

Poetic Justice for Yu Man-hon: Cici Wu Billy Tang

“A Bolex camera is like a spiritual tool, just like how paper lanterns had a similar purpose in the past. Both are technologies related to a spiritual way of searching for things.”
—Cici Wu¹

New York-based artist Cici Wu is interested not only in the materiality of the tools and machines we use to observe the world, but also in the myriad ways our worldly experiences are propelled by subtle interactions among language, memory, rituals, sociopolitical structures, and different states of awareness and emotions that can be triggered by moving images and their ambient effects. Turning increasingly toward the supernatural, Wu’s work alternates between drawing, film projection, and sculpture, skillfully interweaving the human and the nonhuman into surrealistic, dreamlike installations.

The 16mm film *Unfinished Return of Yu Man Hon* (2019) opens with a sequence of white light refracted through paper cutout shapes. In and out of focus, as well as passing between positive and negative imagery, a subtle animation of emoticon shapes floats amid a pale-blue sea of flickering celluloid. Against an atmospheric soundtrack by Victor Au, different intensities of color saturate the screen before abruptly cutting to the back of someone’s head looking out to a body of water. It is in this moment that a voice “enters” the film, speaking first in Mandarin, then in Cantonese, and finally in English: “*Wo jiào Yu Wen-han—Ngo giu Yu Man-hon—My name is Yu Man-hon.*”

The calm invocation of this name comes as an unexpected surprise given the more than twenty years since the well-known and still-unresolved case of his disappearance. Yu Man-hon was a fifteen-year-old with autism who could barely speak at all. He let go of his mother’s hand and ran into an MTR subway station, becoming separated from her in the crowd and managing to get as far away as the Lo Wu land border with China. There he somehow was able to run undetected through the tightly controlled checkpoints, getting to the bridge until he was finally caught. His unintelligible cries led him to be taken for an illegal immigrant and he subsequently became caught in a legal gray area. He was sent back and forth across the border before being left to wander the streets in Shenzhen alone, never to be found again. More than the “cold-hearted indifference”² displayed by immigration policies on both sides, Yu Man-hon’s disappearance quickly turned into cross-border folklore, re-triggering the fear and suspicion still unresolved in the years since the handover.

The “unfinished return” alluded to in the film’s title and repeated in her 2019 first Hong Kong solo exhibition at Empty Gallery refers to Wu’s ambition to summon Yu Man-hon back to our world. Woven into the film’s structure and method of installation, the memory of Yu Man-hon has been extended into layers of multiple “returns” that call out to him. A montage of scenes offers hints to where he could be passing: a market where he clutches a lamp, a moment on a ferry accompanied by a paper cow, glances of a bus depot scene, before passing through the land border again. These moments are interspersed

with projections of investigation reports and missing-person posters, traces and reminders of his previous life. The artist chose Jonathan Chang, the Taiwanese former child actor famous for playing the boy in Edward Yang’s film *Yi Yi* (2000), to channel the spirit of Yu Man-hon. Other ethereal fragments are included to mark an unexpected migratory turn from Hong Kong to snowy Minneapolis—a place where Chang lives in seclusion, away from his cinematic representation. Next to the screening, a series of faux colonial-era lights—former film props in HK movies—fill the gallery space. Each lamp is carefully restored and altered: trinkets and bells added, or dim bulbs wrapped with bamboo frames, crafted into paper lanterns or turned into animal sculptures. These works are either suspended low to the ground from the ceiling, or strewn across the exhibition floor. Textual fragments mix together with parts of the original investigation report. Like harbingers or amulets, these words have been pasted onto the various skins of the lights as “subtitles” in combination with phrases such as “justice and hope,” “forgotten to forget,” and “Memory Cow.”

In an interplay between the light sculptures and the oneiric narrative arc on-screen, the figure of Yu Man-hon drifts within a meditative loop, and together as the audience, we are pulled in to follow the different fragments and traces of places related to him. There are immeasurable feelings of loss when something important to us disappears. It is here that the unfinished return in the title suggests a redemptive potential, a return prolonged and extended into the future as Yu Man-hon gradually awakens with a new memory and state of awareness. In what Ackbar Abbas attributes to an ability to “[work] with disappearance [. . .] using disappearance to deal with disappearance,”³ Hong Kong itself is arguably a city defined by its ability to resiliently exist on borrowed time in the face of a constantly receding identity. It is within this context that Wu makes a point of imagining Yu Man-hon not as a symbol of suffering or something forever taken away, but as a defiant spirit able to roam again in this world of ours. When Yu Man-hon went missing it was August, the time of the Hungry Ghost Festival. In the liminal moment between living and dead, Wu looks to the spiritual realm to imagine a return that is also a day of reckoning for the failures of law and order to protect the most vulnerable in our societies. By rewiring our connection to the loss of Yu Man-hon, remembrance is transformed into resistance and perpetuates a will to keep the imagination alive, anticipating some poetic justice that awaits us in the future.

1 From a conversation with the artist, July 2020.

2 Carol A. G. Jones, *Lost in China?: Law, Culture and Identity in Post-1997 Hong Kong* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press: 2015), 118. (The artist maintains an ongoing dialogue with Jones, most recently at Asia Society Hong Kong Center, July 2020). The border has in fact been a site of disappearance for countless children, many of them with cognitive disabilities.

3 Ackbar Abbas, *Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), 8.

111 Cici Wu, *Unfinished Return of Yu Man Hon* (still), 2019.

Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

112 Cici Wu, *Memory Cow (Mother)*, 2019; *Subtitle 01 (One side different)*, 2019; *Subtitle 01 (Forgotten to forget)*, 2019, *Cici Wu: Unfinished Return* installation view at Empty Gallery, Hong Kong, 2019. Courtesy: Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. Photo: Michael Yu

113 Cici Wu, *Upon Leaving the White Dust* installation view at 47 Canal, New York, 2017–18.

Courtesy: the artist and 47 Canal, New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse

114 Cici Wu, *Unfinished Return of Yu Man Hon* (still), 2019.

Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

115 Cici Wu, *Foreign Object #1 Fluffy Light (Taro Masushio)*, 2017.

Courtesy: the artist and 47 Canal, New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse





