Chan Hau Chun

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SCREEN
SLATE

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Form, Shadow, Motion: Selections from the Burger Collection, Hong Kong

Gladys Lou



Cici Wu, *Unfinished Return of Yu Man Hon* (2019), (still)

A young man holds a rainbow-colored rabbit lantern aboard a ferry rocking across Victoria Harbour. A glint of sunlight catches his shoulder, outlining the contours of his face, as the silhouette of the skyline gently sways in the window behind him. This shot from Cici Wu's film is taken from one of four contemplative portraits of Hong Kong in a screening organized by The Drawing Center that features artist films and videos by Wu, Chan Hau Chun, Tang Kwok-hin, and Simon Liu. Floating between documentary observation and surrealist association, the films follow a missing person, a village's inherited customs, and the city's ever-changing political and urban landscapes across an extended timelapse. Without explicit depiction of protest or violence, they ruminate on the feeling of loss and uncertainty that has lingered in Hong Kong since the 1997 Handover to China, as well as the erosion of civil liberties following the imposition of China's National Security Law in Hong Kong on June 30, 2020. Abstract images of public spaces and fleeting figures flow by like hazy memories, gathering over the city like fog.

In *Unfinished Return of Yu Man Hon* (2019), Wu revisits the case of Yu Man-hon, an autistic boy who went missing on August 24, 2000, after crossing the Hong Kong-Mainland China border. The film opens onto a sky-blue expanse, where amorphous white forms resembling clouds or out-of-focus kites drift slowly across the frame. The image then cuts to the back of a young man's head, followed by an audio clip from Edward Yang's *Yi Yi* (2000), where the child Yangyang explains his desire to photograph people from behind, "I want to tell people things they don't know. Show them things they cannot see." Wu made a deliberate connection as Yu, now grown up, is played by Jonathan Chang, the actor for Yangyang.

Like Yang's film, Wu's work reflects on the multiplicity of truth and what remains fundamentally unknowable beyond the limits of our perception. In this imagined homecoming, Yu reappears as an apparition, wandering through Hong Kong's ferry terminals, playgrounds, bus terminals, markets, and MTR stations. Carrying a paper rabbit lantern, with a large cow lantern trailing behind him, he walks through the city in search of his lost past. Footage of children flying kites and playing on the swings momentarily brings back the beauty and innocence of childhood, only to be interrupted by Yu's missing-person poster, identity photographs, and handwritten accounts, pulling the audience out of the grainy, almost-too-perfect dreamscape. In the voiceover, interviewees recount what they know of the boy, but their testimonies never establish what happened to him. Yu forever lives at the border between Hong Kong and the mainland, never arriving at a destination.

Chan Hau Chun's *The Memory of a Cicada is Longer than its Life* (2024) takes on a more elegiac and political dimension. The film opens with abstract, blurred images of pedestrians and pigeons strolling through an urban park, accompanied by a soundscape of cicadas' high-pitched buzz, swelling in rolling crescendos. The metallic whir eventually gives way to a harmonica that rises into a piercing wail, punctuated by heavy breathing, conjuring a body expending its remaining life force in sudden bursts of energy. The sound mixes with the ambient noise of traffic and the surrounding streets to form a disorientating chorus.

Handwritten text appears on screen alongside a repeated, muffled voiceover, introducing a woman who once stood in the park but is now gone. Made in 2024, the film alludes to Hong Kong's 2019 pro-democracy movement and the subsequent arrests and prosecutions of over ten thousand protesters, activists, and student leaders. Chan draws an analogy with two life forms known for their intensity and brevity: the tung blossom (油桐花) reaches full bloom within days before breaking from the tree and falling to the earth, and the cicada sings through the summer heat over its lifespan of a few weeks. The cicada's song can be understood as a cry for independence in the knowledge of its inevitable fate, much like those who have sacrificed their blood and sweat in the fight for freedom. In the final sequence, a woman submerged in water raises her arms in a posture reminiscent of the Goddess of Democracy, the iconic figure of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. As she is consumed by the tides and vanishes beneath the surface, the tung blossom she holds remains afloat. In Hakka literature and Taiwanese poetry, the flower is remembered for the way it "lifts its head," holding its dignity until the very end.

"Form, Shadow, Motion: Selections from the Burger Collection, Hong Kong" screens this evening, November 4, at Anthology Film Archives.

The New York Times

1 October 2026

It’s Hard to Make a Movie in Hong Kong. But Onscreen, the City’s Magical.

We asked creative types with ties to the metropolis to choose the films set there that made an impression.

