

LUST, CAUTION

Catherine Damman on Tiffany Sia's "Slippery When Wet"



Tiffany Sia, *The Bastard Scroll*, 2021, ink on continuous-feed dot-matrix paper, wooden table, chair. Installation view, Artists Space, New York. Photo: Filip Wolak.

75WORDS DRAPE THEMSELVES on art like a charismatic hostess on her divan, each sentence extruded through a lifetime's discipline in the pretty postures of solicitation. This kind of writing—licit, sanctioned, a vehicle for the conferral of value—is the critic's dominant mode, but the work of Tiffany Sia demands something else. How to deform language, to refuse the services into which it is regularly conscripted? The title of Sia's first institutional exhibition, "Slippery When Wet," which ran at New York's Artists Space from February 17 to May 1, borrows from rather lowly prose, those meager admonishments in public space that attune a person to her environment while disclaiming liability in the event of harm (e.g., "Watch Your Step"). "Slippery When Wet" is at once a banal lump of fact—an index of moisture or of recent janitorial labor—and a suggestive double entendre, glistening with erotic possibility. Sia turns a coin with both of these faces (warning, enticement) over and over in her hand.

The show's subject was Hong Kong, the place of Sia's birth, early childhood, and some of her adult life. Her disposition toward the city is watchful, untidy, relentless. The exhibition comprises twenty-two works organized into ten "THREADS," those metaphors for connectedness that help track conversations on platforms like WhatsApp and LIHKG, where so much of Hong Kong's recent political life has been organized.

Each work was therefore not an autonomous object but rather one link in a larger discursive chain. Often, one piece was a transformed version of another, having slipped its original yoke. *Barriers Buy Time*, 2021, was a shelf of books. Wrapped in Mylar jackets, they nestled close—visually cohering as a flinty, unstable mono-chrome. As volumes were purchased, the sculpture shrank. Mylar is an arguably bad material for a book jacket: It streaks with oils from one's fingers; it dents. Held in front of the face, or affixed to a mask, however, the tensile, shiny material can be repurposed to thwart a surveillance regime—a twist on the old saying about books and their covers.

The books in question are Sia's own *Too Salty Too Wet* 更咸更濕 (Speculative Place Press, 2021), themselves outgrowths of *咸濕 Salty Wet* (Inpatient Press, 2019). I have a copy of the latter, its cover appropriated from that of a 1989 issue of *Lung Fu Pao*, a Hong Kong softcore rag. What looks like a contemporary artist's sly intervention is actually a historical artifact: The gauzy upper register offers a photograph of a nude woman, wrapping her arms around her own body in the manner of a ribboned gift; the bottom is filled with a scene from Tiananmen Square. (The magazine donated the issue's proceeds to students in Beijing.) More recently, footage from the 2019 anti-extradition protests would be leaked to Western viewers as files uploaded to the aggregator Pornhub.

The exhibition took such media cross-contaminations seriously; its centerpiece, *The Bastard Scroll*, 2021, was itself a "leak" of *Too Salty Too Wet* 更咸更濕. In the main gallery, dot-matrix paper unfurled from its zigzag stack to trace the surface of an extended charcoal table. To read it properly, the viewer had to walk backward next to the tabletop, her neck uncomfortably kinked to one side. The pages puddled again in the lap of a chair.



Clockwise, from top: Tiffany Sia, *Hong Kong Is a Fictive Process*, 2021, video projection (color GIF), screen, sofa, chair. Installation view, Artists Space, New York. Photo: Filip Wolak. Tiffany Sia, *A Wet Finger in the Air*, 2021, three-channel video (color, sound, infinite duration), monitors. Installation view, Artists Space, New York. Photo: Filip Wolak. Tiffany Sia, *A Road Movie Is Impossible in Hong Kong*, 2021, livestream March 14–20, 2021, color, sound, livestreams of various durations.

Those inclined to art-historical referents will note the work's dialogue with Hans Haacke's *News, 1969*, a Telex machine installed in the white cube, spouting endless wires from a local press agency (wires from the German agency DPA were received at the Städtische Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf; from UPI when installed at Howard Wise Gallery in New York). The precipitating event, in Haacke's own account, was the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. The installation, with its pools of curling paper, theatricalized its own inadequacy.

For Haacke, the problems of art's relation to current events were those of speed, transmission, and volume. How to capture it all, to give it form? For Sia, the problems are those of translation and refusal. (*Bastard Tongue, 2021*, thrust a ribbon of dot-matrix paper—completely blank—through the empty core of Artists Space's stairwell.) Mention of the 2019 protests conjures news photographs of umbrellas held aloft before water cannons and of barricades built and burned. The latter were, as Sia notes in her writings, purposeful distractions. A barricade on fire—photographic catnip for the journalist—meant the front lines had moved elsewhere.

