



CALVIN SIT

Invoking spirits The museum is transformed with installations by Kwan Sheung-chi (front) and Wu Shanzhuan (behind)

Looking for Antonio Mak

★★★★★

Hong Kong Museum of Art
Until January 28

Finally, a world-class exhibition at the Museum of Art, writes **Clare Morin**

A paranormal energy has taken a hold of the Museum of Art. In the momentous new exhibition *Looking for Antonio Mak*, guest curator Valerie C Doran has achieved the near-impossible: she has thrust a heady, human spirit into the museum's normally lifeless inner sanctum. Stark, formal galleries have been replaced with a throbbing, commanding exhibition that makes the institution feel like a world-class museum.

This is the third in the *Hong Kong Art: Open Dialogue* exhibition series where guest curators are invited into the institution, to rework the museum's collection and generally shake things up. It is by far the highlight.

Doran is an esteemed Hong Kong-based art critic, curator and translator who has set out to question, locate and explore the art of the late Antonio Mak Hin-yeung. In his relatively short life, the enigmatic Mak emerged as one of city's most talented artists, dying tragically of cancer in 1994 at the age of 43. He is renowned for his

small-scale figurative cast-bronze sculptures, which he meticulously created with the lost-wax method – human torsos, horses and tigers were first crafted in wax, allowing the artist a rare dexterity, and then cast in bronze. Mak was prolific and created a substantial body of work, yet after his death and a retrospective exhibition that was organised at City Hall in 1995, his creations dispersed into private collections around the world, making it nigh-impossible for a new generation to see the artist's body of work. Until now.

Entering the second floor Contemporary Art Gallery, an imposing metal screen stands in the way – cleansing the palate before you enter the show. Behind this physical barrier, Doran has ripped the entire carpet from the gallery floor, revealing raw, paint-flecked concrete reminiscent of an artist's studio. This simple act has a monumental effect, transforming the gallery into an exciting, industrial and unknown space, and giving the first inkling of the show's cunning curatorship. Doran begins with a tribute to the artist, and a chance for audiences to commune directly with Mak. A moon gate leads into a mystical room filled with a core exhibition of 120 of the artist's sculptures, paintings and sketches – a rare selection that has been painstakingly gathered from private collections around the world. The design of the space is reminiscent

of a classical Chinese garden, with a wooden bridge in the centre, a stream of sand acting like the central walkway and, at the rear, a glowing white screen that captures the shadow of Mak's iconic sculpture *Good Morning II*, a sleeping man standing on the tail of a tiger. It is a clever way to focus the minds of the audience, and from here on the exhibition transitions into the highly experimental.

“The glowing white space has a mind-warping effect on the audience”

A black curtain at the back of the room is a portal into the second layer of the show, where Doran has commissioned seven Hong Kong artists, and the Shanghai-based conceptual artist Wu Shanzhuan to create new works in response to those of Mak. Walking through the black curtain (make sure you take a flashlight from the ledge besides the entrance), one is plunged into darkness, and a cave-like space where calligraphic artist Fung Ming-chip has responded to Mak's personal writings by scrawling his own alongside. Contrast is the key throughout, and

from the gloom comes the blinding white of Jaffa Lam Laam's meditation room, which pays tribute to the Buddhist themes in Mak's work. The glowing white space has a mind-warping effect on the audience, while a large bronze horn built into the far wall lends a surreal quality to the proceedings – lean your head in and you can hear an otherworldly humming.

Doran's artist selection shows her rich understanding of the contemporary Hong Kong art scene. These are not all obvious names, yet through their individual reinterpretations they collectively reinvigorate the motifs that drove Mak. Kwan Sheung-chi for example, responds to the political undercurrents the artist showed in the early 1990s, and cleverly appropriates the artists' love of puns in his installation *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*. A blockade of rows of police barriers (which in Cantonese are called ‘iron horse’ barriers) obstructs the audience, as mirrors on both walls stretch them into infinity. It is brilliant, appearing as if the fences have gathered into their own herd. Simon Birch's video installation *one hundred five zero* animates Mak's recurrent tiger motif: he fills a huge darkened room with a four-wall video installation of a Bengal tiger leaping around the space, in a powerful meditation on life.

Throughout *Looking for Antonio Mak*, one moves like this, pulled on a journey through the gallery that Doran has masterfully transformed into an entirely new world. It is her attention to detail that ultimately impresses. To add even more depth to the experience, she commissioned musician Kung Chi-shing to create a subtle sound installation, *430 hours: a short history of the world*, which merges music and verbal sound bites from the 43 years that Antonio Mak lived. The sounds trigger memories, pulling the past tangibly, grippingly, into the present.

There is no doubt that Valerie Doran has successfully located Antonio Mak. Yet the curator has gone much further than this. What makes the exhibition ultimately so moving is the way that Doran has invoked the living, animate spirit of contemporary Hong Kong art into an institution where it has for so long been ignored. It is a triumphant homecoming, and one can only imagine Antonio Mak grinning at the sheer brilliance of it all.