STUDIO

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Daphné Mandel

written by **Caroline Ha Thuc**

French urban designer Daphné Mandel used to work in public spaces before moving to Hong Kong, where she decided to reinvent herself as an artist. Since then, she has been observing, depicting and reimagining the landscape of the territory, questioning its identity and specificities. Increasingly, she has engaged deeper in fieldwork, exploring abandoned villages in the New Territories and collecting stories from local villagers whose lifestyle is on the brink of disappearing. Between fantasy and reality, her artworks invite viewers to project themselves into this collective heritage and to dive into the unalterable cycle of time.

Daphné Mandel. Courtesy the artist.

Caroline Ha Thuc: You worked as a landscape architect for a long time. What triggered your desire to become an artist? Daphné Mandel: I moved to Hong Kong in 2008. Seeing the city with my own eyes for the first time, I thought: "How am I going to find work as a landscape architect in such urban density? Where is the public space?"
Knowing that I couldn't practise landscape architecture in the same way that I had in France for more than a decade, I felt the need to find another way to work with Hong Kong's landscape. Exploring a new creative path through art was the most obvious path because it required nothing other than my own desire to create and some inspiration, and there was an abundance of both.

CHT: You began with photo collages that mainly focused on Hong Kong buildings, combining them with paint or pencil. In your early series such as *Warehouses*, these buildings are extracted from their context and, often, stand against a plain background as if they could be treated as autonomous subjects. Why? DM: I knew I would be an artist talking about my environment. That was just a natural continuation of being a landscape architect. I was confused and fascinated at the same time: "Why are these big avenues like Queens Road or Connaught Road parallel to the waterfront, creating massive obstacles to air flow?" Everything I was seeing was contrary to what I was taught at school.
Observing and depicting the buildings individually and systematically was a gradual attempt to familiarise myself with this unusual urban environment that I was trying to grasp. It allowed me to delay the question of their interaction with the city, and of the fabric of the city as a whole. I sought to dissect and peel it back progressively, layer by layer, the facade being the outer skin.

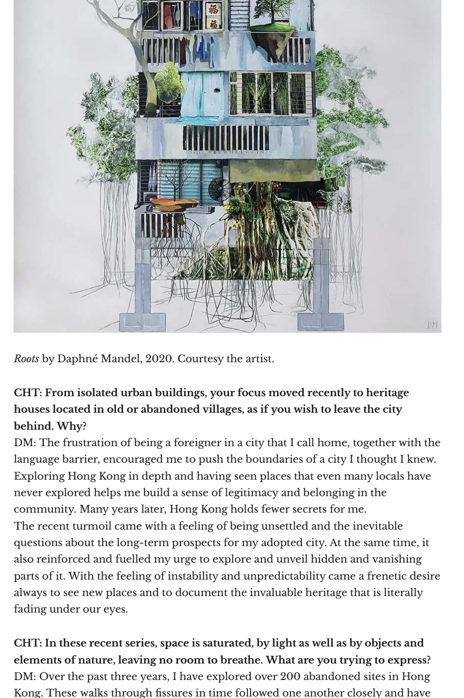
CHT: The frontal angle that you take and the typology of buildings that you propose make me think of the conceptual photographs of Bernd and Hilla Becher. For you, is this also a way to frame your subject with "objectivity" and, through a systematic process of work, to document Hong Kong architecture? DM: Indeed, my early works are very frontal and show that I am contemplating the city while keeping some distance, with no physical interaction. The urban facades are portrayed like set decor, and I am just a spectator. This representation is in phase with my relationship with Hong Kong at that time: distant and passive.
When I contemplate Hong Kong's cityscape, I think about repetition and extreme contiguity. Extracting the buildings from their compact environment and treating them like individual subjects permitted me to methodically highlight and portray their architectural identities and singularity.

CHT: Yet, from the start, there is nothing real in the Hong Kong you depict. Although you are inspired by real elements, everything is carefully staged. Which Hong Kong do you aim at depicting? DM: The imaginary and whimsical Hong Kong I depicted in my first years was an escape from a reality I had not yet confronted. But this fantasised representation has gradually converged with a certain intangible and unanticipated reality.

