

THE POWER PLANT

Howie Tsui: *From swelling shadows, we draw our bows*

Curator: Justine Kohleal

The Power Plant presents Vancouver-based artist Howie Tsui's first institutional solo exhibition in Toronto. Growing up between Hong Kong, Lagos, and Thunder Bay, Tsui has described his childhood and adolescence as existing on the threshold of Chinese and Colonial culture. His artworks, however, have long displayed strong connections to Hongkongese aesthetics. Upon revisiting the city in 2010, Tsui recognized its unique spatial qualities within his work: "my obsessions with windows and reflective surfaces, density, dynamism, kinetic energy, movement, maximalism... in Hong Kong all my nostalgic synapses were firing." His blending of classical and contemporary Chinese art, particularly wuxia—a popular form of martial arts literature that emerged in China during the mid-20th century, and which advocates for resistance and dissidence—with Western popular culture has resulted in a series of works that examine the complexities of the diasporic experience while simultaneously questioning official Chinese culture.

From swelling shadows, we draw our bows takes as its starting point Tsui's seminal work *Retainers of Anarchy* (2017), a five-channel algorithmic animation comprised of hundreds of hand-painted ink drawings. This seminal work was conceived by the artist as a response to the animated scroll *River of Wisdom* (2010)—a Chinese government-sanctioned version of the famous Song Dynasty painting *Along The River During the Qingming Festival* (1085-1145)—created for the Chinese Pavilion at the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. *River of Wisdom's* spectacular presentation, however, obfuscated many of the harsh realities of living in China, past and present; the work's romanticized depiction of the Song Dynasty, with its idyllic marketplace setting emphasizing order, harmony, and prosperity, created a visual link between the current regime and China's Golden Age, effectively negating decades of civil unrest and state-sponsored oppression, particularly within Tsui's birth city of Hong Kong.

Retainers of Anarchy challenges this restructuring of Chinese history and visual culture by introducing wuxia-style characters and shifting the setting from a meandering river in the countryside to the Kowloon Walled City (1898–1994), a densely populated tenement located on the fringes of British-occupied Hong Kong. At its peak, it housed upwards of 50,000 people within its 2.6-hectare borders. Characterized by an impenetrable mass of apartment complexes stacked precariously on top of one another, tangled passageways, and exposed wires, the Walled City gained an almost

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mythic reputation before it was demolished in 1994. Rarely patrolled by law enforcement, it operated largely outside of the official British or Chinese judicial systems, making it a fertile breeding ground for illegal business activities, from doctors and dentists to gangs, sex workers, and opium dens. In spite of this, many tenants remember their time living within its borders fondly, perhaps because its liminal position within Chinese society represented a kind of freedom from both the British and Chinese regimes. Tsui places the crux of the action in *Retainers of Anarchy* inside the Kowloon Walled City, which is further embedded into the background of Italian Jesuit painter Giuseppe Castiglione's court painting *One Hundred Horses* (1723-25), a nod to China's and Europe's entangled past and present.

The single-channel animation, *Parallax Chambers* (2018-ongoing) features many of the same characters as *Retainers of Anarchy*, but emanates a much more claustrophobic feeling. Instead of surveying the entire Kowloon Walled City and its surrounding (fictional) landscape, *Parallax Chambers* focuses on individual rooms within the complex. By definition, parallax refers to shifting points of view, or how an object can be perceived differently depending on the angle in which it is seen—a kind of optical illusion. In *Parallax Chambers*, wuxia and Hong Kong's struggle for political and cultural autonomy exist side-by-side, in parallel, while also colliding in intimate and visceral ways. Tsui has said about the work: "where once [in *Retainers of Anarchy*] there was room for some dark humour, the situation in Hong Kong has become much more dire. This mounting anxiety around the suppression of voice and thought is reflected in the work."

Both *Parallax Chambers* and *Retainers of Anarchy* oscillate between the past and the present, reality and fantasy, and the literary and visual fields, establishing spaces, characters, and scenes that repeat in different configurations. This may be described as modular, with standardized components, or modules, that combined create a more complex whole and can lead to mass-production. In Chinese culture, modularity in painting, sculpture, architecture, porcelain, and other applied arts is rooted in Chinese script, a system with more than 100,000 characters configured from just 200 individual brush strokes. Therefore, it has been suggested that modularity has been perfected in China.

Tsui's works draw from this tradition at the same time that they disrupt it. Embedded within the software for *Retainers of Anarchy* and *Parallax Chambers* are "sprites," modular units common in game design that assist in generating looped animations. Both films also employ standardized individuals, objects, and settings, all of which are designed to be placed in any number of different configurations. However, these

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works' different components combine to create a sort of chaos, as this repeating cast of characters and spaces are reconfigured at random to form narratives without a clear beginning or end. In Tsui's hands, modularity becomes a subversive tool that, like the Kowloon Walled City, defies order and sameness.

Tsui's version of Hong Kong is, at times, nightmarish, full of violence and permeated with a sense of hopelessness as the characters struggle to survive the horrors that befall them. But in the shadows—liminal spaces, like the Kowloon Walled City, or as members of the diaspora shift between cultures—exist the tools to fight against injustice, untruths, and fear.