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This Page

Untitled (detail)

2008

A cabinet installation consisting of replicated personal effects of Hong Kong sculptor Antonio Mak.

From the exhibition "Looking for Antonio Mak" (2008) at Hong Kong Museum of Art.

1

Untitled (detail)

2008

A blue-lit meditation room playing audio of inhalations and exhalations, created to sound as though Antonio Mak were sleeping there.

From the exhibition "Looking for Antonio Mak" (2008) at Hong Kong Museum of Art.

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Untitled (detail)

2008

Video documentation of the artist dancing with museum guards, as part of a project in which Lam interviewed the security personnel about their lives.

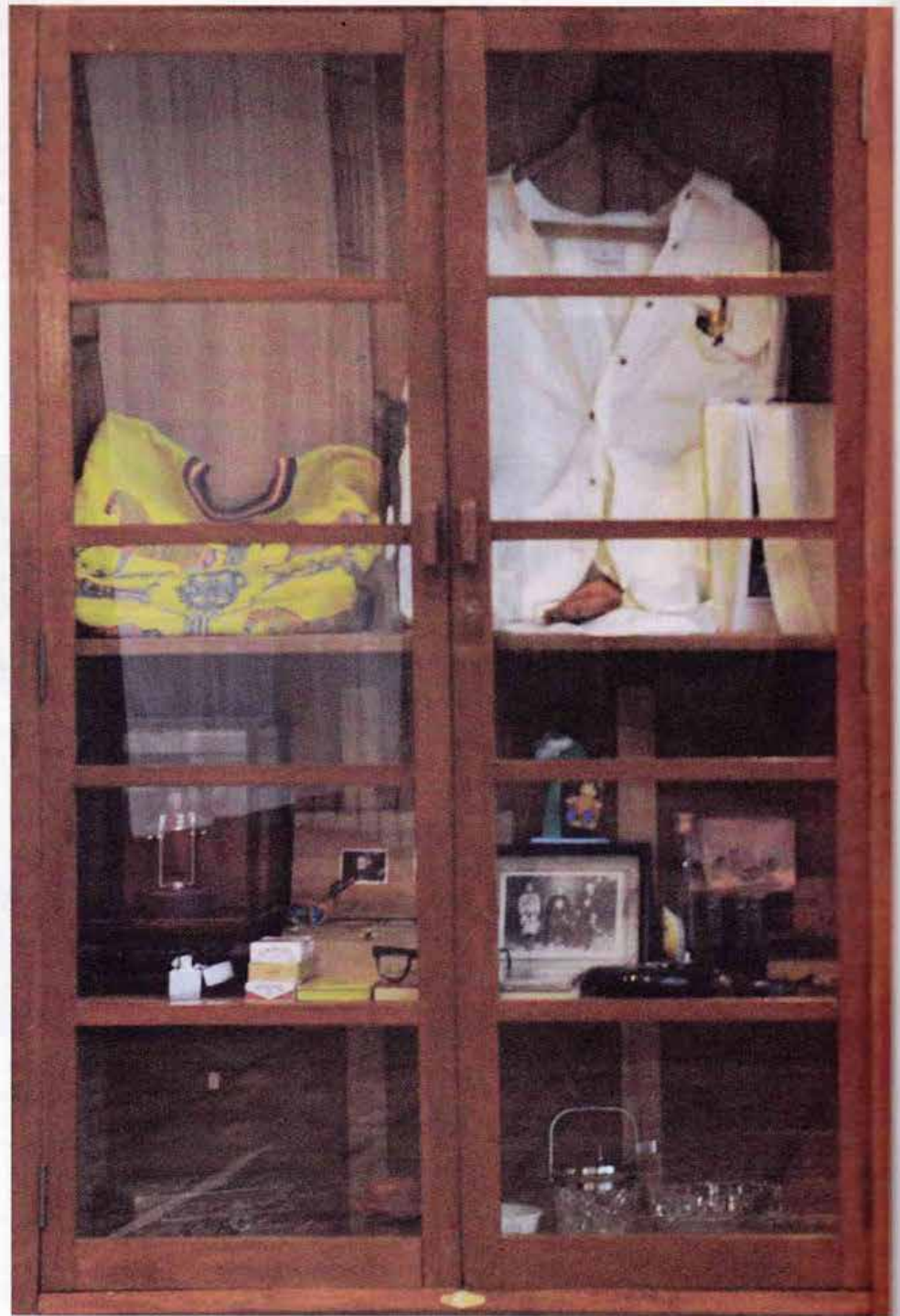
From the artist's residency at Hong Kong Museum of Art in 2008.

All images in this article are courtesy the artist.

PERSONAL HISTORY

Conciliatory Conceptualism

BY JONATHAN GOODMAN



Projects by Hong Kong-based sculptor Jaffa Lam entail social engagement and bringing art to the people. Chronicling the lives of museum guards and recycling textiles from displaced garment workers, she achieves both reform and pure art.

