

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE · INDEPENDENT AND FREE

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Ellen Pau: *She Moves*

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Ellen Pau, *Pledge: I Can Only Tell It to Strangers* 碧麗珠系列：我只跟不相識的說 (detail), 1996/2018. Single-channel video installation (color, sound); found object, mirror, latex, string. Original format: Video 8. 1:00 minute (loop); installation dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and SculptureCenter, New York. Photo: Charles Benton.

How does one speak about Hong Kong today? The stories we tell about the city have been overdetermined by the timeline of handover and the postcolonial nostalgia it inaugurated. Contemporary art in Hong Kong was institutionalized in this same period, as artists like Ellen Pau, alongside Danny Yung's performance group Zuni Icosahedron and others, formalized resource structures around their practices. Pau's first retrospective exhibition in the United States, *Ellen Pau: She Moves* highlights the ways Pau's work bears the preoccupations of this formative moment and garners a thick, affective description of alienation during Hong Kong's interstitial colonial period, between the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 and the advent of its fulfillment in 1997.

The exhibition includes mainstays of Pau's oeuvre—like *Recycling Cinema* 循環影院 (2000), installed as it was shown at Hong Kong's inaugural Venice Biennale pavilion in 2001, and her found-footage works *Diversion* 兩頭唔到岸 (1990) and *Song of the Goddess* 似是故人來 (1992), on the anticipatory exodus from Hong Kong and a pop cultural archive of lesbian love, respectively—alongside less widely exhibited installations and new work that reflects on more recent political developments.

Pledge: Bik Lai Chu #4 碧麗珠系列 4 (1995/2026) frames the show in LED shopfront signs mounted along SculptureCenter's brutalist façade. Saccharine promissory slogans tick by in candy colors in the transposed vernacular of Sinophone urban space, just as at home in Long Island City as in Hong Kong. These flighty commitments, rendered as transparent kitsch, perform language's thinness when conscripted to the tyranny of commerce. The inclusion of phrases like 普世價值 [universal values] extends the work's critique to the ironies of statecraft wielding enlightenment rationalism—the foundation of British common law, exported globally through colonization. As recent history attests in both Hong Kong and the US, language is as easily evacuated of consequence as it is co-opted and weaponized in the convenience of state and property interests. Though the written word is regarded with reverent durability, Pau reminds us that it is as spectral and unreliable as image.



Ellen Pau: *Operation Theatre* 行動劇場, 1995. Video (B&W, sound). Original format: VHS, 4:3. 7:24 minutes. Courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong and New York. Courtesy SculptureCenter, New York. Photo: Charles Benton.

The alienation wrought by this culture of necessitated discernment saturates the exhibition with a haunting loneliness heightened by the venue's cragged tunnels. The surveilling eye of *Operation Theatre* 行動劇場 (1995), made with CCTV footage at the hospital where Pau worked as a

radiographer, and the roving camera of *Recycling Cinema* look out upon the world at a remove. People and vehicles flow by, their corporeality abstracted through ghostly transparency or blur, while the listless eye falls out of time, unable to enter the stream with them. In the earliest work on view, *She Moves 她去* (1988), the body is absent entirely. Vera Lynn's 1939 song "We'll Meet Again" shores up an earlier moment of colonial rupture—when Japanese forces occupied Hong Kong for almost four years during World War II—as a projection of water droplets makes the wall appear as if sweating or crying, the leaky persistence of historical memory in the built environment even evacuated of witness.

Elsewhere, lone figures bring somatic form to collective unease. In *Luminosity (in progress)* (2026), a performer communicating in sign language is slowly enveloped in darkness, contrasting the hypervisibility of its pendant work, *The Shape of Light 光之凝* (2022), originally made for M+'s billboard-like public façade along the Kowloon skyline. Another iteration in the "Pledge" series, which punctuates the show and uses the artist's body to traverse geopolitical and affective scales of subjection, *Pledge: Bik Lai Chu 碧麗珠* (1993/2018), installed roughly at life-size, tucks a doubled figure into a recess, where she slams her head repeatedly against the walls. The work's metallic thud echoes throughout the exhibition, a sensory reminder of the steady march of time toward 2047, when the "One Country, Two Systems" framework expires.



Ellen Pau, *Pledge: Bik Lai Chu 碧麗珠*, 1993/2018. Two-channel video installation (color, sound); panel. Original format: Video 8, 4:3. 1:00 minute (loop); installation dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong and New York. Courtesy SculptureCenter, New York. Photo: Charles Benton.

Pledge: I Can Only Tell It to Strangers 碧麗珠系列：我只跟不相識的說 (1996/2018) captures the artist within a small shrine, whose mirror reflects the image onto a translucent latex screen cast from the figure's back, a fleshy, undead apparition tensed by red strings of fate at its edges. In its original fabrication, Pau used images of her own body, describing herself as “some kind of barometer”—the body as somatic archive of political weather as Hong Kongers are relegated to legal death on borrowed time. The iteration at SculptureCenter complicates the piece with questions of intimacy, where Mandy Wong, Pau's partner, serves as the proxy figure.

In the central tunnel of the exhibition space, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone* 冇花冇假 (2026) updates the account of Hong Kong's interstitial coloniality with recent expansions of censorship. An audiovisual installation composed of wax, candles, film, and video elements that reference what used to be annual June 4 vigils commemorating the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, the work registers the erosion of the public sphere under the sweeping national security law of 2020—passed to quell the incandescent protests of the late 2010s—and later expanded in 2024. The motley assemblage, scattered sparsely along the ground and unfinished brick walls, reads almost like a storage area to which the remnants of a raucous party have been retired.



Ellen Pau, *She Moves* 她去, 1988. Single-channel video installation (color, sound); radio, curtains. Original format: Video 8, 4:3. 2:41 minutes; installation dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong and New York. Courtesy SculptureCenter, New York. Photo: Charles Benton.

Obscured from the exhibition are Pau's collaborative and organizational contributions to Hong Kong's media art scene via Videotage and Microwave International New Media Arts Festival, which advocate for public broadcasting and contemporary arts funding. Instead, the show focuses on the ways Pau's work emblemizes the dominant narration of Hong Kong's recent history through the cultural studies vocabulary of disappearance, advanced by theorist Ackbar Abbas. As a pioneer of experimental media and contemporary art in Asia, Pau deserves her flowers and this retrospective comes long overdue. Beyond Pau's work, however, the calcification of disappearance as nostalgic shorthand for a melancholic Hong Kong subjectivity, and its overrepresentation in curatorial and artistic engagements with the region, has had the effect of displacing more rigorously materialist analysis that would illuminate new and developing facets of political life in the region. Likewise, it risks exceptionalizing Hong Kong's situation, particularly for audiences in the US, where an understanding of Chinese global statecraft is foreclosed by our own domestic propaganda. We would do well to remember that the contraction of the space of appearance is a globally pervasive phenomenon as states, including the US, work mimetically and collaboratively to secure legitimacy. Alongside presenting a long-overlooked artist's practice, the exhibition helpfully occasions such conversations on how we might craft alternative frameworks for curating and critically engaging cultural production from the region.