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EVERYTHING

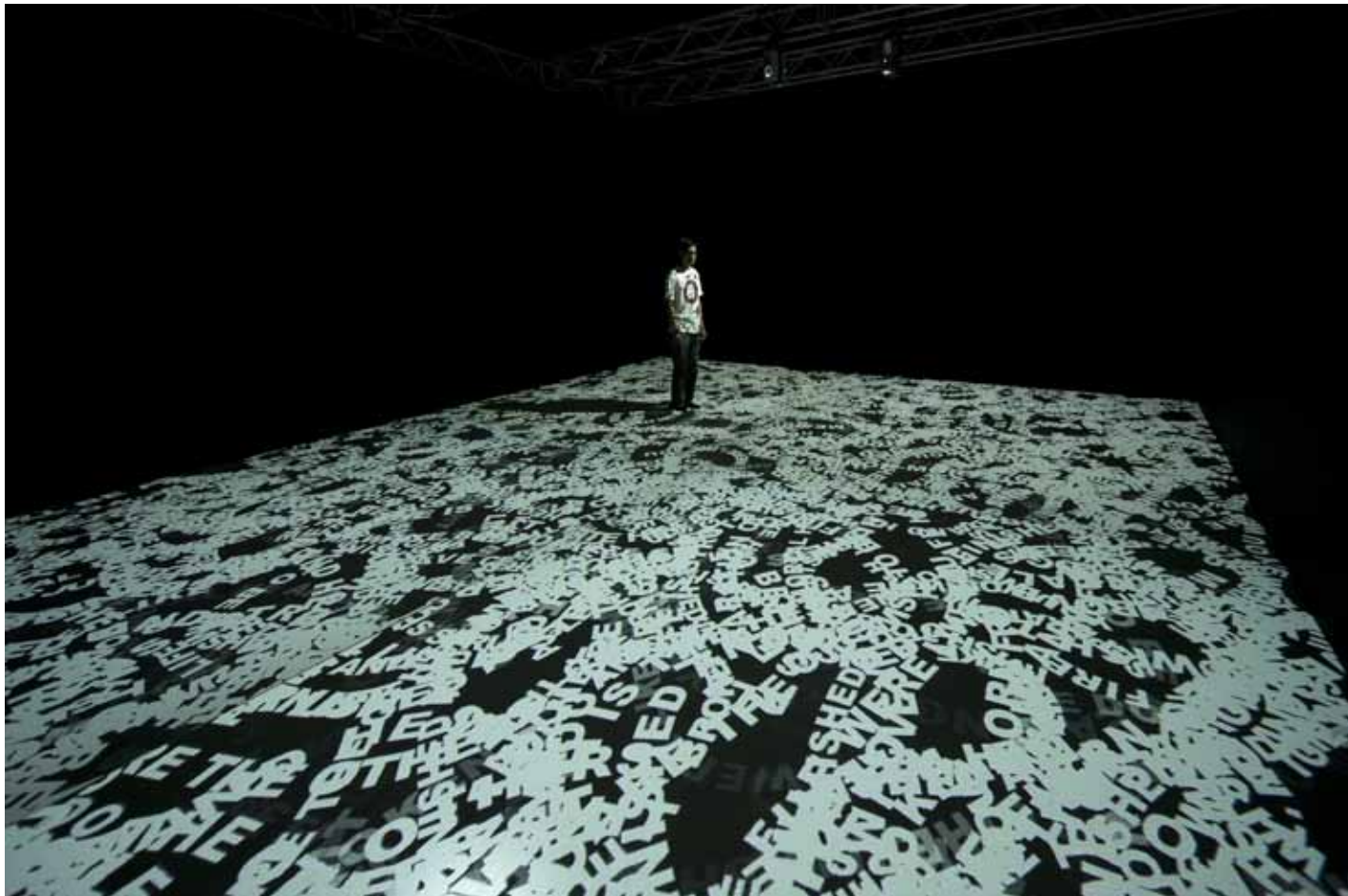
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A ROOM WITH A VIEW

Images: Courtesy of Tsang Kin-Wah

He may look innocent but there's a tempest brewing beneath. Like his installations, there is more to Tsang Kin-Wah than meets the eye. One of Hong Kong's most sought after artists opens up to FRAMED about sex, religion and those disturbing floral prints.



