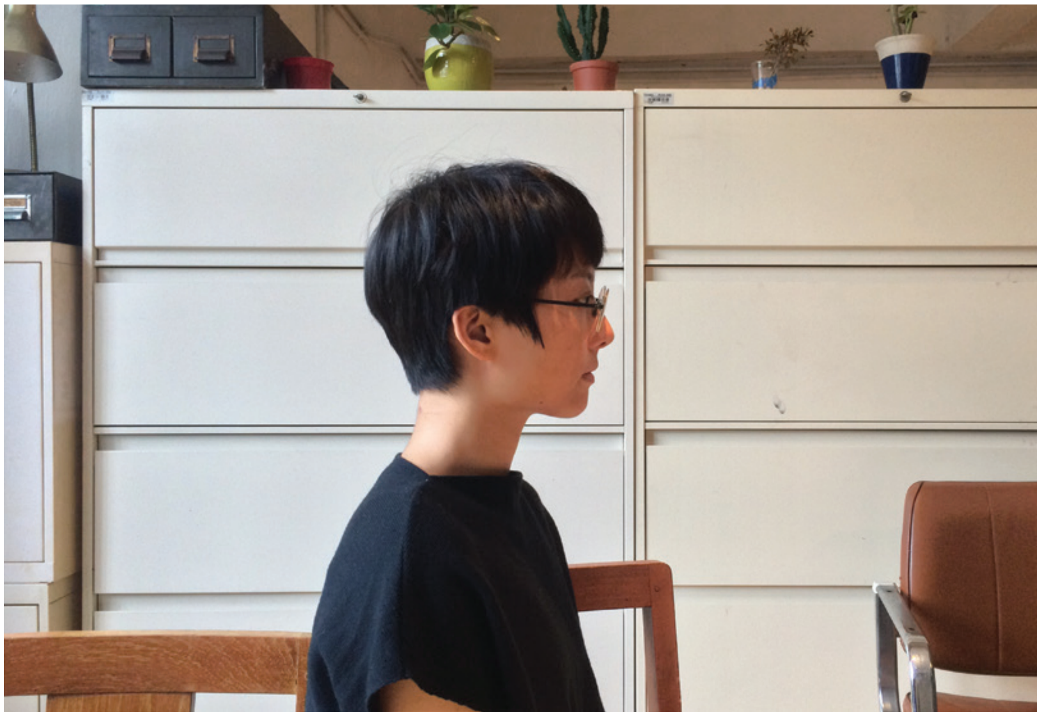
Firenze Lai

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY YSABELLE CHEUNG

How can a painting convey a touch, an embrace, a gesture?

