

Reclamation and Decolonization: Stepping Towards a Uncertain Future

By

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BA (Visual Arts), University of British Columbia, 2020

A THESIS SUPPORT PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY OF ART + DESIGN

2022



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Acknowledgements

First I would like to thank Emily Carr University and the technicians for providing me with an environment that facilitates growth in my artistic research.

To the 2022 cohort for all the care and support that all of you have shown for each other as we navigated through the pandemic together.

To Diyan Achjadi for the guidance and conversations that created a steady foundation for the development of works.

To Gwenessa Lam and Henry Heng Lu for being my internal and external reviewers and me providing me with valuable feedback.

Lastly, thank you to my family for all of your care and support you have given me. I am truly grateful to be able to pursue what I love doing, and it would certainly not be possible without your help in raising me to be who I am now.

Introduction: Positionality and Background

Through my thesis, I investigate how the colonial history of Hong Kong can be visualized through the process of printmaking as a method for the documentation and assimilation of political data, specifically examining theoretical approaches to the process and definitions of reclamation and decolonization. Historically, printmaking provides ways to easily replicate and produce editions of prints which can be mass circulated, but at the same time, it also serves as a medium that documents the social and political concerns within the time of which the prints were made. As a medium that is accessible to artists in various forms, printmaking becomes a vehicle that distributes the social and political messages, in a sense becoming a form of visual documentation. Within the context of my research, the processes and definitions of decolonization are not static; they are fluid and change through time, constantly being redefined through different contexts and people. To visualize the colonial roots specific to the context of Hong Kong I look towards theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Chantal Mouffe and James T. H. Tang, using their independent frameworks to understand colonization and decolonization within the context of Hong Kong.

Rather than exploring Hong Kong's path of decolonization, this thesis aims to examine the complications of decolonization within a place that may be perceived as transitory by nature. In an interview from 2019, Godfre Leung quotes artist Samson Young, "Many Hong Kong people see Hong Kong not as a home, but as a transitional place from which they seek a better future elsewhere" (Leung). Being a place that is tangled between its colonial history under

British rule, and its uncertain future under China, Hong Kong became a temporary place, one that attempts to maintain the systems and laws established by Britain, while also constantly changing under the influence of China. Hong Kong's culture and identity is characterized by this sense of hybridity, but at the same time, the hybridity of the city is also becoming one of the key factors that prevents a clear path towards decolonization.

My exploration is deeply rooted in the idea of place, the place that I associated with home, and the place where my research is conducted. Since my research spans across different contexts, before I can introduce my key research questions, I have to first reflect on the context I am working from, exploring the question of how my work may be perceived by and within different colonial contexts such as Vancouver and Hong Kong. As I begin to dive into my exploration of colonial history and the processes of decolonization, the first question that I ask myself within my artistic research is, how should the term "decolonization" be defined within my own practice? This thesis paper situates and contextualizes this concern within my practice through a framework that strengthens my work by assembling a cumulative definition drawn from different theorists that have defined decolonization in their own terms. Since I work closely with images, I am also interested in extending my research towards racialized bodies within the context of Hong Kong's colonial history, exploring how the body can be interpreted differently depending who is looking at the image and when. A trope that I have identified within my research of racialized bodies is the squatting Chinese body, which can appear as both a lowly body or one that is resistant, depending on the position of the viewer. The squatting Chinese body functions as an anchor for many of my works, a recurring metaphor that connects my

historical and artistic research with experiences of the land. This leads me to my next question that asks what political messages can be conveyed through the image of the squatting Chinese bodies, and how can they be potentially interpreted as a position of resistance and transition? Throughout my research I am constantly thinking about how the Chinese body within the context of Hong Kong is shaped by colonization, but also how the body resists this definition, leading me to the metaphor of the squatting Chinese body.

As a Canadian-born Chinese artist who has had the opportunity to live in both Vancouver and Hong Kong, I am able to pull experiences from these two distinctly different nations. Working with sensitive political imagery and historical textual documents such as agreements and treaties, the place where I am currently working becomes an integral part of how I work. Vancouver in many ways is very similar to Hong Kong, both having experienced the pressures of colonialism under Britain, but at the same time, both places approach the question of reclamation and decolonization differently. It is important for me as a settler in Vancouver to recognize that I am working in the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the Coast Salish peoples, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh, and Musqueam Nations. Although I noted earlier that both places experienced British colonial rule, it should also be pointed out that Canada is currently still under British crown rule, unlike Hong Kong, since the land has been returned. Being in a place that is working towards reconciliation helps me think about the relationship between people and land within the context of Hong Kong, while also providing me with opportunities to create works that include more sensitive references to historical dates within the past, present, and future, along with locations that would be potentially problematic if it were to be shown and researched

in the space of Hong Kong. Take Hong Kong Artist Sampson Wong’s *Countdown Machine* for example, the video installation on the International Commerce Centre (ICC) tower includes six countdown animations that references Wong Kar-wai’s *Days of Being Wild* through the line “our 60-second friendship begins now,” which was also the initial title of the work prior to the renaming by the artist. This video installation became controversial and was promptly removed due to the inclusion of a countdown segment that references the date July 1, 2047, which is the official date when the one country, two systems policy is set to expire¹.



Fig. 1. Patrick Wong, *Borrowed Time and Borrowed Place*, 2021. Ink, paper, water, plexiglass. Image by Michael Love.

¹ For more details on the discussion of why Sampson Wong’s *Countdown Machine* was removed, see *It's All Fear Circulating*

Within my own works such as *Borrowed Time* and *Borrowed Place* (fig. 1), they attempt to tackle the political themes and dates that may become more and more sensitive, as evident from Sampson Wong's experience. In order to critique the political space, having a high degree of autonomy becomes a necessary element of my research and creative practice. As I pursue the MFA program, being situated outside of Hong Kong and taking on the position of someone who is now looking inwards from outside has given me the opportunity to freely explore the problematic nature of colonial history and the difficult process of decolonization, without having to self-censor elements of my prints that may prevent them from being shown in Hong Kong.

My current body of works is deeply rooted in my experiences of my brief visits back to Hong Kong during the height of the political unrest between 2019 - 2020, which ties into my artistic research of Hong Kong's fractured identity as a product of colonization and the ongoing process of reclamation/decolonization that is supposed to aid Hong Kong's reintegration back to China. Within the context of China, reclamation of Hong Kong is not only a necessary step towards unification, but also an important step for decolonization in Hong Kong which began in 1997 following the handover. It is also important to note within my thesis that the process of reintegration that I explore should be defined as a process of restoration, to fully regain sovereignty over land that was taken under unequal treaties, and this ultimately includes processes such as the reshaping of political systems and changes towards people's freedoms and way of living that would be more in line with China's system and policies.

During the summer of 2019 and 2020 I briefly returned Hong Kong and spent my time with my family, along with traversing the familiar streets of Hong Kong during a crucial transitional phase in the city's political division. As someone who was overseas while protests were happening, being there in person changed how I perceived the land and those who associate Hong Kong as their home, which includes myself. The peaceful but busy streets of Hong Kong that I was used to, had changed dramatically; blockades were erected, bricks were strewn across the streets and protestors took to the streets over many weeks. Not everything was as it seemed, as seen through the various deceptive news media coverage that attempted to sway the opinions of the masses through the exaggeration of information, and false accusations². With the ultimate goal being the reclamation of Hong Kong, the gap between China and Hong Kong grew more distinct as many felt alienated in the accelerated process of reintegration.

