

Wong Ping: Politics, Pornography, Giraffes, Oh My!
Article, Alexandra Morris



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It is mid-September; the sun is beating down. A stunning blue sky reveals a vivid and peculiar shape bouncing off of the Victorian red brick. Closer and closer approaching, the shape reveals itself. A red, upside-down heart statue is turning ever so playfully counterclockwise while protruding from a cylinder in the center of the building. Its eyes a fierce orange, its mouth effectively smiling and frowning at the same time. A mirage of sweat caressing the figure's back, or is it the viewer's perspiration trying to enjoy the sculpture in the sweltering heat? A sensation of seduction and tension consumes the air, and rightfully so. This monument and its curves hook you in, yet it is only a tease for what is to come inside.

The Camden Arts Centre presented *Heart Digger* by emerging artist Wong Ping (b. 1984, Hong Kong) to the public on July 5th, 2019. With the leading exhibition in Camden, works had also been displayed in an off-site gallery at 5-6 Cork Street in Mayfair, London. Wongⁱ was awarded the CAC'sⁱⁱ new Emerging Artist Prize during his time at Frieze London in 2018. The prize, created in 2018, was established as part of the Centre's commitment to nurturing and celebrating the most innovative artists of the moment, who have yet to receive the recognition their work deserves (Artomity 2019).

Wong creates artworks across diverse platforms that embody a world of his own. These pieces stem from narratives old and new, whether it is about a weary old man in a park that he encountered in Hong Kong, to Aesop's traditional Fables, he is constantly writing and rewriting his art's story. From the exhibition press release, the CAC states:

“Drawing anecdotally from his own personal encounters, he elaborates his stories into darkly humorous tales that touch on political and cultural anxieties, psycho-sexual taboos, and the perverse complexities of contemporary human relationships,” (Camden Arts Center 2019).

By using fictional fables of his own that act as catalysts within his political narrative against the Hong Kong government, Wong brings to life a myriad of mediums. Often seen in his recent work is a larger-than-life use of sculpture. As described earlier, the show in Camden opened with the *Brick Boner* (2019), breaking through the ceiling of the CAC's reading room. After entering the building, patrons were invited to join one of Wong's sculptures in the garden. While describing his first encounter with the garden space in an interview by *Talk Art*, a podcast hosted by actor Russel Tovey and gallerist Robert Diament, Wong states how he immediately wanted to dig a hole and bury something, “human or animals, I don't know, I just want to do it,”(Wong 2019). In this serene and green environment, you were confronted by a giant, inflatable giraffe. Playing a role as one of his fictitious Fable's, the giraffe's white, cartoon-like bones are exposed while its neck was emerging from a heart shaped grave that Wong had dug himself. The grave was to represent the burial place of the artist's future lover, even though they do not yet exist. The following is a passage from Wong describing this sculpture and the narrative it embodies:

“And so I start digging a heart-shaped hole in the garden. I keep on digging until the shovel meets some kind of tender flesh. I dig further, unearthing a giraffe’s neck, dozens of people struggling to crawl out of its cross-section... Turns out they are Hong Kong’s Chief Executive and officials. They’ve buried the giraffe’s neck in the backyard of the government headquarters so that the Chief Executive and the officials can escape the city quietly... What a way to protect our earth... This hole was meant for my beloved, but these people are not lovely at all,” (Wong 2019).ⁱⁱⁱ

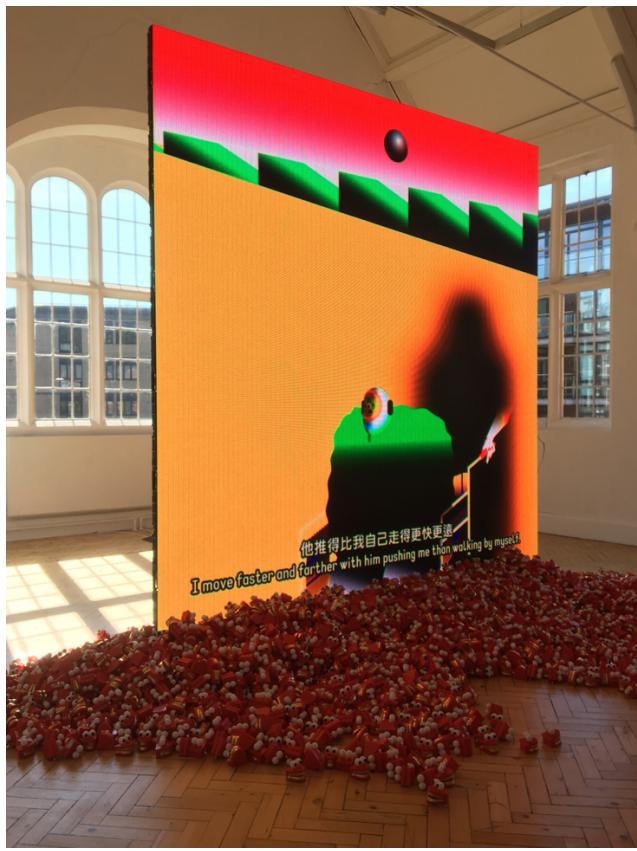


Heart Digger, Camden Arts Centre, 5 July - 15 September, 2019 [image by Alexandra Morris]

