. In ceramic-making people are usually limited by the size of the kiln. I thought about how I could make the size I wanted."

Wong also creates spherical pottery works with miniature figures standing on top. The series was inspired by renowned Hong Kong ceramic artist Ho Siu Kee. *Doppelganger II* is a cylindrical sculpture with two small people standing at either end, looking away from each other. It's an image that Wong relates to as an artist. "In ceramics-making we always split ourselves into two personalities. One is very relaxed and artistic and the other side is very rational. You need to test and analyse the process. I try to strike a balance between these two sides of me."



Flying high Blue Wings