

Ocula Magazine | Exhibition

## In Hong Kong, Myth Makers Makes a Case for Queer Futures

By [Stephanie Bailey](#)

Hong Kong, 15 March 2023



Anne Samat, *Conundrum Ka Sorga / To Heaven* (2019). Exhibition view: Group exhibition, *Myth Makers—Spectrosynthesis III*, Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (24 December 2022–10 April 2023). Courtesy Tai Kwun. Photo: South Ho.

**Keith Haring** met artist **Tseng Kwong Chi** in 1979, on the corner of First Avenue and Fifth Street in **New York**. 'I ended up sort of cruising him,' Haring recalled, struck by Tseng's high-waisted white pants. 'But then we became friends.'<sup>1</sup>

Placed among three silver gelatin prints from Tseng's classic 'Expeditionary Self-Portrait' series (1979–1989), in which Tseng photographed himself in front of global landmarks wearing a thrifted Mao suit and black sunglasses, are images documenting New York's underground downtown scene, where Tseng and Haring's friendship flourished.

*Puck Ball (The Gang's All Here)* (1983) is an exuberant family photo of artists, among them Haring and Kenny Scharf, connected to Club 57, located in a church basement in New York's East Village; while *Royal Wedding* (1981) lines up a grid of Polaroids featuring Tseng joking around with guests at New York club The Underground, during a party held on the occasion of Prince Charles and Lady Diana's wedding.

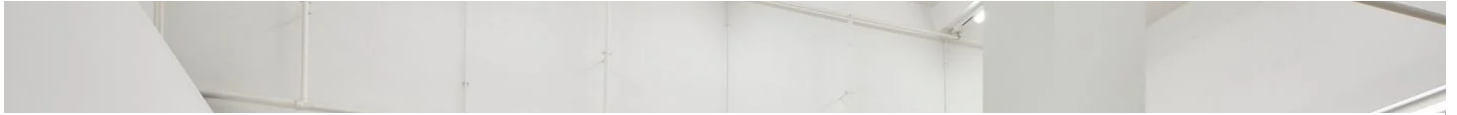


Left to right: Tseng Kwong Chi, *Puck Ball (The Gang's All Here)* (1983); *Assortment of party photos (digital)* (1980s). Exhibition view: Group exhibition, *Myth Makers—Spectrosynthesis III*, 'Chapter 2: Body Politics: Criminalisation, Control and Counter-Narratives', Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (24 December 2022–10 April 2023). Courtesy Tai Kwun. Photo: South Ho.

Though Tseng wears his characteristic Mao suit and sunglasses in these party shots, there is a prismatic warmth to the artist that contrasts the statuesque persona that defined his 'Expeditionary Self-Portrait' series.

That warmth extends to raucous party shots—coupled with iconic stills of Haring famously painting Grace Jones—presented in a digital slideshow where Madonna, Diana Ross, and others make an appearance, as do Haring and Tseng in exuberant drag. Tseng, after all, was documenting his personal world, rather than the world out there. A place where he and his peers were free to express themselves, and love whom they wanted.





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That spirit of celebration, often against all odds, characterises *Myth Makers*, which features over 60 artists from Asia and its diasporas. Curated by Inti Guerrero and Chantal Wong across all of Tai Kwun Contemporary's galleries, this monumental show is co-presented by Sunpride Foundation, established in 2014 by collector Patrick Sun to advocate for LGBTQ+ communities in Asia.

One-third of over 100 exhibited artworks are on loan from Sunpride's collection. Among them are three commissioned papercuts by Xiyadie, whose chosen name, 'Siberian Butterfly', refers to the freedom the artist gained after moving from the closeted confines of a homophobic home village to Beijing.





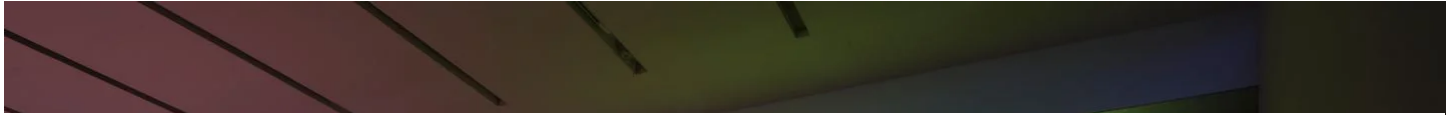
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Left to right: Xiyadie, *Crying Fish*; *Cut Sleeve*; *Split Peach* (both 2022). Exhibition view: Group exhibition, *Myth Makers—Spectrosynthesis III*, Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (24 December 2022–10 April 2023). Courtesy Tai Kwun. Photo: South Ho.

Xiyadie's large-and-intricate papercuts open the show's first chapter on level one, where striking, pearlescent curtains hang over the space to emphasise the intersections of performativity and vulnerability that shape queer spaces. Rendered in the traditional Chinese style, they illuminate examples of queer love drawn from ancient Chinese history.

*Cut Sleeve* (2022), for example, depicts the Han Emperor Ai cutting his sleeve to let his naked lover continue slumbering in bed; a story that created the Chinese euphemism for gay love, 'passion of the cut sleeve'. While *Crying Fish* (2022) shows the moment, as recorded in the *Records of the Warring States*, when Lord Longyang confessed to his Wei king that he feared losing him to men more beautiful than he, leading the monarch to outlaw any mention of handsome men in his vicinity.



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Ellen Pau, *52Hz* (2022). Exhibition view: Group exhibition, *Myth Makers—Spectrosynthesis III*, Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (24 December 2022–10 April 2023). Courtesy Tai Kwun. Photo: South Ho.

Nearby, [Ellen Pau](#)'s 1992 video *Song of the Goddess*, presented on a television monitor, commemorates a more recent history of queer love. Weaving scenes performed by two mid-20th century Cantonese opera stars, Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin, the work pays tribute to both women, whose portrayal of lovers on stage and screen (Yam performed the male role) extended, as it is widely assumed by their lifelong companionship, to real life.

Pau's video, in fact, pays tribute to the verse that Pak quoted at Yam's funeral in 1989, from the ancient poem, *Yellow Bird*: 'Could his life be redeemed, I would have given a hundred lives for him.'



Oscar Chan Yik Long, *You just suck my soul without any hesitation* (2022). Exhibition view: Group exhibition, *Myth Makers—Spectrosynthesis III*, Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (24 December 2022–10 April 2023). Courtesy Tai Kwun. Photo: South Ho.

Yam and Pak's seemingly open love story preceded the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Hong Kong in 1991 by decades. Six years later, Wong Kar Wai would release *Happy Together*, whose iconic depiction of mercurial gay love by actors Leslie Cheung and Tony Leung is captured in an expressive ink painting by Oscar Chan Yik Long, *You just suck my soul without any hesitation* (2022), showing Cheung's character pushing his face into Leung's neck.

Works like these encapsulate *Myth Makers*' intention to illuminate tales of 'same-sex love and desire or gender fluidity as found in ancient belief systems and traditions in Asia', particularly in this first chapter of the show. A blending of queer mythologies and realities underscores the enduring presence, and contributions, of non-binary identities to cultures across the region, not to mention the instability of their mainstream acceptance.



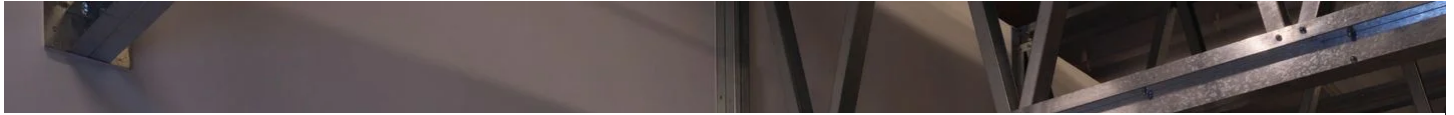


Andrew Thomas Huang, *Kiss of the Rabbit God* (2019) (still). Single-channel video. 14 min. Courtesy the artist and Para Site.

Underscoring this point is Andrew Thomas Huang's 2019 short film *Kiss of the Rabbit God*, a stunning portrayal of a Chinese American dishwasher's sexual and cultural awakening through a dream-like encounter with the Rabbit God, a Taoist deity presiding over love between men. The work is presented with its official classification from Hong Kong's Film Censorship Ordinance pasted outside its booth, deeming the work unsuitable for children.

Shu Lea Cheang's *Foucault X*, one of the videos composing the ten created for 3x3x6—Cheang's Venice Biennale exhibition for the Taiwan Pavilion in 2019, the year Taiwan legalised same-sex marriage—was not so lucky. In the show's second chapter, which explores forms of criminalisation and counter-actions in a gallery classified as Category III (meaning, for ages 18 and above), only nine of the videos are on view, because *Foucault X* was not permitted to be shown in Hong Kong.

Perhaps it was the depiction of Foucault being imprisoned in Poland for being gay, and subsequently engaging in sadomasochistic bondage with his jailer that pushed censors over the edge. Perhaps it was the discussions on freedom that ensued.



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Shu Lea Cheang, *10 cases 10 films 3x3x6* (2019). Exhibition view: Group exhibition, *Myth Makers—Spectrosynthesis III*, Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (24 December 2022–10 April 2023). Courtesy Tai Kwun. Photo: South Ho.