Reflecting back on my own experiences of living in Hong Kong during my childhood to teenage years, the concept of seeing China as a separate and individual entity from Hong Kong was somewhat common, even though China ultimately had sovereignty over Hong Kong. It is also important to note that within the scope of my research, the term sovereignty should be understood as a person or governing body/institution that holds the rightful authority to govern and oversee specific land or territories. During my youth, I always heard people talking about differences between people from China and those who are local to Hong Kong, ranging from small things such as Chinese individuals squatting around the streets, to larger issues such as the rise of housing prices and censorship. Although the issues listed above are all mainly a product

² For examples of how certain news reports during the protests manipulates and intentionally curates fake news to sway readers to a particular side, see "Fake News Amplifies Fear and Confusion in Hong Kong."

of differences in culture and lifestyles of Hong Kong and Chinese people, this difference established between the two groups are still deeply intertwined with the colonial history of Hong Kong as a Crown colony, as it is the systems established by the British that drove these two groups farther apart as the years progressed. All these differences add up to a gradual process of othering between the citizens of Hong Kong and those who are from China. In a way, this sense of othering is one that actively resists and refuses the reclamation of Hong Kong, acting as a counterforce to China's increasing authority.

In order for me to confront and hope to understand these rapid changes and action taken by both the government party and the people of Hong Kong, I began to work on creating prints by collaging images that can visualize impacts of British colonization, and how it is preventing dialogues of reintegration from happening without repercussions. My research confronts the history of Hong Kong, as its present and future are haunted by the ghosts and fragments of colonization.

Context

Within my research, I engage with theoretical texts that forms the base for my process of making. Frantz Fanon, Chantal Mouffe, and James T. H. Tang are some of the theorists that I engage with for the conceptualization of my artworks. Together they help bring together my creative and research practice, bridging the discussion of the political and historical concepts with the images that I work with in my printmaking processes.

The materials I select for my prints reflect my engagement with the investigation of these specific scholars and theorists. In my earlier works, when engaging with the ideas of Chantal Mouffe, my material exploration focused mainly on depicting the antagonistic relationships that Mouffe speaks of and as a result, colours of red and black became the key colours I used to visually capture this relationship in the screenprinted collaged images that I have made with obscured protestors and Carrie Lam. Black becomes the colour of neutral depiction, a way for me to visualize and define the political space that I am engaging with, while the red provides an emotional charge for the image depending on where the red is used, thus also serving the purpose of highlighting specific details of an image. Red can embody many meanings within my work; to list a few, it can be an indication of patriotism, the dominant colour of the China and Hong Kong's flag, and also a reflection of passion or anger that we have seen in the recent political discourse of Hong Kong. Black and red are also colours that are commonly seen in prints that are made in relation to political and social movements, as suggested by political scientist Marian Sawyer, "While red was becoming an emotive signifier of the socialist movement in Europe and beyond, black was developing its own political history...Various meanings have accumulated around black as the anarchist colour...The historical association between anarchism and socialism has also resulted in the use of flags combining red and black" (Sawyer 4). Although my works uses similar colours, it does not directly reference aspects of socialism and anarchism,

Later, when I began my research on Fanon's definition of decolonization and started to look towards official documents/transcripts in disclosed government records, my materials

shifted towards focusing on the use of charcoal powder as an experimental print medium. My creative process and textual research are very much intertwined, with one affecting the other directly, often changing depending on the image and theorists that I work with, which also plays into the idea of cumulation and collaging as techniques that I closely work with. Fanon's perspective on decolonization is one that is rooted in violence, an inescapable process that traps the bodies of the colonized in a cycle of violence. The body of the colonized becomes a broken and corroded shadow of its former self as the colonizers continue to dominate and extract resources from both land and people until their bodies and minds submit to the values of the colonizers. At the core of my recent works inspired by Fanon's writing, the medium of charcoal embodies the essence of the corroded self, the fragile body that is on the verge of disappearing, a body that is barely able to maintain its form. This transformative body that is made from charcoal powder shows the vulnerability of the colonized body, but at the same time, the charcoal also presents a quality of resistance in how it refuses to fully disappear.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon explores decolonization through Africa and provides specific examples from Algeria and its struggle against the colonial power of France. As Fanon explains, the colonial path is a violent process and, in turn, the movement towards decolonization also becomes trapped in this cycle of violence, one that is fuelled by the continuous violent treatment of the colonized people by the colonists. Fanon's exploration spans over five chapters, with the first three chapters focusing on the discussion of the perpetuation of violence in the division between colonists and the colonized, followed by the rise of anti-colonial organizations/ parties within the rural population, and why the "national bourgeoisie" class should not be the

dominant group within the government system of a newly independent nation. In the latter half of the text, Fanon highlights the importance of culture in relation to nationalism and the damage dealt to the colonized people's culture, past, and identity through colonialism. Lastly, Fanon provides us with various traumatic cases from his work as a psychiatrist that looks at how colonialism breaks down its colonized subjects both mentally and physically.

Fanon's definition of decolonization as a violent process is one of the key theoretical frameworks that I have incorporated into my work, as it helps me examine the friction that exists between the colonial power and the colonized people. Although Fanon's text is strictly defining decolonization within the context of Africa and his experiences as a psychiatrist, his perspective on the process as one that is inherently violent (both colonizing and decolonizing), and the traumatic experiences that the colonized people face, which ultimately corrodes their culture and identity is still very relevant within the context of decolonization in Hong Kong. One of the key ideas I took away from Fanon's text is that the colonized should not look towards mimicking the systems and form of the colonizers, in this case, Europe, but rather create their own path, a path that does not feed into this perpetuation of violence. With Hong Kong having been shaped and colonized by Britain and returned to China, Fanon's text helps me understand the violence that came forth in the recent political disputes between 2019 to 2020 regarding government systems and democracy.

On the other hand, in *On The Political*, Mouffe challenges the optimistic 'post-political' vision of globalization within liberal democracy/theory, where a world 'without enemies' could

be established. As Mouffe suggests, this optimistic vision may prove to be problematic in understanding democratic politics, and she addresses the issue through the consequences of both negation and blindness towards antagonism. In order to progress in democratic politics, we must first come to terms with the antagonistic dimension of 'the political', and by doing so, we can begin to understand that within the establishment of us/them relationship, there is always the potential for this relationship to become antagonistic. It is through this relationship that Mouffe suggests the use of an agonistic model, where antagonism has the potential to transform into agonism and pluralism can then be recognized within democratic politics. Unlike the liberal democratic approach of attempting to remove antagonisms to reach a unified solution, the agonistic model works collectively and relies on this relationship of confrontation between adversaries to create a space where democracy could flourish.

Mouffe's proposition to adopt an agonistic model helps me shape a better understanding of how antagonisms within the us/them relationship can be potentially transformed, and therefore reshape the friend/enemy relationship within 'the political' and create a space for pluralism to exist within political dialogues. When I look at the government systems of Hong Kong, Mouffe's perspective proves to be an important tool to use when studying how democracy is progressing and how it can be defined. Hong Kong is a multicultural space, with many layers of complexity in its governing structure. Although using systems established during the British colonial era, the systems still ultimately have to submit to the growing pressures of the Mainland Chinese government. By applying Mouffe's philosophy to the systems of Hong Kong, I am able to see how the absence of antagonisms could be a point of entrance for understanding the underlying

issues of Hong Kong's government, which ultimately fuels the division between the government body and the people of Hong Kong through this lack of pluralism in the political space. At the same time, I also have to acknowledge that there are many factors within the periphery of my research that may prevent the removal of antagonisms, such as how China's current growth and expansion as seen through the example of China's Belt and Road Initiative may be seen a form of neocolonialism by contemporary scholars. Another factor that also prevents Mouffe's concept of agonism from existing in Hong Kong's political space is the tendency for political discourse to escalate towards violence as a solution due to the lack of results that non-violent solutions yield, which is evidently seen in the Hong Kong protests.

