

Jaffa Lam**ARTIST**

Usually in Hong Kong, you know, if you call yourself an artist, either people would think you are a singer or ... You know: what does artist mean? They will think, "maybe a painter or something". "Artist" is never related to a professional occupation. When you are outside, everyone understands that you are an artist. But in Hong Kong I have to explain it.

Another part is I am doing non-art objects productions I would say. That's about expressing my idea, deliver my message to the public through the education.

Usually, people think teaching just helps you to survive. But for me, teaching is really kind of my alternative work. How to deliver the message. Sometimes I deliver the message by making my art production, but education is another way I deliver my work or message to the more audience I would say. So, I am not only teaching in the unis, I also help the education department to develop the programme and the material for the secondary school and also primary school. I also do the teacher training as well. That is ... I would feel like I more enjoy in that part also. Other than making a work and then show it in a museum. That's it.

I didn't do many gallery shows. Because my work is always in large-scale, people always only think about me when they are running the big-scale show. Because in Hong Kong not many people work in large-scales installations. Mainly making the small table objects.

Also my work involves many people sometimes and then maybe it's difficult for them to count the artist's fee, production fee (laughs). I don't know. And also, project by project, it's not by the object you can sell. That is the main thing why it's difficult to show in a gallery.

ARTWORK

I mainly use recycled material like recycled umbrella fabric and also recycled wood, crate wood, like a packing wood and recycled furniture.

Most of my early work is about when I moved in different cities, I would work on the feelings I got or the issues in that city. Because I am the freshcomer. And then it is very easy to raise out some curiosities to find out the city. It is based on that. But in these days that I am back to Hong Kong in the last five, six years, I have to settle down.

It is also interesting, when I worked as a curator before, I curated for other artists and they had to connect with a NGO. One of the NGOs was very interesting because they work with unemployed women. All those people were garment workers before. Also it connects to my childhood. That's why I feel very close and can talk with them easily. Then started my umbrella fabric work.

Long long time ago, yes, I did work in garment industry since I was twelve – that was illegal work, long time ago. And then I worked with them and I explained them I hope I can commission them to do something. So, in the process I felt like this was something that is more important, this connection is more important than the art is itself. And then I started from there.

That was the first time I worked with these ladies and then I kept ... the project continuously because of that.

So, I think the product itself is just a by-product I would say. How to settle myself in the society is the key issue for me because I don't want to lose my value of living in Hong Kong. This is somehow the main struggle of being an artist. Especially when you are not an artist in the commercial world. I think all my things doing is just answering that question. And the rest of them are just by-products (laughs).

PRODUCTION

Maybe I can talk about the bridge work. The bridge work is not done in my studio because that is carving the Human Rights Declaration. That is a work ... Because it is more than 200 pieces, so, I had to ask more than 16 people to carve on that.

Some of them are carving at home and in their own studio. And during the show. Before the show I hadn't seen it. (laughs) After setting it up, that was the first time I saw my work. Because the scale – it is huge – it is 18 meters long. Before the show, I already think about the storage. That's why I asked them to make small pieces, one by one. Because if you do a carving there, you have to spread out. I don't have that space. But after they'd finished, and also after the set-up of the work, it is done and then organized and packed in my studio. That is the kind of work I can store, and a museum cannot. So, a museum – because they are really scared of the scale, they say, "18 meters! It's not possible for us to collect!". But they never know, when I collect it in my studio, it only occupies a book shelf size. My ideas always start from one emotional point. Just like for example the bridge started right after the 1st of July 2012. Right after the marching, I thought I had to make something. I am not a very outspoken person. I don't like to talk in public. But I am still willing to express myself through the art medium.

And I said, "ok, I want to do this. I want to make a human bridge for the people to step on." That's the idea, that's all. And then I had to think, "who is going to make that?" – because of the large scale –, "how to arrange that? The venue, the space? How to fine-tune everything?" That is the rest of the things. I think that's a basic training of being an artist in that way. I never worry about the scale for the arrangement. The only thing is, "where is the idea from?". So, that is the idea. Usually, it is by big issues. This time, it's by the Umbrella Movement.

