

The New York Times

QUEENS

Ellen Pau

Through Aug. 16. SculptureCenter, 44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City; 718-361-1750, sculpture-center.org.



Ellen Pau Pledge, “Bik Lai Chu 碧麗珠,” 1993/2018, two-channel video installation (color, sound). Ellen Pau, via Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong/New York, and SculptureCenter, New York; Photo by Charles Benton

Strong smells are deployed by Ellen Pau, too, in her first U.S. survey show, the video-heavy undertaking “She Moves.”

A pleasant fragrance that fills SculptureCenter traces its source to a single diffuser in the basement passages where Pau's show unfolds. The components of the scent in the show are organic but can smell similar to tear gas, the substance Hong Kong pro-democracy protesters faced down with umbrellas and masks.

Pau, 65, a prominent video artist and a driving force behind Hong Kong's media-art scene, worked for nearly four decades in radiology. One of her videos manipulates her hospital's surveillance footage to create a ghostly scene of doctors and nurses passing through a hallway, fading in and out of view.

Hong Kong's politics and colonial history haunt many works on display. In the video installation "Pledge: Bik Lai Chu 碧麗珠," a hunched, seated woman in a lacy black top repeatedly clangs her head against an enclosure, a loud metallic thud accompanying each collision. Does her entrapment symbolize societal expectations that stifle women and queer Hong Kongers like Pau herself? Or astronomical housing costs that lead to shoe-box-size apartments? Or the isolation of contemporary life?

A video titled "52Hz" addresses that isolation and includes a narrative about a Hong Kong sex worker and A.S.M.R. video creator whose body is found weeks after she dies, an odor from her apartment finally alerting neighbors to her absence. Once again, a pungent smell equates with violence and despair. *DAWN CHAN*