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Staying Power: Ellen Pau Examines a City in Constant Motion

At SculptureCenter, the pioneer of early video presents a portrait of Hong Kong

By Kelly Ma



Ellen Pau, *Operation Theatre*, 1995, video, black-and-white, sound, 7 minutes 24 seconds. Installation View. Photo: Charles Benton.

Through August 16, 2026—Curated by Freya Chou, “Ellen Pau: She Moves” introduces American audiences to the self-taught Hong Kong–based video

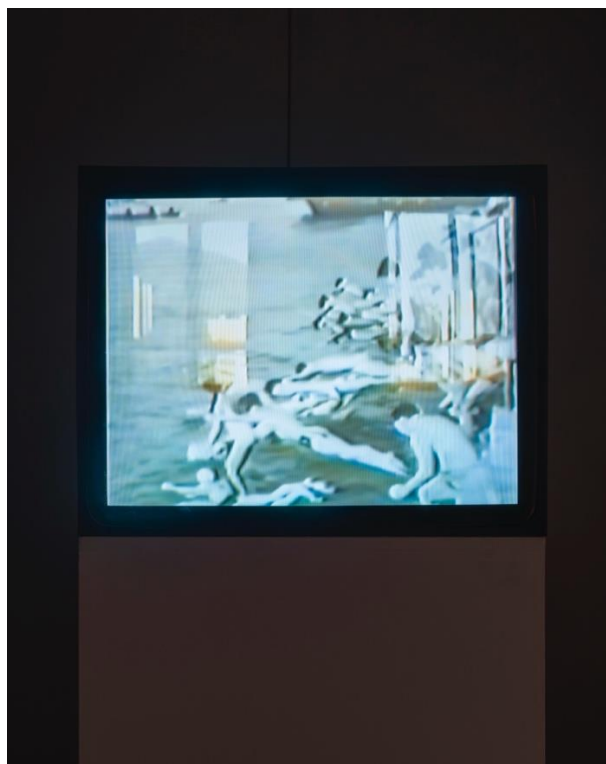
artist. Tracing her career through works spanning 1988 to the present, the exhibition explores Pau's fascination with technological obsolescence, her feminist agenda, and her dedication to a type of site-responsiveness that places her work in dialogue with its surroundings—both historical and architectural. "She Moves," blurs the artist out of focus and reveals, instead, a portrait of Hong Kong that is largely elided in mainstream foreign media. The exhibition begins outside, with three vertical panels featuring traditional Chinese scrolling text in neon colors affixed to SculptureCenter's facade. Their placement recalls the signage commonly seen throughout Hong Kong, while the title of the work, *Pledge: Bik Lai Chu #4, 1995/2026*, a triple entendre, is exemplary of the artist's linguistic play. "Pledge" refers to China's fifty-year "one country, two systems" promise, which allows Hong Kong to maintain its legal independence, separate from mainland China. "*Bik Lai Chu*," on the other hand, is the Cantonese pronunciation of the Chinese title of the work, each character can be part of a feminine name, together the phonetic translation for Pledge, a popular brand of cleaning products. Flowing through the banners are short Chinese phrases drawn from business lingo (anything you want), religious truisms (god loves all), and political slogans (horses will still race). The latter quip is attributed to Deng Xiaoping's reassurance to Hong Kongers, amid a wave of emigration, that life would continue as before, following the 1997 handover from Britain to China. Read together at speed, each pledge trailing into the next, the integrity of these statements suddenly appears ridiculous. Pau, ever aware of the slipperiness of language, asks what gets lost—but also what endures through—in Hong Kong's trilingual and tricultural setup.



Ellen Pau, *Pledge: Bik Lai Chu #4*, 1995/2026, LED Panels. Installation View. Photo: Charles Benton.

Once inside the galleries, visitors encounter the artist's work installed along—and occasionally obstructing—several arched corridors that wind through SculptureCenter's lower level. The conceit makes viewers zigzag back and forth to see various works in the exhibition, essentially mimicking the motion of the panning camera in *Recycling Cinema*, 2000, an early and iconic work highlighting the camera as an extension of the human eye. For twenty-four hours, Pau's lens followed the directions of traffic on a stretch of highway, shooting from the high-rise building where Videotage (the media art collective cofounded by Pau in 1986) had its office. The grainy footage and documentary simplicity belie a complex subtext: the constant flux of regimes, money, goods, and people in this vibrant port city. What stays?

This roving restlessness is palpable throughout the exhibition. *Diversion*, 1990, shows historical footage of the Cross Harbour Race from the 1960s, an annual swim competition where thousands enthusiastically jump into Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour. Decontextualized, the footage calls to mind the Freedom Swimmers, who risked their lives by swimming from Guangzhou in Communist China to Hong Kong between the 1950s and 1980s. In 1990, another rush of mainland immigrants arrived after the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre. Since 2020, immigration has also moved in other ways, with an exodus of foreign passport-holding Hong Kongers and expats in response to the newly imposed National Security Law and frustration with the city's Covid policies. Movement to and from Hong Kong is a perennially relevant and recurring theme in Pau's work. In *Diversion*, it's hard to tell where the swimmers are headed, the ambiguity amplified by the Chinese title's Cantonese slang "unable to reach either bank"—an apt description of Hong Kong's perpetually schizophrenic state.



Ellen Pau, *Diversion*, 1990, video converted to 4K with AI, color, sound, 5 minutes 40 seconds. Installation view. Photo: Charles Benton.

Premiering in this exhibition for the first time since its creation in 1995 is *Operation Theatre*, shown on a small TV monitor perched over a banister, its placement recalling a security camera. Indeed, Pau extracted and edited the footage from closed-circuit surveillance video in the hospital where she worked as a radiographer for nearly forty years until her retirement in 2021, a job she maintained alongside her artistic career. *Operation Theatre* features doctors, nurses, and patients passing through a busy intersection at the entrance of her old department. In an echo of the X-ray images Pau made at the hospital, the figures in the video are rendered semitransparent via long exposure, one of numerous analog editing techniques favored by the artist. The Chinese title of the work alludes to hospitals as liminal spaces of life, death, illness, and healing, a suggestion amplified by Pau's soundtrack over the final credits: a percussion segment from Chinese opera used for scene changes—Hong Kong in eternal transition.