Lastly, In the journal article "*From Empire Defence to Imperial Retreat*", James T.H. Tang, a Professor in the Department Politics and Public Administration at the University Hong Kong examines Hong Kong as a product of British postwar colonial policy, and also as one that holds a unique colony position in terms of its path towards decolonization. Through this article, Tang attempts to unpack the process of decolonization without the establishment of independence within the context of Hong Kong. Within the text, Tang addresses the complexity of Hong Kong's historical background that led to its unique position of being one of the few territories under British rule that did not become independent postwar, through Hong Kong's relationship and political future that is directly linked to China. Tang also considers various social and economic factors that influenced the process towards decolonization in Hong Kong and points to the reasons which prevented Hong Kong from achieving independence with references towards significant historical events such as the Korean War.

Tang provides valuable insight into the historical significance of Hong Kong's upbringing, while also addressing some of the concerns as to why it is so difficult to define Hong Kong's path towards decolonization, as the colonial policies of Britain ultimately complicated Hong Kong's position by shaping it as a part of the British colony, but was unprepared for independence, unlike the other colonies. Tang's article also provides details on certain background dialogues that were going on between China and Britain, which provides insight into the power struggle of countries during the postwar era and also accounts for Britain's hopes of preserving and maintaining their position and significance even after the war. The struggle for power and maintenance of positions of power is an aspect that plays an important role in understanding Hong Kong in the post-colonial era, as it is the power dynamic between Britain and China that led to Hong Kong's political decline, an issue that is deeply rooted in the the relationships built between two countries.

Through the knowledge of the three theorists I have used to support my creative process, I am able to create a body of work that questions the nature of the political space that Hong Kong occupies, while offering the potential of visualizing history through a cyclical frame rather than the traditional linear perspective. In order to free ourselves from the bindings of colonization, we must look towards alternatives that do not feed into the endless cycle of violence, to transform the political space into one that does not force participants to adopt friend/enemy relations.

Methodology

The process of cumulation plays an important role not only in how I define and contextualize the process of decolonization and reclamation but also in my approach towards image-making. Throughout my exploration I have collected various images between 1967-2021, a visualization of a place I call home, its inhabitants, and the journey of decolonization; starting from the leading figure of the Chief Executive of Hong Kong and progressively expanding my image bank to the citizens, protestors, official documents, and the city's complex architecture. My journey started with an image of Chief Executive Carrie Lam's portrait. Since then, it has taken on many forms, from blind contour drawings and diptych prints, to experimental printing processes. The beauty of working with printmaking as my media and method of creating, lies in the ability to continuously apply and reapply images to new contexts. Aside from exploring single or multiple images over different prints, the experimentation of the printing process also influences my approach towards image-making. Independent curator and scholar Alison W. Chang suggests in her journal article *Prints in a time of Political Madness*, "Printmaking and social protest have gone hand-in-hand since the introduction of print into Europe. Modest costs, ease of replication and collective methods of production make print a practical method of communicating ideas on a grassroots level" (Chang 22). Printmaking enables voices from the grassroots level to be heard, and because of the reproducibility of prints, it allows the medium to take on the form as a mode of reproduction and expression. With reproduction being a key aspect of printmaking and a way for me to connect my works with the history associated with mass-printed political images such as propaganda, I also try to put my work into conversation with

theoretical dialogues around the construction of political and cultural identity within the context of colonization/decolonization. My experimental charcoal powder on water prints are an example of how monoprints³ can be used to capture the quality of fragility that I experienced when conducting text-based research on Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. As Fanon claims, "Decolonization is always a violent phenomenon...Decolonization is quite simply the replacing of a certain "species" of men by another "species" of men. Without any period of transition, there is total, complete, and absolute substitution" (Fanon 35). The identity of the colonized people and land are constantly broken and reshaped to fit the needs and values of the governing body. The people become trapped in centre between China and Britain, both of which represents forces that oppose each other by nature (Fanon 36).

The metaphor of the squatting Chinese body remains influential to my creative process, especially in the latter half of my prints, as I discovered the possibility of reading the body as one of resistance through the works of artist Simon Leung. Historically speaking, as seen through my research on Hong Kong's 1967 riots , the position of squatting is one that subverts power from the bodies, but on the other hand, it also has the potential to emerge as a transformational body. There is the possibility for this position and body to change, the squatting body also refuses to be defined, as the body has the ability to convey endless meanings across different contexts.

With the cumulation of both theoretical and visual elements, my research attempts to define and depict the colonial history and the process of decolonization through a non-linear

³ Monoprint is a form of printmaking where the image can only be printed once, which differs from most printmaking processes which allows for multiple originals (Tate).

model, or at the very least challenge the linear perspective, while proposing the potential of visualizing it through a cyclical model of time. In the print *Borrowed Time*, the verticality of the city's architectural growth contrasts against the cyclicity of time present in the print *Borrowed Place*, constantly reminding each other of the space and uncertainty that exists between colonization and decolonization. My works build off of each other, a continuous exploration and cumulation of research, these two works are always seen as a pair when shown, to show different ways time is experienced in my research of history, allowing verticality and linearity of time to be captured in *Borrowed Time*, while *Borrowed Place* contrasts the linear perspective through its materials. This cumulative process reflects the act of unearthing the colonial roots of a specific place that I engage with through my artistic research, while also speaking to the new layers that are constantly added to its pre-existing history that I excavate through my research.

Artistic Influences: Ephemerality and the Squatting Asian Bodies

Oscar Munoz

Within my artistic research, I have placed my works specifically in dialogue with artists Oscar Munoz and Simon Leung, both of whom present political themes and messages through their own creative processes. In this section, I will be referencing and discussing works from both artists in relation to my own practice, diving into their influences on my approach towards image-making, and also how their practices have shaped my experimental printmaking processes.



Fig. 2. Oscar Muñoz, *Project for a Memorial*, 2004-2005. 5 videos, no sound, 7:30 min. 52nd International Venice Biennale, 2007. Courtesy of the artist and Sicardi Ayers Bacino, Houston, TX

The first artwork I will discuss is Oscar Munoz's *Project for a Memorial* (fig. 2). Munoz is a contemporary Colombian visual artist and has exhibited works internationally, exploring the themes of memory, loss, and mortality through the images that he carefully creates with materials that are selected for their ephemeral quality. His practice moves fluidly between various mediums, including printmaking, photography, drawings, video, and installations.

Project for a Memorial is a video installation piece that is composed of five individual looped video projections that are seven minutes long. The screens show the hand of the artist in an endless attempt to draw and reproduce the faces of the dead with water that is applied directly on the hot pavement with a brush. All images of the deceased individuals who were drawn as a part of the project were found in newspaper obituaries, therefore placing the work in direct conversation with the political violence in the context of Munoz's home country, Colombia. The manipulation of water, as one of Munoz's recurring materials across his body of works, directly speaks to the idea of impermanence, not only in the sense of the disappearing state that the produced image is trapped in, but also the impermanent nature of life and memory that is being represented through the tension established between the materials. The fragility of the water that hopelessly tries to maintain the image of the deceased, but nevertheless is subjected to rapid evaporation due to the external pressures of the heat, ultimately leaves behind an image that is destined to disappear, leaving little to no traces of faces and identity of the deceased behind. To provide context to the political questions that Munoz reflected on during the creation of this work, Munoz stated that, "My work today arises from an interest in comprehending the

mechanism developed by a society that has accepted war as part of the routine of living. Or rather, a dark and corrupted succession of wars for more than 50 years...”(Mollins).

