

INTERNATIONAL ARTS

Tsang Kin-wah Channels His Outrage in a New Show

By JOYCE LAU SEPT. 7, 2016

HONG KONG — “I’m very polite. One must be polite,” the artist Tsang Kin-wah said in an interview last month at his spare, one-room studio in an industrial area of Hong Kong. “I used to never swear in real life, so I did so in my art.”

Mr. Tsang, 39, caught the attention of galleries and museums with his work as a student in the early 2000s at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Camberwell College of Arts in London. What appeared from a distance as meticulous illustrations of flowers and paisley patterns were, on closer inspection, angry, vile strings of obscenities in repeating patterns.

It was surprising and not a little unsettling coming from a quiet, bespectacled student from a working-class, Christian background. Since then, Mr. Tsang has been an important part of the art scene, his work appearing at the 2015 Venice Biennale and sought after by museums and collectors.

Mr. Tsang is soft-spoken and almost painfully courteous. To this day, he said, he has a hard time reading out loud the aggressive and offensive words he uses in his art.

His latest work, the first exhibition commissioned for the \$3 billion West Kowloon Cultural District here, may prove to be his darkest yet. The immersive multimedia installation, “Nothing,” opens Friday at the M+ Pavilion, the first permanent structure in the 100-acre district that is expected to eventually house

17 cultural facilities, including a full M+ museum.

Viewers will enter “Nothing” through the pavilion’s shiny stainless-steel clad terrace overlooking Victoria Harbor. Mr. Tsang has covered the interior with a similar surface, so visitors can watch themselves as they walk around — effectively creating a self-reflective experience. It is a clever way for an introverted artist to interpret a public space.

Inside a darkened exhibition hall, film scenes (prisoners walking in a circle in “A Clockwork Orange,” for example) and video clips found on YouTube (a donkey trembling under a heavy load) are projected on the walls.

Mr. Tsang’s artwork is not overtly personal or confessional; but the feelings of outrage and inequality are clear.

Mr. Tsang spent his early years living the transient life of many migrant families, after his family moved to Hong Kong from China when he was 6. At one point, a slum fire burned down his family’s wooden home.

“All I remember was standing outside in a park, knowing everything was gone,” he said. His parents shunted among temporary dwellings until they secured a space in government housing.

“I started drawing because I had nothing else to do,” he said. “All I wanted was to be an artist.”

His path was not an easy one: He recalls being bullied during his first experience overseas, as a student in London on a Chevening scholarship in 2003.

His debut on the art world stage came at the 2001 Hong Kong Biennale, where he presented inked stoneware with classically-rendered Chinese figures who, on further inspection, were performing private bodily functions. In a 2005 exhibit called “White Cube” at the John Batten Gallery in Hong Kong, he painted the walls with insulting phrases aimed at materialistic rich girls and art dealers, among other targets. That same year, he won the Sovereign Foundation Asian Art Prize’s \$25,000 purse.

Mr. Tsang was the first local artist that Pearl Lam, a Chinese art pioneer, chose for a solo show when she opened her Hong Kong gallery in 2012.

Mr. Tsang created “Ecce Homo Trilogy” for that show, a large multimedia installation that recalls the phrase said to have been uttered by Pontius Pilate at the last judgment, and the title of a book by Nietzsche. It features video of the 1989 execution of the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, which deeply affected Mr. Tsang when he saw it on the news as a child. It was only later that he realized who Ceausescu was.

“It’s a work about perception,” Ms. Lam said of “Ecce Homo Trilogy” in an interview. “There are very few contemporary artists who are true intellectuals, who are reading philosophy. His work challenges people’s belief in religion and politics.”

She added: “He’s not a commercial artist; he’s an institutional artist.”

Mr. Tsang seems largely uninterested in marketing himself, or selling his work through the usual auctions, art fairs and commercial galleries. As he dreams up more large-scale installations, his studio remains stacked with unsold or unfinished prints and paintings.

Still, he is seeing his star rise. His work has been acquired by the Mori Museum in Tokyo and other high-profile collectors. In November, he will be the only Hong Kong resident included in “Tales of Our Time,” an exhibition of Chinese artists at the Guggenheim in New York.

The genesis of “Nothing” came from a commission given to Mr. Tsang by the Hong Kong government to represent the city at the 2015 Venice Biennale. His response was an eerie multimedia installation called “The Infinite Nothing,” once again inspired by Nietzsche. It had little of the boyish playfulness of his earlier paintings.

The M+ Pavilion initially planned to reuse “The Infinite Nothing” for its 2016 opening. But it proved hard to take a work custom-made for a historic Italian building and adapt it to a shiny new Hong Kong art space.

In Venice, Mr. Tsang used light and sound to make viewers feel as though they were walking through a torrent of water, but it was impossible to recreate his “river” in Hong Kong.

“You can’t just cut and paste,” he said.

A voracious reader of the morbid and obscure, Mr. Tsang began scouring books and online texts for inspiration. On his home computer is a folder with materials that led to “Nothing,” including documents on Sisyphus eternally pushing a boulder uphill, Japanese kamikaze pilots and a 1775 English essay on suicide.

“I don’t want to be obvious,” he said when asked about these references to death and suicide. “A viewer should not be able to see an artwork’s meaning immediately. One needs patience.”

Mr. Tsang has left his hardscrabble youth far behind, and he now flies to art events in Europe, Japan and the United States. But he still has a bedroom in his parents’ Hong Kong apartment and works out of a rented room nearby. The un-air-conditioned studio has a minimalistic work space in the front — his only indulgence seems to be an Apple computer — and a single bed in the back.

“His work is not about commercialism, and it’s not about ego,” said Ms. Lam, the gallery owner. “He’s found his fame and he hasn’t changed. He’s exactly the same.”

Mr. Tsang has barely mentioned to his parents that he was the sole artist chosen for the government’s largest cultural project in years.

“Their comment is that I should not use such bad language in my art,” he said, adding, “I think they may know I am showing at M+ because they saw it on the TV.”

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