Dennis Zhou

Hong Kong is a notoriously difficult city in which to film. Its densely packed streets, towering housing blocks and hot and humid summers all present distinct challenges, adding to the already unpredictable nature of any on-location set. When the director Wayne Wang was shooting there for his 1989 romantic comedy, “Eat a Bowl of Tea,” for instance, a local gang shut down the production because they claimed the white silk being used to diffuse light brought bad luck. (The movie crew left but, to make a point, did so riding skateboards bedecked with white flags.) Of course, there are also rich rewards to making movies in this metropolis, where a thriving filmmaking culture has existed since the early 20th century. Directors have taken different approaches over the decades, as seen in movies ranging from the iconic Shaw Brothers comedies and martial arts films of the 1960s and ’70s to the fashionably gritty New Wave works of the ’80s and ’90s, when directors like Wong Kar-wai and Ann Hui painted a picture of the city for global audiences. Here, Wang and seven other artists with ties to Hong Kong share the films that have shaped or reflected their visions of the city.

“32+4,” Chan Hau Chun (2014), selected by: **Ellen Pau, 65, video artist**



This documentary isn’t exactly a detective story, but it’s about the filmmaker uncovering the trauma between her parents, and also between her and her stepfather. Watching it, it’s easy to tell it was filmed in public housing, but you can’t tell which complex — it’s kind of a nonplace. They’re all in this one tiny apartment, fighting for space, survival, status and love. There’s a lot of very deep emotion involved, but Hau Chun can capture that without using much dialogue — it’s in how she plays with her camera, what visuals she captures, how she pauses. One scene is very memorable for me: Hau Chun’s’s father is crossing the street, and she’s filming from the other side of the road. And then printed on the screen is something like “How come I can’t cross that road to him, to stand beside him?” The gap between them becomes visible through this road. The things that you can see in the film are only one-tenth of the story, but through them, you can feel the whole story in your heart.

Flash Art

August 1, 2025

Chan Hau Chun “Map of Traces” Empty Gallery / Hong Kong

By Delaney Chieyen Holton



Chan Hau Chun, Map of Traces. Video still. Back and white, sound. 29′, 13″. Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.

Located far from the city center, on the south side of Hong Kong Island, Empty Gallery is tucked into the upper floors of a commercial skyscraper. The black-and-white projection of Chan Hau Chun’s Map of Traces (2025), the sole work and namesake of the artist’s first solo exhibition with Empty, provides the only illumination in an otherwise dark, echoey space. The film’s cloistered presentation, with the feeling of a sparsely attended microcinema screening, heightens the intimate, hushed, and quietly demanding quality of its content.

Organized roughly into three parts that traverse diasporic subjectivity, local public life, and speculative cinematicity, the film begins with a letter to an anonymized “C. R.” in white type across a textured black field, dense with fleeting recollections: an ephemeral encounter, an imprisoned acquaintance, whispers of whimsy against mounting darkness. The aesthetic austerity and temporal drag of this opening gesture

and Chan's other letters on forced silence woven throughout the film situate inscription as a key medium through which memory circulates in time. "If history is always tied to events," the narrator suggests, "then memory is like a hidden shape, waiting for the right moment to resurface."

That hidden shape begins to emerge as the film settles into an exchange between Chan and a friend drifting through Hong Kong in Google Maps Street View. We begin from a still frame of a Hong Kong sidewalk, held long enough to elicit the affective weight of looking at a photograph one knows is dear to someone before Chan scrolls away to take us down Tong Yam Street in her friend's former neighborhood. For the technologized way of seeing that gives us access to the place, intimacy suffuses it with humanistic tenderness. The pair reminisces on the seemingly eternal presence of three large banyan trees and the old men who gather in its shade, pointing out Street View's capacity to archive while using their computer cursor to gaze up lovingly into a canopy of leaves or observe games of chess.

As the pair wanders out into the more public Nathan Road, knowledge of place proves to be unequally distributed, shaped by divergent proximities and lived experiences. Their conversation gradually folds inward into a wistful contemplation of the conditions of distance and the ambient uncertainty of permacrisis. The artist's friend admits, "I don't even know if I'll ever walk this road again." The declaration is neither sentimental nor final. It hovers in the fog of competing timelines, blurred images, and fragmentary information — a false composite of home.

Though the artist is based in Hong Kong, the film's first chapter aligns it with a body of moving-image work by contemporary artists such as Simon Liu and Tiffany Sia, who have looked back at the city from the temporal and geographic remove of diaspora. Emerging from the incandescent years of the late 2010s and the ensuing wave of political suppression, these works negotiate an ambivalent relationship to Hong Kong by navigating the terrain of affect and memory rather than proffering straightforward documentation. Map of Traces also joins a lineage of video letters by earlier artists like Yau Ching, who similarly blend diaristic reflection with personal address to ease a sense of displacement.

Throughout the film, verbal language is freed from the role of didacticism or polemic to which contemporary video work so often relegates it. In Chan's sensitive treatment, verbal language dances with the visual and auditory logics of the film and carries its own aesthetic weight: the latency of letters, the specificity of anecdote, the stumbling rhythm of memory spoken aloud. Together, the tangle of aesthetic forms confirms memory's malleability. It goes even further to suggest that revision happens through forces both authoritarian and subjective, reminding us that one of repression's subtlest tools is making forgetting feel self-authored.

