

REIMAGINED HISTORIES

An Interview with Sharon Lee

What have you been working on this past year?

I just completed my MFA thesis at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, where over the course of a year, I was able to consolidate my ideas and art practice. I also participated in the exhibition “emo gym” (4/21–6/19) at Tai Kwun Contemporary, where I presented *If Tomorrow Never Comes* (2021–2022), which is the result of my recent experimentation with pinhole photography, and *The Remnants of Yesterday* (2022), a series of images featuring a cheongsam patched together by my grandmother. There was also the show “31 Women Artists – Hong Kong” (5/6–7/31) at 10 Chancery Lane gallery, which presented one of my earliest pieces, so both my earliest and latest pieces were showing at the same time.

I haven’t consciously thought of whether Hong Kong’s environment or identity has directly influenced my work, though that would be quite natural since I grew up here. Hong Kong is inherently a place that changes a lot: demolished, repurposed, redeveloped. It is rare to find something that is permanent. This is maybe the essence of the city. The idea of disappearance is inspired by this city, but I don’t consider disappearance as a negative thing. Instead, I try to turn it into a force to contend with in my work and develop a visual language.

My photographic techniques are a bit slow and laborious. I don’t only go to a site and take a photograph. I have to go through a lot of processes to make an image. Often the subject I am documenting has already disappeared—how do you capture something that is already gone?

I’m interested in both the past and the future. Previous works have focused on the changes of the city, but more recent works focus on interpersonal connections. A lot of people plan to emigrate but I haven’t thought about leaving Hong Kong permanently. That makes you hyperaware of your connection with the people in your life, as well as the connection between a person and the city. I am trying to use disappearance as a counter-force; how you can put it in your visual language and turn it in a positive language.

Hong Kong is undergoing a state of flux and an exodus. In general, what is the significance of time in your work?

Light and time are very basic elements to photography; they’re my tools and medium, I have to work with them. In different works, I experiment with their relationship. My work has always been focused on memory and history; memory is very personal, while history is a grander narrative, but both are closely tied to time. I want to use my work to understand or reimagine time. For example, in *If Tomorrow*

Never Comes, I invited each sitter to give me an object, an item from their past, which I would turn into a pinhole camera and use the conversation about the future to determine the exposure time of the portrait. Each image has multiple present times captured. Even though this is a very personal work, this is also very contemporaneous; beside my mother and father, the other sitters are leaving Hong Kong. At the point of departure, our imagined futures must be so different. It’s a time for a slow farewell.

Sometimes my work exists in a vacuum of time or in a fictional time. With *The Crescent Void* (2019), I am creating a fictional time and documenting a vanished grocery store. One of the things I made a mold of was a soy sauce bottle. If there is no soy sauce in the future, this mold will become a fossil. *The Remnants of Yesterday* is connected to my family history. In the 1960s and 1970s, my grandparents worked in textiles, an industry closely related to the development of the city. The cheongsam I used to make a porcelain mold and then photographed was made from some of the remaining textiles not sent for export that my grandmother would make into clothes.

What do you see for Hong Kong in 2023?

I like to make plans, but life often surprises me with detours. I have an ongoing project and new projects.

My ongoing project is *Wish You Well* (2020–). In the Hong Kong Zoological and Botanical Gardens, there is a fountain that faces the city. I put a bronze text installation on the fountain that says, “Here lies a rainbow for wishful thinkers,” which is supposed to be a bit ironic. It is just a fountain, but the act of wishing transforms it into a wishing fountain. There is a time in the afternoon—it looks like a

In 2022, you participated in exhibitions that highlighted Hong Kong. In what ways has the city changed in the past year and how did these changes influence or inform your work?

postcard—when a rainbow will appear, and when it does, I will ask people, “Do you want to make a wish?” As they make their wish, I take a Polaroid of them. Partially inspired by a colonial postcard when it was named the Public Gardens, I wanted to play with the name and the old identity of this place. My work is often inspired by historical photographs and archival materials.

One of my new projects focuses on molds of the negative space between the palm of the hand. I received an invitation from a friend who owns a barber shop in a very narrow alley in Wan Chai. I want to do a hand-molding process there with participants who share stories of how they met. It is timely as we enter a post-pandemic era, especially since physical contact was a sensitive matter during the pandemic. I want to archive this physical contact between hands, as well as the personal connection, city space, and micro narratives.

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From left to right, first row: Installation view of **SHARON LEE**'s *If Tomorrow Never Comes*, 2021–22, double-layered mounted inkjet print on paper, lightbox, and single channel video, each 160 × 160 cm, at “emo gym,” Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong, 2022. Photo by Kwan Sheung Chi. Courtesy the artist and Tai Kwun Contemporary. Second row: **SHARON LEE**'s *The Crescent Void: Canned Fish*, 2018–19, archival print on Hahnemühle paper, 37.5 × 36 cm. Courtesy the artist. Found image of Hong Kong Zoological and Botanical Gardens, postcard, undated, 13.7 × 8.6 cm. Courtesy the artist. Third row: **SHARON LEE**, *Wish You Well* series, 2020, polaroid film, 10.7 × 8.8 cm. Courtesy the artist.

