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“The Images Left Behind”: Shiu Sheng Hung and active archiving at Affinity Art, Hong Kong

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Emerging Taiwanese artist Shiu Sheng Hung transfixes threatened memories to halt their disappearance.

Between “paint skins”, wooden blocks, postcards and pencil drawings, the young artist considers the transience of local histories through a conceptual takeover of Hong Kong’s Affinity Art Gallery.

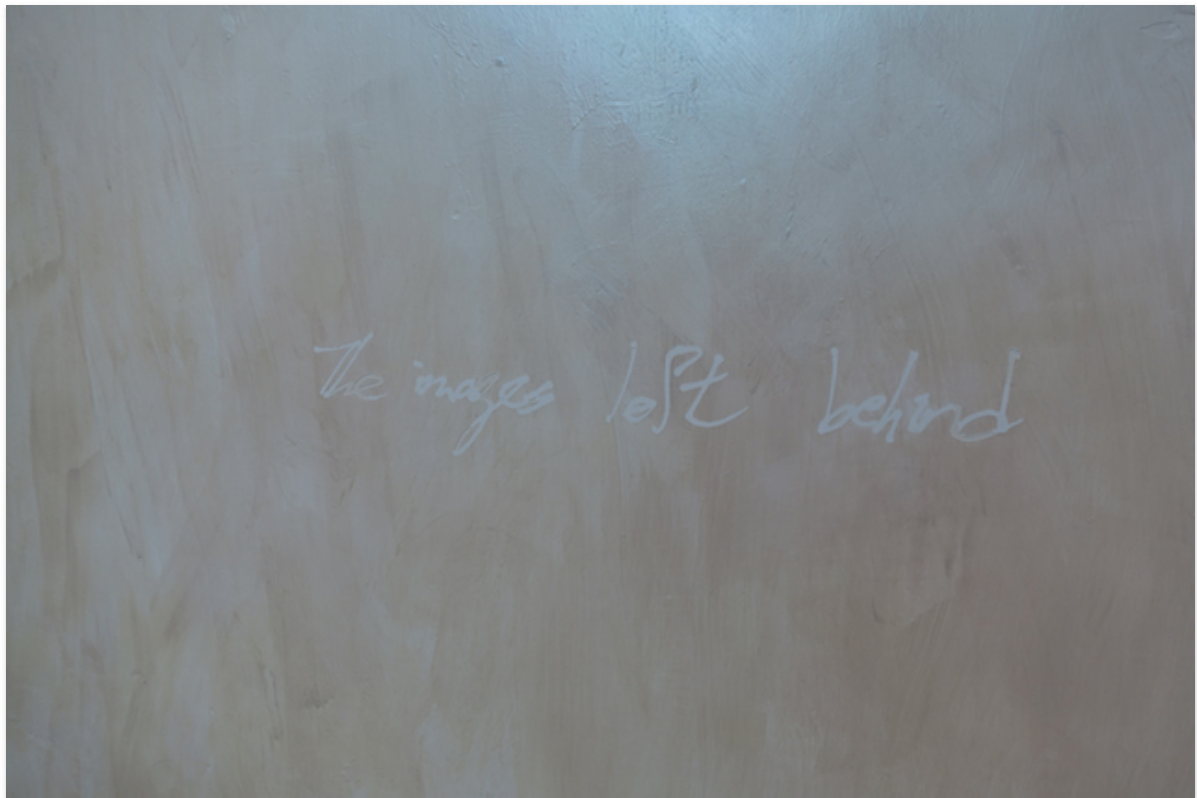


Installation view of “Shiu Sheng Hung: The Images Left Behind” at Affinity Art Gallery, Hong Kong. Image courtesy Affinity Art.

Seemingly disparate objects dominate a brightly lit gallery space; it is as if the artist has long resided in an archive of his own mind, surrounded by the twisted and contorted layers of emotion that have been left to fossilise. Hong Kong’s Affinity Art Gallery hosts this curious setting – a library of self-discovery and

preservation – the brainchild of Taiwanese artist Shiu Sheng Hung. Born in 1987 in Kaohsiung, the south of Taiwan, the multimedia artist has seen rapid success as a young artist, focusing on those themes that are accessible and relatable to all, yet utterly personal in their rendering.

With an oeuvre that explores technology, digital cultures, archiving and memory, Shiu’s career has thus far been an experimental one: a case study on the relationships between images and their various readings. While there are fluid narrative connections between his projects, a viewer’s interaction or conjured memory seem to be of the utmost importance. His most recent solo exhibition, **“The Images Left Behind”**, provides a playful, yet thoughtful arena for this exploration, setting aside the paintings for which he is best known in favour of a more conceptual approach to memory mapping.



Shiu Sheng Hung, 'Images Left Behind' (detail), 2018, pearlescent pigments, acrylic medium on wall, 300 x 244 cm. Image courtesy Affinity Art.

“The Images Left Behind”

When life’s only constant is change – the ebbs and flows of people or moments or surroundings – one’s memories are the sole substance of consistency. And despite their inevitable dimming, mental images of the past provide clues into what has led to the present, or at least certain understandings of it. In “The Images Left Behind”, Shiu seeks to excavate this precarious path by transforming concrete objects and visual representations of familial memories into a cohesive, intimate experiment. Through various media and toying with the (lost) memories of strangers, the artist seeks to fix his own narratives, to freeze them in defense of degradation.

