

## Matter and memory

Shirley and Sara Tse tell **Edmund Lee** about their diverging artistic practices and unifying sisterly bond

It is a small relief that the new exhibition at Osage Kwun Tong wasn't titled 'Parallel Worlds: Shirley Tse and Shirley Tse'. It could so easily have been. Local artist Sara Tse, who speaks in a soft, tender voice like a little sister (which she is), is six years younger than Shirley. Sara entered the same primary school from which her sister graduated as a top student, and was often compared with – and mistakenly addressed as – Shirley by the teachers that they shared. Even when she graduated from the Chinese University of Hong Kong with a Fine Arts degree – as her sister previously did – her professor somehow managed to confuse her name with Shirley's in her reference letter. "When I was young," says Sara, "I was not very happy about it. I complained to myself: why are the school people like that?"

That, of course, doesn't necessarily explain why the two talented sisters have finally come to exhibit their old and new works together for the first time, although it does give the occasion an undeniably heartwarming pretext. Shirley Tse, who grew up with Sara in Hong Kong before moving to the US during her university days, is now an established artist based in Los Angeles. "I've been doing fine in the US – many people know me there – but when I come back, people in Hong Kong are not familiar with my works," says Shirley, whose last show here was in 2000 at Para/Site Art Space. "So it feels really special this time, definitely like a homecoming. And to exhibit with my little sister too!"

While the two's enthusiasm for the show is clearly mutual, their artistic practices and creative concerns couldn't be more different. Shirley's keen interest in connecting with the outside world and its many physical and cultural phenomena is distinctly at odds with Sara's fascination with the fragile nature of her very own memory. *Bionicpak*, one of Shirley's older works currently on view, reflects on the 21st century's shifting trend of public imagination – from rectangular computers to the dome-shaped incarnations pioneered by Apple, and from physics and engineering

to bio-engineering – in all its plastic glory. With two light blue Styrofoam blocks placed side by side and carved with rectilinear and curvilinear design patterns, respectively, the sculpture not only reflects the artist's interest in using simple manufacturing tools

**"It feels really special this time, definitely like a homecoming"**

(she cut the model herself with a router, without computer aid), but also her early interest in plastics.

"I love to observe the world, and the materials [that constitute it]," says Shirley. "I don't limit myself to the given meanings. People asked me if my early works, with their box shape and machine-like structures, are influenced by minimalism. It's possible but I think much of it has actually come from the world around me. We live in a world that is very

organised and standardised."

Perhaps as a response to that rigidity, in her more recent works the artist has turned her focus from plastics to the idea of plasticity and multiplicity. For instance, she tackles the titular, ancient mathematical problem in *Quantum Shirley Series:*

*Squaring the Circle*, an installation where highly reflective

fabric is hung onto a tower structure, with one end being rectangular and the other circular. In *Quantum Shirley Series: Platforms*, on the other hand, a world map is crumpled and sewn with needle and thread to create a mini mountain, highlighting the connections between things from around the world. Despite its very scientific title, Shirley's inspiration behind the series turns out to be entirely personal: "I have an aunt from Tahiti, who almost ended up adopting me," she says. "I imagined what my life would have been if I had lived there. Her children all got sent away to study in Paris, and all became very artistic, so maybe I'd end up being an artist anyway. In quantum physics, there's a theory of parallel worlds, of



The Tse sisters Shirley (left) and Sara



superposition. It's possible that both realities are actually happening, but we're limited to only one perception."

This meditation on the what-might-have-been scenarios is similarly apparent in Sara's works, which may appear trivial at first glance – only to reveal their achingly intimate side upon further inquiry. Included among the older works exhibited in the show is *My February – Dress no. 200-228*, an installation of rusted steel shelves on which 28 eggshell-thin porcelain shirts, which look strikingly close to the real thing, are displayed. The artist first came up with the method in 2001, when the cloth she used to clean her ceramic work table was hardened by the clay that had soaked into it. Sara decided to heat the cloth and was intrigued by the resulting clay object, the cloth itself having been obliterated by the heat. She then began creating ceramic works from other combustible items – including ceramics in the shapes of stuffed teddy bears, tree leaves, and flower patterns cut from table cloth, all at the exhibition – which serve as mere reminders of the things that have incinerated in the process.

Sara's other works, while perhaps not of the highest technical order, drown you in their own private emotions. *My Brother's Tricycle*, a life-sized installation that she sewed into from small pieces of bed sheets and clothes given to her by her friends, is the artist's attempt to remember the best childhood moment in her relationship with her brother. As she recalls fondly, "my brother would pretend to be a driver when we played on our little tricycle at home, with the dining table as the U-turn. We would play that every morning. I wasn't on good terms with my brother when I made this work, but when I fell asleep while stitching together the wheel, I returned to our best time. With the dream, I managed to sort out a few conflicts in my mind."