Tsang Kin-Wah, *The Fourth Seal - HE Is To No Purpose And HE Wants To Die For The Second Time*, Aichi Triennale, Aichi Arts Center, Nagoya 2010

Imagine yourself standing in a room surrounded by delicate floral wallpaper. You step closer to look at the patterns but recoil in shock. What appeared to be leaves and petals are actually swear words compressed, curved and elongated. From ceiling to floor, every inch of space is covered with spiralling obscenities.

Hong Kong-based artist Tsang Kin-Wah executed this installation, *Interior*, in 2003. He had recently moved to London to study Book Arts and was struggling to adapt. “I was quite angry. I felt a certain dislike and I didn’t belong,” says Tsang who remembers being verbally attacked on the street. It was his first time travelling to a foreign country and he was shocked to encounter racism. “People were nice and polite, but after maybe thirty minutes, I realised the real meaning,” he muses.

By placing viewers inside a beautiful yet hostile environment, Tsang sought to create a similar situation in his art. His wallpaper was inspired by the quintessentially English designs of William Morris, a founder of the 19th Century Arts and Crafts movement. Meanwhile, the foul language was an outpouring of his sentiments against the country with phrases

including: “FUCKALLTHESWEETWORDS”, “FUCKINGFAKE” and “FUCKINGSELF-CONFIDENT.”

When we meet in his Fotan studio, the same angry text envelops the coffee table in front of him. Tsang smiles shyly and confesses, “I had some extra pieces [from the installation] and the table didn’t look very nice.” His blue Nike t-shirt is paint-spattered and three freshly painted canvases with similar floral motifs lie on the floor next to him. Tsang tells me they are commissions from collectors.

After completing his Master’s degree at the London Institute’s Camberwell College of Arts, Tsang quickly shot to fame. Upon returning to Hong Kong, his text paintings caught the attention of the Sovereign Art Foundation and he won their Asian Art Prize in 2005. Later that year he had his first major solo exhibition in the city at John Batten Gallery. It wasn’t long before his works were popping up in New York, Oslo, Miami and Paris. Despite his limited presence in the local art scene, he became one of Hong Kong’s most sought after artists.

Today, he is best known for his meticulous silk-screen paintings that evolved from his *Interior*

installation in England. Of his wallpaper-styled works, Tsang says, “It’s not just in London but also in other places, you really don’t know what people are thinking. There is always a conflict between the first impression and the so-called real thing behind it.”

Tsang himself proves that appearances can be deceiving. Behind his thick-framed glasses, the 34 year-old artist comes across as subdued, mild-mannered, even childlike. Yet as he leans back against the wall, I notice a large white canvas above him. It looks like a plain surface at first but when the light shifts, white thread-like brushstrokes become visible. It is an explicit porn scene, a sharp reminder that Tsang is anything but innocent. This was one of many pornographic images he culled from the Internet in 2008 while exploring social norms relating to sexuality.

“A lot of people [in Hong Kong] think about sex all the time or find prostitutes but you just don’t talk about that and always try to behave like a gentleman,” he says wryly. Tsang began his series of *White Porn* paintings to reflect this conservative attitude and the stigma surrounding sex. Creating subtle works with white paint, he interrogated ideas of purity and filth. “Some people think [sex] is very dirty but actually most of them like it, even people from the church. It’s a basic

thing. It’s human instinct and it can be quite pure if you love someone,” he muses.

The year 2008 was a significant period of growth for the artist, who not only began experimenting with new subject matter but also refined his wallpaper works. “I started to think that my pattern installations felt like they were frozen at a certain point of time. I could feel there was something I should do to make them come alive,” says Tsang. Gradually, sound began to play a more prominent role in his works. “I found that there was some kind of atmosphere or tension that I could get.” Using soundscapes, he amplified the effect of his painted words and drew viewers deeper into his writing.

