

## PROFILE

### TAMING RIBALD DESIRES

by Cristina Sanchez K.

Artist **Tsang Kin-wah** (b.1976, Hong Kong) is known for his installation work made of texts in the form of floral patterns – reminiscent of an ornamental tradition inspired by 19th century William Morris's patterns. As painted or digital wallpaper, as well as large-scale installations throughout the exhibition space of a museum, his recognisable word drawings are pretty on the outside, and obscene on the inside. They reveal the labour of an artist that aims at identifying, acknowledging, and bringing out the struggling contradictions found within the human psyche. He is currently working on *The Seven Seals* (since 2009) an on-going series of digital-video text installations tackling the political, social, philosophical, religious and metaphysical issues that arise with the hypothetical notion of the world ending.

**For this issue of Pipeline he talks about his series specifically investigating the values of the fantasies surrounding sexuality, such as in his Porn Paintings, White Porn (2008 – ongoing) and Pattern Paintings (2005-2007) series.**

Informed by philosophy and myth, Tsang's work explores the tension between the irrational and the rational; and the notion of the primitive concealed under the sophistication of social norms. He always saw himself becoming a painter, and developed his subjects in relation to the society surrounding him. In his 20s he was interested in contemporary social issues, especially those affecting Hong Kong, but later his inspirations drew from a more personal approach: the study of human nature,

spiritual considerations, the themes of life and death – and sex. "When we talk about life and death – we talk about sex. Because it is the process that gives life," says Tsang.

The way he expresses his intellectual considerations and aesthetic research corresponds with his personality. "I won't make something that is action-painting based, or highly emotional. Somehow I feel that I need to behave in a very proper way, because of social constraints. I used to study in a Christian school, with a very conservative Chinese education, where you had to behave properly otherwise you got punished. Those two extreme forces that come together and mix together reflect the problem that I had to personally consider," says Tsang, talking about the contents tackled in his pieces, as opposed to the fine, delicate renditions he delivers them with.

The *Pattern Painting* (2005-2007) as an installation, presents an environment that looks pleasant and elegant from a distance but reveals extreme pornographic scenes when one comes closer: sex scenes and images that could trigger extreme emotions – not to mention the violence of the words used to create the patterns. Most of Tsang's works is site-specific, based on preliminary research about the city where he is invited to exhibit; its history, and particular events. He is searching for something that he can relate to his own background. "I get to know about the city and the people. Every time it is different," he says. For his 2007 exhibition in America he got to think about terrorism, church scandals, Bill Clinton and sex scandals, which were at odds with a seemingly conservative and straitlaced society. In his works he points at the "dirty minds" of people who otherwise present themselves as

respectable and righteous members of the community.

As a result of his own education, Tsang recognises that one can appear well-behaved and in control externally, all the while concealing conflicting mental urges and thoughts. He observes that those from the middle classes and the higher income groups may act as proper ladies and gentlemen, but just as often think of graphic penetration fantasies, concealing from their peers the reality of their non-conventional sexual preferences, and relying on the virtual corners of the Internet. Tsang ponders about the judgments made about the *facts of life*. He questions the idea that sex is "dirty", and pro-

poses we pause and accept the act for what it is. "If you look at it through different perspectives – it is not that dirty," he concludes.

His Ivory renditions of sex scenes in *White Porn* (2008 – ongoing) are images he gathered from pornographic websites. They express, with a pure and clean finish, an act that is, after all, common to all human beings – at least in its essence, if not in the orgy scenes he chose. Quite literally, Tsang uses white paint to wash out the potential dirtiness and bring out the beauty from the beast. He applies an elegant varnish to scenes of pleasure in a transcending gesture that sublimates sex into something simply beautiful. [www.tsangkinwah.com](http://www.tsangkinwah.com)



*Self-Holes* by Tsang Kin-wah.  
Acrylic, emulsion and silkscreen on canvas.  
91.4 x 122 x 5 cm, 2007. Courtesy the artist.



*White Form No.7* by Tsang Kin-wah, Emulsion paint and patching paste on canvas, 150 x 100 x 5 cm, 2008. Courtesy the artist.