The film's second chapter shifts from diasporic remove to local entanglement as we continue down Nathan Road, historically a key site of public actions. The first part's ambient percussion gives way to a more vernacular soundscape anchored by Hong Kong's familiar crosswalk countdown as the figure of Lau Tit Man, an elderly graffiti writer and former "street sleeper" featured in Chan's previous works, comes into focus. Once detained for writing on public walls, Lau now tags only in water. "Others can't see it," he explains while presenting his notebook chronicling street life (stray cats, the rays of the sun) in hundreds of locations in Hong Kong. "Only I can." The film layers scans of Lau's drawings over footage of the invisible graffiti, then lingers on a street-side memorial being torn down. For a moment, the mourning symbol 奠 (dian) for which Lau was previously arrested flashes into our line of sight. These scenes accumulate into a meditation on ephemerality — writing that evaporates, public actions silenced — that notes the shared conditions shaping the respective invisibilities of exilic and local inhabitations of the city.

The third chapter, and the film's most atmospheric section, comes quietly. Its images stutter, pixelate and blur, and then, after a final letter to C. R. about the quiet endurance of the land, shatter into a slow retreat from the detention center mentioned in Chan's letters. The film ends with a shot of a foggy mountain outlook. Slowly, the mist lifts to reveal a birds-eye view of the valley below. Chan's work does not aim to rescue Hong Kong from disappearance, but to question the terms of remembrance when erasure is built into visibility itself. Hong Kong becomes a speculative construction formed in the spaces between commitment and loss, intimacy and distance, a tension that Empty Gallery director Kaitlin Chan (no relation to the artist) has called "ambivalent locality." The film doesn't so much articulate this ambivalence as inhabit it. Disappearance is not absolute: there is correspondence, however fragmented; memories, however mediated.

"Map of Traces" then demonstrates that ephemerality is a strategy as much as a condition of form. The multiple forms of inscription the film offers, from digital mapping and diary-keeping to doodles and letter-writing, alongside documentary filmmaking itself, though each flawed and fleeting, offer a scrappy toolbox that recognizes memory's quantum physics under repressive conditions. Through its affective precision and unsettled form, Map of Traces holds to sentimentality not as retreat but as a necessary way of staying with and working through the intersecting forces of surveillance, displacement, incarceration, and censorship that shape what can be remembered and by whom. Against doomerist insistence on Hong Kong's death and disappearance, Chan's accumulation of traces constellates what still remains to be said, felt, and seen of the city.



Chan Hau Chun, Map of Traces. Video still. Back and white, sound. 29′, 13″. Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.



Chan Hau Chun,”Map of Traces.” Installation view at Empty Gallery, Hong Kong, 2025. Photography by Felix S.C. Wong. Courtesy of the artist.



Chan Hau Chun, Map of Traces. Video still. Back and white, sound. 29′, 13″. Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.



Chan Hau Chun, Map of Traces. Video still. Back and white, sound. 29′, 13″. Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.

The New York Review of Books

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Hong Kong Plays Itself

Over the past decade, the filmmaker Chan Hau Chun has kept seeking new ways to capture how Hong Kong's residents navigate its ambiguity and indeterminacy.

By Dennis Zhou



Chan Hau Chun/Empty Gallery
A scene from Chan Hau Chun's Map of Traces, 2025

The cityscape of Hong Kong, which grew over the course of two centuries from a fishing village to a colonial port to a gleaming metropolis and international financial center, has long proven hard to visualize. In his classic 1997 study *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, published just months before the region's handover from Britain to China, the former University of Hong Kong professor Ackbar Abbas suggested that part of the problem lay in the area's perpetual status as "not so much a space as a place of transit."

Before 1842, when the Qing Dynasty ceded the island to the British Empire at the end of the First Opium War, the area's population was about seven and a half thousand people. Over the succeeding decades, as the British leased first the neighboring Kowloon Peninsula and then the outlying New Territories, the expanding colony became less a destination in and of itself than a point to facilitate trade, first between China and the rest of the world and subsequently among the many banks, shipping conglomerates, import-export companies, and other entities that set up shop in the free port. As old-fashioned, extractive imperialism morphed into more nebulous forms of global exchange, Hong Kong became a testing ground for an emergent brand of laissez-faire capitalism, implemented by the British authorities and promulgated as "positive non-interventionism." By 1980 Milton Friedman could declare of Hong Kong, "If you want to see how the free market really works, this is the place to come."

The city's skyline has always been unstable and indeterminate. The lead-up to the new millennium saw a spree of property speculation. Developers demolished still-recent constructions and rebuilt them according to changing priorities and incentives, even as waves of refugees and migrants—driven by famines, conflict, or economic opportunity—needed housing, however haphazardly assembled. Hong Kong's architecture has long combined cultural hybridity and temporal confusion, with traditional bamboo scaffolding adorning the sides of buildings designed by Norman Foster and other international starchitects.

The territory's politics have in recent decades hardly been more secure. The 1997 handover set a timeline that kept the city in a state of suspension: under the "one country, two systems" model, for fifty years, until 2047, residents of Hong Kong are supposed to retain the personal and economic liberties they had received as British subjects. That sense of flux has in some respects grown more acute since 2019, when protests swept the city in reaction to a proposed law, later withdrawn, that would have allowed the extradition of suspected criminals from Hong Kong to the mainland.

