

Hong Kong Art History Research – Phase II
A Collaboration between Hong Kong Museum of Art and Asia Art Archive

Transcript of Edited Interview 訪談文字節錄

白禮仁 訪談

Interview with Robert O'Brien

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白禮仁工作室

Robert O'Brien's studio

於長洲生活與工作的經歷

On living and working on Cheung Chau

O'Brien: And also Cheung Chau. I mean Cheung Chau was just and still is a living place that when you came off the waterfront, "Bang!" it was all there that the market was right in front of the pier. You came crash into it. And then, there was the countryside, you went to the country, there were cows everywhere. And it was just everything was alive and vibrant. And I think that is the whole thing that shook me in terms of living here which I have never seen before was what I call the sense of detail. Mind you, Hong Kong is doing everything it can to get rid of it now. But then, the sense of detail was absolutely phenomenal. What I mean is that there were just so many things that were going on. In Europe, everything was turning into supermarket. Everything, even the lighting in the street was all the same lighting. In Cheung Chau, it did not have much street lighting. So you got used to darkness. You got used to people were doing something. You got into a shop, and they were all having dinner or something like that, and a 6 year-old girl came and kind of sort out whatever you wanted to do. So there were just so many different things happening at the same level. Whereas somehow in Europe everything was being cleaned out, the markets were gone. All those bit of exchanges that were going on were bit by bit eradicated and everything was becoming more and more regularised and quieter. When I first came here, of course you see what I did in Europe was very different because that I was basically always living in an inside space. I was living in Central London, I lived

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in a basement flat. And everything I did was kind of like contained in a space. So in a way that a lot of my paintings had become what I called “windows” and “doors”, because when you were in London, you always went out to go in. You never went out to go out. Whereas here, you went out, and somehow you were constantly out.

1976–1979 年於香港大學校外課程部教學的經歷

Teaching at Department of Extra Mural Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1976-1979

O’Brien: At that time I have met Martha Lesser, who was then the organiser of the Extra Mural Studies Department at Hong Kong University and she asked me to join, just simply because the people that she had teaching there, apart from practical subjects but in terms of theoretical like art history and things like that, nobody had ever seen anything. But I was living in Bloomsbury in London, actually in the Great Ormond Street which is right in the middle of London. The British Museum was round the corner for me. The Tate Gallery is a bicycle ride. I was forever looking at de Gegas, Seurat, Piero della Francesca. So I kind of lived with their presence — the Tate Gallery, of course then it was just Tate Gallery in Millbank, and things like the Horniman Museum or the Dulwich Museum or all these little places in London. And then in Paris when I stayed with my mother I would be in the Louvre a lot or Jeu de Paume or Musée Guimet. So I absorbed a lot in terms of looking. And all the people that taught at the Department of Extra Mural Studies had never looked. So all they spoke was from books. That was what I saw in Hong Kong, that everybody did something by books. And the first students I met were all people wanting to make a decision to do something in their lives, not to continue something but to do something else. So their basic need was to look away from books. But they went to the Extra Mural Studies, they went to whatever colleges as it were, they were all about books, always about how to do it in this way. So actually I think Martha felt that perhaps I would teach in a different way. And I introduced music. Nobody had ever heard Monteverdi together with late Renaissance painting. And if you listen to Guqin while you look at a Chinese landscape painting, you can make a connection too. So sometimes you are mixing different things together, and that is what I did.

香港英國文化協會個展，1980 年

Solo Exhibition at the Hong Kong British Council, 1980

O’Brien: It was not support from the British at all. It was just the support from one madman

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who was running the British Council at that time. Before there was a kind of very dreary affair, then this live wire, I cannot remember his name, but he expanded the whole role of language teaching and all sorts of approaches to English. And it was suggested to him that what about having an art exhibition. He wanted to look at my works and he did, and said, "it's Okay, good." And that was from some friends here, who were teaching in the British Council. So that was my connection there. But that was simply because they were able to see my things. I mean there was a bit of luck on my part. That was how it happened. In term of the reviews, there were a few Chinese reviews, but not much. I was on television, and there was a whole program on television talking about my work.

Nasar: This was after the British Council show?

