

Wong Hau Kwei's ink paintings show the enduring qualities of Hong Kong's landscapes

A solo exhibition of ink paintings by artist Wong Hau Kwei, "Serenity • Hong Kong" is an exploration of the city's urban and natural landscapes. Presented at Artspace K, these glimmering works capture a peaceful, subdued version of Hong Kong, in sharp contrast to its reputation as a bustling international hub. The works, made from 2009 to 2022, depict a range of locations: iconic landmarks of the city, scenes from daily urban life, as well as images of nature in and around Wong's home in Clearwater Bay and beyond. Through his use of light and shadow, Wong's paintings capture these landscapes in moments of transition; yet the body of work comes together to present the enduring qualities of Hong Kong, amidst constant change.

The choice to feature a large proportion of works set by Hong Kong's seascapes seems fitting, given Artspace K's location in Repulse Bay. Travelling to the gallery is an exercise in drifting away from the frenetic energy of the city's urban centre, as one moves through the southern coast of Hong Kong Island. The journey to the gallery is marked by scenes of sunlight glimmering against the gentle waves of the sea; a visual motif that recurs across Wong's works, such as in the case of *Glistening Light on Water*, or *Shadow of Clouds*. In these works, the artist alternates between long and short dashes of ink to create the effect of light fragmenting upon bodies of water. Wong generates a sense of calm amidst movement through his careful attention to detail in his ink paintings of the sea, producing a sense of continuity between the natural landscape just outside of the gallery and the interiors of the exhibition space.

Interspersed between Wong's paintings of the natural landscapes are more familiar scenes of Hong Kong's urban and residential spaces. What creates a sense of visual harmony across his work is the continual and restrained use of colour, limited to shades of black, white, red, orange and yellow. Wong seems particularly interested in drawing attention to the subtle shifts in light across surfaces, and the gradations of colour across a given landscape. This manifests itself most dramatically in *Hoping*, which depicts the sea on the brink of daybreak. A glimmer of the rising sun sits at the horizon point of the scene, resulting in a vibrant splash of light in the sky, which is then reflected in more diffuse tones across the calm morning sea. At the same time, vertical bars of gray score the sea's surface, as the clouds in the sky interrupt the vibrancy of the morning light. A similar interest in the gradations of light is seen within an urban context in *Good Morning Hong Kong*, which teeters between the shadowed lines of the city's

buildings still in slumber, and the bright luminescence of morning light hitting against its windowed surfaces.

While the treatment of light is consistent across Wong's paintings, there are marked differences in the textures of his works when representing natural and urban landscapes. Lion Rock captures the monumental scale of the famed mountain through its use of blank space. A haze of clouds takes up a large proportion of the triptych, Lion's Rock peaking out only across the top third of the work. The craggy surface of the mountain and the gradual change in opacity as the clouds take over the iconic location stand in stark contrast to sharp lines in *Twilight at Victoria Harbour*, which displays the sloping yet crisp lines of the Hong Kong Convention Centre. Here, the change in light through colour sits within the frames of each panel of glass, highlighting the angularity of the city's architecture. The difference between Wong's treatment of natural and built space is apparent within *Twilight at Victoria Harbour* itself, as diffused light frames a singular boat travelling through Victoria Harbour at the bottom of the painting.

Other features play into the idiosyncratic visual language of Wong Hau Kwei's paintings. A key element at play is the interest in scale and a sense of open space through constraining the proportions of his works, seen in the use of narrow, horizontal canvases for works such as the ones in the *Clear Water Abode Series*. The breadth of these paintings, often featuring solitary sailing boats and a narrow stream of movement behind them, emphasises the expanse of nature and the sea in these scenes. Vertical space is similarly used in the *Sketch of Clear Water Abode* series. Even with his smaller works, such as *Morning* or *Village House*, Wong gives space to the clouds above the residential houses which form the subjects of these paintings. Open space is thus a key motif in the artist's works. Another key feature of Wong's works is his use of traditional seals as part of the work. While seals are traditionally used in place of a signature, in the artist's works they often incorporate additional messages. Moreover, such as in the case of the *Sketch of Water Abode* series, Wong often features them prominently in the centre of his works, making them a centre point from which the rest of the landscape emanates.

Through these paintings of Hong Kong, Wong Hau Kwei represents his personal relationship with the city and the symbols it is understood by. This intervention of the personal, alongside the use of urban elements and incorporation of Western watercolour techniques in his work, are ways in which Wong's works can be understood as conversant with the wider traditions of the New Ink Painting Movement. The New Ink

Painting Movement, pioneered by Liu Shou Kwan in the 1970s, was part of the economic and cultural period of transition in the region during that time and was one of the means by which a new Hong Kong identity was formed. Thus Wong Hau Kwei's works might also be understood as part of this articulation of what Hong Kongness means in this contemporary moment; a sentiment reflected in his insistence that "It doesn't matter if [a work uses] avant-garde, traditional or western style; the most important thing is to convey the timely significance of the era."

– by Hayley Wu