

Hong Kong artist Ellen Pau looks at political promises and cynicism in New York show

Ellen Pau's New York exhibition 'She Moves' features 15 major pieces that document life, culture and unfulfilled political pledges



Laura Luo

Published: 9:15pm, 13 Jul 2026

New Yorkers used to their city's relentless noise and movement will find a familiar urban pace and intensity reflected in the works of Hong Kong video artist Ellen Pau.

At the video pioneer's first North American survey, now on view at New York's SculptureCenter, her poignant exploration of unfulfilled pledges also has resonance amid mounting cynicism about politics in the US and beyond.

"She Moves," curated by Freya Chou, features 15 major works dating from 1988 to the present, and charts how Pau documents everyday urban life and Hong Kong's shifting political and cultural landscape through an ambiguous yet poetic lens.

The 65-year-old artist's stateside debut – accompanied by the screening of major works and a talk at the Museum of Modern Art in May – is long overdue. Born in British Hong Kong in 1961, Pau has been a tireless champion of the city's experimental video art scene for decades, and continues to do so long after the 1997 handover to China.

A largely self-taught artist who produced her first Super 8 film in 1984, she co-founded Videotage, a pioneering media art collective, in 1986, and later established the Microwave International New Media Arts Festival in 1996. Alongside her prolific art career, she worked as a radiographer at Queen Mary Hospital for nearly 40 years. This background in medical imaging fundamentally shaped her sensitivity towards capturing, manipulating and interpreting electronic images.

In New York, Pau enters into a long-awaited dialogue with a lineage of pioneering video artists such as Nam June Paik, and Steina and Woody Vasulka, whom she first encountered through magazines early in her career.

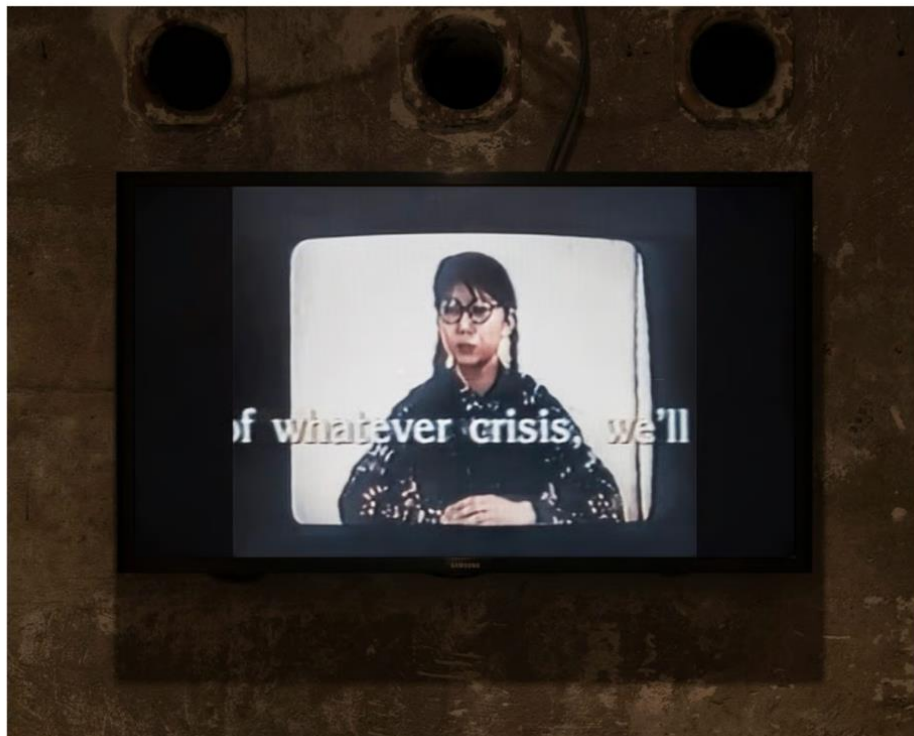
Chou, who also curated Pau's survey at Hong Kong's Para Site in 2018, says "Pau's works are about the human condition, and her central motif is the relationship between image, science and art."

