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**EVERYTHING**

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# A ROOM WITH A VIEW

Images: Courtesy of Tsang Kin-Wah

He may look innocent but there's a tempest brewing beneath. Like his installations, there is more to Tsang Kin-Wah than meets the eye. One of Hong Kong's most sought after artists opens up to FRAMED about sex, religion and those disturbing floral prints.



Tsang Kin-Wah, *The Fourth Seal - HE Is To No Purpose And HE Wants To Die For The Second Time*, Aichi Triennale, Aichi Arts Center, Nagoya 2010

Imagine yourself standing in a room surrounded by delicate floral wallpaper. You step closer to look at the patterns but recoil in shock. What appeared to be leaves and petals are actually swear words compressed, curved and elongated. From ceiling to floor, every inch of space is covered with spiralling obscenities.

Hong Kong-based artist Tsang Kin-Wah executed this installation, *Interior*, in 2003. He had recently moved to London to study Book Arts and was struggling to adapt. “I was quite angry. I felt a certain dislike and I didn’t belong,” says Tsang who remembers being verbally attacked on the street. It was his first time travelling to a foreign country and he was shocked to encounter racism. “People were nice and polite, but after maybe thirty minutes, I realised the real meaning,” he muses.

By placing viewers inside a beautiful yet hostile environment, Tsang sought to create a similar situation in his art. His wallpaper was inspired by the quintessentially English designs of William Morris, a founder of the 19th Century Arts and Crafts movement. Meanwhile, the foul language was an outpouring of his sentiments against the country with phrases

including: “FUCKALLTHESWEETWORDS”, “FUCKINGFAKE” and “FUCKINGSELF-CONFIDENT.”

When we meet in his Fotan studio, the same angry text envelops the coffee table in front of him. Tsang smiles shyly and confesses, “I had some extra pieces [from the installation] and the table didn’t look very nice.” His blue Nike t-shirt is paint-spattered and three freshly painted canvases with similar floral motifs lie on the floor next to him. Tsang tells me they are commissions from collectors.

After completing his Master’s degree at the London Institute’s Camberwell College of Arts, Tsang quickly shot to fame. Upon returning to Hong Kong, his text paintings caught the attention of the Sovereign Art Foundation and he won their Asian Art Prize in 2005. Later that year he had his first major solo exhibition in the city at John Batten Gallery. It wasn’t long before his works were popping up in New York, Oslo, Miami and Paris. Despite his limited presence in the local art scene, he became one of Hong Kong’s most sought after artists.

Today, he is best known for his meticulous silk-screen paintings that evolved from his *Interior*

installation in England. Of his wallpaper-styled works, Tsang says, “It’s not just in London but also in other places, you really don’t know what people are thinking. There is always a conflict between the first impression and the so-called real thing behind it.”

Tsang himself proves that appearances can be deceiving. Behind his thick-framed glasses, the 34 year-old artist comes across as subdued, mild-mannered, even childlike. Yet as he leans back against the wall, I notice a large white canvas above him. It looks like a plain surface at first but when the light shifts, white thread-like brushstrokes become visible. It is an explicit porn scene, a sharp reminder that Tsang is anything but innocent. This was one of many pornographic images he culled from the Internet in 2008 while exploring social norms relating to sexuality.

“A lot of people [in Hong Kong] think about sex all the time or find prostitutes but you just don’t talk about that and always try to behave like a gentleman,” he says wryly. Tsang began his series of *White Porn* paintings to reflect this conservative attitude and the stigma surrounding sex. Creating subtle works with white paint, he interrogated ideas of purity and filth. “Some people think [sex] is very dirty but actually most of them like it, even people from the church. It’s a basic

thing. It’s human instinct and it can be quite pure if you love someone,” he muses.

The year 2008 was a significant period of growth for the artist, who not only began experimenting with new subject matter but also refined his wallpaper works. “I started to think that my pattern installations felt like they were frozen at a certain point of time. I could feel there was something I should do to make them come alive,” says Tsang. Gradually, sound began to play a more prominent role in his works. “I found that there was some kind of atmosphere or tension that I could get.” Using soundscapes, he amplified the effect of his painted words and drew viewers deeper into his writing.

By 2009, Tsang ventured into the terrain of video art adding yet another dimension to his work. His first video installation was titled *The First Seal - It Would Be Better If You Have Never Been Born*. He set up a small black room and projected white text onto the ceiling. The work began innocently with words like “THE NIGHT”, “THE KISS”, “THE SOUL”, moving in straight lines with quiet, bell-like sounds. Gradually, the tone of the work shifted. Words became sentences, sounds grew louder and viewers were suddenly implicated in the text. Accusatory sentences



Tsang Kin-Wah, *The First Seal*, 17th Biennale of Sydney, Cockatoo Island, Sydney, 2010