Generations of Hong Kong filmmakers have worked to find a cinematic language that could capture an environment so marked by contingency and ephemerality. In recent years, one particularly original and sustained such effort has come from Chan Hau Chun, who has made several works blurring the boundaries between documentary and video art, and whose newest film debuted at Hong Kong's Empty Gallery this summer. An epistolary reflection on the city, partly addressed to a then-imprisoned friend, *Map of Traces* (2025) unearths fragments of Hong Kong's collective history and forms them into an image of its present. "Memory," she writes in one letter displayed over a black background, "is like a hidden shape, waiting for the right moment to resurface."

For many people the most recognizable images of Hong Kong still come from the 1980s and 1990s, when a wave of iconoclastic filmmakers—Wong Kar-wai, John Woo, Ann Hui, Tsui Hark—and martial arts stars like Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee started making hyperstylized commercial features. Often starring Cantopop idols, these films tended to have pulpy plots that followed recognizable but exaggerated genre conventions, all filtered through antic, almost music video–like aesthetics. Frequently they lavished attention on the landscape of Hong Kong and paid close attention to the proximity of the licit and the illicit.



Album/Alamy Stock Photo
Tony Leung as Cop 663 and Faye Wong as Faye in Wong Kar-wai's Chungking Express, 1994

In Wong's *Chungking Express* (1994), for example, shot in twenty-three days on location in the Chungking Mansions housing development of Tsim Sha Tsui district and other local landmarks, one fast food joint provides the backdrop for chance encounters between police officers, gangsters, smugglers, drug mules, flight attendants, immigrants, expatriates, and the city's many other denizens. The film's form encapsulated Hong Kong as much as its content did. By slowing down the frame rate and step-printing (duplicating frames to create a laggy effect), Wong and his cinematographer, Christopher Doyle, created a visual style—part slow-motion blurring, part jerky queasiness—that replicated the experience of the city's hyperactivity.

In his book, Abbas argues that domestic audiences came to desire a more specific form of Hong Kong culture at the same moment that the city's relative independence felt threatened, creating an identity rooted in the potential for its own disappearance. It was during this period between Margaret Thatcher's 1982 visit to Hong Kong, which led to the signing of the Sino–British Joint Declaration in 1984, and the official handover in 1997 that a recognizably Hong Kong aesthetic cohered: intensely commercial yet idiosyncratic, filled with pop optimism yet grounded in diverse traditions. Genres like the romance, the wuxia, the gangster film, and the police procedural were ready foundations from which to develop that aesthetic: filmmakers could draw on both received and local frameworks to create a vernacular that felt representative of a city caught between worlds. Shootouts could be modeled after Peking Opera choreography; martial-arts stars could confront neocolonial overlords.

After 1997, however, a darker mood set in, apparent in films like Fruit Chan's *Made in Hong Kong*, the first independent feature to be released after the handover. Made on leftover film stock, Chan's feature addressed similar subjects as, say, *Chungking Express* in a more pessimistic, unvarnished vein, following alienated youth through the city's gang-infested public housing estates. A similar cynicism runs through Johnnie To's *Election* films, in which a triad's political system mirrors that of contemporary Hong Kong, and Andrew Lau and Alan Mak's *Infernal Affairs* trilogy (the basis for Martin Scorsese's *The Departed*), in which an undercover police officer and a mole from the triads embedded in the police department have corresponding identity crises as they try to ferret each other out.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century Hong Kong filmmakers found themselves in a changed practical environment, with new incentives. After the signing of the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement in 2003, coproductions between Hong Kong and mainland China became more viable. Many directors moved either to Hollywood or the mainland, or both. After directing American blockbusters like *Face/Off* and *Mission: Impossible 2*, John Woo helmed *Red Cliff*, a mainland action film inspired by episodes from the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*; Wong's most recent project was his first television series, *Blossoms Shanghai*, an adaptation of the 2014 Chinese novel *Blossoms*, by Jin Yucheng, and a coproduction with China Central Television and the Chinese tech conglomerate Tencent's streaming service. The show, which came out in China in 2023, captures the frenetic reopening of the stock market in 1990s Shanghai, the city of Wong's birth. In Hong Kong the exodus of these auteurs—combined with commercial pressures and political stasis—drew local productions back to a safer mean, before the political crises of the next decade further restricted their room to maneuver.

What paths forward remain, then, for filmmakers living and working in Hong Kong today? By approaching Hong Kong and its freighted identities from a different angle, eschewing the monumentality and genre conventions of her predecessors in favor of a more intimate, essayistic, and personal style, Chan Hau Chun offers one perspective on how the territory appears to its residents now.