Munoz’s material exploration within print media and water as both a surface and material has directly influenced my approach towards printmaking, rethinking how my choice of materials can directly influence the understanding of the political dialogues that are present within my exploration of colonization, decolonization and reclamation. The technique of charcoal printing on water was a technique that was pioneered by Munoz, and one that I have recently adopted within my printmaking practice, to use ephemeral and impermanent materials to speak about the fragmentation and dissolution of identity within the groups of colonized people and the cycle of violence that subsides and reemerges between colonial history and the path towards decolonization. The transformational quality of water is one that I found myself attracted to, from being used as the foundational support that holds the charcoal powder above the surface of the water, to the water becoming the ink that paints the picture an ephemeral image, a powerful representation of the border between existence and disappearance.

Simon Leung



Fig. 3. Simon Leung, 'Squatting Project/Berlin', 1994. Courtesy of the artist

The second artwork that I will discuss is the *Squatting Project* series by artist Simon Leung (fig. 3). Leung is a New York and California based artist who was born in Hong Kong in 1964, which coincidentally was three years prior to the 1967 large scale Hong Kong Riots where civilians who were seen as “leftist” protested against the agreement for British colonial rule. Being born into British Hong Kong as a colonial subject, and later immigrating to North California with his family, Leung’s practice is heavily shaped by his cultural and political relationships which in certain projects took on the form of the squatting body as a visualization of the displaced body within a foreign context (Leung). Prior to introducing Leung’s project, I would like to point towards the distinction that Leung describes the squatting figures that he uses as Asian, but in the context of my research, I specifically reference the Chinese body, which builds on concepts referenced by Leung, but through a more specific type of body in the context of Hong Kong.

Leung’s *Squatting Project* series was done in various cities, including Berlin, New York, Chicago, Vienna, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong, while the project also took on many different forms, from posters to videos and an opera set. The work that I focus on in this essay is the *Squatting Project/Berlin* which was a public poster project done in 1994 where the Leung printed and wheat-pasted 1000 posters at different bus stops and walls and several neighbourhoods. 500 posters were printed and with an accompanying text printed in German, while the other 500 posters were only printed with the squatting body of the artist against the white background of the poster. There are three parts to the accompanying text, which reads as follows:

“Imagine a city of squatters, an entire city in which everyone created their own chairs with their own bodies. When you are tired, or when you need to wait, participate in this position. Observe the city again from this squatting position. (Leung 101)”

To approach a foreign place as a displaced body and the idea of having both assimilated and un(der)assimilated bodies take on the squatting position to view the world through the perspective of the displaced is an aspect present in Leung’s project, but also something that I attempt to explore with my work.

I explore the perspective of the displaced through the experimental process of charcoal powder prints that are placed at ground level to encourage the audience to take a new perspective when looking at the position of the squatting figure. As Leung claims,

A displaced body that squatted where seats were available bespoke the difference between material availability and technological access: perhaps the squatters had not availed themselves of seats out of habit, perhaps my brother had lost access to a body that can squat. In a sense, they were anachronisms to one another. This belatedness is crucial, for the habitual squatter carries through the city a body's time-frame that is measured against the schedule of the city's own identity. (Leung,94)

The concept of time being measured through the body and the identity of the city is one that resurfaces within my body of works, questioning the relationship between the displaced and fragmented bodies of the colonized people and the violent confrontation that exists within the space between these bodies and decolonization. I also attempt to place an emphasis on time

within my work through the process of evaporation within my water and charcoal prints, where the image of the bodies of the squatters are subject to the external pressure of evaporation which slowly fragments and reforms them. Leung's approach towards the squatting body as a transitional and transformational site has helped me think more closely about the body as a site for resistance and protest, specifically through the squatting position. In the eyes of Western societies, this position may be seen as lowly and foreign, but within the context of politics within Hong Kong that I explore, Leung's work offers an alternative: a way to reclaim space, identity and existence. The image of squatting bodies as shown through Leung's posters is also one that is framed in a background of violence, as Leung's goal was to place back 1000 squatters⁴ into Berlin due to the mass expelling of the 50,000 out of 60,000 "guest workers" from Vietnam that occurred in Berlin during 1992. The problem of mass immigration and the influx of foreign bodies within another city or country is also something that my work deals with, and also something that is occurring again recently, as many decide to immigrate to other countries due to the uncertain future of Hong Kong.

⁴ According to The Oxford English Dictionary, the history of the word "squatters" can also be defined as a settler having no formal or legal title to the land occupied by him, esp. one thus occupying land in a district not yet surveyed or apportioned by the government

Unraveling through Lines: Blind Contour Drawings

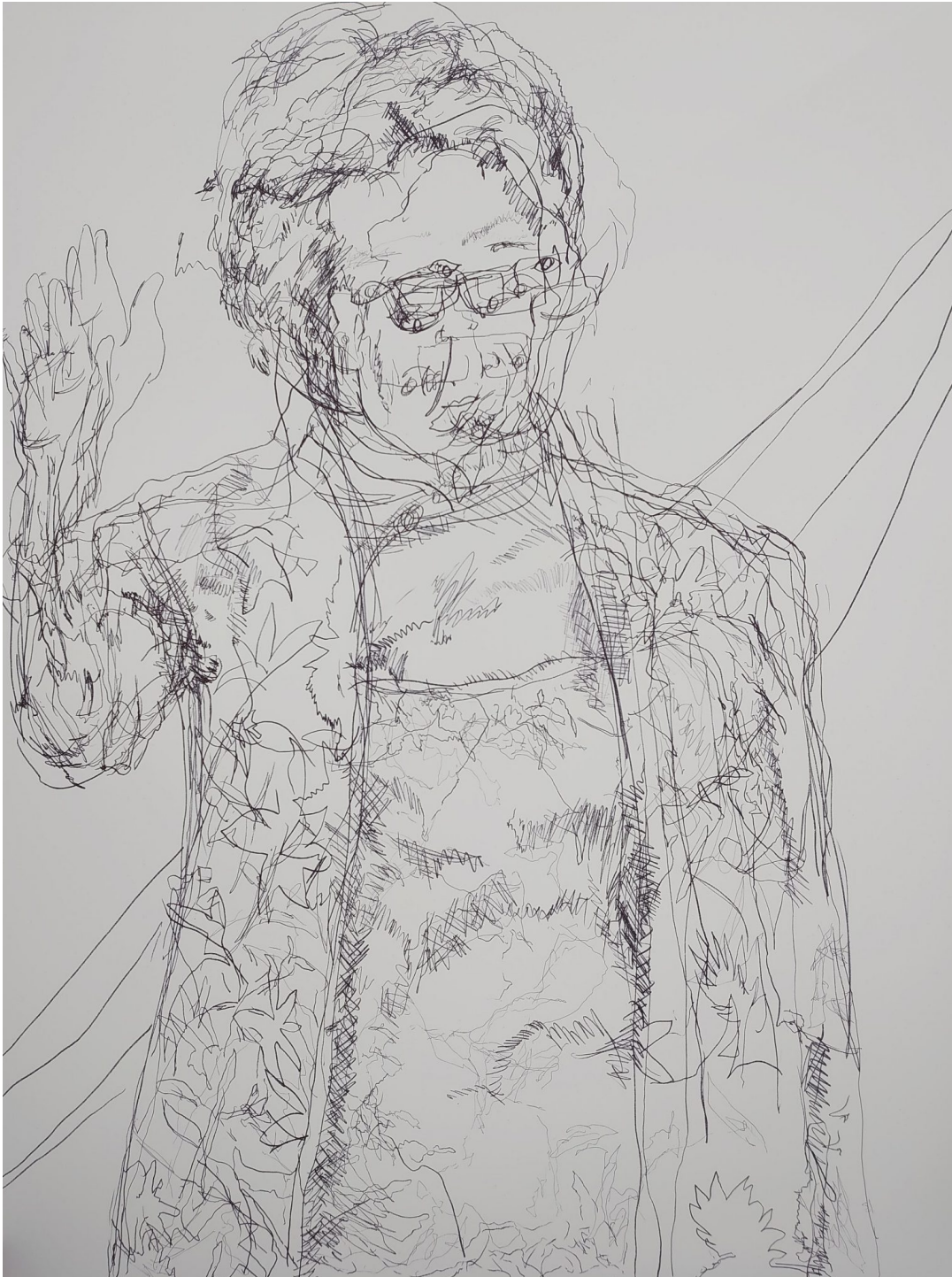


Fig. 4. Patrick Wong, *Blind Contour Drawings*, 2020. Sharpie marker on canvas, 71"x48".