It is clear Wong has an immense distrust in his home country’s government. He describes in the same interview that he, too, has taken part in the political protests in Hong Kong. It is through his whimsical sculptures and demonic, yet fairytale-like, animation that he attacks corruption, alienation, and taboos to violence (Artomity 2019).^{iv}

I confidently define Wong as a classic Millennial: ambitious, self-taught, and technologically savvy to the point of over stimulation. Born in Hong Kong in the ‘80s, he had no choice but to join the technological movement to stay afloat, a paralyzing truth most of us now suffer from. Hong Kong’s innovation and technology sector has been at the forefront for new computer graphics and programming skills, and is currently ranked the world’s second-largest based on the Global Innovation Index.^v This computer-dominated environment seems to have molded Wong’s work immensely. He began making animations as a hobby while working in a TV station in Hong Kong. Here he learned the software to work in post-production editing for films, including but not limited to removing wires from stunt men, editing actor’s blemishes and makeup, and in Wong’s own words, “making the body look better” (Wong 2019).^{vi} Using the skills he developed in this line of work and his inspiration from reading Manga^{vii} as a child, he found passion in creating fictional videos of his own.

These animations are soft, bubbly, confusingly hypnotic and take Wong about two months to produce. While watching his work *Dear Can I Give You a Hand* (2019) in the CAC’s third gallery room, the images turned demonic as the film followed an elderly man whose life changes rapidly by the relentless pace of the digital economy. He is a retired widower, gripping to a personal collection of pornographic VHS tapes. The man is being forced out of his home by a younger generation since he cannot keep up with the times. This vision of Wong’s came to be when he was near a park in Hong Kong and saw an old man dragging a black plastic bag quickly to the garbage. Out of unabashed curiosity Wong had the urge to look inside the bag, which was covered in trash, finding nearly mint-condition pornographic tapes. These moments in his life inspire fables like this one, but his enthralment with social media and the unpredictable online



world give them an unparalleled bravado (Artemity 2019).^{viii}

Another theme that is addressed in Wong's work goes beyond the line of comfort in contemporary art. I would be lying if I said I felt at ease in this exhibition. The press release for the show even stated that children under the age of thirteen should be accompanied by an adult, but as you observed adults in these rooms they were much more disturbed than the children were. With develop-

mental ages passed and the outside world's opinions penetrating our brains, there is more of an inclination to psychoanalyze Wong's fables and categorize them as making us as the viewer uneasy. In his *Talk Art* interview, he explicitly explains that he wants to make art for children, because "their brains aren't as closed off and embarrassed" (Wong 2019).^{ix} His piece *Who's the Daddy* (2017) at the CAC, situated in a small and dimly lit room, was surrounded by yellow bean bag chairs begging you to sit and stay awhile. Although the images on the screen are quick, enticing and colorful, the viewer is being given facts ranging from male genitalia to innuendos about racial strife. This topic is valid in the current climate as it affects men around the world, not just in Hong Kong. He makes the comparison that if you do not swing left or swing right then you do not belong, but what about men whose genitalia hang in the middle? What about the peo-

ple in the middle of political lefts and rights who do not want to decide, or can't decide, on a party to swing to? It is questions like these that give Wong's fables the adult messages to fuel their political undertones, while their childlike graphics make them so chilling.

The argument can be made that we are all connected to his fables in some way. Whether it be running from the law, protesting the law, racial profiling, aging or obsessing over social media to name a few. These themes are all current and Wong depicts a cynical world full of them in a sickeningly colorful, larger than life way. For this exhibition to rock the art world in the hot London summer of 2019, Wong's technology-savvy fables have a long road ahead of them.

About the Author

Alexandra Morris was raised in California and currently resides in London, England, while studying for a Masters in Visual Arts Management and Curating from Richmond, the American International University. Her background includes working as a Gallery Assistant for Fabrik Projects in Los Angeles for two years and a fine arts degree in Printmaking and Painting from Sonoma State University.

ⁱ Wong Ping's surname is Wong.

ⁱⁱ Camden Arts Center abbreviated to CAC for the duration of this review.

ⁱⁱⁱ Camden Arts Centre. 2019. "Wong Ping: Heart Digger". <https://www.camdenartscentre.org/press/>.

^{iv} Artomity. 2019. "Wong Ping". ARTOMITY 藝源. <https://artomity.art/2019/09/21/wong-ping/>.

^v Yuen, Jacqueline. 2019. "Innovation and Technology Industry in Hong Kong | HKTDC". *Hong-Kong-Economy-Research.Hktdc.Com*. <http://hong-kong-economy-research.hktdc.com/business-news/article/Hong-Kong-Industry-Profiles/Innovation-and-Technology-Industry-in-Hong-Kong/hkip/en/1/1X000000/1X09U6YK.htm>.

^{vi} Spiritland Productions Ltd. 2019. "Wong Ping". Podcast. *Talk Art*.

^{vii} Manga is a visual narrative art form that has become a multimedia global phenomenon, telling stories with themes from gender to adventure, in real or imagined worlds. https://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/manga.aspx

^{viii} Artomity. 2019. "Wong Ping". ARTOMITY 藝源. <https://artomity.art/2019/09/21/wong-ping/>.

^{ix} Spiritland Productions Ltd. 2019. "Wong Ping". Podcast. *Talk Art*.