By 2009, Tsang ventured into the terrain of video art adding yet another dimension to his work. His first video installation was titled *The First Seal - It Would Be Better If You Have Never Been Born*. He set up a small black room and projected white text onto the ceiling. The work began innocently with words like “THE NIGHT”, “THE KISS”, “THE SOUL”, moving in straight lines with quiet, bell-like sounds. Gradually, the tone of the work shifted. Words became sentences, sounds grew louder and viewers were suddenly implicated in the text. Accusatory sentences



Tsang Kin-Wah, *The First Seal*, 17th Biennale of Sydney, Cockatoo Island, Sydney, 2010



Tsang Kin-Wah, *Interior*, Silkscreen and acrylic on paper, 2003

“YOU REALLY DON’T KNOW WHAT PEOPLE ARE THINKING. THERE IS ALWAYS A CONFLICT BETWEEN THE FIRST IMPRESSION AND THE SO-CALLED REAL THING BEHIND IT.”

began snaking across the walls like “YOUR ENVY AND YOUR HATRED”, “YOUR LUST”, and “FINISH YOUR FUCKING LIFE”. Moving faster, overlapping and coiling into organic shapes, the letters took on a life of their own. Eventually the text disappeared and only two beams of white light remained forming a cross before the video looped back to the beginning.

The idea for this work arose while Tsang was passing through a depressive phase. “I had a bad time. I was trying to review or revisit what I used to believe,” he says. Although he was raised in a Buddhist and Taoist household, Tsang was unwittingly converted to Christianity in secondary school. Confused and fearful of his parents’ reaction, he kept his new religion a secret for several years.

As he grew older, Tsang slowly distanced himself from the Christian belief system, realising that he never truly identified with the religion. Yet the ideas instilled in him as a boy remain etched deeply in his mind. Feeling slightly lost, he turned to various texts on theology, existentialism and metaphysics.

While mulling over morality and the meaning of life, the Seven Seals – a list of apocalyptic prophecies from the Bible – suddenly resurfaced in his memory. Issues such as war, revolution, suicide and self-denial also entered his mind. Tsang decided to mimic the process of a belief system collapsing in his video. The choice of words



Tsang Kin-Wah working



Tsang Kin-Wah working

and chaotic streams of text suggest the breakdown of ideologies in Tsang’s own mind.

After the first video work, Tsang decided to move onto the next seal. He unveiled *The Second Seal - Every Being That Opposes Progress Should Be Food For You* at the 10th Biennale de Lyon in France. Set in a larger space, this installation started with red sentences slinking slowly down the wall, like caterpillars or dripping liquid. As they hit the bottom, the words rose up and began moving in waves across the bottom. Eventually new phrases arrived with more urgency creating a waterfall of red words cascading down the walls. In the background sounds of water quickly intensified. Finally, the words were blown up in size and ominously drenched the walls in red before the sequence repeated.

As *The First Seal* and *The Second Seal* suggest, each of Tsang’s works is vociferous. It comes as no surprise then that he is a man of few words. Allowing his works to speak for themselves, Tsang is something of a recluse. Although he orbits the same circles as prominent local artists such as Pak Sheung Chuen, Lee Kit, and Chow Chun Fai, Tsang rarely emerges into the public eye. Instead, he prefers his own company, often burrowing himself in his work

for days on end (there’s a small bed in the back of his studio).

It took some persuasion for Tsang to even agree to this meeting, as he had been preoccupied with his exhibition at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo opening 17 September. One of his most significant shows yet, *The Fifth Seal*, will be shown in a dark room of about 6 by 11 metres in the museum. He plans to follow a similar format to the previous seals where the text and sound gradually build to a climax. “Most of my video works and installations are very heavy and negative in some way. That is something that I am trying to express or what I believe,” explains Tsang who insists that he is a pessimist.

Given his track record, the subject matter of his next work comes as no surprise. Tsang tells me he’s been busy scouring videos on YouTube for executions of politicians. Now that he is focusing on state sanctioned murder, I ask if he’s finished with the swearing. Tsang grins and replies, “Visually, [the executions] are different, but there is still a certain language to it.”