Lorraine Kiang, co-founder of Kiang Malingue Gallery, which represents the artist, describes Pau's works as "universal". Pau's works reflect not only the alienating, fast-changing urban experience, but also the human condition of

navigating political and technological shifts, love and loss, pledges and lies, she says.

At the New York show, visitors first encounter *Pledge: Bik Lai Chu* #4 (1995/2026), displayed prominently against the SculptureCenter's steel facade. The work embodies Pau's tongue-in-cheek approach, with three vertical LED screens flashing up a rotation of Chinese phrases sampled from political speeches ("fair and just"), advertising slogans ("meticulously handmade"), idioms and local slang ("have anything one wants").

By juxtaposing political rhetoric with exaggerated commercial slogans, Pau hints that grand political promises might be nothing more than false advertising.



TV Game of the Year (1989) by Ellen Pau. The six-minute video features Pau's friends mirroring the gestures made by Chinese Premier Li Peng in his televised address after the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in Beijing. Photo: Charles Benton

A few more minutes of looking at the LED screens would reveal that several of the phrases employ a “one ... two ...” structure, such as “one night of stay with two meals” and the Chinese equivalent of “kill two birds with one stone”.

This phrasing unmistakably recalls “one country, two systems”, the framework introduced by Beijing, promising that Hong Kong would retain its own economic and administrative systems following the handover.

Created just before that transition, the updated series continues to challenge viewers to consider whether pledges – be they in advertisements or constitutional frameworks – are truly being upheld, just as the sting of unfulfilled political promises resonates globally in today’s volatile geopolitical climate.

The rest of the exhibition unfolds in the venue’s basement, an idiosyncratic space defined by low ceilings and exposed brickwork. The architecture feels custom-made for the presentation: artworks set in alcoves or along narrow tunnels force visitors to crouch, lean and squeeze past one another, mirroring the physical experience of navigating a crowded metropolis.

The stairs lead down to *Recycling Cinema* (2000), a seminal video installation projected along a curved paper screen. This piece was first exhibited at the Hong Kong Pavilion during the 49th Venice Biennale in 2001.

Pau captures Hong Kong’s tempo by embedding complex layers of movement: footage of shifting traffic on the Island Eastern Corridor over 24 hours is combined with a camera panning back and forth. Adding to this, the projector itself sits on a motorised head, physically panning across the screen. These layered, oscillating movements create a mesmerising, slightly woozy effect. The city, just as the exhibition title suggests, is always moving.

Pledge: Bik Lai Chu (1993/2018) was the first pre-handover work in the series named after the popular brand of household cleaner and the appropriation of the English name in Cantonese. This two-channel video features the artist continuously banging her head against a hard surface as she sits cross-legged

inside a cramped space. Installed in a similarly cramped, squat alcove in the SculptureCenter basement, the claustrophobia and helplessness in this work about sociopolitical uncertainty and the confines of gender roles are amplified.



Pau (right) and her spouse Mandy Wong at the SculptureCenter in New York. Photo: Tiffany Sia

In *Song of the Goddess* (1992), New Yorkers will recognise opening scenes filmed at the 34th Street subway station. Pau shot the footage during a six-month Asian Cultural Council fellowship in 1992, when she attended a workshop by the pioneering American lesbian filmmaker Barbara Hammer. Adopting Hammer's technique of superimposing moving images, Pau recounts a queer love story little known outside Hong Kong.

She overlays the subway footage with scenes from a Cantonese opera starring the legendary female duo Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin. Yam and Pak, who frequently played lovers on stage, remained a secret couple off-screen for nearly 40 years until Yam's death in 1989. *Song of the Goddess* features romantic scenes of the pair exchanging gazes and embracing.

These moments merge beautifully with the shuttling subway trains, as classical opera music fades into ambient city noise. By excavating this hidden history, Pau, who identifies as a lesbian, makes visible a tender, coded and once-taboo intimacy that also blurs the line between traditional and modern, reality and appearance.

Emerging from the basement and stepping back onto the street, visitors will find that the rhythms of Pau's Hong Kong sync perfectly with New York's own.

"Ellen Pau: She Moves", SculptureCenter, 44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City, New York, until August 16, 2026. For more information, visit sculpture-center.org.