CHT: Very soon, you started representing these buildings within new settings, creating strong contrasts but also new narratives. First you imagined typical backgrounds, such as in the series *Funfair*, but increasingly, the buildings became points of departure for expanded scenery – for example, in *Chimerical Villages*. Does this evolution reflect your desire to explore and develop your own imagination? DM: The *Funfair* series extends the exploration of old Hong Kong's architecture while introducing a new scale: its natural surroundings and topography (*Coaster Dips*, 2016 and *Tai Tam Amusement Park*, 2016). In *Funfair*,Hong Kong buildings are displayed in the deserted landscapes of theme parks, merry-go-rounds, rusting carnival rides and Ferris wheels, and are revealed in all their ghostly glory. The surreal pairing of those modern and silent ruins with the hustle and bustle of Hong Kong seems to be frozen in time. Forgotten structures and wild nature coexist and forge scenery in perpetual metamorphosis.
As years go by and as I dig in deeper in Hong Kong's territory, the fantasised compositions are gradually more inspired by a fantasised reality that is fed by what I find on site. Surprisingly, as my ventures take me deeper into Hong Kong's territory, I realise that the fantasised compositions that I had been depicting, for example in the series *Funfair* or *Cliff Dwellings*, approach the reality of scenes of ruins that I have actually been discovering over the past three years. Before, I was imagining the ruins; now I am finding them. In the series *Chimerical Villages*, I am expanding the scale of these visionary illusions.

Tai Tam Amusement Park by Daphné Mandel. Courtesy the artist.

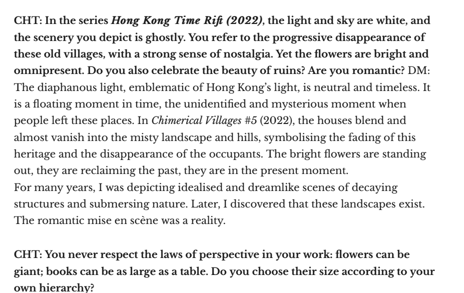
CHT: Nature appears progressively in your work, until the point when it becomes almost a topic in itself. It feels that the urban landscape cannot hold its expansion any more, yet there is also a sense of solidarity between nature and human architecture. How do you see this relationship? DM: In Hong Kong, there is an ardent relationship between the city's manufactured and natural elements. I see it as a push-pull relationship in time and space.
In large parts of Hong Kong, nature is omnipresent and anything but tamed. Abandoned sites are a spectacular manifestation of the power of nature overgrowing these remnants and urban ruins. In *Oasis* (2020) and *Pink Lady* (2020), luxuriant plants and rock formations infiltrate and wrap Hong Kong's edifices. *Tree Metamorphosis* (2019) and *Roots* (2020) evoke the tenacious vegetation surviving in the city's concrete jungle; the relentless roots perforate the ground, stairs, retaining walls and facades, exploiting any gap or void to regain some territory.
A friend once said about my work that it embodies the persistence of change and inevitability of green life, the cycles of growth and rot, and of the innately organic substance of the city. I want to think of Hong Kong as a process, not as a destination.



Roots by Daphné Mandel, 2020. Courtesy the artist.

CHT: From isolated urban buildings, your focus moved recently to heritage houses located in old or abandoned villages, as if you wish to leave the city behind. Why?
DM: The frustration of being a foreigner in a city that I call home, together with the language barrier, encouraged me to push the boundaries of a city I thought I knew. Exploring Hong Kong in depth and having seen places that even many locals have never explored helps me build a sense of legitimacy and belonging in the community. Many years later, Hong Kong holds fewer secrets for me.
The recent turmoil came with a feeling of being unsettled and the inevitable questions about the long-term prospects for my adopted city. At the same time, it also reinforced and fuelled my urge to explore and unveil hidden and vanishing parts of it. With the feeling of instability and unpredictability came a frenetic desire always to see new places and to document the invaluable heritage that is literally fading under our eyes.

