

CULTURE | ARTS

Hong Kong's Unseen Ruins and Old Villages Are Brought Back to Life by This French Artist

Words by ZABRINA LO

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COVER Chimerical Villages #6 (2022) (Image: Gallery Exit and the artist)

Architect-turned-artist Daphné Mandel foregoes chandeliers and grand theatres for Hong Kong's forgotten ruins, old villages and abandoned buildings, which are now captured in her digital art.

Hong Kong has made an artist out of former architect Daphné Mandel. This Paris-raised, Versailles-educated landscape architect was named by the French Ministry of Culture as one of the “best young urban planning and landscape architecture professionals” in 2006, in recognition of her career designing Europe’s public spaces. After she moved to Hong Kong in 2008, it wasn’t the city’s remarkable skyline but the forgotten ruins and abandoned villages that piqued her interest.

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ABOVE Daphné Mandel (Photo: Daphné Mandel)

“Anyone who hikes a lot in Hong Kong eventually comes across Hakka villages in the New Territories, or abandoned structures and obsolete houses in the hills, and I happen to be an avid hiker,” she says. She met members of a local group of urban explorers interested in documenting ruins and hidden spots across Asia, which led her to some of Hong Kong’s oldest villages.



ABOVE Carrick House Memories (2022) (Image: Gallery Exit and the artist)

“It’s still a surprise and mystery to me. How can people abandon their homes when the price of land is so high in Hong Kong? Exploring these places is magical because they’re full of personal objects that carry so many memories and stories.”

[Read more: The Beauty of Hong Kong Trails, Captured by a Painter Who Spends His Days Hiking](#)



ABOVE Recital (2022) (Image: Gallery Exit and the artist)

Combining her sketching skills from her previous job and her love of exploration, she captures Hong Kong's old villages and abandoned homes with acrylic paint, digital techniques and a touch of imagination: she sometimes mixes in abandoned trinkets, corners of ruins from different places and subtropical plants to create a theatrical and surreal style.



ABOVE Chimerical Villages #5 (2022) (Image: Gallery Exit and the artist)

Ahead of her new exhibition, *Hong Kong Time Rift*, in which she presents new work at Gallery Exit, she tells Tatler what venturing into these lost villages is like.

ABOVE Daphné Mandel (Photo: Daphné Mandel)

6am

I am a night owl except when it's an exploration day when I'll leave home at around 6am. Often it is a long drive to reach these places and I like to get there when the neighbourhood is still sleeping.



ABOVE Daphné Mandel exploring an abandoned house (Photo: Daphné Mandel)

I plan my exploration by gathering tips from fellow urban explorers or looking up information online. I like venturing into all kinds of places: the densely populated areas such as Kwai Chung, Sha Tin or Mong Kok, or rural areas like Yuen Long, Fanling and the outlying islands. I focus on sites with stunning architectural features or interesting histories, or places transformed into a magical space by weathering and decay. I love it when nature is crawling in, when the roof is collapsing, and when rays of sun are coming in through the fissures.



ABOVE Precious Reminiscences (2021) (Image: Gallery Exit and the artist)

7am

Once I arrive at the site, I capture as many details as possible with my camera and my eyes. You never know when it will be gone. I make sure that the structure is safe enough every step of the way. I seldom sit down and paint on-site for fear that someone may ask me to leave and the site won't be accessible again.

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In almost anywhere else in the world, ruins are always vandalised. Interestingly in Hong Kong, when I visit the places and compare them to pictures taken by urban explorers five years ago, nothing has changed. The teapot and cups are still on the table, books remain on the shelves, calendars on the wall, decorative objects and portraits untouched. It's like the places are frozen in time and have become a testament to the disappearing culture and architecture.

Stepping into Hong Kong's past and attempting to reassemble fragments



ABOVE Homecoming (2022) (Image: Gallery Exit and the artist)

1pm

I never pack any lunch. My friend and I like stopping by the nearby villages to try villagers' home cooking or simple snacks, which is a part of the whole experience of exploration. Malay sponge cakes and egg waffles are my favourite. I always end up in places I would otherwise never have come across, and have conversations with villagers, who are often intrigued by us because these ruins aren't touristy places.

In case you missed: [The Best Hong Kong Hikes—Plus Where To Eat And Drink After](#)

Once, I learnt from a villager that the owner of an abandoned beautiful house close to the border left for Holland and never came back. There wasn't much I could discover about this man, which is the case for a lot of the other abandoned houses I explored, but I thought it was serendipitous for me—I'm half-Dutch—to have explored his house.



ABOVE Abandoned Home in Sha Tin from the "Cabinet of Memories" series (Image: Gallery Exit and the artist)

6pm

When I go out exploring, it usually takes a whole day. When I return, I always take a shower first to make sure I'm clean of any bugs or germs I may have brought back from the wild. Then I go through my pictures and file them by themes: a gate, a back alley, an entrance, vases, personal objects and furniture.



ABOVE Chimerical Villages #4 (2022) (Image: Gallery Exit and the artist)

7pm

positioning parts from different villages to get the right atmosphere and the elements I want to include. Then I paint and draw the vegetation and the landscape. I merge the different elements together with smoke or steam, using the transparency function in the digital graphics editing software.



ABOVE Daphné Mandel on the staircase of an abandoned house (Photo: Daphné Mandel)

Each painting takes about two weeks. I work on several pieces at the same time. For instance, when the first layer of one painting is mocked up, I can start another one if I don't want to paint it just yet.

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The Dutch Golden Age of “the cabinet of curiosities” [paintings in the 17th century in which painters captured intricate details of objects] has a special place in my heart. Not only do they look incredible, but these paintings also document different traditions, and botanical finds or trinkets that people would



ABOVE Cabinet of Memories, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong (2022) (Image: Gallery Exit and the artist)

Because of my past as an architect on cultural projects, specifically theatres and circuses, I love incorporating the stage, chandeliers and velvet curtains in my work. They contrast with something that's crumbling. Also, a theatre curtain is associated with storytelling. I like to play with these theatrical motifs in my art.

Hong Kong Time Rift *runs from April 30 to May 28, 2022.*

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Words by AAINA BHARGAVA

April 13, 2022



COVER Artist Amir Fallah, Photo: Adam Schaffer, courtesy of the artist

Revenge shopping and navigating a third-culture identity inform Amir Fallah's first show in Hong Kong

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