

# Trevor Yeung

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY YSABELLE CHEUNG

**In the artist's jungly Fo Tan studio, manicured situations involving flora and fauna come to life**



Trevor Yeung in his small but lively Fo Tan studio in Hong Kong, which he has rented since early 2015.

Behind a narrow nursery in Mong Kok's Flower Market, tiny plant specimens glow like mutant organisms under a pulsing UV light. Hong Kong artist Trevor Yeung inspects their bulbous caudices. Some sprout baby vines as thin as hairs; others carry cracks like those found on hoary tortoise shells. Although diminutive in size, these plants—some of which are saplings that will eventually become trees—will add meters to their height over time. “Sometimes things change so fast, especially in Hong Kong. I like these kinds of plants, because they grow so, so slowly,” says Yeung, tapping with precision the pointed, semi-translucent leaves of a potted succulent.

Once a week, Yeung makes a trip here, as well as to the bird and goldfish markets nearby, to procure flora, fish and other biota he calls his “readymades.” He then hauls these back to his studio in

an industrial building in Fo Tan—a space shared with photographer South Ho—to incorporate them into artworks that mimic, or create anew, functioning ecosystems.

Born in 1988 in Dongguan, China, Yeung has made these pilgrimages to Mong Kok since he enrolled as a high-school student in the city, and has observed with mixed feelings the wave of gentrification sweeping through the neighborhood. “This area has become more expensive, more luxury-based,” he says, as he points to an empty store aggressively barricaded by bamboo scaffolding, an example of the proliferating renovations in the market. “On one hand, I like the old way [of Flower Market stores], but on the other, I also appreciate that these shop owners are trying to get new customers in to learn about plants. It's conflicting. This is also how I feel about the art world.”

Yeung likens the forced intervention aspect of gentrification to mingling with the art crowd at exhibition openings—an activity he says he's become less nervous about, although he still dreads the small talk. He relieves these compulsive anxieties by creating controlled, hermetic environments as small studies of the human condition. For his work displayed at the 10th Shanghai Biennale (2014–15), he traipsed along Hong Kong's Flower Market Road foraging for the passion fruit plant, notoriously unpopular for its vigorous, fast-growing vines. Titled *Maracuja Road* (2014), the resulting work consists of an assembly of potted passion fruit shrubs, each entwined tightly around an erect bamboo pole. Like the age-old Greek myth in which Tantalus is forced to eternally stand under a cluster of unreachable fruit, the bamboo poles end inches away from an inviting canopy that hangs above, ensuring the vines can never populate the frames. The empty space between the poles and the latticework represents a futile, yearning desire that Yeung seems to reference in much of his work; titles such as *I Could Be A Good Boyfriend* (2011) and *Portrait of Lonesome George* (2015) point to that. However, when viewing the works—the former a meticulously designed plant installation, the latter a grainy photograph of a man obfuscated by smoke—it is not Yeung's own narrative that is dominant, but one that is general and abstract enough to be relevant to anyone who sees it.

“A friend once described my work as masturbatory, in that all my emotions are kind of spewing on everyone,” Yeung says with a thoughtful, playful smile. “I kind of disagree . . . I think I actually want to create a, let's say, 'intimate' moment between the audience and me. A connection.”

At the market, his eyes alight on a *sinningia leucotricha*, a South American flowering plant with leaves covered in dense silvery hairs—perfect for vacuuming up moisture. “I think I’m going to have to buy this one,” he says, fondly admiring the plant’s leaves. We hurry back to his studio via the subway and a minibus, pressed for time as Yeung has to finish a rock and photo installation work in his “Enigma” series (2015– ) before he leaves for a residency at Paris’s Parc Rousseau in October.

Yeung’s studio is a place where he attempts to convene the unresolved with the comfortingly familiar: while South Ho’s walls are plastered with fixed images that capture life, Yeung’s half of the unit cultivates it. He keeps a small nursery of growing plants in one corner by the windows, and a fish tank on his desk. Some past works are embedded in or attached to various plant pots. Cream-pink sea snail shells, whose spindles were interlocked in the sexually uproarious *Three to Tango* (2014– ), share a pot with a fern. These are his work plants, not his home plants which are kept in his apartment along with a flying squirrel and two lovebirds. The separation between his studio and home is important for maintaining boundaries in his life, he tells me. Ironically, Yeung self-exhibited a solo show in his room titled “The Bedroom Show”

in 2012 to comment on public invasions of the private, and vice versa.

