Installation view of **ELLEN PAU**'s *Drained II*, 1989/2026, 4K video, AI-upscaled, color, sound: 5 min 49 sec, at "She Moves," SculptureCenter, New York, 2026. Photo by Charles Benton. Courtesy the artist; Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong/New York; and SculptureCenter.

ELLEN PAU

BY ELAINE W. NG

The Lighthouse Keeper

Portrait of **ELLEN PAU**, 1991. Courtesy the artist and Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong/New York.

On a warm early evening in late May 2022, a female performer, larger than life, stood in silence. She was projected on the façade of Hong Kong's new M+ museum and began translating the Heart Sutra into sign language. Her movements were slow, deliberate, and fluid, as if she was underwater. The 65-by-110-meter LED screen is visible from the far shore of Victoria Harbour, from the ferries cutting through the dark sea, and from the high-rise apartments stacked against the hills of the island. On it, a video work by Ellen Pau pulsed with shifting fields of light. Sometimes the screen went blinding, pure white. Sometimes it dissolved into granular static, the visual equivalent of broadband noise. Titled *The Shape of Light*, it marked the first co-commission between M+ and Art Basel: a beacon for a city emerging from its longest Covid-19 lockdown, for a newly activated cultural district nearly two decades in the works, and, in some ways, for an artist who had spent 40 years building the conditions for a moment like this.

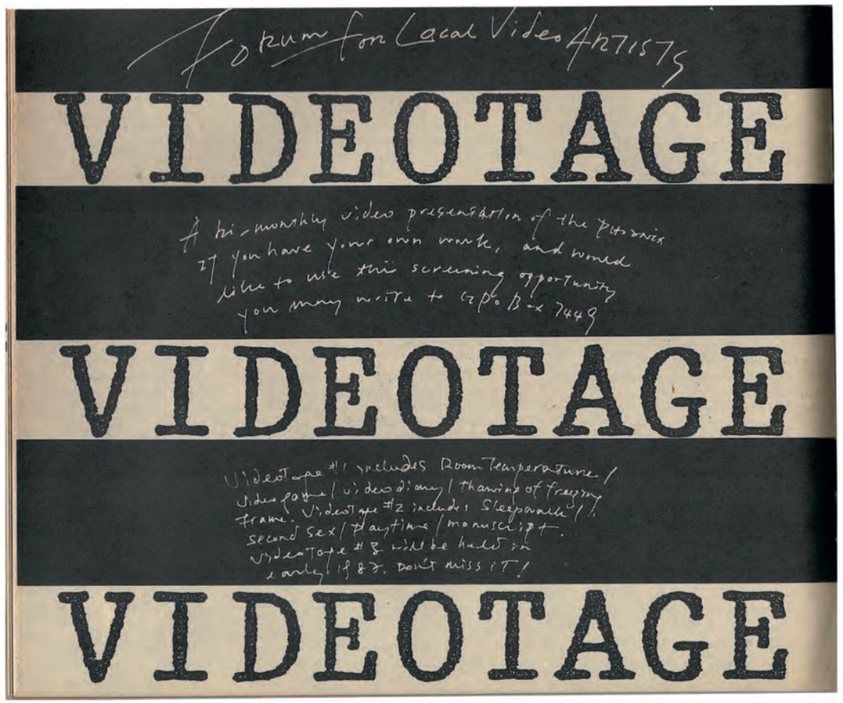
That Pau had reached the façade of M+ at all was, depending on your perspective, either perfectly logical or quietly astonishing. She is one of Hong Kong's most significant artists—a fact the city's institutions were slow to acknowledge, though her peers have known it for decades. She co-founded Videotage, the collective and archive that became the de facto home for media art in Hong Kong. She started the Microwave International New Media Arts Festival, which for 30 years invited international artists such as Shu Lea Cheang, Camille Utterback, Christa Sommerer, and Laurent Mignonneau to the city without reliable funding. She spent years arguing, in conference rooms and museum talks, that video deserved to be taken seriously as an art form—at a time when the city's art schools were still teaching ink painting as the dominant practice, and contemporary work was routinely dismissed as "Western." She did all of this while making some of the most personal and politically charged videos to come out of Hong Kong in the 1980s and '90s. The institution-building and the artmaking were never separate endeavors. They were the same project—different voltages of the same current.