MATERIAL

I think in Hong Kong, I am quite fixed with some material – like umbrella fabric and recycled wood. Before, I had many other materials but mainly it's industrial material. But still, I have a different material or the mediums I would use when I am travelling.

I think I have to save the material. Because I am not selling the work anyway. Whatever I am making, the work is wasting the material resources.

And then, those resources are belonging to the planet, it's not only by me. So whatever I am making and then becomes non-collection, that is a waste already and it occupies the space.

MEDIUM

I don't think about what kind of medium I should use. It's about what the theme takes me to go. I am always being teased of my photography work. A photographer once said, "you are not professional enough. There is so many noise in your pictures." But I just follow the concept, I would say. I follow the concept.

PROCESS

So, every time I go to other cities, I will try to do something for that city which invited me to be there. I always feel I have to connect to the cities I visit.

In Penang I didn't expect to do anything.

But it just happens that I got another fellowship to work in a glass workshop. In the beginning they said they offer me just like a class for the practicing, not making the huge artwork. But in the end I said, "could you make this and that?",

So, it just happened I felt in that moment that I needed to present it in this way.

And also just follow the rhythm of the work rather than what kind of mediums I choose.

PRESENTATION

If you have to present it in a gallery or museum, that is easier for many people because the audience will come. You know most of them, at least. Those people are art lovers. Otherwise they wouldn't go there. It's easier, honestly. For that work, I say the difficult thing is how to convince those people that I am an artist.

The artist's commitment is about education. Spread out the statement of yourself. That is about ... So, if you treat the wording itself, conversation itself could be the art piece. You know, the theme is very suitable for that lobby, I think I can propose.

That's what I say is most important about education: It is not the education in the school, it's the education that happens in any place, with any people. Just like, the worker I work with, she changed her mind and let her children study art and music. So, that is the real outcome but not the production work she worked for me.

INTENTION

I feel that art changed my life. I would like to share this message with many people. As many as I can. I just want to deliver this message: "If art can change my life, it can also change your life." That's why I talk to different people without thinking they are poor or rich, educated or not educated.

I think art makes me happy. And also be easy. Easier to accept everything, very flexible, I guess. Whenever you put me in any situation, I think I can survive (laughs). That is very important. Survive and also be happy.

METHOD

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ART

I am not keen on making art, if the situation is not allowed, I can stop making art. And ... I will like to deliver the message by any of the ways, not necessarily by making art. But maybe the people still like to read the message from me through the art piece. That's why I am making that. And also maybe so far it is still the best presentation of my ideas.

A lot of people struggle on their life but never know what they are living on. If you have too much money, if you have a perfect family – I don't know. I always think: what is most important of human beings living in the world? Maybe art could give me the answer.

For some people it's by religion. For myself, art is that kind of ... similar to religion, but it's very open. That's why I like it. Because everyone has a different interpretation. It's a myth, I would say.

BIO

* 1973, Lam is a sculptor specializing in large-scale site-specific works of mixed-media sculptures and installations, which are mainly made with recycled materials like crate wood, old furniture and recycled fabric. In recent years, she has been involved in many public art and community projects in Hong Kong and overseas. Her works often explore issues related to local culture, history, the society and current affairs.

Lam received her BFA, MFA and Postgraduate Diploma in Education at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. She is now teaching at the Hong Kong Art School as Senior Lecturer and Programme Coordinator of Higher Diploma in Fine Art.

Apart from solo exhibitions, Lam was invited to take part in many local and international exhibitions, as well as artist residency programmes in Kenya, Taiwan, Bangladesh, China, United States and Canada, etc. She was awarded Asian Cultural Council Desiree and Hans Michael Jebsen Fellowship as recognition in 2006.

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Credits

The interview was conducted on 29 November 2014 at Hong Kong Art School.

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