Such opacity is at one level tactical (to record protesters' faces is to do unpaid identificatory work on behalf of the state), but it's also conceptual—Hong Kong is throttled by many projections, from the saturated delectations of its local cinema to the boosterism of those cathected on mainland China as a political bogeyman. Galling, too, is the administrative language in which its residents' lives are suspended. "Handed over" from Britain to China in 1997, Hong Kong's partial political sovereignty is "set to expire" in 2047. Less well known is Resolution 2908, which the United Nations General Assembly adopted in 1972, and which removed both Hong Kong and Macau from its list of Non-Self-Governing Territories. In effect, a few words stripped the regions of their right to anticolonial self-determination by declaring them not to have been colonies at all.

What is one to do with torqued phrases such as these, which are emphatically real, however ludicrous? Sia's reverberating title, 咸濕 *Salty Wet*, is itself a clumsily literal translation of the Cantonese characters for "perverse." So Haam sap: sweat, tears, and semen, but also haam sap: the depraved actions of an ignoble state.

Sia's adoption of a new form, the exhibition, seems apposite to another, more implacable shift. If in her earlier publications Sia foregrounded the libidinal energies of protest, the steaming aphrodisiac of revolt, the new work is wary of leering eyes and appetites. This is not prudishness. Rather, it is a consequence of a protracted encounter with the unsexy contours of authoritarian violence.

Art's role in all this, as a familiar safe house for radicalism, with often cloistering effects, is treated with wise ambivalence. Sia fogged up the entrance windows of Artists Space with anti-surveillance film designed to mimic condensation (*Too Wet, 2021*). Another intervention was still easier to miss: Four stage markers, each about the size of a coin and emanating a thin LED glow, squatted in direct view of surveillance cameras (required even at a nonprofit like Artists Space in order for the gallery to be eligible for fine-art insurance). This work, *In Plain Sight, 2021*, both points the visitor to her ongoing supervision (while looking, she is being watched) and—because we are trained to keep our distance from objects designated as "art" in the gallery—allows her to evade it, if only slightly.

The crisp, formal Cantonese and British-inflected English pronunciations of newscasters suffused the gallery air, intersecting with jaunty intro melodies and commercials for Omega watches. *A Wet Finger in the Air, 2021*, was a hypnotic three-channel video on stacked monitors. The footage is culled from late-'80s and early-'90s weather reports on channels like TVB Pearl. Indelible are clips from a long-running cartoon segment featuring *Freddy* (天氣先生), a yellow-suited protagonist who is physically afflicted by various climatological phenomena: blown back by animated winds, melting in extreme heat, often reacting to the forecasts with coos and cries.

This sensitivity to fluctuating environmental conditions informs two of Sia's films, both included in the show: *Never Rest/Unrest, 2020*, and *A Road Movie Is Impossible in Hong Kong, 2021*. The former features footage shot entirely on an iPhone (and screened at the handheld device's 16:9 aspect ratio) from June to December 2019, compressed into a tidy twenty-nine minutes. Made in the roiling scrum of mass protest, the movie resists the temptations of spectacle. The camera often alights on hands caressing smart phones, on partial reflections caught in security mirrors, or on glimpses of other screens, such as those on public transit or the back of an airplane headrest. Concluding with archival footage of the 1997 hand over's pageantry, the film makes clear whose interests such displays serve.

The latter film was a weeklong series of livestreams, timed to the co-occurrence of Hong Kong's sunrise and New York City's sunset. During each broadcast, Sia walked through Lamma Island, where she has maintained an artist residency since 2018. Banish the image of Hong Kong as shimmering postmodern metropolis; instead, take in plangent birdsong and thicketed winding trails, which, in the final scene, burst onto an ocean vista, a tangerine sun throbbing through the fuzzy atmosphere. It feels personal. Sia's landscape films appeared both online, in a compelling virtual exhibition aimed at making the show accessible to those in the global HK diaspora, and also in the

galleries at appointed times. During regular hours, the screen displayed a 1988 photograph of the Hong Kong skyline, scarred by a flickering murmuration of pixels. What seems to be a digital glitch is in fact a rendering of those neurological hallucinations that besiege sufferers at the onset of a migraine.

The image is part of the installation *Hong Kong is a Fictive Process*, 2021. Its punctum was an unassuming bamboo chair upholstered in delicate floral fabric—it belonged to the artist's grandmother. It was placed to offer its hypothetical sitter the best view both of a Hong Kong now more than thirty years in the past and the painful blight on its surface. Rather than a sign bearing a polite interdiction (PLEASE DO NOT SIT), the seat announced only that it waited for its proper occupant: A metallic placard said RESERVED.

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