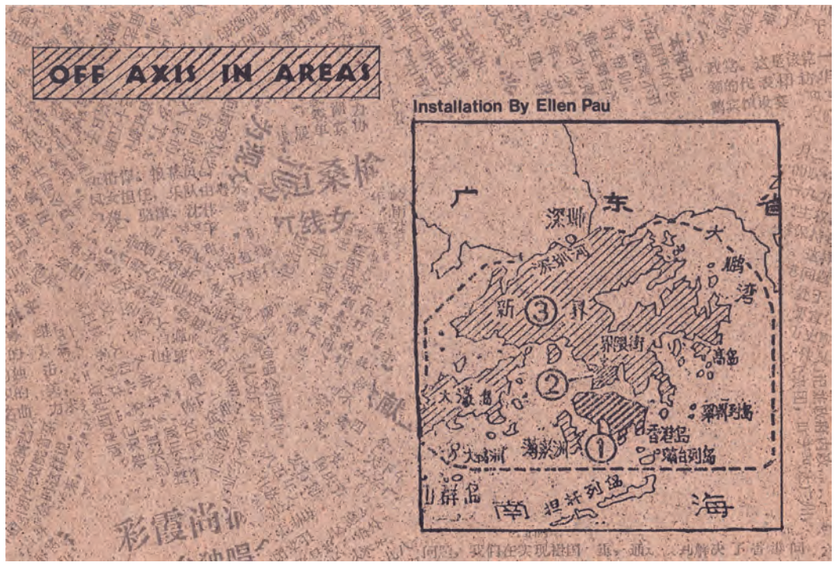
Pau was born in 1961 into a middle-class Hong Kong family during the city's long economic boom. Deng Xiaoping's 1978 Reform and Opening-up policy transformed the colony into a gateway between mainland China and the world, and the money flowing through it created a new generation who could afford to think about art. Trade between Hong Kong and the mainland grew at nearly 30% per year through the 1980s and '90s. The city's visual identity—neon-lit signs jockeying for attention, crowded harbor views, the golden age of its commercial movie industry—was forming in real time, later packaged as "Hong Kong style."

But the same era was shadowed by a political clock that everyone could hear ticking. In 1984, British prime minister Margaret Thatcher and Chinese premier Zhao Ziyang signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration, setting the terms for Hong Kong's return to China in 1997. Five years later, the Tiananmen incident sent a chill through a city that was already nervously surveying its future. In the years before the handover, hundreds of thousands of residents emigrated—mostly to Canada, Australia, and the UK—though many would later return, carrying foreign passports as insurance policies. Pau stayed. And she taught herself to make art.

She had no formal education in film or video, but then, in 1980s Hong Kong, no such training existed. The territory's most prestigious fine arts program, at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), was built around Chinese ink painting. Contemporary practices—from installation to video and conceptual art—were disparaged as foreign imports. The University of Hong Kong's art history department focused on

Screening of **ELLEN PAU**'s *The Shape of Light*, 2022, on the M+ Façade, Hong Kong, 2022. Photo by Lok Cheng. Courtesy the artist and M+.





traditional Asian art and the established Western canon. If you wanted to study film seriously, you went abroad.

Pau didn't go abroad. Instead, she studied medical radiography at Hong Kong Polytechnic University in the early 1980s, learning to operate imaging equipment and read what it produced, though she was not a doctor. For most of her career, she held a day job as a radiographer at Queen Mary Hospital before retiring in 2021. The work gave her a technical fluency that most Hong Kong artists her age lacked: she understood electromagnetic radiation, the translation of invisible energy into visible image, the feedback loops of monitors and cameras. As a young girl, she entertained herself by taking apart radios and cameras. Now, with radiographic training, she understood the physics of the image. She began experimenting using whatever she could find: a consumer video camera, a Betamax machine, a television monitor. She read about Nam June Paik, Bill Viola, and Steina and Woody Vasulka in art magazines such as *Art in America* and *Artforum*, which trickled into Hong Kong sporadically, though she wouldn't see examples of video art by practitioners from Europe and North America until she clinched an Asian Cultural Council (ACC) residency in New York in 1991. She was solving the same problems they had, on the other side of the world, working with the particular grain of Hong Kong's electronic landscape.

Her entry point into Hong Kong's creative world was the Phoenix Cine Club, an informal collective founded in 1973 by CUHK film lecturer Kam Ping Hing. Phoenix had no permanent home; it rented spaces around the city, from church halls to school classrooms, to screen avant-garde cinema: French New Wave, Italian Neorealism, New German Cinema, the structural films of Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton. It gave young filmmakers access to Super 8mm cameras and, eventually, video equipment. The screenings operated within the legally "gray" status as a private club—showing films without proper licenses—and the audience was a mix of students, expatriates, and local cinephiles.