Chan Hau Chun/Empty Gallery
A scene from Chan Hau Chun's 32+4, 2015

Like many in Hong Kong, she began her life elsewhere. Chan was born in a small village in Chaozhou in 1989, the second child of an arranged marriage between a father who had been working in Hong Kong as an undocumented laborer and a mother twenty years his junior. Partly because she was an unsanctioned additional child under the One Child Policy, after her father returned to Hong Kong she had to live with relatives, neighbors, and foster families in different cities. She joined her father at twelve, along with her mother and siblings, when he raised enough money to get them all permits. Growing up in the city's public housing estates, she picked up photography as a teenager as a way to spend more time away from a difficult home environment, before studying film production at the City University of Hong Kong.

Her thesis project, *32+4* (2015), already shows a striking awareness of how Hong Kong's cramped infrastructure both shapes its residents' domestic lives and reflects the fraught trajectories that brought so many of them to the city in the first place. The opening shot is of an ordinary street seen through a window, before the film cuts to show Chan, perched on her bed, blocking out the light with black construction paper. In diaristic narration—conveyed only through onscreen text—Chan discusses how she came to live in this space, one of the many subdivided flats (lofts partitioned into multiple tiny units) that provide the remnants of affordable housing in the city. Her mother, she explains, left her father and married her stepfather soon after arriving in Hong Kong—but they all still live in the same housing estate, where they share an elevator bank. A blurry still shows a moment when Chan recorded her father and stepfather passing each other, possibly unbeknownst to either of them; throughout the film Chan tries to interview her mother only for the older woman to defensively evade her questions about the past.

As Chan films herself—editing the footage that would make it into *32+4*, going through old photographs doctored to remove Chan's father, or discussing her ambivalence about recording her parents—she tries to piece together her family's unspoken history by other means. In one scene she films a dented door. It got that way, she explains, when her father attacked her mother with a meat cleaver. To remove it from view, her stepfather took it down from the living room, turned it around, and installed it in her room, where she had to see it every day. After sketching an image of a woman onto the dented wood, she covers up parts of it with photographs from years earlier showing her mother in the midst of a nervous breakdown—huddled naked in the shower or looking defensively into the camera—occasionally cropped to leave the top of her head or the bottoms of her feet unseen. The edges of Chan's drawing fill in the missing parts of her shorn images, as if completing them.



Chan Hau Chun/Empty Gallery
Chan Hau Chun and her father in 32+4, 2015

Unlike Hong Kong New Wave auteurs, who mostly focused on public spaces, sites of commerce, or governmental offices, Chan lingers throughout her work on these sorts of claustrophobic domestic interiors. In *32+4* her handheld camera almost never ventures outside, except for a brief trip with her father to his ancestral village. There he finally unburdens himself, admitting that he doesn't know whether he should die in Hong Kong or on the mainland, discussing his years of hard labor, and opening up about his feelings of betrayal over his divorce. Finally he asks Chan to pass judgment on whether he or her

mother are to blame. “Why bother asking if it’s not about right or wrong?” he says. “What’s the interview about?”

Chan’s next projects expanded from her immediate family to the city at large, focusing on people that earlier portrayals of the city tended to exclude. *Searching Lau* (2019) and *Call Me Mrs. Chan* (2017) profile a street artist and a custodian in an office tower, respectively, as one roams the city and the other takes out endless bags of trash. *No Song to Sing* (2017) juxtaposes scenes of mundane, urban ennui with sexual fantasies and dream sequences in a vein that recalls the work of the Taiwan-based Malaysian-Chinese filmmaker Tsai Ming-liang, cutting from a scene of a man foraging for parts on a street to another man forlornly waiting in a sex parlor or being whipped by a dominatrix, or a young sex worker scrolling her phone in a replica subway car.

A room of many rooms (2024), edited from footage that Chan started amassing in 2019, centers on residents of a subdivided flat whom Chan befriended. We see them lying in bed, smoking, watching television, playing on their phones, discussing their daily routines or the swallows that have made a nest inside their building, in a series of mostly stationary shots that both convey each person’s confinement and attend patiently to how they curate their limited space. One can see the influence of figures like Tsai, the Chinese documentarian Wang Bing, and the Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul, not just in their attention to how the surreal and the fantastical leak out of the everyday but also in their comfort with formats that prioritize immediacy and intimacy. Like them, too, Chan has a certain skepticism about what aspects of life a camera can fully capture, even as she tries to document the social reality around her.



Chan Hau Chun/Empty Gallery
A scene from Chan Hau Chun’s A room of many rooms, 2024

Her latest work, *Map of Traces*, further develops her diarist’s-eye-view of Hong Kong. (I was invited to view the work in Hong Kong by Empty Gallery.) It opens on what looks like a still image of figures in a park, their faces curiously blurred. After a few moments the camera zooms, pans, and then starts moving down the park lane in a distinctively jerky manner that gives the game away: we’re watching footage taken from Google Maps, passed through a grainy black-and-white filter. Soon Chan and a friend in

London start narrating their “walk” as a cursor blinks on and off. They put the map’s function to endearingly impractical ends, tilting the vantage up to see the foliage of a banyan tree during a conversation about why such trees can’t take root in the harsh climes of England. Nostalgia is mediated through surveillance technology: as the pair discuss old pop songs and folk sayings and stroll down Nathan Road (named after Hong Kong’s thirteenth colonial governor) and past Prince Edward Station, it becomes clear that Chan’s friend lives in exile and may never return to Hong Kong. “I just don’t know how to make sense of what’s going on in this world,” she says. “I’m desperate to find meaning in all of this.”

