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Another Garden of Remembrance



By John Batten /

So, you have entered the *Garden of Hong Kong*.

(Something like) 'How to...' instructions (with extra comments) to listen to a DVD, or appreciate a broken washing machine or refrigerator, in Lee Kit's Hong Kong Garden:

Be comfortable and confident as you walk in the garden.
Walk around to get a good overview of what's inside.

Don't touch, just look.

Listen, to the music. There's not much, but it's everywhere.
And there is thumping. Thumping.

Thump thump thump.

Can't hear it? Listen again.
It's quiet, and only heard intermittently, near the two swans' video.

Thump thump thump
(I remember the banging of hands or sticks or anything hard against the city's street-signs and steel barriers, just like this, a strong tinny-steel thump).

Don't walk in bare feet.

There are smashed-up bits of washing machine and refrigerator on the floor.

Have a look, get down at eye-level, if you wish; look. Want to touch?
Don't! But, no-one will know if you do.

(I remembered not to touch anything on the streets when I was on the streets.

We could have been accused of possessing a bottle, a rock; holding, then accused of throwing).

The streets were littered like this, on so many nights in late-2019, with trashed piles of rubbish bins, street fencing, lumps of wood, pallets, pot-plants, pavement bricks, plastic wrapped around light-poles, construction safety barriers, anything lying idle and easily at hand.

I didn't check if the exhibition has a security camera. Did you?

If you did touch – but I instructed you not to! – then you could've been caught on camera. (In the MTR stations or on the street, the cameras were smashed or spray-painted over).

The exhibition cameras, if here, are harmless; I am sure of it.

Three videos are playing.

Watch them. If you wish.

Have you made a circuit around the room? Stood under the arches?
Walked under the arches? Brushed past the pillars? Stood under the window?

Now, find the furthest corner of the garden, stand in it; for the...for the (I am hesitating to suggest!)

...for the (great, perfect selfie-spot) wide-angled view of *Hong Kong Garden!*

You might be thinking: *Is this all?* or *Is this it?* *Is this the whole exhibition?*

OK – go outside.

No, there is no (formal) Part II, no other room to visit. That's it. For the moment.

Return again for a second look, after a little rest in the outdoor garden; or take a short walk down Oil Street towards the sea; come back in the moment it takes to have a cigarette....

If you are looking for absolute meaning and explanation in Lee Kit's artwork, you might be disappointed. There is not too much. *Hong Kong Garden* is minimal and abstract and there is not much activity. Well, not right now, not while you are here. But something did happen: the ruins that is *Hong Kong Garden* is a landscaped metaphor for Hong Kong's recent past, the protests and its aftermath, families and friends split by political disagreements, daily police briefings and government announcements, culminating in the November 2019 sieges between police and protesters at Hong Kong universities. Then, the promulgation of the National Security Law in mid-2020 and the immediate early morning knocks on doors and police arrests of prominent protesters. More recently, the stresses in the city have been compounded by Covid-19 infections and restrictions on gatherings, lockdowns, restaurant closures, and economic recession.

The exhibition also recalls memories of those difficult past times – including, the Japanese occupation; post-war recession and recovery; the 1967 leftist riots and Cultural Revolution fervour crossing into Hong Kong from the mainland; and, anxiety about the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration – when the city has been governed in the interests of what decision-makers-of-the moment want, rather than the obvious needs of the people (referred to, in a widely embracing category, as 'the grass-roots', or, by ordinary people themselves, as "small potatoes").

"Meaning" in Lee Kit's work is only an aspect of his visual creativity. Let me use the example of Ogawa Yoko's extraordinary novel *The Memory Police* (1994). The inhabitants of a small island experience the disappearance of objects. Once

disappeared, everyone on the island is forbidden to recall these objects in their memory, this is enforced by the thuggish, robot-like efficiency of the Memory Police, who surveil the populace to ensure those memories are completely forgotten. Initially, only small objects disappear, such as candy, jewellery, musical instruments; then it is plants, birds, and the island's ferries. Finally, and ominously, people's body parts disappear and all memory of their use. A disappeared leg is initially a hindrance, until its use is forgotten, and the body adapts with difficulty; this becomes accepted, but only because memory of its existence is erased. Finally, the head/the brain disappear.

