

Sea-Skins 海皮

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Natalie Quan Yau Tso



Exhibition text by Louisa Lim

Growing up in Hong Kong, we became used to the shifting boundaries of land and sea. We watched the island swelling in front of our eyes, gobbling up the surrounding waters as it crept outwards. The seafront was always moving further away from us, as we filled in our harbour, burying the sea with soil and rocks to colonise the waters. With its fictitious borders ever in motion, the island itself is a feat of the imagination, willed into being by the ambition of its inhabitants.

Natalie Tso traces those ancestral boundaries with her body, reclaiming the act of reclamation. When the standard unit of measure is one Hong Konger, temporal and geographical scales shrink to the personal. Her embodied practice echoes how Hong Kongers are using their own bodies to protest against Beijing, flocking into self-exile rather than submitting to Chinese control. It's estimated that more than 200,000 Hong Kongers have emigrated since Beijing imposed draconian National Security legislation on the city in 2020. As those communities of Hong Kongers coalesce overseas, they reconstitute little Hong Kongs beyond the reach of the Communist Party.

Tso's work evokes Hong Kong's vernacular history, which is less known than the colonial histories ventriloquized for the city by its successive rulers. In fact, Hong Kong's history dates back six thousand years, long before the British arrival in 1841. The homegrown creation myths imagine Hong Kongers as descended from a fifth-century court official who sought shelter with his men in its rocky caves after launching

a rebellion against the Jin dynasty. The original Hong Kongers were children of insurrection, brined in defiance.

Salt plays a central role in these unofficial histories. Hong Kong's thriving salt industry was brought under central control after Emperor Wu of Han instituted a salt monopoly in 119BCE. In the twelfth century, the Song emperor's troops massacred Hong Kong's illegal salt farmers in order to reassert control over the industry. That state salt monopoly was retained by the Communist Party in 1949, and is now the world's longest-running monopoly. Against this backdrop, Natalie Tso's act of mining salt from her own body represents an assertion of personal autonomy and a physical act of resistance.

To me, salt evokes sweat and tears. It casts me back to those stifling June days in 2019, when two million of us crammed into the streets to march against a proposed extradition bill. The sun beat down on us, leaving our arms slick with perspiration. We were packed so tight that we sweated onto one another. There was literally no distance between us. We moved as one. Now so many of these protestors are scattered far from home. Tso evokes this distance by placing her body-salt in Hong Kong's salty seawater, magnifying the space between them. Returning home is an impossibility when home no longer truly exists. It is an act of mourning and of hope, reminding us that the spirit of Hong Kong can be embodied and kept alive far beyond Hong Kong's physical borders.

Louisa Lim is an award-winning journalist and the author of *Indelible City: Dispossession and Defiance in Hong Kong* (Text publishing, 2022). It was shortlisted for the Stella Prize, the Prime Minister's Literary Award and the Walkley book award. Her first book *The People's Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited* (OUP, 2014) was shortlisted for the Orwell Prize. She is an Associate Professor in Audiovisual Journalism at the University of Melbourne, and hosts the Little Red Podcast and the King of Kowloon podcast. She spent a decade in China as a correspondent for the BBC and NPR.

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Natalie Quan Yau Tso's practice seeks to urgently place, archive and remember Hong Kong to survive their erasure. She investigates bodily boundaries as political boundaries through sculptures, installations and performances. She is guided by the layers of her body as a meeting of place and histories, performing acts to activate bodily dispersions. She then collects these materials, including saliva, sweat, hair and skin to form sculptures. She is invested in transparent, almost invisible, materials as a mask that both protects and erases her in the post-colonial contexts of Australia and Hong Kong.

She has performed and exhibited nationally, including Performance Space, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Arts, Carriageworks and the Art Gallery of NSW. She currently works and lives across Gadigal, Wangal and Cammeraygal country.

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