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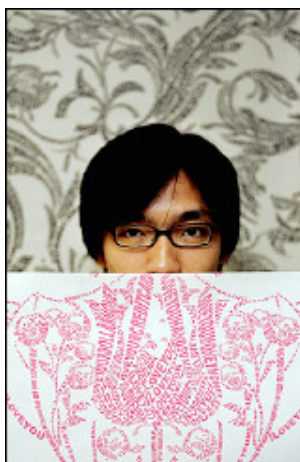
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## CENSORSHIP FEARS AS HONG KONG'S ART WORLD IS FORCED TO GO SHOPPING

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*Tsang Kin-wah's controversial art has raised eyebrows in Hong Kong, with its arrangement of often profane and offensive words in deceptively pleasant patterns.*



*Tsang Kin-wah shows some of his often profane and offensive silk screens*  
© AFP/File Mike Clarke

HONG KONG (AFP) - But one of the quiet 28-year old's silk-screen prints has just earned itself the dubious distinction of being among a crop of victims in what many fear may herald a new era of censorship in the Chinese territory's art world.

Tsang's untitled piece was banned by the owners of a shopping mall that staged an exhibition he was invited to join.

The company claimed the text in his piece could have been offensive to mall shoppers who would have made up the exhibition's audience.

It comes amid renewed concern for freedom of expression in the former British colony following the sacking of an outspoken China-baiting radio talkshow last week.

Artist Tsang's case was different; he fell foul of commercial, rather than political, sensibilities.

But with a paucity of purpose-built art spaces here and more shows being held in the city's countless shopping centres, art experts warn commercial considerations will become increasingly more important when staging future exhibitions.

"The more you rely on commercial spaces to stage exhibitions the more art is going to be subjected to tests of commercial suitability -- and that means potentially more censorship," says Howard Bilton, chairman of the Sovereign Arts Foundation, which awards an annual prize to up and coming Asian artists and which was this year won by Tsang.

Tsang's painting was excluded from an exhibition being held in Langham Place, a mighty luxury hotel and shopping complex built as

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part of an expensive effort to gentrify the seedy red-light district of Mong Kok in the Kowloon area.

"I was okay with Kin-wah's piece, it was the company that felt it may not have been suitable -- I suppose they were worried children would see it," says artist Simon Birch, who curated the Langham Place show.

The painting -- with words arranged in the pattern of a flower -- includes the Chinese slang words for prostitute, plus English words such as "sex" and obscenities including "fuck" and "bastard".

Tsang is sanguine about his painting's stigmatisation.

"They didn't like the use of the word prostitute," says the artist, a pale, thin man who lives at home with his family because he cannot afford his own home or studio in expensive Hong Kong.

"I suppose they didn't want to be reminded of what the neighbourhood is really like," he jokes.

The censorship of Tsang's painting has stunned Hong Kong's art world, however, which has long enjoyed a very liberal-minded audience, despite the city's conservatism in every other walk of life.

"A thing to remember about this place is that it is incredibly open-minded when it comes to art -- it has none of those pre-conditioned sensibilities about religion or politics like in the West," says prominent gallery owner John Batten. "You can get away with more here -- even if it is part of China."

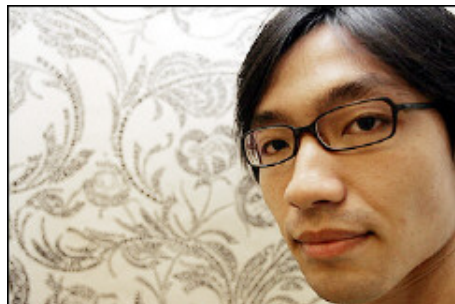
-- More resources needed --

Malls and shopping districts have become popular stages for the arts in Hong Kong in the past couple of years due to a lack of government funding for exhibitions -- its arts development fund has a budget of just one million US dollars each year -- and a lack of space.

Last year, Picasso's huge "Parade" painted ballet curtain was loaned by the Centre Pompidou in Paris and displayed in the atrium of 2 IFC, a towering high-end downtown arcade, because the official arts centre wasn't big enough to display it.

Though the concept was at first poorly received by artists they have since warmed to the idea of placing art in the same buildings as global coffee and fast-food chains.

"I blanched at first but then thought, 'well if there's nowhere else, it might as well be in malls'," says Birch.



*Tsang Kin-wah shows some of his often profane and offensive silk screens*  
© AFP/File Mike Clarke

Critics say they have seen the writing on the wall in the Tsang censorship case and fear the days of the city's freewheeling art world may soon be over as corporate heads increasingly call the shots on what can and can't be shown.

Bilton believes there wouldn't be a problem if there were enough interest and resources for orthodox art outlets.

"Our foundation stages shows in shopping centres but they are within roped-off zones where you have to make an effort to walk in. If the art

is simply dotted around the mall, and where anyone passing by can see the works, then there is a greater chance of restriction of what is shown," he says.

One of the proposed answers to Hong Kong's chronic lack of decent exhibition space has been a proposed 40-hectare, 20 billion US dollar cultural hub.

The sprawling plan calls for private developers to bid for the rights to build a string of theatres, museums and other performance spaces on a spit of land overlooking the famous harbour in West Kowloon.

The winning bidder will be expected to build and manage the facilities for 30 years, at a loss if necessary.

In return for the deal, they will be given large parcels of land on the site to build lucrative residential and commercial office real estate.

The general plan has been welcomed by the arts community but one concern still nags: almost all the city's arts infrastructure will come under the control of one corporation, raising the prospect of further commercial censorship.

"Look, the problem is that these companies put their public relations people in charge of what can and can't go on show -- and they are the very last people you want doing that job," says Batten.

"They will be so worried about harming the reputation of the company that they'll put a block on anything vaguely controversial."

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