

## Caught on camera

Two major exhibitions reveal the evolution of video art, raising important questions about the medium's local future, writes **Clare Morin**

In an era where you can film your entire life with your iPhone, what is the future of video art? According to Elaine Ng, publisher and editor of *Art Asia Pacific Magazine*, and one of the founders of Hong Kong media art collective Videotage, video has now become one of the leading art forms worldwide.

"Globally, I would say it's one of the dominant mediums," says Ng. "Today, video and technology are so ubiquitous ... for instance, when I look at art in Central Asia, like in Uzbekistan, you see a lot of artists working in video because everyone is familiar [with it]." She adds that the ease with which artists can send and share video online, compared to painting which has to be crated and moved, further adds to its global appeal. "The combination of the language ... and the economics, lends itself to becoming the predominant medium of the 21st century."

Video art hasn't always enjoyed such mainstream appeal. The art form first appeared in the early 1960s, when

**"Before, we needed to work with editors, but now video artists are free to work alone. We are like painters now"**

artists such as the South Korean-born American artist Nam June Paik, and French artist Fred Forest used Sony Portapak cameras to document events and later screen the images. It was very avant-garde – rebellious in the way it veered away from the commercial art market, as video works were very difficult to sell. Not anymore.

"Everything has changed," suggests French pioneer Robert Cahen, whose retrospective *The Sight of Time* opens at City Hall this Thursday. "Before, we needed to work with editors, but now video artists are free to work alone. We



**360 degrees** Date Line by Taiwanese artist Chan Tse-Gin

are like painters now." Cahen comes from an early generation of video artists, and was one of the first to fuse sound with images at Paris' National Video Insitut in the early 1970s. The artist created slow, haunting pieces, which explored memory, perception and the passing of time.

One of the works that made video history was, interestingly enough, shot in Hong Kong in 1989. The 21-minute video *Hong Kong Song*, included in the upcoming retrospective at City Hall, was filmed in an effort to explore "the sonic identity of Hong Kong, its sound and architecture." Opening with the voice of an opera singer in Temple Street, it moves from planes landing at Kai Tak to the city streets to the sampans of Aberdeen, with various layers of images, noises and vibrations. "Sound for me is very important," says Cahen. "I don't use words, so I need to use sound and silence to transmit my ideas."

While Cahen is a purist of the

form, Ellen Pau's current show at the Museum of Art reveals the differing approaches Hong Kong artists have applied to the medium. Pau has bought together 20 new media artists from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Shanghai in *Digit@logue*, which marks the first in the Museum's new "Hong Kong Art: Open Dialogue" series. Here, video is juxtaposed with its digital counterparts spanning robotic, web and computational art. "While Robert Cahen is a poet, the artists in this show are very diverse," explains Pau.

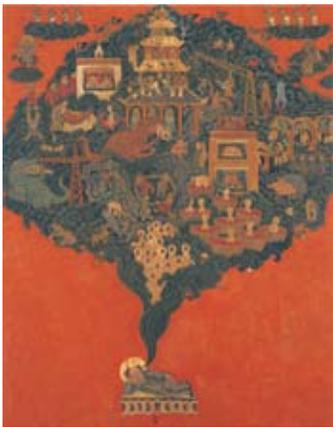
Indeed, video art particularly suits Hong Kong artists, who usually live in cramped conditions, and rarely have spaces big enough to create large paintings or installations. Included in Pau's show are iconic works from the past 25 years, including pieces by Hung Keung, and the 32-channel installation *Video Circle* by Danny Yung (co-founder of experimental theatre company Zuni Icosahedron). Another striking video work is

*Dateline* by Taiwanese artist Chan Tse-Gin, who shot a panorama of Causeway Bay over 24 hours, creating a 360-degree collage that is projected in a large circular room, allowing viewers to see the past, present and future at once.

In terms of today's Hong Kong video art scene, Pau suggests that despite being the one of the gadget capitals of the world, our artists are lacking in critical thinking. Pointing to most of the entries in the annual IFVA Festival (Independent Film and Video Awards), she feels many of the works are more like films with strong narratives. "They are not really fine art. It's more like broadcast or entertainment media," she says. "Our artists should ask more critical questions about the media itself. What is technology saying to us?" *The Sight of Time*, City Hall Exhibition Hall, Thu 22-Tue 3. *Digit@logue*, Hong Kong Museum of Art, until Jul 20.

## Previews

### Mushroom Cloud



Modern Tibet My Father's Nightmare

Plum Blossoms Gallery  
Opens Fri 23

Cosmic timing appears to be behind the arrival in Hong Kong of one of Tibet's most interesting new artists. However, amidst the recent controversy, Plum Blossoms' managing director Stephen McGuinness is keen to keep politics and art separate with *Mushroom Cloud*. "The coincidence with the recent Tibetan upheavals has served to confuse our audience [about] the timing," agrees McGuinness, who has been planning the show since 2006.

The art is certainly striking. Gade (who like many Tibetans is known by one singular name) creates what appear at first to be *thangka* (religious scrolls that were commonly rolled up and transported between monasteries. In Tibetan *thang* means flat, and *ka* painting), but closer analysis reveals Mickey Mouse, Charlie Chaplin, McDonalds and martial-arts iconography lurking within. "We still don't know where our spiritual homeland is – New York, Beijing or Lhasa," writes the artist in his statement. "We wear jeans and T-shirts, and it is only when we drink a Budweiser that we occasionally talk about 'Buddhahood'".