The film takes its structure from letters that Chan wrote to another friend, C.R., while he was confined to a detention facility for his role in the 2019 protests. The text, which flashes silently onscreen at intervals, mixes poetic musings with practical affairs. Chan responds to C.R.’s updates about learning guitar in his cell; she shares footage of herself exploring the hill behind his facility and a cell phone video of two people holding hands across the aisle of a train carriage.

Also interspersed throughout are fragments of footage that Chan shot of the 2019 protests. A scene of a musical action—protesters playing trombones and clarinets in a park—plays without volume, except for the isolated, plaintive sound of a woman blowing on a blade of grass; fuzzy images depict what might be figures tending to a hedge, until we realize that they are stripping protest flyers from its branches. The result is not so much elegiac as defiantly evasive. One man, the protagonist from *Searching Lau*, describes getting arrested after surveillance cameras captured him writing a character associated with the protests on a city wall. Now he uses water, which the cameras can’t pick up, to tag buildings around Hong Kong with his seemingly innocuous drawings: a smiling sunflower, spindly-rayed suns, goofy cat-like creatures.



Chan Hau Chun/Empty Gallery
A scene from Chan Hau Chun’s Map of Traces, 2025

“Lately I’ve wandered through many places in my dreams,” Chan writes to C.R. in one of her letters. “Sometimes I catch glimpses of you there, but more often, it’s just empty landscapes. Like a city that both exists and doesn’t exist, hovering between presence and absence.” *Map of Traces* seems interested less in ascribing a single identity to Hong Kong than in capturing how the city’s residents navigate its ambiguity and indeterminacy themselves, their own ways of representing the space and their relationship to it—precisely what often gets squeezed out of the discourse about its future. In this sense Chan’s films present one way to finally see Hong Kong the way it sees itself. In the beginning of *Map of Traces*, as she and her friend traverse the city through Google Maps, the images start blurring together, racing through crowds with anonymized faces and past street signs, storefronts, and almost abstract scenery in a way that seems to reflect an uncontainable sense of time flying by, before the film settles on one detail: a pedestrian traffic signal covered with a trash bag, broken during the protests and then removed from sight.

October 3, 2025

You are Still Here, Even When You are Not

By Ngo Chun Phoenix Tse



Map of Traces, 2025, Chan Hau Chun at Empty Gallery Hong Kong, June 7 – August 23, 2025. Photo: Felix S.C. Wong.

The Paradox of Proximity

Krzysztof Kieślowski once mentioned that “the closer the camera gets to its human object, the more that human object seems to disappear before the camera.” It’s a paradox that informs Chan Hau Chun’s Map of Traces, her latest film at Empty Gallery. Though frequently discussed in relation to documentary practices, Chan Hau Chun’s work appears more interested in the breakdown of that category. The film doesn’t record in any stable sense. Instead, it observes obliquely and refuses the frame’s authority.

Map of Traces revolves around a series of letters addressed to C.R., an imprisoned friend who never replies. The viewer is given only Chan Hau Chun’s thoughts, her questions, her recollections. C.R.’s

silence is not a gap to be filled but something that gives shape to the work. Geography here offers no anchors. The locations we pass through seem emptied of coordinates. The camera looks, waits, and withdraws. This isn't distance as detachment, but distance as structure. If the scene gets closer, it is only to remind us that proximity does not guarantee understanding. That uncertainty is not a defect but a principle of form.

The Unseen

In much of the writing on Hong Kong culture since the 1990s, disappearance has functioned as a dominant metaphor. The city has been described as vanishing, suspended between identities, always somewhere in between. Map of Traces does not confront this directly, but it moves elsewhere. It lingers not on what has vanished, but on what persists at the edge: half-visible, unclaimed, still unfinished.

This refusal to claim visibility, to settle meaning, is where the ontology of Chan Hau Chun's images begins to speak. Her frames are less concerned with showing than with returning. They don't present information but reactivate collective memory, often silently, almost imperceptibly. To those outside Hong Kong, these streets and surfaces may appear incidental or generic. But to those who have lived through recent history, these images resonate in excess of what they show. The image is no longer tied to its site but to what Jacques Rancière might call an off-site, a zone where visibility intersects with memory, and where seeing is no longer about recognition, but about recollection.



Chan Hau Chun, Map of Traces, DV (Video), black/white, sound, 29 minutes, 13 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery.