With his subject matter all in one space, Shiu is able to look at his own mind and ponder how the ravenous tears of time, forgetfulness and emotion have taken their toll. The abstract show consists of a translucent wall painting, a drawing from the artist’s late mother, an installation made up of vintage postcards and a pile of acrylic paint layers, or “skins”, and a set of old cypress wood planks. What appears to be a collection of incongruent objects is Shiu’s attempt to challenge not only a viewer’s perception of memory, but also one’s imagination of the past with a “poetry written in his own brand of visual language”.



Shiu Sheng Hung, '時差 (Time Lapse)', 2018, vintage postcards on metal frames, 30 x 20 x 10.5 cm. Image courtesy Affinity Art.

Wandering within “The Images Left Behind” – as one does not simply walk *through* – begins with *Mother’s Sketch*, the piece which provides the epicenter for Shiu’s exhibitionary journey. A nimble pencil drawing of a tree, the piece is both a familial archive, drawn by the artist’s late mother, and an ephemeral reminder of time’s lapse; as the pencil fades, the Shiu encases the print in a glass frame in hopes of preserving its artefact.

The drawing is then juxtaposed with a blue-tinted photograph of a construction site, a curious pairing as it appears the photo, and therefore the moment it captured, is fading. Titled *Drama*, the image depicts the site of Shiu’s family home, or at least the plan for one, suggesting that this architectural site may bare the weight of years of family feud. Did this site bring people together? Tear them apart? Witness birth and death and celebration? Regardless of its place in history, Shiu has chosen to preserve it, and revive it in a gallery, in hopes of prolonging its existence.



Shiu Sheng Hung, 'The Drama' (left), 'Mother's Sketch' (right), 2018, digital print on fine rag paper, pencil on paper, 46 x 37 x 3. Image courtesy Affinity Art.

Mother's Sketch and Drama are Shiu's personal visual mementos, contrasting the collected vintage postcards that are hung on recycled industrial metal racks. The work titled *Time Lapse* is an attempt to preserve the discarded memories of others; each card carries a message from a time and a place that is other, that does not belong to the artist, but has found itself nestled amongst his most intimate archives. Sent from Slovakia, Hong Kong, old Taipei, New Zealand, Cannes and the Isle of Wight, the postcards embody not only the sender's memories of the place but their attempts in maintaining contacts with the postcards' addressees. Perhaps Shiu hopes for them to be found again, for their forgotten owners to see them performing in a new role.

This is the crux of Shiu's "The Images Left Behind": performativity. These images and messages and found objects have transformed into entirely different objects when in the artist's possession, or on the gallery walls or collecting dust in an archive. They take on new significance when reimagined for different eyes or spaces.



Shiu Sheng Hung, ‘時差 (Time Lapse)’, 2018, vintage postcards on metal frames, 30 x 20 x 10.5 cm. Image courtesy Affinity Art.

An unmissable segment of the exhibition is what appears to be a pile of laundry, yet upon closer inspection are the dried “skins” of acrylic paint. The works are created over a period of weeks – or months – while artist patiently waits for each layer to dry before adding another mark. And like rings on a tree trunk, viewers can see the distortions and emotions that have hardened, emblematic of what Shiu was thinking and feeling a given moment. Of this process, Shiu comments:

In the process of painting, I repeatedly apply layers after layers. I impart messages, feelings and experiences that I encounter every day into each layer. I don't intend to recreate forms in a figurative way but rather to transpose and juxtapose these fleeting fragments of life into a concrete collage using paint as a medium. At the same time, these become the starting points for my exploration of the relationship between material, time and space.



Shiu Sheng Hung, 'Skin, Rubbles, Lies, Intuitions', 2018, assemblage of paint skins, approx. 190 x 110 cm. Image courtesy Affinity Art.

Propped up against the gallery wall are reclaimed planks of rare cypress wood. Affinity Art's gallery director, Kim Lam, notes in the exhibition's press release that cypress wood was widely used when Japan colonised Taiwan, but sourcing timber from the protected cypress trees is and act that is now prohibited. Thus the original form of the cypress wood is a thing of the past, yet the memories that these pieces represent remain steadfast as they are given new life.

Each of the scratches, dents and marks on the postcards, "paint skins" and wood panels are inevitable, a "deliberate analogy to the flawed process of memory creation – and recollection". Their imperfections show their degradation, bringing the archive's permanence into question. This fleeting existence is then mirrored

by a mural that Shiu has painted for the gallery; the chosen pearlescent paint is barely visible, only revealing the show's title when the sunlight hits it at a precise angle. Here, visitors are confronted with the terrifying speed of forgetfulness or whitewashed memory: it only takes a moment for treasured objects to disappear, leaving only a vague imprint on one's psyche.



Shiu Sheng Hung, 'Portrait of an Island', 2018, reclaimed Taiwanese cypress wood planks, 151 x 76 x 3.5 cm. Image courtesy Affinity Art.



Shiu Sheng Hung creating the wall mural in “Images Left Behind”, on-site three days before the opening at Affinity Art Gallery Hong Kong. Image courtesy the artist and Affinity Art.

In a world that struggles between forgetfulness and retrospection, or amnesia and the fervent desire to document one’s every thought and action online, Shiu pairs absence with gesture, his colourless painting, neglected materials and dried silhouettes shedding light onto lost local histories and personal memories. Tracing rapid changes in environment, be they sociopolitical, natural or ancestral, is only possible when moments of reflection are met with archival action. As Shiu says in his artist statement:

I believe that memory and images can be placed together, and once the “things” might have gone, only memory – wonderfully unreliable as it can be – and some images will be left behind.

Megan Miller

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“Shiu Sheng Hung: The Images Left Behind” is on view from 15 March to 10 May 2018 at Affinity Art Gallery, 1/F, 1 Queen’s Road West, Sheung Wan, Hong Kong.

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