

ARTS & CULTURE

EXHIBITION



Abraham Cruzvillegas' *Juntitud*; *Ordinary Affects* features botanical drawings by Zhou Xiaopeng and the woman with Alzheimer's he was teaching; a still from *Fireflies (Lucciole)*. Photos: Para Site, Felix SC Wong, Pauline Curnier Jardin & Feel Good Cooperative

A question of happiness

Para Site exhibition pays homage to film by Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai and shines a spotlight on the experiences of the Chinese diaspora

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At Hong Kong independent art space Para Site, a group exhibition called "How to Be Happy Together?" pays homage to filmmaker Wong Kar-wai's 1997 film *Happy Together*, in which two men from the city who are in a turbulent romance travel to Argentina, just about the furthest place from their hometown.

The film, which stars Tony Leung Chiu-wai and the late Leslie Cheung Kwok-wing, is only referred to in the abstract by the more than 20 artists involved in the exhibition.

The show is not a mere retelling of Wong's film; it suggests more authentic ways of human connection, its curator, Xiang Zairong, says.

How can we live happily together? By recognising and living with historical, social and cultural differences, he adds.

"*Happy Together* was a very influential film [to me]," Xiang says. "This show is inspired holistically by the sexually charged feeling in the film but at the same time, also by how there is something very open about the film's meaning and the history it touches upon."

Apart from the Hong Kong context – the film was released as China prepared to resume sovereignty over the territory after 156 years of it being a British colony – *Happy Together* can also be seen to reflect the sense of homelessness experienced by generations of economic migrants.

Starting from the mid-1500s, East and Southeast Asians settled in Latin America as labourers and tradespeople, and later restaurateurs and waiters – like Leung's character in *Happy Together*.

Today, there are more than 4 million Latin Americans of Asian descent. Among them are an estimated 2 million Brazilians who identify as having East Asian ancestry.

Their experiences are reflected in the Hong Kong exhibition in *Orelhão*, a work by Shanghai-born Brazilian architect Chu Ming Silveira. The artist's family moved to São Paulo via Hong Kong following the Chinese civil war that ended in 1949 with the communists victorious.



This is something we need... [as] we live in a moment of great transition across the world

XIANG ZAIRONG, CURATOR OF HOW TO BE HAPPY TOGETHER?

Chu Ming Silveira's phone booth design was used in Brazil and beyond. Photo: courtesy of Alan Chu Silveira



Her piece, whose name means "big ear" in Portuguese, is based on her 1972 design for telephone booths, used throughout Brazil and beyond.

The Brazilian telecoms company had initially considered other designs, including the cabin-shaped telephone boxes used in the UK and Hong Kong, but these were soon found to be inadequate and easily vandalised. "[Silveira] needed to think up something that was cost-effective. It was almost like a Taoist impossibility, something light but enduring, something private but also public," Xiang says.

The artist's uniquely shaped protector for public telephones has been exported to many countries. It is widely used in China, as Xiang recalls from his formative years in Guiyang, in Guizhou province, southwest China.

"There are all these connections, historical and contemporary, between Hong Kong and Latin America, not only [with] the Chinese migrant workers who

moved through Hong Kong to the Americas, but also the other way around," Xiang says.

Guangzhou-born and Berlin-based artists Zhou Xiaopeng and Tang Han's two-channel video *Ordinary Affects* (2024) examines another type of modern-day Chinese labour overseas. In 2019, Zhou began teaching an elderly woman with Alzheimer's disease to draw flowers and trees in a botanical garden in Berlin.

When the pandemic took their sessions indoors, they developed a close bond; their relationship scratched an itch for Zhou, who was deprived of the chance to give the same kind of in-person care to his family in Guangzhou.

This redirection of affection forged "a very complex and kind of unusual relationship between an ageing woman and a young Chinese artist in Berlin", Xiang says. "It's a mutually affecting coupling. She doesn't remember, so she knows who he is, but not quite."

He adds: "If we think of the

film *Happy Together*, we tend to think about intimate [romantic] relationships, but this is an intimacy based on social reproduction, class difference, immigration and the question of age."

The botanical drawings made by Zhou and the woman from 2019 to 2023 are shown in the Para Site exhibition as a series titled "How Does a Flower Bend?"

Each sketch illustrates the pair's shared journey in disability, loss and healing as the expatriate artist grapples with homesickness and identity.

Fireflies (Lucciole), another work featured in the exhibition, was developed in 2021 by French artist Pauline Curnier Jardin and Feel Good Cooperative, an art collective from Rome, Italy, made up of Colombian transgender sex workers and their supporters.

The video piece is mostly hidden behind a mirror and only visible to the wandering eye. *Lucciole*, Italian for fireflies, is a euphemism in Italy for street sex workers.

Curator Xiang Zairong looks at Chu Ming Silveira's *Orelhão* at the exhibition.

Photo: Jonathan Wong

As the camera flashes on their glitter-covered skin, sequined dresses and patent leather heeled boots, these rebellious, empowered yet vulnerable women move and flinch like fireflies in the night.

"There's a beautiful, very mysterious and divine light shining on these sex workers," Xiang says. They create "a happy-togetherness" through one of the oldest professions in the world, he adds.

The exhibition's centrepiece represents unity in a more physical way. *Juntitud* is a newly commissioned sculptural installation by Mexican artist Abraham Cruzvillegas, who grew up in Ajusco, a volcanic area south of Mexico City once deemed uninhabitable because of its geology.

There are all these connections... between Hong Kong and Latin America

XIANG ZAIRONG

However, in the 1960s, an economic boom brought over labourers from other parts of the country, who built their own community by appropriating whatever they could get their hands on.