CHT: In these recent series, space is saturated, by light as well as by objects and elements of nature, leaving no room to breathe. What are you trying to express?
DM: Over the past three years, I have explored over 200 abandoned sites in Hong Kong. These walks through fissures in time followed one another closely and have overwhelmed me with impressions, emotions and souvenirs. I struggled to process and to create a hierarchy for all that I witnessed. In an attempt to reassemble fragments reminiscent of previous lives, I create my own fantasised ruins.
In *Curtains on the Fringes* (2022), for instance, the crowded physical space is a transposition of a mental vision where memories overlap, intersect and occupy space chaotically and randomly like shattered glass. Overgrown nature colliding with these objects evokes the passage of time.



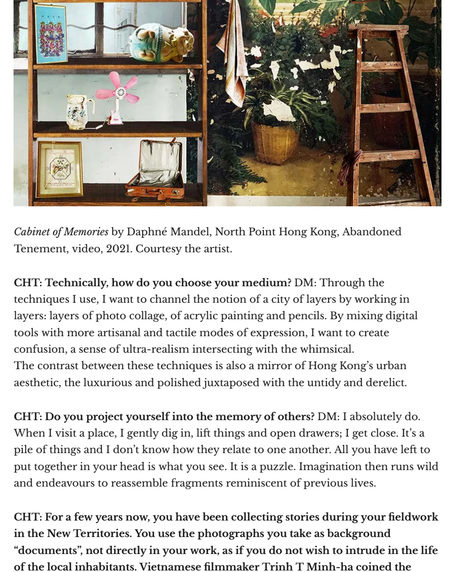
Curtains on the Fringes by Daphné Mandel, 2022. Courtesy the artist.

CHT: In the series *Hong Kong Time Rift (2022)*, the light and sky are white, and the scenery you depict is ghostly. You refer to the progressive disappearance of these old villages, with a strong sense of nostalgia. Yet the flowers are bright and omnipresent. Do you also celebrate the beauty of ruins? Are you romantic? DM: The diaphanous light, emblematic of Hong Kong's light, is neutral and timeless. It is a floating moment in time, the unidentified and mysterious moment when people left these places. In *Chimerical Villages #5* (2022), the houses blend and almost vanish into the misty landscape and hills, symbolising the fading of this heritage and the disappearance of the occupants. The bright flowers are standing out, they are reclaiming the past, they are in the present moment.
For many years, I was depicting idealised and dreamlike scenes of decaying structures and submersing nature. Later, I discovered that these landscapes exist. The romantic mise en scène was a reality.

CHT: You never respect the laws of perspective in your work: flowers can be giant; books can be as large as a table. Do you choose their size according to your own hierarchy?
DM: The unconventional representations regarding scale and perspective are similar to a mental map. The subjective depiction reveals my interaction with the space and the objects.
Multiple focal points mirror my attention being drawn to certain elements or objects during the time of exploration. Unorthodox graphic representation also evokes the world of the abandoned, places where things are no longer under control and not featured or configured as expected in an established order.

CHT: In the past, we never saw human faces in your work, yet human beings are very much present through the traces they leave behind. What are you suggesting?
DM: For many years, I felt more comfortable positioning myself as an observer rather than as an actor and was more engaged with Hong Kong's past rather than its present and future. Human faces are slowly and only recently starting to appear in my works. They surface through the traces of the past occupants' lives and their memories left behind.

CHT: With *Cabinet of Memories*, you have started experimenting with new media, including video. It feels that you wished to expand this idea of multilayered collages and multimedia to embrace not only space but time, also embodying the chaotic logic of memory. DM: Experiencing walking through a deserted site, for example an abandoned home, feels like walking through a still life on a human scale, a time capsule, a moment frozen in time. However, these places are still subtly alive. There are exposed and vulnerable. Everything feels unstable, precarious, ephemeral. With motion and sound, the video arouses this dimension.
In *Cabinet of Memories: North Point, Abandoned Tenement* (2021), at first sight the video seems static. A closer look reveals the objects coming to life in slow motion, mimicking the mind processing the estranged surroundings and turning them into projected and interpreted memories.
The videos narrate short tales using a unique frontal camera angle, like a spectator facing a theatre stage. The format imbues the narrative with its whimsical and curious dimension, like a fairy tale. The small screen size forces the viewer to engage closely and intimately with the video, giving perhaps a feel of intrusiveness, similar to what I feel walking through people's abandoned homes.



