**Review: Tsang Kin Wah's White Cube**

Mark Johnson

What I like about ‘White Cube', which opened last night at the John Batten Gallery, is its simplicity. Its deceptive simplicity.

The idea behind ‘White Cube' is straightforward in one sense. The cube refers to the common layout of galleries, while white refers to the colour of gallery walls.

When entering the gallery the overwhelming sensation is of whiteness. Both the walls and the pieces of art are shades of white or near-white. The pieces stand out from the walls by virtue of subtle tonal differences. On both the walls and the pieces are swirling decorative patterns based on 19th-century designs by William Morris. Upon closer inspection, however, it turns out that these are made up of English and Chinese profanities such as FUCKINGARTLOVERS and FUCKINGWHITEMANJOHNBATTEN (the gallery owner) and many more.

This comes as something of a surprise. It's not really shocking — not much is truly shocking these days — but it is surprising in the sense that the artist, Tsang Kin Wah , is insulting the very people he needs to support him. Then again, I imagine that is part of the joke as well, because every single person who sees the show will assume that the artist is talking about someone else, not them. With a roll of the eyes they can think: “Oh, I know exactly what you mean, dahling. Those nouveaux riche have more money than braincells.”

So… ‘White Cube' is obviously a show about galleries or, more to the point, the art market and all that term entails: buyers, sellers, gallery owners, dilettantes, and curators. All of this seems incredibly cynical, of course, and on one level it certainly is. On another level, I do hope it is sincere: it is one thing to be cynical about the market, quite another to be cynical about one's own work. Like Damien Hirst's infamous quote: “They'll buy what you fucking give them.”

One of the things I found interesting is that the pieces seem to blend in with the walls. As if the works were camouflaged for that purpose. This is very pertinent to the problem, which is that gallery spaces and works of art sometimes seem to blend to the point where they are nearly indistinguishable. Another way of putting this is that the actual works of art can seem secondary in the gallery system. What people buy and how much they are willing to pay for it is often not a reflection of the art itself but of the gallery environment. That is why galleries need to be swanky, impressive places. And that is why some art costs a mint even when it's crap, while true, good art can go unnoticed for years while the artist slowly starves.

One of the highlights of the show is, oddly enough, the price list. Or rather, the Price Li$t. It demonstrates Tsang's frustration with the arbitrary values attached to art. Poking fun at the “it can't be good if it's not expensive” mentality, Tsang actually crossed out some prices and marked them up . One piece, ‘For you, platinum art lover', goes from HK$19,500 to HK$24,500. Hilarious.

Aside from stupid buyers, Tsang also takes aim at galleries and other middlemen. For ‘Kill me please, U DEALER!', Tsang doubled the list price. This is a reflection of the traditional 50% commission galleries charge. Think about it.

The system really doesn't seem fair, but that's the way things are. The White Cube always wins, because if you don't play the game you don't eat. The four walls of the cube may be a trap, but it is a trap the artist must enter.

Show runs: 10 May-5 June at John Batten Gallery

Verdict: Cynical, humorous and certainly worth a look