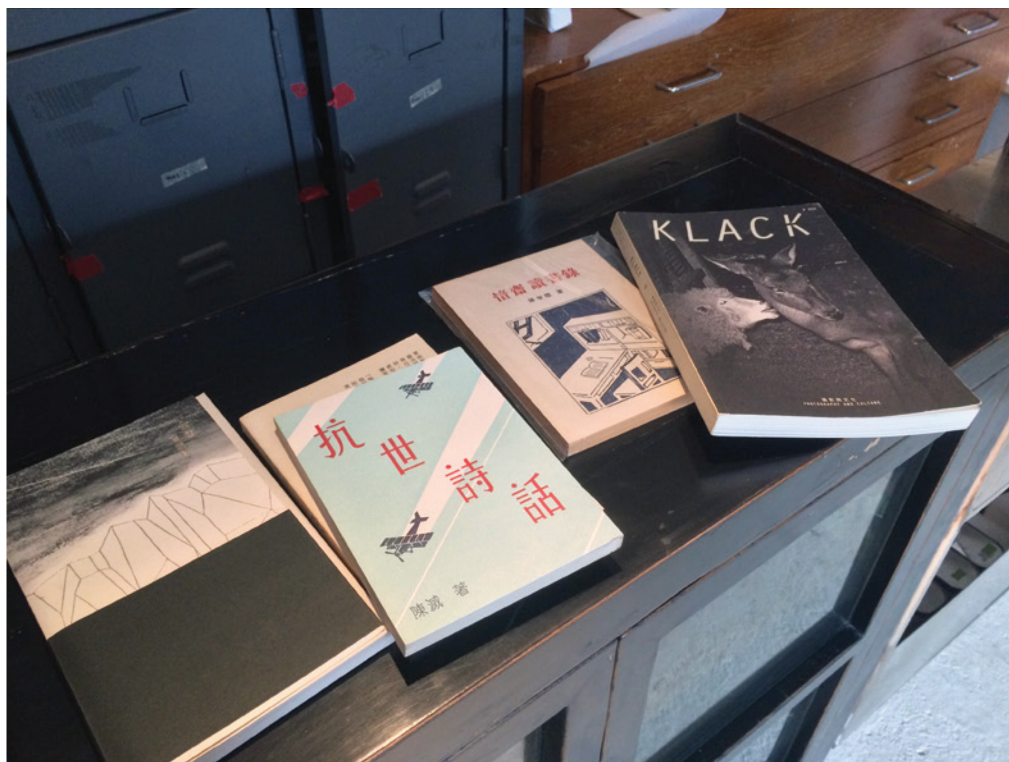


Firenze Lai in her studio in Kwai Chung, Hong Kong.

An appointment with Firenze Lai at her studio in the New Territories of Hong Kong began with "petite musique de chambre." Translated as a "little chamber music," the term was used by postminimalist composer Wim Mertens to define his 1983 EP *Struggle for Pleasure*, the lugubrious piano lines of which ran softly from Lai's MacBook the day we met. Dimly lit by a few maple-syrup-toned lamps, the components of Lai's studio slowly came into focus against this ebbing of music: there was an assembly of midcentury office furniture sourced from secondhand markets; there were her toy owls—"my guardians of the studio"; there were piles of books in languages such as Polish and French, rising like steeples across the space; there were her canvases, leaning gently against easels; there were drawings and sketches in charcoal clinging to the walls; there were her hand-painted color charts, tacked onto surfaces in a designated working area.

This setting reflected the artist's slow reveal in awareness of existence. Lai's work is quiet and gestural. Her paintings seek to embody the narratives of physicality in the human body, such as in the gentle knot of a couple's intertwined fingers, or a skittish office worker who anxiously crosses her legs at both the knees and ankles. For the artist, these expressions exist in environments that are "political," which, according to Lai, are spaces that someone else has designed for us and that we often become complacent with. Naturally, Lai's own environment in which she contemplates these bodies and their existence in the world is also a "political" act in itself. Dotted around the space are her preferred designs for chairs—those built with strong, erect spines that not only force sitters to instantly straighten their postures, but also push for a reconsideration of the slumped positions that they usually assume. "I like these kinds of triggers," Lai said. "I'm not painting something from figures; I'm trying to depict how one adapts to their environment and how that environment shapes you mentally and physically."

In her early days of painting—then a solely nocturnal activity due to her workload as a freelance book designer and co-owner of the now-defunct art space Hulahoop—Lai rendered figures closer to how we view each other on a day-to-day basis. The postures and proportions of people in these works are solidly and densely composed, although her characteristic sense of *saudade*—an untranslatable Portuguese expression that describes a kind of melancholy—had already taken root. Later, as Lai began to delve into the metaphysical and the anti-figurative, bordering on a style that recalls abstract expressionism, she painted heads and faces smaller and smaller, some appearing like grapes cradled atop a giant nest of limbs. "One day, I thought—I realized—that actually the perspective of the world of a person starts from the head. In this sense, the head is the smallest thing." This realization arrived around the same time a vertebra slipped out of alignment in her spine, leaving her with lopsided movements for a month. It was Lai's doctor who sparked attention to a perception that would plunge the artist further into her study of postures and supportive systems in the human body. He asked her to regularly place herself in front of a full-length mirror, and eye the space between her inner arms and waist until her stance was realigned. "He said to me, 'Can you see this hollow? If they are not the same size, then your spine is actually not in the right position.' So, all this negative space defines whether



(This page, left)
A selection of books the artist contributed to during her years as a freelance book designer, when she would work during daylight hours and then begin painting after sunset.

(This page, bottom)
"Have you ever booked a karaoke room for one?" During our visit, Lai described each one of her paintings in detail. For this one in the foreground, titled *The Secret in Red* (2016), she conveys the allure of hermetic karaoke lounges and their typically red-hued, amiably large upholstery: the perfect setting for one to do whatever they like within a paid session.