Ogawa's book has been described as depicting Mao's China during the Cultural Revolution, or the repressive purges of Stalin's Soviet Union in the 1930s. It could, however, be a novel about life and slow bodily changes and losses encountered towards death. Or, Alzheimer's disease and the traumatic loss of memory, and the complete inability to do the simplest of tasks. On the whole island, one person, known as 'R', hidden from society and the Memory Police in the home of the novel's narrator, has retained his memory. His advice to the narrator, who struggles to recall words, memories and the use of forgotten objects to complete her own novel, is: "The meaning isn't important. What matters is the story hidden deep in the words. You are at the point now where you're trying to extract that story. Your soul is trying to bring back the things it lost in the disappearances."

Lee Kit's *Hong Kong Garden* does similar. Set in this heritage building, he visually recalls the recent past.(1) By laying simple markers, he prompts us to remember our hidden stories, our memories. Lee's work always possesses great feeling. And imaginings. And always good music. There will be a video or two, or three. Paintings, but, unusually in this exhibition, there are no paintings. Lee's work is like a sensual finger working down your spine, the sensations range from initial surprise, pleasant calm to dreamy contentment. His strength is the ability to touch the emotions, often of melancholia, sentimentality, and nostalgia, of his audience. His exhibitions allow space to recall love, friendship, companionship, and good times. In his *Hong Kong Garden*, these are here, but also conjured are darker, more recent, memories. Painful memories are remembered; forgetting them is another, bigger challenge.

Part II

There is always a Part II if you want it, when you return, as you should.
So, enter *Hong Kong Garden* again.
Sit down, be comfortable, but (I know, I know) there is no seating. So,
use an old newspaper, or,
flattened cardboard, or anything!
Get comfortable.

Like meditation, focus.

Hong Kong Garden allows you to imagine, to recall, the recent past.

But, where are we? We should first know some history.
Now, and the future, will be clearer.

There are shadows and light and air. There is space. There are pillars and a concrete floor and a ceiling. We are inside the former clubhouse (between 1908 to 1938) of the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club, when the sea was just a few metres away, just past the entrance doors you have entered. After the yacht club moved to its present, bigger location in Causeway Bay, this site was enlarged by reclamation, extending the land into Victoria Harbour. As government services are often sited on the waterfront, a supplies depot was established on this land.

When Hong Kong's post-war influx of refugees from the mainland put immense pressure on the city's public services, the colonial government undertook an ambitious building programme of schools, hospitals, clinics, and mass residential public housing. The Government Supplies Department Depot at Oil Street expanded throughout the 1950s and 1960s to become a busy place of large warehouses and offices, including these former yacht club premises (some rooms used by security guards for overnight accommodation). The goods stored here were almost any material imaginable: rolls of wire, light-bulbs, bags of cement, tarpaulin and writing pads, teacups, pens and all the varied supplies required by the city's growing brigade of government workers in offices and on building projects around Hong Kong.

In 1998, not long after Hong Kong's return to the mainland, the whole site was vacated, the buildings and its prime waterfront location awaited its sale to a property developer. Only the former yacht club buildings were to be preserved.

In between the vacancy and sale of the site, for a magical eighteen months, the warehouses were rented-out at low cost to become, momentarily, a fabled place of art and culture, known at the time simply as 'Oil Street.' (2) Scattered inside and around these former warehouses, in different buildings, were the studios of artists, designers, architects, and arts organisations Videotage, Zuni Icosahedran, Artists' Commune and Iaspace. Regular businesses were also attracted by the low rent, particularly transportation and logistics companies, utilizing the established storage, loading and unloading facilities of the former supplies' depot.

Within the depot, amongst the businesses and the energy of art exhibitions, artist gatherings, performances, and spontaneous cultural activities, were many unoccupied spaces. Running off the long corridors of the various warehouses were rooms – some incredibly large – mostly unlocked and open for anyone to enter. These rooms were rarely completely empty. Some had desks, whose desktops had a scattered assortment of ink blotter holders, chops, trays, paperclips, piles of discarded elastic-bands and envelopes embossed with the colonial 'OHMS'. There were also lovely wooden chairs with rattan webbing, long wooden benches, stationery cabinets. Some rooms eerily felt as if the inhabitants had simply left for the afternoon, desks awaiting their return. Other rooms had heaped office furniture, dumped and unwanted, stacked as rubbish, calendars frozen at '1997' and prosaic posters about safety, hygiene, and departmental instructions. Ancient green fridges were abandoned, some pushed over and damaged, the floor covered with dust and bits of flotsam; as you walked around this 'rubbish', rising motes of dust were caught in the sun through dirty steel-reinforced windows.