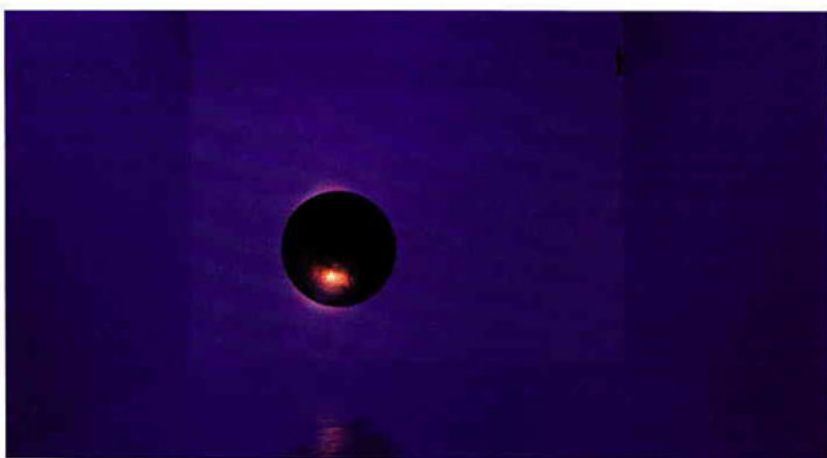
As contemporary culture is finding its place in financially oriented Hong Kong, Jaffa Lam's conceptual social projects of the past decade are an unlikely representative of the city's renaissance. Born in 1973 in Fuzhou, China, but raised in Hong Kong, Lam first won attention for her work in 2008 at the Hong Kong Museum of Art, where she was a quasi-resident for two months as part of an exhibition memorializing Antonio Mak (1951–94), a gifted Hong Kong sculptor who died young.

Lam's tribute consisted of two spaces: a blue-lit meditation room with the sounds of inhalation and exhalation—as if Mak were sleeping there—in what the artist called a “dream studio.” The latter was a corridor with an ocean view along with a display of personal effects, including a ruler and a book on human anatomy, both references to Mak's work that often abstracted the human figure. Additionally, there were objects Lam contributed herself—cigarettes and a lighter, sculpture tools and an old white shirt—based on stories from Mak's friends. Though many people thought the two were close friends, Lam was only a student when Mak died. The space was based on a “dream relationship” and Lam's own desire to commemorate an artist whom she admired.

The “dream studio” also served a very practical function for Lam, who previously could only afford small spaces in which to work. She had a long table and red sofa from Mak's actual studio replicated, providing herself with a place to contemplate and occasionally to sleep. In doing so, Lam publicly demonstrated the practice of a “real, full-time Hong Kong artist,” and her discussions with visitors addressed the particular conditions and practices of local artists. But Lam recognized that the exhibition was an elaborate fantasy, “a dream life, something that could never happen in Hong Kong's real world.”

Her perspective on the struggles of the territory's artists stems from personal experience. After completing an MFA at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1999, Lam set up a studio with fellow artists from the program. Today she is the only one from that group who remains a practicing artist; her peers were defeated by the difficulties of establishing themselves as practicing artists and became teachers instead. Lam sees herself as existing between two artistic generations—the one that came of age during the economic growth of the 1990s before Hong Kong was handed over to China and was primarily concerned with identity issues, and the generation now establishing itself in a frenzied commercial marketplace.

Along with many younger artists today, Lam is just as interested in social reform as she is in making something beautiful. She is compelled to create actions as well as objects that include an audience not usually



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familiar with contemporary art. The gesture returns art to the public, which benefits educationally and even materially. During her time at the museum, for example, in a project inspired by Joseph Beuys' notion of “social sculpture,” Lam interviewed the guards about their lives outside their job, personalizing their work experience in ways that usually do not happen for such employees. She created a diary chronicling her many conversations, with pictures of herself and individual guards, as well as a video of herself and security personnel dancing together, forming a new kind of alliance between the artist-protagonist and her audience.

In keeping with her art of social involvement, Lam is currently working on a sewing collaboration with the Hong Kong Woman Workers' Association. Using her own artist fees to hire women who were

once the backbone of Hong Kong's garment manufacturing boom in the 1970s and 1980s but who have since been displaced by changes in the territory's economy, she takes her inspiration from the recycled materials of sewing teams. From those fabrics, she designs a nonfunctional object, whether an unusable parachute made from discarded umbrellas or a skirt so light in weight that it cannot be worn. These unique, exquisitely made pieces are given what Lam calls an “alternative function,” a use that is more poetic than practical, and they are shown in exhibitions rather than worn as clothing.

Another project incorporates trees originally found on a construction site in Tuen Mun, a residential area in the New Territories. Building requirements demanded the removal of trees, and the real-estate developer, knowing that Lam had previously made works inspired by trees, asked if she wanted some of them. After a site visit, Lam suggested that the project preserve and transplant other trees not on the original preservation list. Additionally, the wood cut from felled trees could become furniture for the new buildings. Lam, who sees this project as a form of social sculpture, even recorded the ambient sound of the site. Characterizing her involvement as a fruitful experience for an artist working with a developer, Lam notes that “usually the artist is the last one involved in the building's decorative treatment.”

With quiet determination, Lam shows us how performative interactions with the public can result in benefits for the creator and the community alike. Her work is difficult to collect, allowing her to remain free of financial dependence on the galleries—a strategy, she says, “for the sake of making a pure art.” Lam's projects also display a concern for justice, yet her idealism is rooted in physical reality. Her inventions are never abstract in the extreme; instead, they point to a life made richer by increased aesthetic and social awareness.



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