

Paul Wong: Private/Public/Lives

Curated by Anushka Rajendran

Private/Public/Lives is an exhibition that identifies a strand of ideas that have consistently informed artist-provocateur Paul Wong's practice. The selection of recent public art projects presented here, edited and reformatted for gallery viewing, has also been an exercise in unraveling the associations and relational dialogues that emerge when these works are viewed together in a single space.

From early, iconic works such as *60 Unit: Bruise* (1976) to his ongoing project *Occupying Chinatown* (on view here), the artist has foregrounded the personal as political. The ostensibly simple, yet radically vulnerable gesture of making public the private transgressions and encounters of his body/identity has also been a process of queering histories and spaces by exposing what is conventionally marginalized and hidden in the recesses of the everyday. His practice makes obvious that what is considered 'invisible', is in fact a refusal to render visible what is in plain sight. This liminal, overlapping relationship between the intimate and the open is made more complex in the work *Year of GIF*. For the course of one year, the artist engaged in spontaneously documenting and making GIFs of what he encountered around him — photographs, shapes, objects, news stories, and self-reflexive traces of his own process of engaging with the visual medium. Speaking through a format generated on a smartphone for a public that will consume it via isolated interfaces, *Year of GIF* comments on the conundrum of the age of the social media — where private is public — as perhaps taking a toxic turn through an excess of the possibility of 'anonymous', wide, address.

Paul Wong's interests in cutting edge, inter-disciplinary media as well as traditional media and public space, are also indicative of an interest in language, and the semantic possibilities of various forms of engagement. In *Five Octave Range*, the artist asserts the universal resonance and appeal of the opera, despite it being limited by access and language. As part of *Occupying Chinatown*, despite not speaking the language the letters are written in, Wong worked with a translator to decipher the 700 letters written to his mother from various sources in China. Wong exhibited intimate traces of his Chinese heritage on transit shelters across Vancouver to challenge and celebrate a reality that has been pushed to the margins by historical discrimination. Such everyday records also become material in *Mother's Cupboard*, where he

photographed his mother's unconscious rewriting of signifiers of mainstream patterns of production and consumption such as jars of mayonnaise and instant coffee by relabeling and refilling them with Chinese herbs and homemade medicines. His installations of these photographs of a quotidian habit in public spaces perform reclamation of disappearing histories.

ON SUNBOARD



Year of GIF

Video mapping projection, 5-minute loop, no sound
2013

(Commissioned by Surrey Art Gallery, BC, Canada, for Urban Screen located at the Chuck Bailey Recreation Centre)

The everyday is captured in a series of GIFs. Over 350 Graphic Interchange Format files are mashed together in this visual party. Drawing from an archive of hundreds of smart phone GIFs made by the artist over a year, this new work commissioned for Surrey Urban Screen (SUS) functions like a mosaic of virtual flipbooks simultaneously exploring themes of new media, the RGB colour model, colour bar test patterns, the formal shape of the circle, architecture, art, and portraits of family and friends. This is the largest GIF-art in the world at 120' X 35' installed at Surrey Urban Screen. SUS is located on the west wall of the Chuck Bailey Recreation Centre and was viewable from the SkyTrain (public transit train system) between Gateway and Surrey Central stations and operated 30 minutes after sundown until midnight daily. By taking the format of the GIF, primarily engaged through private interfaces connected to the web, into a public space, Paul Wong questions the politics of the Internet, and the liminal public/private identities that lie at its locus. The aggregate of popular, yet intimately encountered GIFs in the work, acquires a different meaning altogether, at an expansive scale.



Five Octave Range

Four channel video installation, non-synced loops, sound
2017

From left to right features singers: Marion, Maria, Fred, and Taiya.

(Commissioned by Vancouver Opera for the 2017 Vancouver Opera Festival)

This was a site-specific installation created for the Queen Elizabeth Theatre Plaza from April 27 to May 14, 2017 featuring four performers with diverse octave ranges: a baritone, tenor, coloratura soprano, and a mezzo singer were asked to demonstrate their skills for the camera. The selection of performers was a deliberate choice of professional singers from diverse ethnic backgrounds and who also identify as queer. A primarily elitist form, the opera has a strange affect that is able to transcend its own exclusivity. Paul Wong's experiments with opera plays on the form's affect, digitally exaggerating and manipulating its overwhelming quality for a public space, where it can be accessed by all — the seasoned opera goer, and non-traditional audiences. Art really is more democratic than the circuit it often traverses.



媽媽的藥櫃/Mother's Cupboard

Archival inkjet prints on paper

24 x 36 inches

2018

(Commissioned by the City of Vancouver's Public Art Program in partnership with Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden)

This is a series of photographs of a collection of Chinese herbs and medicines, stored inside empty mayonnaise and instant coffee jars by the artist's mother Suk Fong. The collection includes "hak dew", a homemade compound that has no written recipe used for healing cuts and bruises. Research has helped Wong identify that its various ingredients can be found at herbal stores in Vancouver's Chinatown even today. This project is part of Wong's year-long residency: 身在唐人街/Occupying Chinatown and is featured in transit shelters across Vancouver from 22 October, 2018 to 14 January, 2019. It will lead into 身在唐人街/Occupying Chinatown's exhibition, 'Suk Fong Nay Ho Mah?' at the Dr. SYS Classical Chinese Garden opening on 12 January, 2019. The launch of the residency on April 2018 coincided with the City of Vancouver's formal apology for the historical discrimination against Chinese residents. Immigrant and minority identities often reside in oral traditions quietly passed on from generation to generation. This project reinforces the presence of traditional wisdom that often remains bashfully hidden in dark cupboards in the face of more dominant cultural forces.

父字/Father's Words

Archival inkjet prints on paper

24 x 36 inches

2018

(Commissioned by the City of Vancouver's Public Art Program in partnership with Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden)

This triptych shows three letters written by Suk Fong's father in China to her. From among only 16 letters between his Grandfather and Mother, Wong creates prints of the first correspondence on 1964, August 24 (title of the first print as well), then on the letter for 1971, December 29, and on Fong's father's final letter in 1973, June 22. 父字/Father's Words will also be featured in 身在唐人街/Occupying Chinatown's exhibition 'Suk Fong Nay Ho Mah?' at the Dr. SYS Classical Chinese Garden opening on January 12th, 2019. During China's Land Reformation period in the 1950s, Suk Fong's father was declared a rightist and sent to a labour camp. The letters' careful wording and construction can be attributed to the writer's desire to be cautious of the scrutiny of China's censoring of mail going overseas. This work is indicative of the interconnectedness between the personal and the political. These letters are probably as telling of a chapter in our history as official accounts on the matter. When viewed tangentially with Year of GIF, it also becomes an embodiment of surveillance and censorship, and the ways in which it looms over the personal.

身在唐人街/Occupying Chinatown
April 2018 – Ongoing

(Commissioned by the City of Vancouver's Public Art Program in partnership with Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden)

Paul Wong's 身在唐人街/Occupying Chinatown is a year-long residency and public art project commissioned by the City of Vancouver Public Art Program in partnership with the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden. The launch of the residency on April 2018 coincided with the City of Vancouver's formal apology for the historical discrimination against Chinese residents. Wong is creating a series of multidisciplinary artworks based on 700 letters in Chinese sent by 90 writers to his mother Suk Fong Wong from 1946 to 2016. The residency has included, and will continue to include: exhibitions, screenings, collaborations with other artists, workshops, performances, events, a website, and a book. This study of personal letters makes public revisions to histories that have for long been overlooked, if not silenced.