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Just breathing

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JUST BREATHING

Once in a while we might think something strange like “how long does it take to inhale all the air in my bedroom?” or “what would it feel like if I travelled with my eyes shut?” As *DAISY ZHONG* discovered, artist **PAK SHEUNG CHUEN** takes these eccentric ideas seriously and has drawn upon them to build an impressive reputation in the art world.

When the He Xiangnin Art Museum in Shenzhen held an opening ceremony in July last year for Pak Shueng Chuen’s solo exhibition it lacked the usual elements found in Asian gallery openings. There were no collectors, socialites, art critics, designer clothing or champagne. The artist himself, surrounded by many of his friends and fans, wore a crumpled short-sleeved shirt and carried a knapsack with a bottle of water in its side pocket.

And yet Pak is not an unknown – he was the only Hong Kong artist to exhibit at the 2009 53rd Venice Biennale and his works have been collected by Tate Modern in London. The style of the opening was a statement of Pak’s aesthetic. His works are as unpretentious as his appearance. At the Venice Biennale, Pak showed his installation *The Horizon Placed at Home*, which features 45 plastic bottles filled with seawater collected from Victoria Harbour. The collection points were established by drawing a horizontal line on a map of Victoria Harbour from east to west, which creates 45 intersections on the coastline. The idea came to Pak when he was “daydreaming” that he might one day live in a sea view apartment.

Another internationally renowned installation of Pak’s is called *Breathing in a House*, which shows

transparent plastic bags full of air that consume all the space in a room. The work was created in a rented apartment in Busan, Korea, where Pak collected the air he breathed into transparent plastic bags until the whole apartment was full. It took him 10 days. The idea came as Pak was lying on his bed “thinking of nothing, but I heard my own breathing, and I wondered, ‘How long does it take to breathe in all the air of this room?’”

For the past decade, 35-year-old Pak has pursued these seemingly trivial and eccentric ideas, but in the process he has revealed the uniqueness and potential of day-to-day reality. “The uniqueness of everyday life is often repressed by the imposing narratives of modernity,” he says. “I think many things in our living environment are more interesting than the exhibits in galleries. When your eyes are opened, daily objects also become art.”

On April 15, Pak came to the Experience Centre at HKDI campus and shared his perspective on art in a seminar titled *Self-Reflection/City Exploration*, in which he unveiled a cityscape that is full of “unfamiliar familiarities.”

Born in Fujian Province in 1977, Pak was educated in Hong Kong and has been based here since 1984. Yet his way of being seems out of sync with the restless metropolis. In contrast to Hong Kong’s making-every-second-count spirit, Pak is remarkably slow. He likes to stroll down a street full of vehicles and pedestrians as if it’s a footpath covered with maple leaves; or meditate upon the numbers on the information board in a bus station; or he likes to stand under a tall building to wait until all the residents turn off their lights; or he stands at an MTR exit to see if a friend might emerge unexpectedly. He is a master creator from scraps of inconsequentiality.

This patient and loving attitude towards life is the foundation upon which Pak has created work that establishes an intimate relationship between spirituality and daily trivial objects.

One of his key “materials” has been his own body.

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“The human body is the first point of access to the outside environment,” he says. “Your body and the surrounding environment have a curious yet precise corresponding relationship.” On the streets, Pak measured the width of zebra crossing with the width of his shoulders, and “I found that a typical zebra crossing in Hong Kong equals the shoulder widths of five men standing together.” Few would find this fact remarkable. For Pak it’s as artistically significant as the Mona Lisa’s smile.

In another project, he laid a piece of yellow cloth across Hennessy Road in Causeway Bay during the third July 1 protest in 2005. Cutting across the route, the cloth was there to record the footprints of the marchers. Two weeks later Pak brought the cloth to Beijing, tore it into tiny ribbons and tied the ribbons around the periphery of Tiananmen Square. “The work was a

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present for the Beijing government from the citizens of Hong Kong. My artwork was a witness to Hong Kong’s history,” says Pak.

Pak works in a variety of media including installations, photos, paintings or videos, but he also likes to work in real time, making an event into a work of art.

At the 2010 Taipei Biennial Pak sat on a chair with a banner that read “Let the artist go home with you!” During the 23 days of the exhibition he managed to get 19 visitors to take him home. “On the road, the audience takes an equal position with the artist,” he explained. “They act as a viewer and provide creative materials at the same time, while the artist plays a dual role as a creator and viewer as well. Thus, two people and four roles are revealed on the road.”

Pak believes that the motivation for all of his work is to make “a conscientious construction of my memory”. “Life is like a forward-moving axis from birth to death, and very often the driving force for us to go forward is because of some memorable moments in the past,” he says. “My works are to create such valuable moments, and when I look at them I feel happy.”

The ability to get delight from ordinariness has defined Pak’s life as an artist since his graduation from the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2003. “I have been focused on doing things that I like,” he told his audience at HKDI. “My mother has always been worried about me not having a ‘serious’ job but I have never looked for a job or wanted to.”

But that’s not because his work has made him rich. Although the booming Chinese art market has elevated many artists into the wealth class, Pak’s work shows a disregard for commerce. That his works are often more like a performance they also cease to exist in the moment they are created.

This attitude has made Pak a darling of the critics. “Pak’s work marks a shift in Chinese contemporary art away from commodification and cynical detachment towards a more humanist, conscientious examination of



《AMBIGUITIES ARE WHERE EVERY CREATIVE
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relevant social issues,” said Chris Dercon, the Director of Tate Modern, at the Contemporary Chinese Art Awards in 2012, at which Pak won the Best Artist Award. The jury’s comment also noted “Pak’s work is not for the market, not for the media, but for everyone who cares about discovery.”

A disengagement from money and power might have prevented Pak from being rich and chic but it has secured him the freedom to continue his exploration of unfashionable approaches to art. “[Pak’s] art is almost invisible, almost impossible to document, but manages to explore the human condition in all its complexities and with loving precision,” says Lars Nittve, the director of M+, the museum for visual culture that will soon rise in Hong Kong’s West Kowloon Cultural District.

Pak keeps a notebook with him wherever he goes and jots down everything he finds interesting, giving a daily record of things small that may one day become works of art. “When you actually take note of what are seemingly trivial actions, you will find that every time it gives you some kind of inspiration.”

His notebook not only contains words and phrases (for instance, “To whom does the voice ‘please hold the handrail’ in the MTR belong to?”), but also sketches that are primitive and surrealistic. “Ambiguities are where every creative process begins,” he says, “the articulation of this ambiguity is what the visual arts are about. And during the process of visualising these thoughts, one is also discovering him/herself.”

And that’s a view that should make every artist take a deep breath before they begin work on their next project. ©