In order to show the scope of my research and experimentation within printmaking, I will reference and explain in the following section, starting from some of my earliest line-based drawings, and leading into my experimental prints. My earlier works, such as the blind contouring works will not be extensively explained, as it serves as a reference for the foundation that my research started on, but since the initial works, my research has shifted into other areas.

Every line has a beginning, and this is where mine started. At the start of the MFA program the direction of my works was not clearcut, there was a strong sense of uncertainty, being unable to find a suitable way for me to navigate the vast and complex space of politics within the context of Hong Kong. At the heart of the earliest works done in the program, my goal was to make sense of the space around me, to understand the relationship established between me and the place I call home. To dissect these relationships, I began researching political figures and political portraits (fig. 4), while also looking back on my experience of blind contour drawings as a starting point towards narrowing the scope of my research and how I can refine my creative practice in a way that can visually represent my journey of connecting with my home through its historical roots, and how colonization shaped the fractured present of Hong Kong.

Patriots?: It Is All a Matter of Perspective



Fig. 5. Patrick Wong, *Patriots?*, 2020. Ink on paper, 15"x22".

The project *Patriots?* marked a crucial turning point within my creative and theoretical research, as I departed from my focus of using the blind contour technique as a way to navigate the politics of Hong Kong. Although blind contouring offered me a way to process the overwhelming amount of information that I collect through various online news media sources, it ultimately falls short as I develop new ways to approach the greater question of decolonization in Hong Kong through Theorists such as Chantal Mouffe. The blind contour drawings gives form to a small part of the complex and ambiguous nature of Hong Kong's political discourse, but it fails

to provide the viewers with a glimpse of the fractured government and people's relation that I am interested in. With this project, I began my transition towards using printmaking as my primary method of production, and this has also affected how I approach image making through more experimental methods which will be discussed in later works.

Patriots? is composed of eighteen individual black and red prints that are split into nine diptychs (fig. 5). The prints are arranged horizontally, starting with red on the left and gradually darkens to black as we reach the prints on the right. The diptychs are displayed vertically with the top row focusing on the gradual shift of colour on the hand of the figure, while the row of prints beneath it shows the change of colour in the background image. Images used in the print are sourced digitally through live map databases and news reports, these images are also added to my image bank that was mentioned within the methodology section. The background image depicts a chaotic scene where protestors clashed with police forces, while the foreground image depicts a portrait of Hong Kong chief executive Carrie Lam crying, which was taken from an interview where Lam addresses the extradition law controversy⁵.

Red and black are dominant colours that emerge across multiple prints I have done over the course of the MFA program. This project was the first where these two colours were used to depict Mouffe's friend/enemy relation through the layering of images and the shift between red and black. The prints were made as diptych prints to suggest a two-way perspective that is highlighted through the shifting between red and black; on one hand there is the responsibilities

⁵ For further information on Carrie Lam's interview, see "Carrie Lam Addresses Extradition Law Controversy."

of Carrie Lam as Hong Kong's representative, and on the other there is the ceaseless violence enforced by protestors who were more extreme. The clash of blame and responsibility between the two negates the possibility of creating a space for any dialogue to be established. The highlight of the red is never used on both the foreground and background at the same time, this is to create a narrative within the sets of prints that visually represents the back and forth movement present in news and media coverage. As a way to visualize the manipulative nature of news media, I choose to use the gradual shifting of red to black as a way to obscure the emotionally charged images that can invite audience interpretations. As the background becomes obscured with black, the scene of violence becomes ambiguous, and our attention is placed on the crying portrait of Carrie Lam. On the other hand, as Carrie Lam's portrait becomes obscured, there may be more clarity offered in the chaotic scenes in the background.

Borrowed Time: An Exploration of Movement in Time and Architectural Spaces



Fig. 6a. Patrick Wong, *Borrowed Time*, 2021. Ink on Paper, 58" x 78". Photograph taken by Michael Love.



Fig. 6b. Patrick Wong, *'Borrowed Time'*, 2021. Ink on Paper, 58" x 78". Photograph taken by Michael Love.

The work *Borrowed Time* (fig. 6a & 6b) is a black and red image made from high contrast photos that were digitally sourced. Measuring 58” x 78,” the screen-printed image is composed of nine smaller individual prints that are arranged in a three-by-three format to form a larger image. The piece explores the colonial history of Hong Kong through its cityscape and architectural elements, contrasting the modern skyscrapers with the remnants of colonial-era structures that are preserved but obscured within the rapid expansion of and construction of newer and taller high-rise buildings.

The making of this print firstly required me to think about the work in terms of the layers that I want to incorporate into the image. Consequently I began the image-making process by selecting buildings from both sides that embody Hong Kong’s architectural and cultural hybridity. The skyscrapers that I have used in my print include the Bank of China Tower, International Commerce Centre, HSBC Building, International Finance Centre, and Central Plaza. All of the high-rise and skyscrapers that were chosen are representational of China’s influence on Hong Kong’s architecture, visualizing the rapid development of the city as more and more structures that are representational of economic power and wealth are constructed. On the other hand, to contrast the post-colonial structures, I included buildings such as the Central Police Station, Legislative Council Building, Former French Mission Building, and the Government House. The colonial-era buildings are not only stylistically and functionally different from the earlier mentioned buildings but also serve as a reminder to the people of Hong Kong of its colonial history, land that was ceded to Britain under the unequal treaties of the

Chuenpi Convention⁶. The conditions that lead to the cession of Hong Kong were oppressive by nature, therefore the contrast between the two different sets of structures not only explores the critical transitional phases of Hong Kong's history through architecture but also shows the power dynamic and friction between these sites of power and wealth.

Using the digital images I have collected of the skyscrapers and colonial buildings, I created a base photoshop template with the images collaged on top, and with the colonial structures forming the base of the image. The skyscrapers placed behind them create a cityscape that reflects the verticality of Hong Kong's progression, both in terms of the architecture and history. With the collage completed, I flatten the image as a grayscale image, adjusting the brightness and contrast values manually to create a high contrast image that can be exposed onto the silkscreen coated with photo emulsion. During the process of editing the images in photoshop, I use the burn tool to enhance the shadows or darkened areas to create more contrast within the image, while the dodge tool brightens up parts of the image. A separate photoshop template is prepared for the second layer of the print that will be screen-printed on top of the collaged image of the buildings with the important years vertically displayed down the middle of the print from 1997-2047. The significance of the years arranged vertically on the buildings not only references Hong Kong's adoption of the 'One Country, Two Systems' model that fundamentally establishes and recognizes Hong Kong's hybrid identity, but also ties into the verticality of the city, as both time and place are being pushed vertically. The completed background layer of the buildings is digitally split into nine separate panels to be printed out on

⁶ For further information on the events that led up to and the conclusion of the Chuenpi Convention, see "China Reluctantly Cedes Hong Kong to Britain."

individual transparency sheets measuring at 19” x 26” each, and similarly, the top layer of the print including the important years are divided into three vertically arranged panels with the same dimensions as the base layer of the split images.

