

Title wall text – white vinyl, 3 feet wide

Howie Tsui: From swelling shadows, we draw our bows

Growing up between Hong Kong, Lagos, and Thunder Bay, Howie Tsui has described his childhood and adolescence as existing between Chinese and colonial cultures. In his artworks, he blends classical and contemporary Chinese art, particularly wuxia—a popular martial arts genre advocating for resistance against oppressors that emerged in China during the mid-20th century—with Western popular culture to examine the complexities of the diasporic experience and question official Chinese culture.

The exhibition takes as its starting point Tsui's *Retainers of Anarchy* (2017), a five-channel algorithmic animation comprised of hundreds of hand-painted ink drawings of wuxia-style characters. This seminal work was created as a response to the animated scroll *River of Wisdom* (2010), a Chinese government-sanctioned version of a famous Song Dynasty (960–1279) painting. Exhibited at the 2010 Expo Shanghai China, *River of Wisdom*'s idyllic marketplace setting negated decades of state-sponsored oppression and civil unrest, most recently in Hong Kong. Tsui's animation is set, instead, in the Kowloon Walled City (1898–1994)—a tenement once situated on the fringes of British-occupied Hong Kong that housed up to 35,000 people in a 2.6-hectare footprint. Rarely patrolled by police, it was known by locals as “the city of darkness.”

The single-channel animation *Parallax Chambers* (2018-ongoing) features many of the same characters as *Retainers of Anarchy*, but emanates a much more claustrophobic feeling. Both animations are accompanied by site-specific frescos in the Clerestory. These automatic drawings are made as the artist's hand moves randomly across walls, conjuring ephemeral, ghost-like images.

Tsui's version of Hong Kong is, at times, nightmarish, full of violence and permeated with a sense of hopelessness as the characters struggle to survive the horrors that befall them. But in the shadows—liminal spaces, like the Kowloon Walled City, or as members of the diaspora shift between cultures—are the tools to fight against injustice, untruths, and fear.

#TPPHowieTsui

Sectional label no. 1 – white vinyl, two feet wide

*Parallax Chambers*, 2018 - ongoing

Algorithmic animation sequence, single channel projection, stereo sound

Courtesy the artist and Patil Brown Gallery

Programming & Sound Design: Remy Siu

Animation: Anna Firth, Chhaya Naran, Kodai Yanagawa, and Roxanne Zagar

Additional Sound Design: Paul Paroczai

Installation Design: Wade Thomas

Wuxia and Hong Kong's struggle for political and cultural autonomy exist side-by-side in this algorithmic animation. Like all works in this exhibition, the characters in *Parallax Chambers* reference a martial arts clan from Jin Yong's *Condor Trilogy* (1957-61) novels, conflating them with people, real and imagined, from the Kowloon Walled City (1898–1994) and present-day Hong Kong. Tsui's layered animations thus oscillate between the past and present, reality and fantasy, and literary and visual fields, establishing spaces, characters, and scenes that loop and collide in intimate and visceral ways.

“Parallax” is how an object appears differently when viewed from different angles. *Parallax Chambers* uses artificial intelligence to explore this concept, as animations are looped and sampled at random to generate shifting viewpoints and narratives without beginning or end. The work thus presents scenarios where characters' motives are forever in flux, raising questions about the binary nature of harmony versus chaos and “good” versus “evil.”

Lenticular Lightboxes – sectional label no. 2 – white vinyl, two feet wide

Tsui's use of lenticular prints mounted in lightboxes is an experiment in translating ephemeral animations into a physical format that retains transformative potential, and brings motion to what is inherently flat and static. *The Three Greats*, *Joyride*, and *Winged Assassin* (all 2018) include characters that are also found in *Retainers of Anarchy*, and their shape and luminosity allude to the television glow of some of Tsui's original source material, including the martial arts movies he watched as an adolescent in Thunder Bay.

#### Lenticular Lightboxes – sectional label no. 3 – white vinyl, two feet wide

The tactility of Tsui's lightbox works—including *The peel, the bark, the tome (White Camel Mountain)* and *Parallax Neon (White Camel Mountain)*, both 2019—contrasts with how digital technology flattens time and space, limiting or eradicating nuance. Tsui has referred to these works as inhabiting “old, haunted mediums,” and, in this way, they further his interest in exploring the way the past haunts the future. The goat parchment support used in *The peel, the bark, the tome*, in particular, alludes to parchment used for sacred texts, war manuals, and ancient manuscripts, as well as the *Nine Yin Manual*, a fictional martial arts manual from the *Condor Trilogy* fabled to have been printed on vellum, with sections etched onto human skin.

#### Sectional Label no. 4 – white vinyl, two feet wide

##### *Retainers of Anarchy*, 2017

Algorithmic animation sequence, 5-channel projection, 6-channel audio

Courtesy the artist and Patell Brown Gallery

Programming & Sound Design: Remy Siu

Animation: Sitji Chou, Roxanne Zagar, Kodai Yanagawa, Kerel Alaas, Amelia Earhart

Installation Design: Wade Thomas

In this seminal, five-channel algorithmic animation, wuxia-inspired characters occupy a fictionalized Kowloon Walled City (1898–1994), a densely populated tenement once located in a liminal zone between British-occupied Hong Kong and China. The complex developed organically, and was characterized by an impenetrable mass of convoluted passageways, tangled wires, and haphazard apartment complexes stacked precariously on top of one another—an ad-hoc architecture and social structure that mirrors how Chinatowns evolved globally.

The action is set inside the Walled City, which is embedded in a background based upon the 18<sup>th</sup> century painting *One Hundred Horses* (1723–25) by Lang Shining, an Italian Jesuit missionary and court painter born Giuseppe Castiglione—a nod to China and Europe's entangled past and present. Embedded further still in the makeup of the animation itself are “sprites,” modular units common in game design that generate looped animations. While the work employs standardized individuals, objects, and settings, these components are reconfigured and repeat at random, creating a looped narrative without a beginning or end.

#### Sectional label no. 5 – dark grey vinyl

##### *A Geomantic Corridor*, 2020

Calligraphy ink, acrylic paint, xuan paper, matches, joss sticks, incense coils, bagua mirrors

Since 2009, Tsui has used a combination of smoke staining, impression making, and automatic drawing techniques—whereby his hand moves randomly across walls—to conjure ephemeral, ghost-like images. Within the context of Tsui's exhibition, *A Geomantic Corridor*'s anguished figures suggest persecuted and disappearing dissidents, past and present, haunting Hong Kong streets. The figures weave between a schematic installation of bagua (or Feng Shui) mirrors, and joss sticks, incense traditionally burned as an offering to the dead during Hong Kong's Hungry Ghost Festival.

The incense arrangements stem from the *Yellow River Diagram* and the *Nine Halls Diagram* that symbolize founding principles for the *I Ching* [Book of Changes], traditional Chinese medicine, and Feng Shui—the art of geomancy concerned with the placement of objects in relation to the flow of qi, or “natural energy.” The combination of drawings, mirrors, and incense evokes the belief that burial sites that fail to adhere to Feng Shui principles produce negative frequencies. In extreme cases, as depicted in some Hong Kong horror films, this can lead to reanimated cadavers driven to seek retribution.

