

CRITICS' PICKS

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Chow Chun Fai, *Press 1*, 2020, oil on canvas, 4 x 4".

HONG KONG

Chow Chun Fai

GALLERY EXIT

3/F, 25 Hing Wo Street Tin Wan, Aberdeen

March 14–May 16, 2020

In 2012, Chow Chun Fai unsuccessfully campaigned for one of seventy seats in the highest governing body in Hong Kong—the Legislative Council—under the slogan “Cultural Right.” Although he tends to separate his civic and artistic identities, this show sees Chow shift into a directly political register. Trained as a painter at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, he witnessed its siege last November during the Hong Kong unrest sparked last June in opposition to an extradition bill. A sense of fugitivity, abetted by fear of government retaliation from participating in antiestablishment demonstrations, has since been extended to over two million people,

or nearly one-third of the population. The eighty oils in “Portraits from Behind” chronicle the ongoing—still nameless and faceless—movement for democracy in Hong Kong.

Dubious preemptive arrests and mysterious deaths, triad-led beatings on subway riders and escalating, conflagratory violence between protestors and police—Chow’s history paintings recall a mix between Goya and the more agile citizen photojournalism now ubiquitous online. Indeed, the images are all sourced from Chow’s phone and the internet. He began by working on four-by-four inch canvases as a way to process his emotions with some imposed control. The screenlike format is apt for a city largely understood by residents through apps such as HK Map Live, which shows real-time police activity, and LIHKG, the premier forum for organizing direct action on the ground.

Here, the largest works are the stillest. *Hong Kong International Airport II*, all works cited 2020, depicts a mass sit-in of black-clad protesters, one among several that, overall, canceled 160 flights. The Kowloon intersection brightly portrayed in *Nathan Road VII* seems innocuous enough, but note the removed sidewalk barriers, broken stoplight, jammed cars, and yellow helmet-sporting dissident crossing the street. As mass gatherings are currently on lockdown due to COVID-19, Chow’s series offers a necessary, stirring reminder that we are not behind this conflict yet.

— Hera Chan

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