In works such as *Borrowed Time*, the split images appear grid-like and although it is a product of the process of making multi-part prints, it also hints towards the idea of urban city planning and the use of the grid within the architectural context as my research navigates the complex landscape of the city. Another reason for my decision to keep the prints as split images is due to the connection to my research process and method, as the research I am conducting requires me to piece together various definitions and parts of colonial history that I am engaging with, from my textual research on different definitions of decolonization and reclamation, to the collaging of images across different points in time.

Before exposing the images, the silkscreens are prepared through cleaning and degreasing procedures in order to remove all the chemical and non-chemical residues from previous prints. Afterwards, the emulsion is applied to the front side of the screen with a coater and at least a day of dry time is required before the printing takes place, to ensure that the photo emulsion is completely set and ready to be exposed on the UV lightbox. With the transparency sheets printed and the silkscreen prepared, each image is exposed onto the screen individually with an exposure time of 90 seconds per image. Once all nine parts of the image are printed out with the silkscreen and dried, the final layer which depicts the years are then printed on top of the base prints in red ink. With all the components of the large print complete, each print is then individually carefully

torn to fit the presentation dimensions of the work, and lastly assembled together in a tile-like fashion where each piece of the nine prints connects to the next between the seams of the separate smaller prints.

Borrowed Place: Water and Charcoal



Fig. 7. Patrick Wong, '*Borrowed Place*', 2021. plexiglass, water, charcoal powder, 12" x 10". Photograph taken by Michael Love.

Borrowed Place (fig. 7) is a charcoal powder image printed on water that is contained within a 12"x10" plexiglass box. There are two plexiglass boxes displayed next to each other,

both sharing the same charcoal printed image of three Chinese figures in the squatting position on the top layer of the print. It is also important for me to provide context for this image, as it depicts the scene of individuals being arrested during 1967 riots in Hong Kong, where peaceful demonstrations rapidly changed into riots, as people began to voice their opinions of dissatisfaction on British colonial rule over Hong Kong. In a similar way, the political disputes that took place in Hong Kong between 2019-2020 echoes what happened in 1967, but rather than being focused on the issue of becoming colonial subjects of the British, we now see lingering problems related to concerns over freedom, democracy and human rights after the Hong Kong handover. The work examines how the display of the Chinese body in the squatting position can be interpreted as a body that is in transition/transformation, and also one that is in a position of resistance. This piece was displayed with *Borrowed Time*, working together to visualize my research on how the past resurfaces through the present within the context of colonial history, thus depicting history in a way that shows how a nation's colonial past may haunt its present.

Although I use the technique of printing charcoal powder images on water, it was the artist Oscar Munoz who pioneered this technique within printmaking. Munoz is an influential figure within the development of my artistic practice through his printmaking techniques and unique approach towards materials in his depiction of political subjects has helped shape my material exploration. The extent of Munoz's influence on my works has been detailed in an earlier section on my artistic influences. Within the current chapter, I will be focusing on the experimental aspect of printmaking through my choice of material and techniques that places my

work in conversation with my research on decolonization, reclamation, and the corrosion of the colonial subject's identity.

The work has four key components, which includes the plexiglass box, water, a screen printed background image, and the final layer of image that is made from charcoal powder. The two plexiglass boxes are filled nearly to the brim with water, leaving roughly one quarter of an inch of space for the charcoal powder to be applied as the final layer of the print through a silkscreen that is placed above the box. Before the application of the charcoal powder, two background prints are placed into the plexiglass container and submerged slightly under the surface of the water to act as the foundation for the charcoal powder when evaporation begins. There are two different images used as the background image, the first being a quote taken from *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon and the second image depicts an arrest during Hong Kong's political unrest where individuals were lined up in squatting or kneeling positions. After the paper is submerged slightly under the surface of the water, a silkscreen with the exposed image of the 1967 squatting figures is placed onto the top of the plexiglass box. A thin layer of fine charcoal powder is then applied to the surface of the screen, covering the entire area of the exposed image. After the charcoal powder is applied, a paint brush is used to gently move the powder around in a circular motion to carefully push the fine powder through the silkscreen in the shape of the exposed image. During this part of the process, it is also important to periodically gently tap or flick around the surface of the exposed image to help smaller details of the exposed images come through. In this experimental process, the paint brush replaces the squeegee as the tool that pushes the powder/ink through the silkscreen, rather than having the ink

being pushed onto the paper, the powder slowly accumulates on the thin layer of water above the background image, creating a fragile and delicate image that will transform as evaporation occurs. Due to the silkscreen being placed directly over the plexiglass box, it is hard to tell when and if the image has fully transferred onto the surface. For this reason, the process described above for the treatment of the charcoal powder is usually done for around one and a half to two minutes, depending on the size of the exposed image. Lastly, after the charcoal powder has been pushed through, the screen is carefully lifted from the frame of the plexiglass box, revealing the exposed image.

The quote used for the background of one of the prints came from Fanon's text in a chapter where his experiences as a psychiatrist were discussed, examining the ties between colonial war and mental disorders, Fanon claims that,

Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: "In reality, who am I?"

The defensive attitudes created by this violent bringing together of the colonized man and the colonial system form themselves into a structure which then reveals the colonized personality. This "sensitivity" is easily understood if we simply study and are alive to the number and depth of the injuries inflicted upon a native during a single day spent amidst the colonial regime. (Fanon 150)

Fanon's writing is still very relevant within the contemporary discussion of decolonization, and provides valuable insight for my research in the construction and deconstruction of one's identity. By placing this quote in the same frame as the metaphor of the squatting Chinese bodies within my work, I'm applying Fanon's understanding of the fractured

identity of the colonized subjects into the political discourse of Hong Kong, in the process showing how Hong Kong's colonial history can potentially be perceived cyclically. The second image also hints towards this relationship of cyclicity in colonial history, as the squatting bodies depicted in the 2019 arrest overlaps with the ephemeral charcoal printed figures of the 1967 arrest.

