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The essence of Hong Kong

What happens when two languages collide? In the SAR, the result is an oral cultural artifact that some believe should be preserved, writes Julia Tanski

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Chinglish, the new exhibition at the Hong Kong Art Museum, gives visual force to the phrase "you are what you speak." Six local artists, chosen by curator Eve Tam have defined Hong Kong's communal language as Chinglish, a mixture of English and Chinese, but more than that, as the essence of their city's identity. To this effect, ceramic, video, digital, and installation art come together in this thought-provoking show.

Both before and after Hong Kong's handover from the British to the Chinese in 1997, this city has struggled to find its own identity. One of its strongest components has always been there and is only getting stronger - the language that Hongkongers speak.

Cantonese mixed with English words, mixed with different Chinese languages and dialects, make for a colorful and often untranslatable lingo. It took a group of contemporary local artists to dig into the complexity behind this social pillar.

Chinglish, the starting point for the exhibition, was first the title of a computer-produced work from 1999 by Blue Puk Yuk-chun, which used translated text to demonstrate that Hongkongese is neither Chinese nor English. The artist uses red punctuation marks from traditional Chinese literature, traditional Chinese and smeared English words to give an idea of how locals incorporate English words - sometimes phonetically - to their spoken language. The overall effect and the technique point to the artist's design background.

Using words as a design motif is at the core of Tsang Kin-wah's installation work *Untitled Hong Kong* (2003-2005). Appearances are deceiving when first entering this room where the walls, floors and ceiling are completely covered with a spiraling, arabesque pattern. While the mixture of 19th century William Morris Arts and Crafts florals and Chinese blue-and-white design brings the eye closer to the motif, the bold text repulses it; his often foul language presents the conflicts that exist between the Hong Kong Chinese population and mainlanders. While the print seems to be industrially produced, Tsang actually does it all by hand.

The ideas of beauty and ugliness, traditional and modern, pre-colonial and colonial, pre-industrial and industrial are debated within this work.

Also done by hand are Rosanna Li Wei-han's two series of ceramic figurines, entitled *Man Wanted: Work Within the Words (Partial)* (2003) and *Man, I Wish I Knew How to Quit You (partial)* (2006). Modeled by hand, the 30-40centimeter-high figurative sculptures have round bodies and sweet faces, derived from the funeral statuary from the Han and Tang Dynasties. They also have a Nikki de Saint-

Phalle poignant humor to them. Born and raised in Hong Kong, her bilingual English- Cantonese education inspired her to become obsessed by the translations of characters into phonetic sounds which she would then give English meanings to. The jumble in her head became clear with these pieces which act out words. Starting with the word "man" and declining the words in which it appears, such as "manuscript" or "manure," her individual conception of these words become visual translations.

Luke Ching Chin-wah has no lack of humor, either. His work derives from his experiences in teaching Cantonese to foreigners. Stemming from the premise that the Cantonese language deserves to be preserved and the only way to do this is by passing it on to others, he developed a language center in New York. He videos his students pronouncing charged phrases. I Love You (2002) is a video screen of identity photo size images of people pronouncing the words in Cantonese, in turn. Another of the four video installation works in the show by Ching has foreigners repeating "sorry," as he believes that the more we pronounce this word, the more world conflicts will be resolved. The fact that these works are shown in the museum protects them for future generations. It's a way of mummifying them, which is vital to Ching's general language-based artistic conception.

Protection and preservation of language is also a starting point for Hung Keung and imhk lab's Bloated City / Skinny Language (version II) (2007). A whole room is dedicated to this installation where two screens are projected on to one of its walls. The person in front of the screen attracts the black marks and they come to life, virtually assembling around the arms or legs. Like Fantasia's magician, the exhibition visitor determines the flow of these sticks which become Chinese characters. Hung's idea stems from the complexity of traditional and simplified Chinese writing. 2008 will mark the abolition of the traditional characters and Hung wants to preserve this aspect of our collective memory, using advanced computer programs.

Making text appear in a technologically advanced way, but in a traditional Chinese format is the basis for Wong Chung-yu's work, Spiritual Water. As one of two computer- generated pieces, Wong uses a pen and ink landscape drawing as a background for the interactive center. Once you touch it, the sacred 8 fish form within a rippling pond, only to have calligraphy then appear and disappear in a simulated ink-wash effect. Advanced heat- sensory technology that Wong masters being a computer engineer is fused with this symbolic concept. His work plays on tradition, words, and their creative realization in a world where it seems nothing is impossible with a computer.

Wong and Ching are perhaps the least internationally seen of the artists, as Hung Keung has participated in international exhibitions in Paris, Shanghai and Sydney. Li's work is in prominent collections within the region, including the Heritage Museum and the Guangdong Museum of Art. Tsang kin- wah's work has already been shown in Tokyo, Moscow and Melbourne and he is already something of a local art pop- star. These artists deserve the international acclaim they are getting and this exhibition is a great way of answering the lingering question "are there any local contemporary artists worth following?"