Cabinet of Memories by Daphné Mandel, North Point Hong Kong, Abandoned Tenement, video, 2021. Courtesy the artist.

CHT: Technically, how do you choose your medium? DM: Through the techniques I use, I want to channel the notion of a city of layers by working in layers: layers of photo collage, of acrylic painting and pencils. By mixing digital tools with more artisanal and tactile modes of expression, I want to create confusion, a sense of ultra-realism intersecting with the whimsical.
The contrast between these techniques is also a mirror of Hong Kong's urban aesthetic, the luxurious and polished juxtaposed with the untidy and derelict.

CHT: Do you project yourself into the memory of others? DM: I absolutely do. When I visit a place, I gently dig in, lift things and open drawers; I get close. It's a pile of things and I don't know how they relate to one another. All you have left to put together in your head is what you see. It is a puzzle. Imagination then runs wild and endeavours to reassemble fragments reminiscent of previous lives.

CHT: For a few years now, you have been collecting stories during your fieldwork in the New Territories. You use the photographs you take as background "documents", not directly in your work, as if you do not wish to intrude in the life of the local inhabitants. Vietnamese filmmaker Trinh T Minh-ha coined the concept of "speaking nearby" as a mode of approaching and documenting any community you do not belong to. Do you wish to remain on the edge? DM: For a long time, I believed I could only be at most on the edge, just "nearby", presumably because I only interacted with people's traces and the memories that they left behind. Documenting felt legitimate and valuable, while appropriation seemed unethical and opportunistic.
I have recently spent more time around the rural and urban edges of the city, in Hong Kong's fringes. These areas are undergoing gradual change as they stand in the way of modernisation and the expansion of high-density development projects. Villagers who used to make a living from agricultural and industrial activities are witnessing the brutal upheaval of their life and roots. Meeting the residents and listening to their stories gives me a sense of involvement, legitimacy and even responsibility in sharing their disappearing culture and heritage. I no longer wish to stay on the edge. While I am not appropriating their memories, I nonetheless wish to share what I have learned and am being strongly encouraged to do so by the communities themselves.

CHT: Perhaps an outsider gaze is also useful to see things differently, even to address a collective memory that you don't share? DM: Maybe we could start by defining the notion of an outsider. The wider one in the context of Hong Kong would be a foreigner. But even a Hong Kong native is an outsider in countless communities. Groups from Kwu Tung (New Territories), Cha Kwo Ling (East Kowloon) or Lamma island, with respectively a farming, industrial and fishing history, and populations of different ethnic and geographic origins, would likely not share a group identity.
Collective memories have a different significance in Hong Kong by virtue of the city undergoing perpetual transformation. While for me the term "memories" refers unequivocally to something of the past, I have recurrently heard Hongkongers use "Hong Kong's collective memories" in the sense of "present patrimony", as if it were undoubtedly going to be lost.

CHT: Increasingly, objects are the focus of your attention. Already, with *Afterglow*, you were looking at mundane elements of the street, decontextualised, and now you are doing a series in acrylic on paper about a single daily object. Is this a way to free yourself from the specificities of a place? DM: To the community, the objects portrayed are trivial, negligible and insignificant. To the outsider, they are noticeable and singular. Each painting represents a single object, extracted from its original context. Their potential to suggest a place, a time, a presence is inherent to their shape, colour, texture. In previous works, they were seen entwined and tangled. Now they are dissociated and isolated via a similar process to when I was isolating the buildings.
These objects have become so familiar to me after seeing them, photographing them, archiving them, classifying them, painting them that they constitute my memories of my visits to these villages. I took the process further by making paintings of photographs found in people's homes: photographs of people's travels, families etc. To me, the slightly absurd act of taking photos of photos and then painting them is a metaphor for the process of memory. It loses exactitude as it goes through time and interpretations.

Featured image: *Chimerical Villages* by Daphné Mandel. Courtesy the artist.

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Family having cake and coffee, overlooking a misty Victoria Harbour, from Rooftop Garden, M+, West Kowloon, Hong Kong, 12 February 2023.

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