In July 1986, Phoenix organized its final event: "Videotage – The Montage of Four Video Filmmakers." The title suggested both montage as editing and the idea of a montage of artists, four voices spliced together. When the club folded shortly after, Pau and three other members—May Fung, Wong Chi-fai, and Comyn Mo—formed a new collective under the same name as their group show. They were in their 20s with no money. They weren't making commercial movies. They had equipment that was already on the verge of obsolescence (Pau had to take out a bank loan to buy her first camera in Tsim Sha Tsui, which catered to affluent American tourists, in 1986). They belonged to a city that didn't know what to make of them.

Videotage began in the premises of Zuni Icosahedron, the performance group co-founded in 1982 by the experimental artist Danny Yung, which had already been mixing video and installation into its productions. Zuni's work was theatrical, politically sharp, often drawing on Chinese opera and Brechtian techniques. The marriage made sense: Zuni provided the community, space, and audience, while Videotage provided technical expertise, editing know-how, and, most importantly, a growing cache of equipment they would rent at deeply discounted prices. Para Site, founded in 1996 in a diminutive shop space in Kennedy Town by a group of CUHK students, would later join this loose ecosystem of nontraditional platforms. Together, these organizations filled a void that the city's official institutions had little interest in. Of Videotage's four founders, only Pau remained continuously active in the art world, with the organization surviving largely on her energy, her ability to hustle for grants and space, and her refusal to let it die.

In 1996, at the inaugural conference of the Hong Kong chapter of the International Association of Art Critics (AICAHK), Pau made the case plainly. "Video art is reflected not only in popular culture," she told the room, "but also in the ever-changing political and alternative culture." Super 8mm and video had been launched as consumer products, she noted, and had never entered the education system. The users of these time-based media came mostly from the middle and upper classes. CUHK had only just opened a photography course a year earlier. "It is doubtful," she said, "when there would be a course on video."

She was right to be skeptical. The School of Creative Media at City University of Hong Kong—the program that would finally give media art a formal institutional home—was not established until 1998. By then, Pau had already been making videos for more than a decade, and Videotage had become the unofficial academy for a ragtag group of artists who wanted to work with moving images.

Her earliest video works were abstract and minimalist, probing the medium's formal qualities. *Disenchantment of Statue* (1987), made for the Fringe Festival at its home venue, explored video as a physical substance of light and electricity, taking the white noise around the space itself as its raw material. The *Drained* series (1988–96) pushed further into the properties of her chosen material. *Drained I* (1988) documents flames moving through a corridor—a simple image, shot with a consumer camera's limited dynamic range so that the fire becomes a smear of orange against black, abstracted into pure motion. The crackling sound of the blaze amplifies until it resembles static, blurring the line between the acoustic and the electronic.

Drained II (1989), made in collaboration with Zuni Icosahedron, is more haunting. It features a basic electronic wipe effect—often employed in cheap television productions, where one image slides across the screen to replace another—but she used it obsessively, repeating the transition

(top) Videotage I–III Alternative Film and Video Festival advertisement, 1986.

(bottom) Backside of an invitation to **ELLEN PAU**'s Super 8 installation *Off Axis in Areas*, 1988.

hundreds of times. A figure appears and disappears behind a black curtain, multiplying endlessly across repeated frames. The result is hypnotic and slightly nauseating; the viewer becomes aware of the frame rate, the persistence of vision, the way the eye is tricked into seeing continuous motion from discrete still images. Pau described it as "a closed cycle of production and discourse," in which "the electronic medium itself becomes the source of creation." She had not yet seen Joan Jonas's seminal piece *Vertical Roll* (1972), with its similar investigations of video feedback. Unbeknownst to Pau, she was working in parallel, unraveling the problems that the medium presented to anyone who took it seriously as an art form.

But Hong Kong's existential anxiety kept finding its way into her work. *Game of the Year* (1990) parodies the interview segments on national broadcast networks in Hong Kong and the mainland: stiff exchanges where journalists ask softball questions and politicians deliver scripted answers. Pau's friends, many of them fellow Videotage members, teasingly impersonate political figures, but the playfulness has teeth. The target is premier Li Peng and his speech justifying his decision to use martial law to clamp down on pro-democracy student demonstrations. He is gently, devastatingly mocked through absurdist repetition and deadpan delivery. The video quality is deliberately poor, shot on consumer equipment with visible tracking errors and color bleeding, as if the medium itself is defying the slickness of official propaganda. The work still circulates underground among Hong Kongers who annually organize small, roving events to mark the fourth of June, keeping the memory alive in the interstices of the city's digital infrastructure.