I see on a worktable a pumice rock that has been sliced in two; Yeung later screws the halves into a sheet of glass to create an illusion of the pumice naturally invading it. He picks up a pair of scissors to score the porous surface of the pale volcanic rock, explaining his goal of altering the piece to make it look like a textured, mossy boulder weathered by many natural factors. Yeung likes to make dead or dried objects alive again, or at least look the part; his Frankenstein-esque experiments are strewn across his studio.

Hollow sea urchin shells and barnacle clusters lurk in bowls and on windowsills, prototypes for the “Cacti” series (2014– ), some of which were exhibited at his solo show at Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong, in September. These works sprang from Yeung’s encounter with a dried blowfish, which he accidentally brushed against in a store. “I thought it was a cactus at first,” he says, describing his surprise at discovering two protruding eyes on the object. Yeung’s attempt to reenact that moment for his viewers resulted in sculptures that appear to be spherical cacti embedded in potted soil, though closer inspection reveals the texture of fish skin and naked fin spikes

(This page)  
Dried, once-living and alive organisms co-exist in harmony in the artist’s space, which he also shares with the photographer South Ho.

(Opposite page, top)  
The plant nursery in the studio, above which hangs part of a work from the artist’s “Sleepy Bed” (2010– ) series, where Yeung took photographs of strangers sleeping in youth hostels and dormitories in an observation of intimacy.

(Opposite page, bottom left)  
Yeung watering his plants, next to windows that overlook the green rambling mountains of Fo Tan.

(Opposite page, bottom right)  
A table with a halved pumice rock that Yeung is working on, for a piece in his “Enigma” series (2015– ), which looks at the relationships between plants and humans.







through painted layers of green. “If you looked again, you would see it—if you didn’t, you would miss it,” he says, adding that all too often, we fail to observe our environment properly when overcome by stress, fatigue or repetition.

Overhead, a gaping dried blowfish hangs like a trinket inside a large glass display case leftover from his work for the 2015 Para Site group show “A Hundred Years of Shame – Songs of Resistance and Scenarios for Chinese Nations.” For this exhibition, the tanks were arranged in a circular composition and filled with sought-after fish imported to Hong Kong from various parts of the world. When viewers ventured inside this circle, they were forced to gaze at the fat-cheeked Japanese “ranchu” goldfish or arowana native to Southeast Asia. Aptly titling the work *Live in Hong Kong, Born in Dongguan* (2015), Yeung mines his own insecurities about his birthright and the betrayal of appearance, a recurrent motif in his oeuvre.

The artist adds today’s purchases to the existing archipelagos of bio-life in his studio: he slips algae-munchers from the goldfish market into the tank on his table, and arranges two new plants, after some

deliberation, in the nursery. With a slim-nozzled copper watering can, he hydrates these plants individually, recounting the stories behind every one of them. “South is going to hate me for buying two more plants,” he says with a laugh as he puts down his can. “He has to water them when I’m away.”

As I leave, Yeung hands me a packet of Pocky biscuits unearthed from a pile of rocks, which I refuse out of politeness. “No! Take it,” he says, pushing the packet in my hands and peering with avuncular concern at my face. “It looks like you haven’t eaten today.” He provides a specific set of instructions for exiting the building—“Unlock the wooden door, you can leave that metal one open, turn left, hit the lifts, take it down to the ground floor”—and then turns his attention back to the pumice rock, which still awaits transformation. I emerge from the industrial building into the hazy, deserted sprawl of Fo Tan where, without the artist’s guidance, I will have to find my own way home.

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(Top)  
 A newly acquired South American plant in the artist’s collection of flora, of which there are hardly any flowers. The artist confesses that he despises orchids as they die easily and are aesthetically generic, whereas he obsesses over ferns and quirky details of unusual plants, like the soft, hairy leaves of this one.

(Middle)  
 Dried blowfish, which the artist buys in bulk from wholesalers, hang in a tank.

(Bottom)  
 A fish tank and various tools on the artist’s desk, where he drills, scratches, paints and refines his “readymade” objects. He says he prefers working in small-scale, a limitation that other Hong Kong artists might view as a hindrance.