Gade's work is representative of a new artistic movement within Tibet. Having trained at Beijing's Central Fine Art Academy, the artist returned home to lecture at the Fine Arts School of Tibet University, subsequently helping to found Lhasa's pioneering arts collective, the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild.

McGuinness first met the group three years ago, after hearing reports of a new arts movement emerging in Lhasa. "The Tibetan struggle to make sense of their world ... gives it a great deal of source material to draw upon," he says. "The artists are young and well educated, and their art has crossed beyond their own borders."

Clare Morin

### Gao Xingjian Arts Festival

Various locations  
Thur 22-Jun 11

This month, local audiences are being given the opportunity to peer into the mind of one of China's most multitalented artists, Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian. The Gao Xingjian Arts Festival ([www.gxjartsfest2008.com](http://www.gxjartsfest2008.com)), co-organised by the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the French Consulate and Le French May, presents the French-based artist in all of his myriad roles – author of novels *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible*, playwright, poet and painter. The festival includes film screenings, lectures, a world premiere of Gao's play *Of Mountains and Seas* and an exhibition of 25 new paintings.

Alice King, who is one of Hong Kong's strongest advocates of ink painting, has been representing Gao at Alisan Fine Arts since 1996. "His paintings are neither figurative nor abstract," she says. "They are cerebral and spiritual. Looking at them takes you to another world." King feels Gao's paintings are his most personal medium. "He doesn't paint for a market. He's not trying to please anyone."

The fascinating inner world that radiates throughout Gao's work will be the subject of a public lecture held

by the artist himself at The Chinese University of Hong Kong on Friday 23 (in Mandarin only). Taking the myriad frameworks that he works within – from the language in literature, to the actors in a drama performance – Gao will explain his theory that the secret to artistic creation lies in first accepting ones limitations, and then diving into the art form in search of the infinite. For an artist who has masterfully straddled so many artistic disciplines, he would be a wise soul to listen to.

Clare Morin



Introvert The Waiting

## Review

### Roland Fischer

★★★★★  
Goethe Gallery Until June 7

What does architecture have to do with portraits? You'd be forgiven for asking this at the Goethe Gallery's new exhibition, which features photographs from Roland Fischer's *Façade* and *Chinese Pool Portraits* series. At first glance, exteriors of global skyscrapers may not appear to share a lot in common with large-format head shots of young Chinese women in swimming pools, but under the Munich-based artist's pictorial gaze, it becomes clear that the two are united by parallel principles: first, a rigorous formal aesthetic, and second, a clinical spirit of inquiry which compels viewers to question the boundaries of reality.

Unlike fellow contemporary German photographers Andreas Gursky and Candida Hofer, who also bring a detached, formalist vision to their work, Fischer takes no interest in documentation. A row of large, gleaming architectural photographs dominates the show, yet it's almost impossible to tell what you're looking at. Here, geometry rules: these images reduce buildings to two-dimensional graphic planes, recalling the abstract modernist paintings of Piet Mondrian



Lady of the lake Chinese Pool Series

or Barnett Newman more than the materiality of concrete and metal.

Literally face to face with the architecture shots – they're hung on opposing walls, and blown up to roughly the same size – Fischer's lush pool pictures confront us, head on, with equally impenetrable facades. Youthful, impeccably groomed Chinese females emerge from the shoulders up in monochrome fields of cerulean water, but their identities are coyly concealed by their unyieldingly uniform packaging; the photographer offers no hint who they are as people. This refusal to engage verges on visual tyranny, but therein lies Fischer's power as an artist. Reading his images is like coming up against a brick wall – a hard, irresistibly hypnotic one.

Lara Day

### Eye spy Thou art GOD

Art is starting to infiltrate Hong Kong's fashion stores. Diesel kicked off the trend last October with their Diesel Brave art parties, which brought über-cool contemporary artists to an abandoned exhibition space opposite Harvey Nichols in Central. In March, Chanel took things high brow with the colossal, Zaha Hadid-designed, Mobile Art Container. Is this part of a new trend?

I discussed the concept with Davena Mok, founder of the A-Vibe PR consultancy who is involved in the upcoming Art On Foam exhibition at a Quiksilver "guerilla gallery" in Central. "In general, art itself is becoming part of mainstream culture," suggests Mok. "For most brands ... doing events now, they're bringing in artists. It's definitely happened in the past eight months."

But the biggest and perhaps

boldest move lies around the corner from Sogo in Causeway Bay, where Douglas Young, founder of GOD, has devoted 20,000 square feet of the first floor of his Delay No Mall to Hong Kong artists. Local arts and design groups such as tagging crew Graffiti Airlines have already moved in. "I want this to be a showcase of design activity in Hong Kong," said Young, as he gave me a tour of the enormous space, adding that his ambition is to make art more accessible to Hongkongers. "It's a great opportunity for art to be right in the heart of the city, and I want to present it in a way that is like shopping. Hong Kong people are adverse to pristine white boxes. They want the shopping experience, where you can touch, feel and chat, make a noise and buy the art."

Clare Morin

Board artist Jean Linnhoff