Diversion, also made in 1990, approaches the same angst more obliquely, through the language of architecture and migration. The video opens with archival footage from a 1960s television program, *Hong Kong Today*, its British voiceover intoning cheerfully: "This is no ordinary ferry crossing: on one side is Hong Kong Island and the City of Victoria, on the other, mainland China and the City of Kowloon, all part of Hong Kong." Pau weaves this propaganda—happy beachgoers, government-sponsored swimming contests designed to promote community feeling during the 1967 anticolonial riots—with her own footage: an infinite stairwell descending into darkness, a female swimmer suspended in murky water, a dancer struggling to stay upright on cobblestones as the camera tilts vertiginously. The work captures the vertigo of a city built by settlers—whether Chinese migrants who made Hong Kong their home in the first half of the 20th century or the Hong Kong residents who relocated in the lead-up to the 1997 handover—facing an unknown future. Rather than resolving, the work holds the tension, letting the viewer sit with the discomfort of not knowing what comes next.

Pau's exploration of Hong Kong's identity was inseparable from her own self-examination. She was an openly lesbian artist in a city where homosexuality had only been decriminalized in 1991, and gender and sexuality ran through her work with the same insistence as politics—sometimes as irony, sometimes as surrealism, sometimes as something rawer and more vulnerable.

Video Vogue (1992) debuted at the Hong Kong Museum of Art's first exhibition dedicated to contemporary local artists, whose title "City Vibrance: Recent Works in Western Media by Hong Kong Artists" announced the dichotomy between traditional Chinese culture and the experimental art forms that it was celebrating. Pau's contribution was a small monitor wrapped in faux fur (a Hong Kong winter fashion staple, despite the subtropical climate, worn as status symbol), showing a woman's lips, covered in thick red lipstick, puckering for the camera in grotesque close-up, becoming abstract flesh as they fill the screen. Referencing Madonna's 1990 hit *Vogue*, the work also echoed what Pau had mentioned at the AICAHK conference: video's ability to mirror pop culture but also the "ever-changing political and alternative culture." The fur, the mouth, the monitor—all of it was about the pressure to be looked at, and the pleasure and distress in complying. In an interview for the exhibition catalog, she mentioned that her installation was also a response to video as an artistic medium, "a vogue to be aestheticized by the image world in today's museum." The work is funny and bizarre, camp and critical, a perfect encapsulation of Pau's ability to simultaneously inhabit contradictory tones.

Song of the Goddess (1992) is the work Pau is most often cited for. It is a masterpiece of compression, entwining multiple registers of history, personal memory, and cultural mythology. The single-channel video work centers on Yam Kim Fai and Pak Suet Sin, two legendary Cantonese opera performers who were lovers both onscreen and off, albeit secretly. Over a 40-year relationship, Yam always played the male lead in drag while Pak played the female role. Their 1968 film *The Emperor Lee* provides the archival footage: Yam in elaborate male costume, Pak in flowing female robes, enacting the coded erotics of traditional opera, where gender is always already performance.

When Yam died in 1989, Pak declared her love publicly at the funeral: "I would die a hundred times to bring you back to me." Pau stitched these archival clips together with footage she shot during her 1991 ACC residency in New York, including a tender scene of two Asian women, one washing the other's back (Pau and her lover at the time). The transition between the opera scenes and the contemporary visuals is seamless, dreamlike, suggesting a continuity of queer experience across time and geography. The sound design is crucial: the opera music fades into ambient noise,

(top) **ELLEN PAU**, *Video Vogue*, 1992, two monitors wrapped in faux fur, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.

(bottom) Installation view of **ELLEN PAU**'s *Song of the Goddess*, 1992, 4K video, AI-upscaled, color, sound: 6 min 39 sec, at "She Moves," SculptureCenter, New York, 2026. Photo by Charles Benton. Courtesy the artist; Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong/New York; and SculptureCenter.

ArtAsiaPacific 149 Jul/Aug 2026 Features

Installation view of **ELLEN PAU**'s *Pledge: Bik Lai Chu*, 1993/2018, two-channel installation, color, sound, panel: 1 min, at "She Moves," SculptureCenter, New York, 2026. Photo by Charles Benton. Courtesy the artist; Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong/New York; and SculptureCenter.

with the intimacy of splashing water. The result is mournful and celebratory, historical and immediate, one of the earliest works to address LGBTQ+ experience in Hong Kong and Asia, made by an artist who understood, from the inside, the cost of loving openly in a highly conservative city.