Lee Kit's refrigerator and washing machine would be appropriate in either domestic or commercial settings. They are not particularly out of place in any apartment, or a supply depot, an art gallery, or a former yacht club. Lee has an uncanny ability to choose just the right objects in his installations to focus and draw an audience into his artistic 'aura.' His intended ambience is skillfully created by these physical objects. This is further reinforced by the balance created between his installations and a venue's architecture. This room's architecture is intentional. The pillars and arches in yacht club days mitigated against any unexpected high tidal sea-surges. Any destruction was contained when waves mounted the adjacent seawall, swirled through the room, around pillars, under the arches, and returned to the sea. The room's dungeon-like mood retains a suppressed violence. It is this exact vibe that Lee Kit wishes for. (3)

The addition of music, noise, video and (sub-titled) text allows an atmosphere for his audience to run with memories and recall subliminal associations.

Illusions are allowed.

In fact, illusions are preferred.

It is a trigger to remember the recent past, and...

Helpful to forget, despite the rallying call of protesters, to "never forgive, never forget."

A final illusion of ruination and destruction are the pillars supporting the room's beautiful arches that allude to the Biblical pillars that Samson grasped and pulled down in the Temple of Dagon, destroying the temple and all its inhabitants, including his captors, the Philistines. Think about that. In common parlance, the dictionary meaning of 'philistine' is "a person who refuses to see the beauty or the value of art or culture."

We could play with such a free association of ideas.

Is the experience of *Hong Kong Garden* something like after Samson has pulled down the pillars?

BTW, who are Hong Kong's philistines?

Lee Kit's *Hong Kong Garden* could depict the ruination of everything. It is embodied in that cry you sometimes hear or read on T-shirts: "Everything's gone to Hell." But, then watch his three projected videos. They offer a humane perspective to balance the nihilistic destruction on the floor.

For example:

Nature (in the pot-plant video): "all things wise and wonderful / all creatures great and small."

Lee, however, does not allow us to hear the clincher next line: "...the Lord God made them all." In Lee's world, human-

ity is the architect of the world, and of its destruction.

The haunting lines:

“Are you gonna stay with the one who loves you
Or, are you going back to the one you love

...

What you gonna say when he comes over
There's no easy way to see this through.

...

But, still you've gotta make up your mind.”

That sounds like a messy love-triangle. It is a mess, yes, but there are still choices. At least, there is the option, always in failing relationships – or, of any serious moment of regret or disagreement, or of a grand realization – to “make up your mind” and to answer the question, ‘should I stay, or should I go.’ In Hong Kong, now, these are questions literally being weighed-up by younger residents, many who consider the city's recent changes as unpalatable.

Here then: you can also sit and (re)consider any of your own messy love affairs, failed friendships, work-place arguments, political disagreements, lifestyle choices, the fights and bullying you received – and gave.

Are you embarrassed for what you did, in the past?

Are you seeking understanding and reconciliation? Do you just want some time and space to think?

Hong Kong Garden could be,
if there was an advertisement: ‘a safe-space, a refuge for reflection,
reconciliation, change.’

However, the garden may also reinforce the strength and convictions you had.

Does it explain past actions and motivations?

Can you be better?

Can you be a better person?

Can everything be better?

Despite the ruins, Lee Kit's garden has the assured hope that winters turn to spring, that gardens renew, reflower, regrow. The Biblical words of Isaiah (43:18-19) – thump thump thump – are embedded in the garden: “Forget the former things; do not dwell in the past...I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”

Lee Kit's options? Be the dog in the video, enjoy the sun! Leave the ‘xx’ in your pocket.

For now.

Notes:

*I have abbreviated Lee Kit's exhibition title Garden of Hong Kong as ‘Hong Kong Garden’ in this essay.

(1) Two other significant exhibitions that Lee Kit presented in heritage buildings include: ‘You’ (2014) at the Cattle Depot, To Kwa Wan, Hong Kong; and ‘We used to be more sensitive’ (2018), Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan. See my review of Lee's use of the Hara Museum's domestic architecture in ‘Lee Kit’, Artomity, December 2018.

(2) Known as just ‘Oil Street’ at the time, the term ‘Oil Street Artist Village’ was coined later after the site's closure. See my articles: ‘Oil Street 1998 and Non-profit Art Spaces Now’, The Peak magazine, February 2015, and ‘The Origins of Hong Kong's Independent Art Spaces’, Ming Pao Weekly, 16 April 2018.

(3) Also, Tsang Kin-wah's video installation at Oil Street, Prelude to the Seven Bowls (2013) literally swirled through this room by using horrifying video footage of the destruction from the tsunami and sea-surge immediately after the 2011 Fukushima earthquake in Japan.