(Opposite page, top)
Sketches in pencil, charcoal and other media pinned to the artist's workstation walls.

(Opposite page, bottom)
The Kwai Chung Sports Ground, a spot which the artist frequents in order to observe and take pictures or videos of people. While she derives inspiration for her paintings from specific gestures, she is quick to mention that these pictures are not exact studies or references; they serve more as an activity that eventually leads to the formulation of a painting.

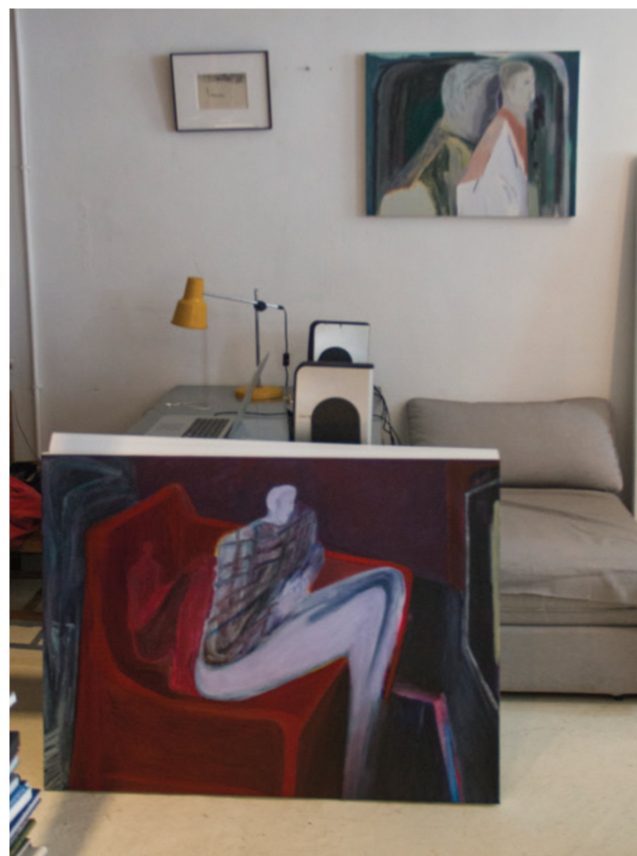
your body's correct or not," she explained. "I started to look at these kinds of things . . . this, well, I don't want to use this word, but this kind of *existence* of your body, of everything."