"This kind of ingenious improvisation created a sculptural aspect [which was] not only an aesthetic pursuit but also from necessity and economic precarity and functionality [in an impossible situation]," Xiang says. "We have a lot of these examples in Asia at large and in Hong Kong."

Much like the people of Ajusco, Cruzvillegas makes use of found objects in his art practice, particularly for his ongoing project *Autoconstrucción* ("self-construction"), which is partly inspired by his hometown.

Over four days, he assembled *Juntitud* in Para Site's 22nd floor space in an industrial building in Quarry Bay by using locally found items as pieces of a puzzle.

"Forms can come together when their commodity value is lost but the use or sculptural value still lasts. Some of them can work together very nicely, some of them resist. Their differences, precisely, is what holds them together," Xiang says.

"This is something I think we really need nowadays [as] we live in a moment of great transition across the world. That's why the [exhibition title ends with] a question mark. It's a proposition."

"How to Be Happy Together?" at Para Site, 22/F Wing Wah Industrial Building, 677 King's Rd, Quarry Bay. Wed-Sun, 12pm-7pm. Until April 6

EXHIBITION

Artist's colourful, flamboyant paintings mix Chinese and Western styles

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Take one look at paintings by the late Chinese-American artist Walasse Ting and you will immediately feel a sense of joy and exuberance.

The artist is known for his unapologetic use of lively acrylic colours, while his preferred motifs – dynamic flowers, sultry women, lounging cats – easily give rise to positive feelings.

"I always loved [my father's paintings] because they were all different colours and everything was pretty, and there was nothing I couldn't understand," says his daughter Mia Ting, who with her brother, Jesse Ting, grew up watching her father paint.

"[My father was] just trying, in a natural, simple way, to show joy and beauty," Jesse Ting adds.

Born in 1928 in Wuxi, Walasse Ting was a largely self-taught artist who lived in many cities in his lifetime, including Hong Kong,

Paris, New York and Amsterdam. Over the years he became influenced by pop art and abstract expressionism, and developed a signature style that involved using bright, vibrant colours to depict female nudes, flora and animals.

Now, 25 of the artist's works can be seen at a new solo exhibition called "Walasse Ting: Joy, Temptation and Magic" at Alisan Fine Arts, in Central.

Running until March 15, 2025, the exhibition not only features his most representative paintings from the 1990s but also works from as early as the 1950s, which show how his artistic tendencies evolved and how he married both Chinese and Western influences in his works.

"People always think his [paintings] are beautiful – they're lovely – but they don't really understand his background and the depth of where he came from," says Daphne King, director of Alisan Fine Arts.

"I thought by showcasing the black-and-white pieces and these

abstract [works], people can really see that he was influenced by the abstract expressionist movement [and] the pop art movement, with all the colour in New York in the 1960s and 1970s."

Walasse Ting's life and career began in China, where he grew up as the youngest of four sons. He briefly studied at the Shanghai Academy of Art and stayed in Hong Kong for a short time before moving to Paris when he was in his mid-twenties, in 1953.

There, he befriended artists who were members of the European avant-garde art group Cobra. By then, he had started using the name Walasse, a portmanteau of a Shanghaiese childhood nickname – *huai lai shee*, meaning very spoiled – and Matisse, as in the French painter.

He moved to New York in 1957, where he became particularly influenced by abstract expressionism and pop art, associating himself with artists such as Sam Francis and Joan Mitchell.

I Love You (1959), one of the

black-and-white paintings in the new exhibition, highlights his experimentation with gestural abstraction.

"A lot of these very early black-and-white [paintings] almost look like close-ups of a part of calligraphy," Mia Ting says. "This comes from his technique in calligraphy and experimenting with canvas."

"A lot of the time, people ask us: 'Is it paint? Is it ink?' It's probably a mix of paint, ink and shoe polish. He had no money in those days."

His 1967 work *Summer Symphony (Painted with Beethoven Symphony No. 4)* is another example of his exploration of abstract expression. The painting features vivid colours splashed onto the canvas in style reminiscent of American painter Jackson Pollock.

By the 1970s he had already started to receive recognition – later winning the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship Award for his drawings in 1977 – and develop his exuberant painting

style, but a trip back to China in 1979 reacquainted him with Chinese materials and brushes.

"He really returns to rice paper after we went back to China for the first time," says Jesse Ting, recalling how the family travelled to several cities in the country after it began to open up, including Beijing, Wuxi, Shanghai and Guilin.

Following the trip, Walasse

Ting also began incorporating more Chinese elements and artistic traditions into his paintings. *Cruising on the Emerald River* (1990s), for example, reflects the traditional *shanshui* style – Chinese landscape paintings – while a notable four-panel piece called *Pink Hues of Spring* (1990s) depicts clothed and unclothed Tang dynasty courtesans holding Chinese fans.

Walasse Ting would continue to create art until 2002, when he suffered a brain haemorrhage that left him unable to paint. He died in 2010.

A huge part of the reason that his paintings have remained popular is because of their universality and accessibility, Jesse Ting says.

At the same time, it is not too simplistic, Mia Ting says.

King agrees, noting that his works had depth, though she warns against viewing the artist as one-dimensional, especially since he himself refused to be categorised.

"He didn't really want to be pigeonholed ever into any artistic movement, and as a result, art historians found it very difficult to place him and [didn't know] what to make of him."



Jesse Ting and Mia Ting with Walasse Ting's *Summer Symphony (Painted with Beethoven Symphony No. 4) (1967)*. Photo: Alisan Fine Arts

"Walasse Ting: Joy, Temptation and Magic", Alisan Fine Arts, 21/F Lyndhurst Tower, 1 Lyndhurst Terrace, Central, Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm. Until March 15, 2025.