State definitions of unsuitability apply, too, to Patrick Ng Kah Onn's 1958 oil-on-paper self-portrait as a Malay woman, and Fan Chon Hoo's archive of photographic studio portraits from the 1950s and 60s discovered by Fan in a Penang antique shop, which show the transition of a young man into a woman named Ava Leong.

In Malaysia, the rights of gender expressions of trans people and homosexual acts are unstable in a dual-track legal system, with the latter decriminalised across the border in Singapore only in 2022, despite Singapore being the first Asian country to legalise gender reassignment surgery in 1973.



Left to right: Eikoh Hosoe, *Ordeal by Roses (Barakei) No. 32* (1961); Josef Ng, *Brother Cane* (1994). Exhibition view: Group exhibition, *Myth Makers—Spectrosynthesis III*, Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (24 December 2022–10 April 2023). Courtesy Tai Kwun. Photo: South Ho.

All of which makes Josef Ng's *Brother Cane*, a video documenting Ng's 1994 performance, even more noteworthy. The work was an angry response to the arrest of 12 men at a cruising spot in Singapore, which included Ng caning bags of red liquid in a mimicry of the punishment that befell them. The performance proved so incendiary that Singapore's National Arts Council condemned the act and withdrew funding support for 'script-less' performance art and 'forum theatre' for over a decade.<sup>2</sup>

Such tensions between public and private, not to mention moments of strategic revelation and rebellion in the context of imposed concealment, runs through *Myth Makers*. Indirectly, they highlight the importance of an out-and-proud institution like Sunpride, with its unwavering intention to publicly normalise the fluidity of gender and sexual expressions across Asia through art.



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Ho Tam's quadruplet of oil-on-canvas portraits from the 'Secret Garden' series (1996) depict naked Chinese immigrant workers—waiters and cooks perhaps, at various stages in their lives—in homage to encounters of desire and vulnerability they seek out in private.

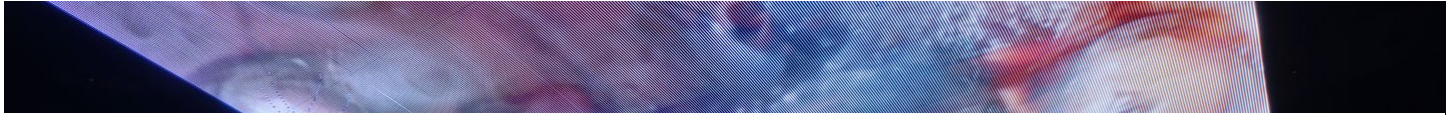
Nearby, the screening of Zheng Bo's *Pteridophilia 1* (2016), in which a naked body engages in acts of intimacy with a bed of ferns, hints at what is to come in the exhibition's third and final chapter, which seeks to open pathways into expanded, queer futures.



Jes Fan, *Visible Woman* (2018). Exhibition view: Group exhibition, *Myth Makers—Spectrosynthesis III*, Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (24 December 2022–10 April 2023). Courtesy Tai Kwun. Photo: South Ho.

There, Josh Serafin's *Cosmological Gangbang* (2020–2021) presents a figure in a black room illuminated by two fluorescent light tubes. They dance in the same black mud on the floor that covers their entire body. The video calls back to ancient, animist beliefs that were overpowered by European colonial impositions of heteronormativity on the Philippines and elsewhere: a call to decolonise that resonates across a congregation of works set within a dramatic, black-PVC-covered room.

Pushing open the boundaries of bodily being is [Jes Fan](#)'s *Visible Woman* (2018), a three-dimensional splay where a grid of fleshy peach plastic tubes are connected by 3D-printed human organs. Fan's sculpture is reflected in the shiny surfaces of its surrounding space, which seem to transform into liquid under the LED lights of Wang Shui's *Scr.:pe* (2022).



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Exhibition view: Group exhibition, *Myth Makers—Spectrosynthesis III*, 'Chapter 3: Queer Futurities: Dematerialisation, Transformation, and New Vocabularies', Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (24 December 2022–10 April 2023). Courtesy Tai Kwun. Photo: South Ho.

Transmitted through a screen hanging from the ceiling are images reflected and refracted on the ground; their contents are determined by sensors that measure the light levels emitted from the screen itself, which are fed into a generative adversarial network.

*Scr.:pe*'s feedback loop is effectively a collaboration with artificial intelligence. In the context of this show, it feels like an abstract rebuttal to those systemic controls and circuits that have come before it—like the legal and often socially imposed limits that befall living, loving bodies across the world. —[O]

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1 John Gruen, 'Keith Haring: The Authorized Biography', (Prentice Hall, 1991).

2 Lee Jian Xuan, 'Curator Josef Ng, whose 1994 performance led to proscription of performance art, joins Pearl Lam Galleries', The Straits Times, 19 January 2016: <https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/curator-josef-ng-whose-1994-performance-led-to-proscription-of-performance-art-joins>.



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