In the same vein, Sara has also sewn a new rabbit to commemorate the stuffed bunny that Shirley made her when she was ten. So how does she feel about her elder sister's shadow, under which she has spent years living in her youth? "Luckily we're both working in art now," Sara tells me with a big, bright smile. "It's not like mathematics, where they give you 80 marks or 100 marks and decide who's better."

Parallel Worlds: Sara Tse and Shirley Tse is at *Osage Kwun Tong* until Apr 18.

## Interview

### Zhou Jun

The Mainland Chinese photographer reflects on China's relentless urban development. By Grace Tsoi

Zhou Jun's photographs of skyscrapers and construction sites are instantly recognizable for their stark combination of black, white, and red colours. After capturing his nation's cityscape in greyscale format, the Chinese photographer uses shades of red to highlight the transient sections of architectural buildings that are under construction or repair. Throughout this visual exploration he has contemplated the effect the country's rapid urban development has had on the landscape and its inhabitants.

#### Why do you use red colours in your photographs?

Since I take black and white photos, the colour red is the perfect highlighter because of its brightness. On the Mainland the red colour can mean happiness, yet it can also be a warning colour. People from different social and cultural backgrounds may have very different interpretations of my photos. I didn't have anything particular on my mind when I picked the red colour – I simply wanted to point out the things that caught my attention. For this exhibition, the scaffolding [outside the architectural structures] is highlighted in red. Scaffolding offers protection to the construction workers, and I believe protection is also needed for the people during times of progress.



Canny observer Zhou sees the transient side of his rapidly progressing country

#### Is there any reason for the lack of people in your photos?

I have tried very hard not to include people in my pictures. Sometimes I include them in the images, but they are almost negligible among the big buildings. Human existence is rendered inconsequential to economic development when magnificent constructions dominate over the lives of people.

#### How did you capture the cityscape of China?

I travelled to different cities in China, and by bus only. I feel so sorry for my shoulders and legs, but I insisted on not taking cabs despite the heavy weight of cameras. Taking buses is the best way to observe the daily changes along the same routes. Taking cabs is of course more convenient, but I'll be kept at a distance [from the changing environment].

#### How do you feel about China's development?

Everything is just too quick. You only need a click to take a picture. But it seems [we] can't even keep pace with the development by taking photos. Changes take place in the cityscape – sometimes even within a couple of days. China has attained remarkable economic achievement in a very short time, but it does not necessarily mean that the people's well-being has improved.

#### What's next for you?

I still have a burning interest in exploring the relationship between people and the city. Before, I always used films and cameras to record the transition, but now I am eager to experiment with the use of porcelain – an ancient Chinese craft. It will be a move from 2D and 3D, perhaps working into the direction of installation art.

Zhou Jun: *Red Hot and Grey is at Louis Vuitton Maison, 5 Canton Road, until the end of May.*

## Review

### Late Night Contemplation

★★★★★

Sin Sin Fine Art Until April 15

The first thing that hits you upon entering the three modest rooms of the Sin Sin Fine Art gallery is the soft, slightly ecclesiastical smell. Joss sticks secreted under plinths holding potted house plants set the bohemian atmosphere before one has caught a glimpse of any of the multitude of bright canvasses by Indonesian artists Fauzie As'Ad.

Each canvas, whether large enough to solitarily occupy one of the freestanding walls or small enough to be hung inches apart from a companion piece, is an investigation in tonality. Colour is the primary concern throughout. Shapes and figurative motifs appear consistently in each

canvas, uniting them as a complete show. Their repetition undermines what is being represented in lieu of the complete colour experience.

*Sign Fiction*, one of the larger canvases, is an exploration in blue. Acrylic washes of bottle greens and dark maritime tones are broken sporadically with complimentary dashes of red. This sense of the understanding of colour in nature is mirrored throughout the collection in representations of yellow soaked sunshine (*Vertical and Horizontal Journey in my Mind*) and sage washed earth (*Just Imaginary Meeting*).

The effect is clean and light-filled. The collection feels cohesive, if a little bland,

but is of a size not often seen in Hong Kong from an individual artist. This artist is present at all times. In each of his canvases As'Ad paints a self portrait, an armless bald figure



with a bird perched on his head. This frustrated figure acts as an accurate representation of the core feelings of the show; it's quirky, simple and observant. Mary Agnew

Tranquility in colours Fauzie As'Ad's Sign Fiction