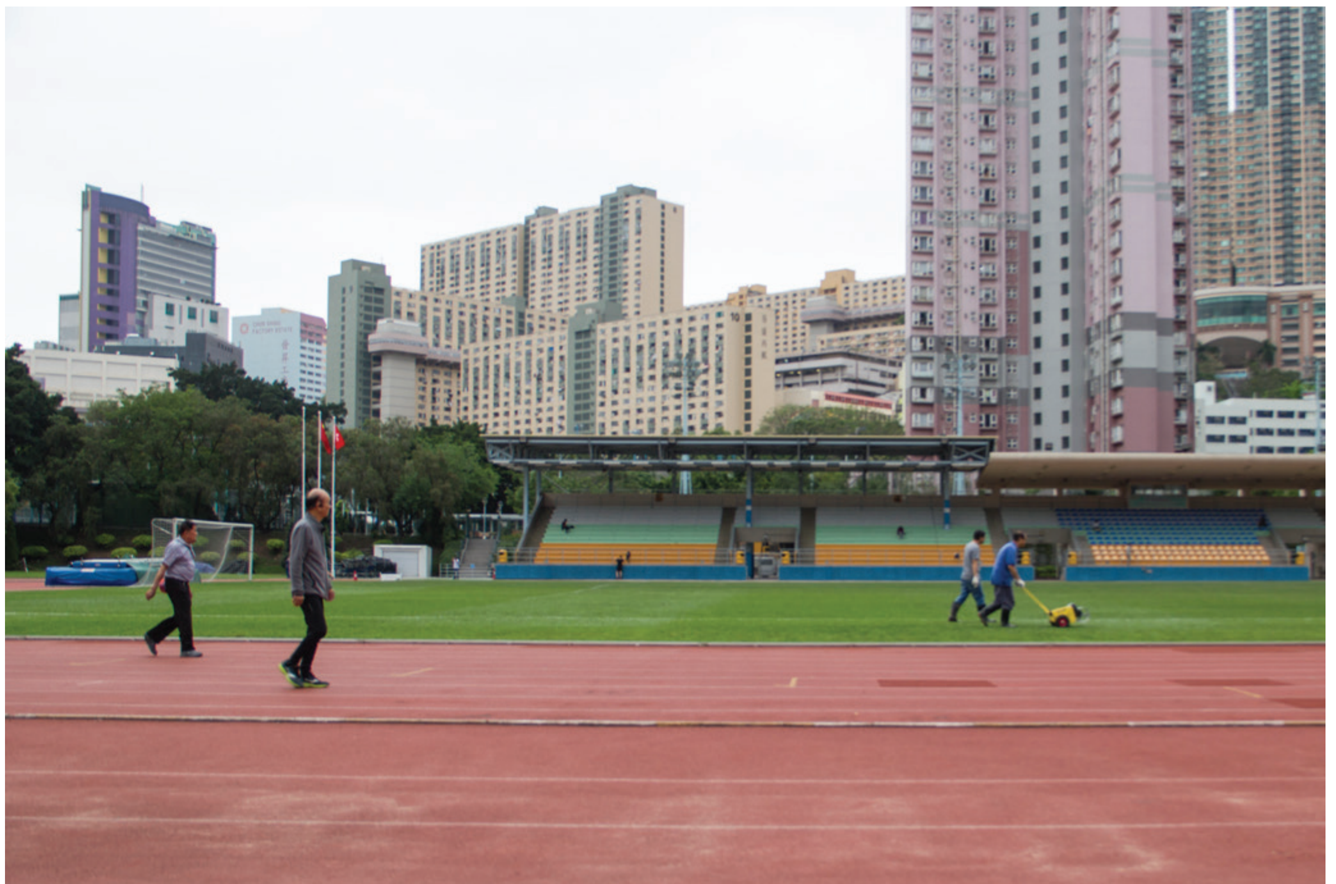
On the day we met, Lai was also recovering from a shoulder injury of mysterious origins. She explained: "I think I'm too weak, because I never do sports; I'm always working in the same pose." The artist notices herself, just as she notices others. She took me to a running track a block away from her industrial-building studio, which faces a mint-green refrigerator factory, and through the netted fence pointed out the various people practicing calisthenics, jogging or reclining on the bleachers. She comes here often to take pictures and videos, and simply observes. "Nobody ever runs clockwise," she said. "Always counterclockwise."

She included a set of these photos and videos in her submission for a sub-project as part of the 57th Venice Biennale "Viva Arte Viva," which focused on artists' practices and their ways of working. Curator Christine Macel had asked participants to present an inspiration board of sorts, via video. Lai's video includes images of people seated or walking around in Hong Kong's subway stations and on the streets of Kowloon, as well as footage of her studio, in particular the desktop where she mixes paints and keeps her panoply of brushes, from large, bristly mops to delicate fans.

There were several large, unwrapped canvases in her studio. She freed more from storage, encouraging me to ask questions about their painted gestures, such as two people with their backs pressed together, supporting each other's weight, or a scene of a man holding another, which Lai had come across in Tokyo subway stations, where drunken salarymen often require help to board the train home. There was directness to this proposition, similar to her candor toward an obsession with human expression and gesture.