Treaties: (Un)heard Voices, (Un)known Language

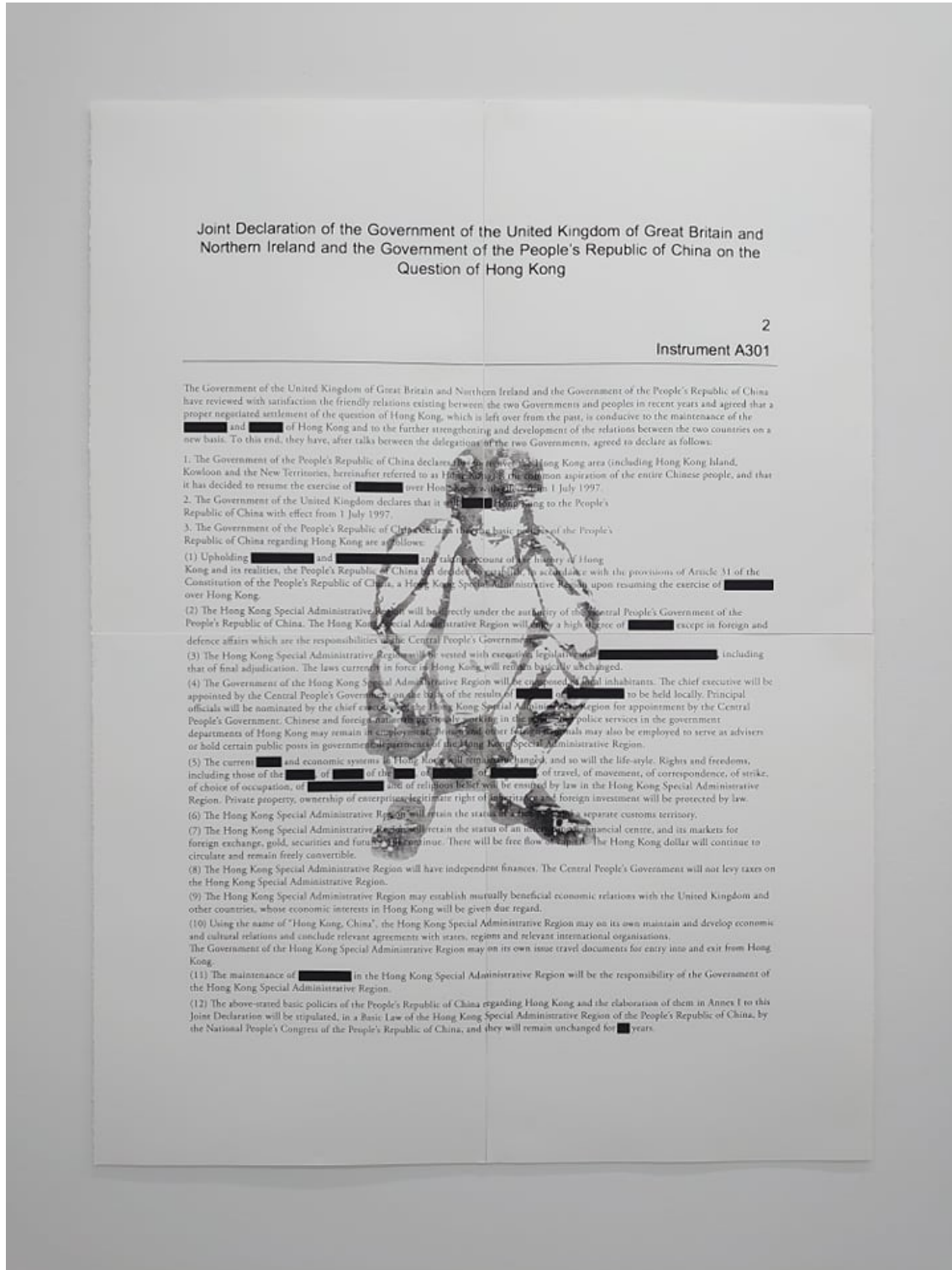


Fig. 7a. Patrick Wong, *Treaties* (English), 2021. Paper, charcoal powder, transparent base, ink, 44”x60”.

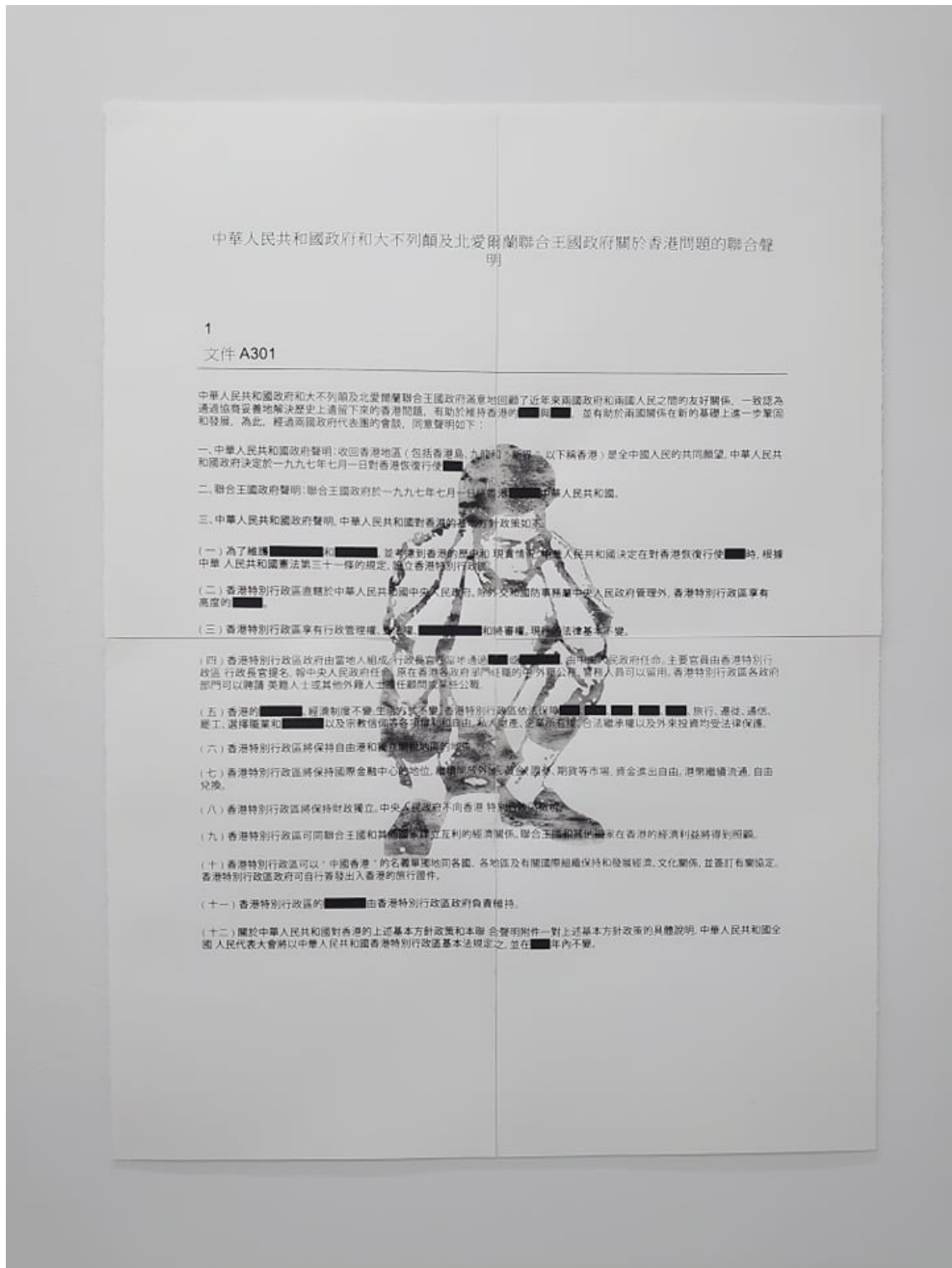


Fig. 7b. Patrick Wong, *Treaties* (Chinese), 2021. Paper, charcoal powder, transparent extender base, ink, 44"x60".

Treaties is composed of two separate black and white prints that are each assembled from four smaller prints (fig. 7a & b). The squatting figure from the 1967 riots which were used in my previous works emerges again in this set of prints as the background figure, while the foreground depicts twelve points from the Sino-British Joint Declaration that was signed between UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the third premier of the People's Republic of China, Zhao Ziyang. Both prints share the same background image, but the foregrounded text is presented differently, with one being printed in English and the other in Chinese. This work specifically examines the relationship between people and the government through the establishment of treaties between countries, while also questioning how the use of bureaucratic language within official documents such as the Sino-British Joint Declaration may alienate the people and groups that are being represented by the government bodies through the redaction of specific words in the document. Certain words related to rights, freedom, and sovereignty are redacted from the treaty through me, in order to create a new version of the treaty which reflects sensitive and unstable nature of the document. Although it is presented as an official document that essentially charts Hong Kong's path following the handover for 50 years, many aspects of the treaty is no longer viable or properly reflects the path of which Hong Kong is following.

