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Tiffany Sia: Slippery When Wet



Tiffany Sia, *A Wet Finger in the Air*, 2021. Courtesy Artists Space, New York. Photo: Filip Wolak.

The works in “Slippery When Wet,” Tiffany Sia says, all think through one essential question: “How do we capture the cusp of change in history?” To be sure, history is currently being made in Hong Kong—in its struggle for democracy, in its fight against state violence, in its attempts to be seen and heard globally. In parsing this moment, Sia takes the exhibition as hermeneutics for the city. As Hong Kong secretes humidity and tears, it leaks ink and information. “Slippery When Wet,” which is presented by Artists Space in both in-person and online forms, flows across ten curatorial and conceptual “threads” to capture and interrogate this still-unfolding sociopolitical shift in the city.

This a show for which a viewer might miss something should they visit only in person. It takes the form, as Sia puts it, of a “braided, multi-formed inquiry across paper, video, and image.” As many New York spaces have struggled with how to bring shows online in the wake of the pandemic, Sia has been thinking through issues of digital mediation and dispersion for years, often directing her work at an audience of scattered Hong Kong natives.

“Digital media, as a site,” Sia says, “hosts the theater of terror.” In the best of times, it holds the potential for dissemination and organization; at the worst, it is weaponized as an instrument of violence. And so it is that the narrator of the Scroll, the first of the ten threads—“leaked” online and “unfurled” in the physical space—watches with horror as protesters watch other protesters get gassed by police, and later, scrolls through Instagram. “Doomscroll,” here, is not a cute nor flippant activity.

Thread three, the three-channel video work *A Wet Finger in the Air* (2021) [pictured] plays before a projection of Hong Kong circa 1988. This disappears between March 14th and 20th for a livestream of the film *A Road Movie is Impossible in Hong Kong* (2021), which goes largely untranslated for a non-Cantonese-speaking audience.

"I employ refusal as a generative tool to force the distant audience to do the work," the artist shares. "To refuse to translate something is to hold the space of unknowing between knowledge systems." At the same time, the formal challenges of an opaque work is itself a prompt—that is, a means of knowing or at least attempting to understand. Usurping the typical channels of distance and mediation, the work in "Slippery When Wet" at once bridges the literal and metaphorical distance between New York and Hong Kong.