If traditional documentary lays claim to witnessing a “there” (a subject, a location, an event), then Map of Traces turns its gaze toward the not-there, the remainder. It is not simply that what we see has changed, but that it now speaks from elsewhere: an emotional, political, and collective off-site space. Rancière’s formulation of the “distribution of the sensible” is useful here, not to frame Chan Hau Chun as didactic or oppositional, but to understand her intervention in terms of reordering visibility itself. What becomes visible is not a new truth, but the weight of something already known and too fragile to state.

One of the film’s most arresting moments shows a man painting with water. His gesture leaves no lasting mark, and it may be visible only to him. The act is fleeting and intimate, not designed for an audience. But its inclusion signals something essential to Chan Hau Chun’s approach: attention to forms of persistence that do not register within conventional terms of meaning. It doesn’t perform. It remembers.

Google Street View as a technology usually tied to surveillance and spatial standardisation is here stripped of its function. It doesn’t map or clarify. Instead, it returns us to a place changed by time and by personal memory. Street View becomes a vessel for subjective drift. Not a radical act, but a quiet redirection, almost offhand, but not accidental.

Chan Hau Chun’s film is not a self-portrait, nor does it chase after interiority. Instead, it sketches a space in which the personal emerges through impersonal means: detached technologies, untraceable gestures, letters that never ask to be answered. If politics appears here, it does so without announcement, shaped by what escapes containment.

Silence
If the film has a governing strategy, it may be its handling of silence, not just the absence of sound, but a commitment to what cannot or should not be spoken. The letters to C.R. remain unanswered. The spaces between them carry just as much weight as the voice that delivers them. The camera rarely insists. It observes without concluding.

Susan Sontag, writing on Robert Bresson’s The Trial of Joan of Arc (1962), contrasts Bresson’s austere formalism with Carl Theodor Dreyer’s emotive expressiveness in The Passion of Joan of Arc (1928). For Sontag, Bresson’s silence is not inert but ethical. It refrains from dramatisation in order to preserve the dignity of suffering. Chan Hau Chun’s work channels this same restraint. Its silences don’t signify blankness. They acknowledge the limits of language and refuse to turn pain into narrative. It is a form of attention without appropriation.

This is not to suggest Chan Hau Chun is aligned strictly with Bresson’s asceticism. There are moments in Map of Traces that feel warmer, more elliptical, even fragile. But the ethical logic is related. Meaning, in this context, is not a message to be extracted but a presence to be sensed.

Chan Hau Chun avoids reconstructing C.R.’s voice. There is no reenactment, no imaginative filling-in. What we hear and see is one side of a broken exchange. Yet this incompleteness is what gives the film its shape. The decision to leave the conversation open, to resist narrative closure, becomes a structural and ethical choice. The work does not mourn in the usual sense. It accompanies. It waits.

“They see only what is visible, and mistake it for the whole.”
—after Matthew 23

Chan Hau Chun’s images move around this mistake. They suggest that to see is not necessarily to understand, and that what lies beneath or beyond the visible may be more enduring than what’s made

explicit. The letters, the blurry close-up scene, the half-erased graffiti, all of it signals a commitment to remain with what does not resolve.
Map of Traces does not offer revelation. It does not stake claims. It follows the residual movements of memory, correspondence, and care. In doing so, it constructs a fragile, non-linear cartography. Nothing here is fixed. Yet within its shifting contours, the film insists, gently, and without spectacle, that not everything worth witnessing will be seen.

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Chan Hau Chun, Map of Traces, DV (Video), black/white, sound, 29 minutes, 13 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery.

2025-10-03

你就在這裡，即使這刻你不在

謝傲俊



Map of Traces, 2025, Chan Hau Chun at Empty Gallery Hong Kong, June 7 – August 23, 2025. Photo: Felix S.C. Wong.

距離

奇斯洛夫斯基（Krzysztof Kieślowski）曾說過：「紀錄片先天有一道難以逾越的限制。在真實生活中，人們不會讓你拍到他們的眼淚，他們想哭的時候會把門關上」。這種限制或許貫穿於陳巧真的舊作以及最新的作品《記憶座標》，該新作曾在Empty Gallery首次展出。雖然她的背景及創作經常被放在紀錄片類別下討論，但要理解陳巧真的作品似乎更應該解構紀錄片這個類別本身。影片並非以任何穩定的方式「紀錄」，而是不斷地拆解「紀錄影像」本身，拒絕讓畫面／影像成為唯一的意義。

《記憶座標》圍繞著一系列寄給 C.R.（一位被囚禁、始終沒有回信的朋友）的信發生。觀眾聽到的只有陳巧真的思緒、提問與回憶。C.R. 的沉默不是需要被填補的空白，而是一種塑造作品的力量。鏡頭帶領我們經過的地點似乎

被掏空了座標。鏡頭凝視、等待，然後退後。這不是冷漠的距離，而是一種結構性的距離。當畫面靠近時，它只是提醒我們：靠近並不保證理解，而不確定性並非缺陷，而是一種形式的原則。