In the making of this project, I also expanded on some of the experimental elements of my previous charcoal powder prints by combining charcoal powder and transparent extender base during the printing process. After the image preparation, the background layer is printed by scattering varying amount of charcoal powder with a spoon or brush onto the backside of the silkscreen, followed by a line of transparency extender base that is applied above the exposed

image. The extender base serves the same purpose as the line of ink that is applied to the screen in the standard screen printing process, but instead of pushing coloured ink directly through the screen, the extender base remains transparent after being pulled through the screen with the charcoal powder partially mixed with it, therefore creating a light grey image that appears to be fading or corroded due to the unpredictable spread of the charcoal powder when being pulled through with the extender base. The image created from this experimental process allows the charcoal dust and the marks of the dust being pulled come through in the print, as the extender base helps the powder adhere to the surface of the paper giving the image a sense of impermanence. Lastly, with the base layer dried, the final layer with the text of the treaty is then printed onto it with black ink. The process of working with ephemeral materials is one that reflects the struggle of the process, and that of capturing the image, therefore the figure becomes trapped in a state of being visible, yet it exists on the verge of dissolution.

The work is displayed slightly above the standard gallery height with both prints placed next to each other, with a few inches of space allocated between the prints. The decision to elevate the prints above eye level is meant to encourage the viewers to approach the work having to view it by looking slightly upwards. This forced perspective is meant to establish a power dynamic between viewer and the artwork, one specifically that elevates the power of the treaty over that of the viewer. Throughout my research on the treaty, I have come to the realization of how much power the bureaucratic language within these treaties hold over the people, but at the same time, due to the complexity and sometimes ambiguous nature of said agreements, the

people are never truly represented, much like how the squatting figure appears trapped behind the words of the treaty.

Throughout history, prints have been a powerful medium enabling the communication and distribution of ideas through reproduction, but in the case of my works, I would argue that monoprints have the potential to hold more power in the delivery of social and political messages. Although in the digital age images and posters can easily be mass-produced and reproduced digitally, the monoprint is unique in its irreproducibility, giving it the potential for a more powerful delivery of a message, which prioritizes the printmaking process as method of expression, rather than reproduction. Although both the English and Chinese versions of the prints share the same content and method of production, neither print can become an edition, as the charcoal printing process renders a unique image every time the charcoal is pulled through the screen. None of the charcoal powder falls onto the surface of the screen in the exact same way, from the quantity of powder, the elevation of the drop, to the uncontrolled spread of the powder once it makes contact with the surface of the screen, all these variables factors into the uncertain nature of the prints I produce. It is precisely this sense of uncertainty that I aim towards exploring, a potential way to visualize the rapid and unpredictable changes that are occurring within Hong Kong's political sphere, and how that can be reflected in the body of the colonized. The appearance of the squatting figure being faded and corroded is also an important element of the piece, as this was a way for me to segue the experimental qualities of my water and charcoal powder prints, along with Fanon's writing on the identity of the colonized people into the formal qualities of my work. My previous project *Borrowed Place* created prints which transformed

overtime, resulting in the natural distortion of the image through the movement and evaporation of water, while the printing techniques used in *Treaties* allows for a greater degree of control over the maintenance of form that the charcoal powder takes on. The figure maintains its clarity and details of the squatting body, while also capturing the corroded appearance of the body which appears to almost be in stasis, frozen in time behind the imposing treaty.

Is It Time?: Taking on the Squatting Position



Fig. 8. Patrick Wong, *'Is It Time?'*, 2022. acrylic glass, ink, 12" x 14" x 9.5". Photograph taken by Michael Love.

The piece *Is It Time?* (fig. 8) continues my exploration of Hong Kong through the motif of the squatting Chinese body, while also experimenting with how screen prints could be experienced and seen through a sculptural form. The print is composed of five separate 12 x 12” acrylic panels that are placed into a custom acrylic stand, and each panel depicts one image of my own body in the squatting position.

The image of the squatting body shown depicts a sequence from squatting to standing, or from standing to squatting depending on how the viewer approaches the print. This work builds on the concepts explored through the squatting Chinese body that were discussed within previous works, but it also distinguishes itself from them, as this piece departs from the depiction of the squatting Chinese bodies that were taken from the context of the 1967 riots in Hong Kong, and embraces the position through my own body. The transparent quality of the acrylic panels also provides an opportunity for past works to be seen through it, allowing the squatting bodies that were referenced in previous works to be experienced through this piece, connecting the image of my squatting body, with the bodies that I have referenced in the past. The consideration of using a transparent surface and displaying the work on a tall plinth is meant to encourage viewers to go around the work and approach it from different angles, which can potentially help open up the squatting position to various viewer interpretations. This work does not aim to illustrate Hong Kong’s path of decolonization or independence, but rather, it highlights my questions around Hong Kong’s current geo-political space, focusing on the ambiguous and transitional nature of the squatting position, while also posing a question to the viewer through the title of the piece, as it questions when it is time for the squatter to stand up.

The main reason for my attachment to the squatting position is due to its transformative and transitional nature, it is a position that exists between the state of being passive and active. Another reason being the flexibility of this position, as it can be read and interpreted in numerous ways, changing its meaning depending on who or what the context is. In the Western context, the term squatting or squatter may be more commonly associated with the unlawful occupation of unoccupied land or buildings, to a body unfamiliar with squatting, the position may seem foreign or lowly, while in parts of Asia where it is more commonly practiced, it can be an indicator for class or hierarchy. This piece combines the transitory nature of both the place and the Chinese bodies that exists within it, inviting conversation and dialogue to be made through the ambiguous relationship of place and people.

Conclusion: From Lines to the Squatting Body

Through this thesis, I set out to define the process of decolonization for myself and explore the possibilities of expressing resistance through the squatting posture of the Chinese body within the context of Hong Kong. My project started as research on the political division of Hong Kong taking on the form of blind contour drawings as a method for understanding, processing, and digesting the political information fed to me through news media, gradually became an exploration of colonial history and understanding how the colonial past shapes the uncertain future of a city that is torn between two different political systems. Using printmaking as a way to navigate the complex layers of history, I attempt to unfold and confront Hong Kong's

colonial past, where we can see the resurfacing of political tensions as China moves towards Hong Kong's decolonization.

In order to understand the conflicts of the present, I looked to the past, attempting to untangle the lines that intertwine between China, Britain, and Hong Kong. Using the squatting Chinese body as a metaphor for resistance against colonial power I was able to visualize the process of decolonization within Hong Kong that is constantly being pushed back by the colonial past that it has yet to overcome. With the knowledge of theorists that shaped my work, such as Fanon and Mouffe, I came to understand the decolonization process as one that is violent, but in order to move forward, we must confront the colonial past within a political sphere that has space for pluralism to exist. Much like Mouffe's agonistic model, it is necessary to prevent the political space from perpetuating an antagonistic model where relationships are limited to friend/enemies and to instead transform these relationships to that of pluralism and agonism. The metaphor of the Chinese body present within my artworks also speaks to this issue of the political space as addressed above. Since the solution to the current political problems require a transformation of the existing systems, the squatting posture which embodies the necessary transformative qualities become the perfect metaphor for my work bridging together the transformative quality of Mouffe's model with the transformative posture of squatting, a position in which the body is static, yet it is ready to be on the move, a form of resistance that is transformative in the time and space that the body occupies. Over the course of this research project it is also important to understand that Hong Kong is only one example within the larger context of decolonization around the world in the post-colonial era, and the process of healing

requires not only time, but also the engagement of political conversations within the political sphere that is inclusive of different parties in collectively building solutions. In order to avoid the perpetuation of violence within the process of decolonization, agonism within political spaces is not only unavoidable, but also highly necessary for the growth of democracy, where conflicts can be addressed and the people are not prevented from accessing the political sphere by the bureaucratic language of governing bodies/institutions.

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