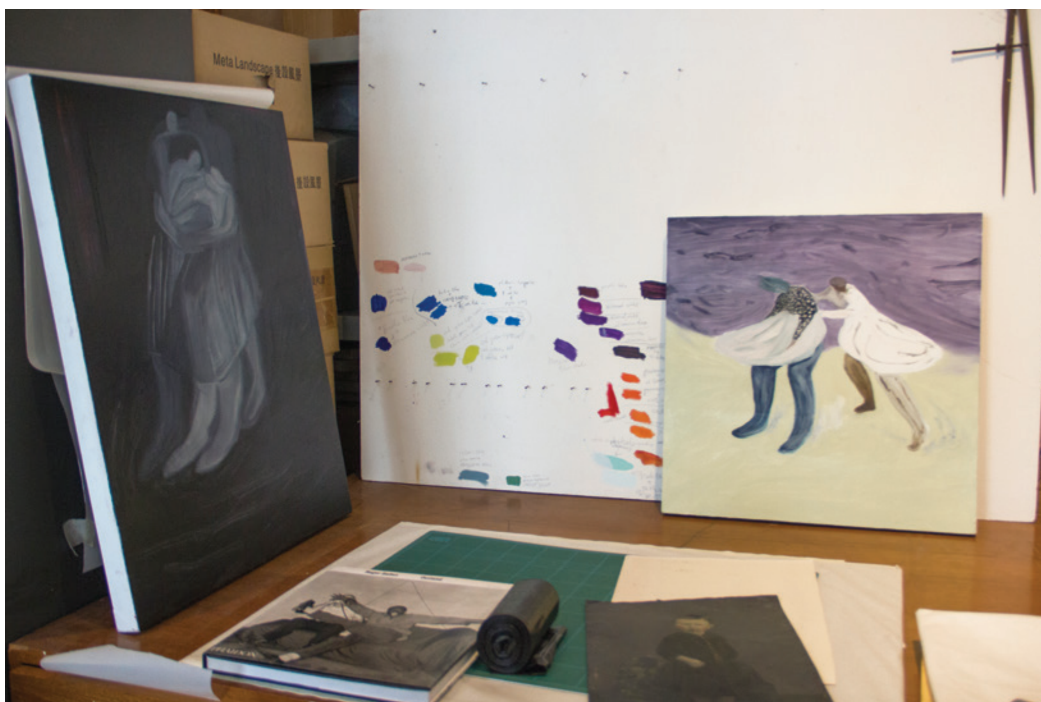
Clues of this proclivity were scattered throughout the studio. Picking up a leathery book from the top of a pile, she thumbed through a series of purebred dog portraits, praising the humanistic angles of the photographer's lens. She also showed me a recent purchase from London —a vintage daguerreotype of a young boy whose expression was somewhere between joy, shock and bewilderment, his lips painted a blush-rose tint. "I collect visual expressions—that's how I collect," she noted. "If there is a painting or drawing that has a weird pose or weird expression, then I'll buy it."





Lai's usage of the word "weird" changed several times as we spoke. At first, she used it to illustrate her interests and perspective, but then later she weighed the word and its charged definitions in conventional, social vocabulary. Her voice took on a tender, protective tone when she spoke about the people in her photographs and paintings. "I don't want others to think they are weird. They are *not weird*," she stressed. She is uninterested in deformity and views her portraits more as nonlinear, multidimensional sketches, similar to the works of Francis Bacon, whom she cites as a source of inspiration. Lai also mentioned that she is seeking to portray an awkwardness that is inherent in humans: sometimes we don't understand the nuances of our selves or our own bodies, even if they are obvious to others. Her earliest memories of this awareness of the body's narration came from her family. As a child, she was hypnotized by the pickled, wrinkled fingers of her mother, who worked at a snake-soup kitchen and spent hours deboning and preparing raw reptile meat. These hardened puckerings became a definition cleaved to a profession, and vice versa.

In the studio, I spotted two works propped against a wall that were at once evocative and remote. In the first, *Typhoon* (2012), we see two figures either standing or dancing in a wind that beats at their hair and dresses; they stand back to face, with one figure clinging to the other. This act of trying to hold on and almost letting go in the gust—straining against limits—is gently acted out against a background of pale lemon and painterly strokes of dark purple, where visible brush marks mimic streaks of moving wind. Next to it was a work I hadn't seen before, which Lai had painted in a few hours. Within a dark gray space are figures in varying tones of gray and black, intertwined vertically like a classical sculpture. "This is my family. I have four sisters and my mother, but we are not the kind of sweet sisters who hold each other," Lai explained. There is neither a sense of longing nor regret in Lai's voice. The huddled figures on the canvas are tight in their embrace—they support each other with a quiet but remarkable persistence, aware of their own presence as well as the presence of others.



(Top)
The view from Firenze Lai's studio, showing a pastel-colored building complex, of which there are many in Hong Kong.

(Bottom)
Left to right: *Family* (2015) and *Typhoon* (2012), both oil on canvas.