O'Brien: Yes, this was done by the British Council, they did all the PR work and all that kind of stuff. It was very professional. But the art reviewer, Nigel Cameron, he did not review it very well. I think one of the reasons is, because he rang me up the night before the exhibition and wanted to become my agent and also take a percentage. But I said, "Ah? I'm sorry, this is British Council-do." Apparently I had done a very bad thing by talking nastily to "god". So basically he gave me a rough time ever since. The people who wrote about art at that time were very nice, they were saying nice things about you but it did not really go anywhere. There was no critical writing. Hong Kong is very... it still is and perhaps even more. It has always been very divided in a lot of ways. And it was then, a very colonial side to it, the British on one side and the Chinese on the other.

Nasar: And where were you?

O'Brien: Kind of somewhere in the middle. It was really "Out of Context" that I was working with people like Yank Wong, Josh Hon.

《外圍》，1987 年

"Out of Context", 1987

O'Brien: The "Out of Context" exhibition is, I cannot remember how I got into it but I did. I think it was because I knew Yank Wong, and I think it might be also Antonio Mak. But the person who organised that was Christine Loh and also Sandra Walters. There were a whole group of organisers. It wasn't the artists...They were the kind of mamas and papas and the artists were the kids. We would meet in this old house. And I think I met Oscar Ho there. He just came back from Canada. He was one of the participants. There were a lot of people. It was the first time that I came across

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them, before that I had no idea all these people were around. I mean it was like a who's who of Hong Kong. But the reason it was "out of context" was nothing was for sale, which was very much the statement of the exhibition, because everything here always had to have something to do with money, which is why art was not exactly a high on the list. That unfortunately has always been here, that monetary thing. "Out of Context" was entirely about the issue of something without a commercial value. So there were so many different kinds of displays going on. Ricky Yeung was in a cage, he was the starving artist, refusing to eat during the duration of the exhibition. And then somebody else, an Italian whom I had never heard of produced a whole loaf of a huge bakery, representing private parts. So there was an artist, I cannot remember the name, who laid in a bed, basically living there as a work of art. And there were paintings, there was assemblage, there were paintings on the floor. So there were all sorts of issues of things. But the interesting thing was that you had Hugh Chiverton, who came along, and David Clarke, he had just arrived. So it was actually a quite important moment.

《強勢以外》展覽，1997年

"Being Minorities", 1997

O'Brien: This was Oscar Ho who was putting things together. I think Oscar has a wicked sense of humour, that's why I quite like about most of the exhibitions he put up, because there were always a little bit of sardonic humour lurking around somewhere. I think it was interesting that Macau was represented by Konstantin Bessmertny and I was representing Hong Kong. I met great people there, like Montien Boonma, he was a beautiful man. And the Vietnamese guy, I cannot remember his name now.

Nasar: Vu Dan Tan.

O'Brien: Yes, Vu Dan Tan, he is lovely and with big bossy Russian wife. This wonderful bunch of people they actually all came to Cheung Chau. We had a great time. It was wonderful. It was just lovely. I think what Oscar was seeing, and it was a very interesting thing which I certainly came across when I first came to Hong Kong, that people were very ambivalent about being Chinese. In a sense they were passionate about being Chinese but at the same time worried very much about it. So it was kind of a divided thing because of there was one thing they could not agree with across the border but nevertheless they were compatriots. So that was a very divided kind of thing. And as it was going towards 1997, there were a lot of people beginning to fall in lines of saying going towards China. A lot of people felt very strongly in being

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Chinese. I think Oscar had the premonition that a lot of minorities would be marginalized because of it. So actually the Vietnamese, the Indians, the Pakistanis, the Thais, all the people that are here in Hong Kong would be kind of marginalized in one way or another, and the English. It was actually a kind of statement of what he felt that could be on being a minority, but at the same time looking at their creativity. Even Philippines, that's right, it was Sid, he did a very beautiful installation, and it was the "Prayer for the Maids". It was a very beautiful exhibition. And what I loved about it was that we were so different, but it worked. Somehow the whole space worked, even at that funny space of the Arts Centre. I think it has something to do with feelings.