Bik Lai Chu (1993) is more violent in its imagery. Originally, the video was projected beneath a low dressing table—the kind of furniture found in old colonial Hong Kong apartments. The viewer must bend down, assuming a posture of submission or supplication to see the image. What one observes is Pau repeatedly trying to sit up and banging her head against the underside of the furniture, each impact accompanied by the sound of metal slamming. The title carries two meanings: *Bik* and *Chu* ("jade" and "pearl") are common girls' names in Hong Kong, evoking the preciousness and constraint of feminine identity, while the three characters (碧麗珠) together spell out the Chinese name for the famous furniture polish Pledge. The work renders visible the simmering frustrations of women confined by the rigid expectations of Hong Kong society.

By the mid-1990s, Pau was one of Hong Kong's most active artists and one of its most overextended cultural workers. She was running Videotage, while juggling her real job that paid the bills. The former role had become a full-time effort of grant-writing, management, and community organizing. She advocated at conferences, and chaired and served on committees for the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, teaching herself the bureaucratic language of cultural policy. And she was still making work, squeezed into the days after leaving the hospital and the administrative labor at Videotage.

Pau eventually found herself at a crossroads, and the toll became visible in works like *Recycling Cinema* (1998), a melancholy yet potent 20-minute meditation on loss, movement, and stasis. It pairs surveillance tapes of an anonymous highway—cars flowing smoothly like blood through a vein—with handheld night-driving recordings shot by Pau herself, the camera drifting across lane markings, streetlights smearing into luminous streaks. The work was made as Videotage was preparing to leave its squatter home at the Oil Street Artist Village, a former government depot where arts groups had occupied abandoned buildings, and simultaneously as a significant romantic relationship was ending. In 2001, she updated *Recycling Cinema* into a kinetic video installation after the work was selected to be shown at the Venice Biennale that year. The video images, projected from two panning tripods onto a curved paper screen, never fully align, poetically capturing the solitude and sadness of urban life: how surveillance footage loops endlessly, how memories replay, but also, the way Hong Kong constantly tears down and rebuilds, leaving no trace of what came before. The tone is elegiac, exhausted, a love letter to a city that is always disappearing.

The demands of Videotage and Microwave pulled Pau further from her practice. She resigned from Videotage's board in 2013, passing the organization to younger hands. A small retrospective at Para Site in 2018, "Ellen Pau: What About Home Affairs?," curated by Freya Chou, introduced her work to a new generation of Hong Kong artists, curators, and collectors who had grown up after the handover and knew the city only as a Special Administrative Region, not the colonial trepidation that shaped her early work. The show was a homecoming, but also a departure—the first time she was able to look back at her own career with any real distance.

In May this year, Pau received her first institutional midcareer survey, again curated by Chou, but at SculptureCenter in New York. Since its founding in 1928, the kunsthalle has championed oft-overlooked artists working at the periphery of established categories. That it is happening in New York, the city where she shot the tender scenes in *Song of the Goddess* during her 1991 residency, carries its own quiet symmetry. For an artist who built her practice in near isolation from established art-world circuits, the retrospective is less a return than a belated acknowledgment: the work was always there, just waiting to be seen.

The M+ and Art Basel co-commission followed the 2018 Para Site jumpstart, which led to a renewed interest in her work, and with it, the strange, satisfying logic of a career that had always been about constructing something larger: an artist who had spent decades arguing that video deserved a place in the establishment, finally projected across the edifice of the institution itself.

The Shape of Light drew on sources that ran through Pau's entire practice: the female body, the electromagnetic properties of light, the relationship between video and performance, and the motif of the lighthouse that first appeared in her 1993–95 work *Great Movement*. The Heart Sutra, translated into sign language on a façade overlooking Victoria Harbour, was both a public gesture and a deeply private one. The Sanskrit mantra, *gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha* ("Gone, gone, everyone gone to the other shore, awakening"), is about letting go, and was performed in silence for a city that had undergone a great deal of suffering—the divisive 2019 protests, followed immediately by the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, Pau was inspired by lighthouses for direction, resilience, and overcoming obstacles.

The optical and performative elements were equally layered. Electromagnetic waves—the invisible frequencies that carry television signals, radio broadcasts, the data of our daily lives—were visualized as shimmering light. Inside the museum, at sunset, Tibetan singing bowls and gongs were played. The sound baths were part of the performance, designed to vibrate through the bodies of the audience, creating a physical experience of the sonic waves that paralleled the visual waves on the façade.

Pau had said in 1996 that she doubted video would ever gain academic, institutional recognition in Hong Kong. She was wrong—or rather, the wait was longer than anyone would have wished. What she built in the meantime, through stubbornness and ingenuity and a refusal to wait for permission, was the foundation on which the recognition eventually rested. The lighthouse, it turned out, was her.