未見之物

自 1990 年代以來，有關香港文化的書寫中，「消失」一直被塑造成一個重要的概念——城市被描述為正在消逝，懸浮於身份之間，永遠處於「中間」狀態。然而，《記憶座標》某程度上是這種說法的反面。它凝視的不是已經消逝的，而是那些仍在邊緣逗留的：介乎可見與不可見、說不出口的話語和尚未完成的事物之間。

拒絕紀錄的可見性正是陳巧真的影像語言。她的鏡頭較少在「展示」，而更著重「返回」；它們並不提供資訊，卻悄然、幾乎不可察地重新喚起集體記憶。對不熟悉香港的人而言，這些街道與表面或許只是偶然普通的影像；但對經歷過一些近年社會事件的香港人而言，這些影像的共鳴遠超過它們所呈現的內容。影像不再與其「現場」緊密相連，而是指向洪席耶（Jacques Rancière）所說的「場外」（off-site）——一個可見性與記憶交錯的地帶。在這裡，「看」不再是辨認，而是追憶。



Chan Hau Chun, Map of Traces, DV (Video), black/white, sound, 29 minutes, 13 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery.

如果傳統紀錄片強調見證一種「在場」（主題、地點、事件），那麼《記憶座標》則將目光投向「不在場」的殘餘之物。看到的並不只是改變了的事物，還有那些異質空間的事物：一個情感、政治與集體的「場外」空間。洪席耶的「感性配享」（distribution of the sensible）概念在此或許有助我們去理解，不可將陳巧真定性為說教式或對抗性的創作者，要理解她的介入是在重新編排可見性的秩序。出現在畫面中的不是新的真理，是某種早已被知曉、卻脆弱得難以言說的事物。

影片中最令人難忘的片段之一，是一名男子以水作畫，他的塗鴉不會留下任何持久的痕跡，甚至可能只有他自己能看見。這是一個並非為觀眾而作的行為，短暫且親密。但它的出現，正暗示了陳巧真創作方法的核心：關注那些在既有意義體系中無法被展示的持續性。它不在表演，而是在記憶。

Google 街景在藝術上常被理解為與監控與空間標準化相關的技術，在這裡它不再具政治性的功能（雖然背後的對話可能源自一些政治性的事）。它帶我們回到一個被時間與個人記憶改變過的地方。街景成為一種主觀漂移的容器——不是激進的行動，而是一種安靜的轉向，看似隨意，卻絕非偶然。

這部影片並沒有追求有形的事物。它描繪出一個空間，在這裡，自身乃透過非個人化的手段浮現：平靜而模糊的鏡頭、若隱若現的塗鴉、不期待回覆的信件。政治性是無形，由那些脫離出框架的事物所構成。

沉默
如果說這部影片有一個貫徹始終的形式，那便是對沉默的處理——不僅是聲音的缺席，還有一種對不能或不該說出口之事的堅持。寫給 C.R. 的信始終沒有回覆，信與信之間的空隙和述說它們的聲音同樣重要。鏡頭觀察而不下結論。

蘇珊・桑塔格（Susan Sontag）在論及布烈遜（Robert Bresson）的《聖女貞德受難記》（The Trial of Joan of Arc, 1962）時，將布烈遜的嚴峻形式主義與德萊葉（Carl Theodor Dreyer）在《聖女貞德》（The Passion of Joan of Arc, 1928）中的情感表達做了對比。對桑塔格而言，布烈遜的沉默不是靜止，而是一種倫理——它避免戲劇化，以此保留苦難的尊嚴。陳巧真的作品或許承繼了這種節制：沉默並非空白，而是承認語言的侷限，拒絕將痛苦轉化為敘事。

這並不是說陳巧真完全遵循布烈遜的冷峻。在《記憶座標》中也有更溫柔、跳躍甚至脆弱的時刻，但倫理上的邏輯是相通的。在這個脈絡下，意義不是被提煉出來的訊息，而是一種被感知到的在場。

她沒有重構 C.R. 的聲音，沒有重演，也沒有想像性的補足。我們聽見與看見的，只是一段破裂對話中的單一一方。而這種不完整，正是影片的形式主義。選擇讓對話保持開放、拒絕結論，這是一種結構與倫理上的決定。這部作品並不以常規的方式地哀悼，它陪伴，它等待。

「他們只看見可見的，卻誤以為那就是全部。」
——《馬太福音》**23** 章
陳巧真影像的全貌卻是不可見的。它們暗示，看見並不必然意味著理解，而那些位於可見之外的事物，或許比直白的陳述更為長久。信件、模糊的特寫、半被抹去的塗鴉——這些都顯示出她對未解決事件的堅定。

《記憶座標》不提供啟示，不立下主張。它追隨的是記憶、溝通與關懷，並在此過程中建構了一幅脆弱而非線性的地圖。沒有任何東西在這裡被固定。然而，在這些漂移的輪廓之中，影片溫柔地、無聲地、沒有任何奇觀地堅持：並非所有值得見證的事物都會被看見。

本文是對*Empty Gallery*個展《陳巧真：記憶座標》的評論寫作，展覽日期為*2025*年*6*月*7*日至*2025*年*8*月*30*日。

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