

ADRIAN WONG



Portrait of Adrian Wong with pet rabbit Michael. Photo by Ann Woo for ArtAsiaPacific.

ADRIAN WONG, *Wun Dun* (detail), 2013, art bar installation in the basement of Fringe Club, Hong Kong, 2013. Photo by Christian Hagward. Courtesy Absolut Art Bureau, Stockholm.

Wong's World

BY NOELLE BODICK

When Adrian Wong—a sculptor, storyteller and second-generation Chinese-American—careens in a cab through the lively, narrow streets of Hong Kong, he can catch details in the city’s architecture, even as it slips by in one long ribbon of color. “Look at those octagonal windows,” he says, rubbernecking at a squat, gray building we passed a millisecond before. A few minutes later, he goes off on another tangent, pointing to an apartment block that’s been painted electric blue. The color is the result of a clerical error, Wong explains. After over-ordering paint for the bottoms of its public pools, the district spread the surplus like a great wave across the surfaces of the concrete neighborhood. “It’s the nice thing about teaching and being a multimedia artist: I can stare at these sorts of things,” says Wong, who finds his subjects in the eclectic frenzy and crumbling surfaces beneath the slick, modern facade of the city.

Like his work—which ranges from restaging an unrecorded 1960s Pearl River Delta television show, to researching accounts of an apocryphal starlet in the city’s Western district, to kissing a slaughtered chicken at the height of an avian-flu outbreak in 2007—Wong is digressive but observant. He has adopted a version of mid-century style, wearing flared, creased jeans, pink socks, a bisque-colored zippered windbreaker, and large, clear-rimmed glasses on this summer afternoon. Lean, long and loose-limbed, he carries it off with impeccable, almost studied competence; at one point during the day, he deems an old donut-shaped barbershop pole so tacky and wonderful that he must have it. This exclamation is not unusual for the 33-year-old artist who, in his gregarious manner, becomes, as he says, “fixated with certain things.”

Wong’s true skill is storytelling. Allowing himself to trip down into the holes of the past, and, in the darkness, casting strange shadows, he layers sculptural forms (lost film footage, a moldering tile wall) with elaborate narrative scripts, often inspired by forgotten histories. “Hong Kong is a place where pseudo-historical narrative is alive and well,” he says, attributing the effect to its modest efforts at preservation. Does he regret this? Not exactly. “I think, as an artist, it leaves a lot of space for imagination and mis-memory to be played with in a substantive way.” Later in the day, he defines a historian as a “handcuffed artist.”

Wong’s most recent and brilliant work of misremembering was a retro-styled bar, *Wun Dun* (2013), which popped up this past May in an old ice storage room in Central district

during the week of Art Basel in Hong Kong. In his act of transformation, he converted the white-tiled basement—briefly a morgue during the Japanese occupation—into a concentrated, hyperreal interpretation of mid-20th-century Hong Kong, recruiting winsome, uniformed waiters, a crooning lounge singer in a silvery sequin dress, glowing fish tanks, surfaces from local *cha-chaan teng* diners and a band of furry, robotic monsters. The beguiling artifice, bathed in lambent red lighting, transcended the city’s artifacts. “The slippage between fantastical space has more weight than straight fiction or historical investigation,” Wong reflects. Indeed, at *Wun Dun*, guests sipped curious cocktails, such as oolong tea martinis and vodka mixed with roasted-duck fat, all sprung from Wong’s deep well of nostalgia.

“The sense of nostalgia is authentic. It is how I related to the exotic East as one of a handful of Asian kids growing up in a small town in Illinois,” he says. “I don’t think the feeling is any less real, even if it is not tied to anything real.” Wong’s parents, both originally from Hong Kong, stopped speaking Chinese to him when he was a child, cooked their loose interpretations of American fare and dispensed scarce little about their past lives, all in fear of their son being ostracized in the new country. This hardly stymied his curiosity. Wong remembers that while his grandmother, who emigrated from Hong Kong and spoke no English, took rigorous notes on American daytime soap operas downstairs, he studied her Chinese newspapers and magazine clippings upstairs with equal fascination and ignorance. “As a result, all of my imaginings of where my roots trace back to were complete fantasies,” he says.

As an adult, even after living in Hong Kong for eight years, he still calls himself an outsider. However, he is quick to dismiss any sort of privileged, objective understanding of the city. After all, he shrugged off such stiff posturing when he traded research psychology at Stanford for sculpture at Yale, graduating with an MFA in 2005 and moving to Hong Kong that same year. Arriving during autumn’s Chung Yeung festival, Wong found his new city surfacing buried pasts and paying tribute to memories of lost relatives, not unlike himself as he searched for broken family ties across the city. Pursuing research on rituals while living in Fo Tan—a suburb that mixes artists and industry—in a studio marked as haunted, he threw a dance party for the spirits after moving in and, after a

series of portentous events, underwent a public exorcism as a performance piece. Looking back, he dismisses the body of work as pandering to “a cult of personality.” Today, he has been accessing the many sides of the city through projects that are more collaborative in nature.

“I thrive on the reciprocity and serendipity that comes with it,” he tells me in his temporary apartment in Kowloon. Sitting on the floor, Wong is cradling one such esteemed collaborator, a nine-month-old rabbit. “Michael [the rabbit] was chief contractor,” he says, referring to the solo exhibition “Rodentia in Absentia,” for which the Netherland Dwarf, along with a crew of hamsters and rats, gnawed on the show’s constructions—hutches, floor tiles and vinyl-foam cushions typical of blue-collar Hong Kong, all crafted and lacquered (sometimes with carrot juice) by Wong. Working with animals was the artist’s wry response to galleries’ demands that he suppress his collaborative spirit. “It won’t change market value if the collaborator is not human,” he says with a half-smile. A list of Wong’s other (less furry) collaborators includes a feng-shui master, Taoist priests and an animal psychic. Wong hedges that he is not getting the better of the people who “simply know immeasurably more about the subject matter than I do,” and believes these meetings and conversations deepen the connection between his artistic practice and the city.

Later that afternoon, in a cramped studio in Fo Tan, Wong meets with one such collaborator, the robot engineer Wilton Ip. The conversation clatters all over the place (casting a 65-million-year-old triceratops skull in a one-man play, officiating a wedding at a Chuck E. Cheese’s food joint, animating a Lincolnshire hog roast) until Wong hits on an idea involving the mechanical dogs that pace in front of local children’s toy stores. Interested in the process of taking something lifelike and making it into a machine, he wants to mimic the geometric, synchronized choreographies of the early-20th-century American film director Busby Berkeley, using these same robotic animals. Ip suggests trying moving balls instead of toys, concerned about feasibility and cost. “That’s totally brilliant,” Wong says, covering his face with his hands. “If they were balls . . . we could get the balls moving and get a bunch of live puppies to interact with them. If we had strong-enough magnets and weak-enough animals . . .” Wong trails off, his mind moving in an ecstatic, wild choreography with the city.