

A Japanese die-cut from Yusuke Oono at Common Room & Co.

# Artistic Measures

While big-brand galleries with commercial clout crowd into Central, the low-key, local neighborhood of Sham Shui Po has been quietly welcoming less conventional creative spaces. **Diana Hubbell** speaks with curator Chantal Wong about some of the best and boldest. >>





FROM TOP: Questions of identity in Chinese characters at Things That Can Happen; Chantal Wong, who set up the space; work by Wong Ping.



**“WHEN THE UMBRELLA** Movement happened, there was just so much going on in terms of creativity. Hong Kongers are known for being somewhat subdued and it was inspiring to see young people finding their voice and picking up loudspeakers,” remembers gallery co-founder Chantal Wong. When the pro-democracy protests that brought parts of the SAR to a screeching halt in 2014 dispersed, she wanted to build a platform to continue the dialogue they started. “It wasn’t so much about creating an art space as making sure that people still had an opportunity to communicate. The Umbrella Movement was so divisive and, naturally, when something like that happens, there’s a rupture

in society that needs to be addressed.” Thanks in part to the presence of Art Basel, art in Hong Kong has never been more prevalent or more profitable. While Wong welcomes the interest that heavy-hitting international galleries have brought to the city, she envisioned creating a very different sort of project. Only in her twenties at the time, Wong was already well connected in the local art scene, thanks to her work as the Head of Strategic

Development at Asia Art Archive. In September 2015, she and prominent Hong Kong artist Lee Kit opened **Things That Can Happen** ([thingsthatcanhappen.hk](http://thingsthatcanhappen.hk)) in Sham Shui Po, a working-class slice of Kowloon. This month, the space is at the end of its two-year run but has planted an artistic seed in Sham Shui Po that has already been bearing fascinating fruit.

“The art scene in Hong Kong has gone from something underground to more of a market,” she



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says. She and Kit aimed to bring a non-profit antidote to the increasingly money-driven field. “It’s great to have so many commercial galleries, but the counter-effect is that it turns art into a consumption-based thing. It means that while there’s growth in infrastructure, the imagination behind it might shrink.”

Inspired by New York’s artist-run spaces in the 1980s and 90s, the duo used a lightly renovated flat. In stark contrast to the cold, space-age interiors of high-profile operations, it feels more like entering your hip friend’s living room. Other spaces in Sham Shui Po play on the same theme, whether they’re shopfronts or industrial addresses. “We wanted to make it more of a home. It’s organic and comfortable, so that’s just kind of the way we left it. Then we leave it to the artist to evolve it over the course of their time there, so the entire thing becomes an artwork.”

“Hong Kong has always been dealing with an identified point in time in the future in which something changes, whether it’s 1984, 1997 or 2017, so we can’t really imagine some sort of huge, unbounded future,” Wong says. With this in mind, Artist Angela Su challenged a group of artists, activists and cultural workers to use fiction set in the Hong Kong of an unknown tomorrow to make relevant political commentary about its

present. “It’s not just about their stories. It’s about how we can use methodology to imagine a different future.”

Wong steered clear of the ritzy districts that host many of the city’s galleries in Central. “We wanted to be where people would see art on a day-to-day basis. For us, art shouldn’t be a destination, it should part of your neighborhood—a hangout where you can stop by, say ‘hi’ to your friends and feel inspired,” she says. Here, young, boho urbanites still outnumber bankers. “We’re part of a new generation of art spaces in Sham Shui Po. The rent is still cheap, but it’s urban enough that people feel comfortable setting up here and building communities.” Here are a few of her favorite spots in the ’hood where Hong Kong’s young creatives are making their voices heard.

+ **“Holy Motors** (GF, 195 Lai Chi Kok Rd., Sham Shui Po; [holymotorsproject.com/info](http://holymotorsproject.com/info)) is actually just the window space of a motorcycle mechanic’s place where they invite people to do installations,” Wong says. “For one of their first exhibitions, they invited an artist called Dylan DeRose to make curtain installations with sandpaper and spray paint. There was another installation by an artist duo from Hong Kong with a video where you watched a chain hooked to a motorcycle dangle. It was really urban and responded to the limitations of that space.”



+ Another spot that packs a disproportionately high impact for its diminutive size is **100 ft Park** (1F, 220 Apliu St., Sham Shui Po, Kowloon; [100ftpark.hk](http://100ftpark.hk)). “The name comes from the fact that they used to park in different cafés or bookshops and they would just take up the window shop, or roughly 100 square feet,” Wong says. Although they’ve since set up a more formal permanent space in front of an architecture firm, they’ve resisted the temptation to expand in scale—fitting for a project dedicated to giving the little guys a shot at the spotlight. “It helps Hong Kong artists put up their first exhibition.”

+ **“Common Room & Co** (198 Tai Nan St., Sham Shui Po; [fb.com/commonroomandco](http://fb.com/commonroomandco)) is a café. It’s not so much an art space as a maker space,” Wong clarifies. Here, they have a workshop where artists are free to tinker away on individual projects or interact with one another. “There are more spaces like that where young people try to teach others how to be creative.”

+ **“Form Society** (186 Tai Nan St., Sham Shui Po; [fb.com/formsocietyhk](http://fb.com/formsocietyhk)) is home to artists who bring in community members who repair things, whether it’s watches or kitchenware, and teach others how to fix things themselves. So there’s a sense of sustainability and also DIY culture. I think that’s really symbolic of what Sham Shui Po is.”



FROM TOP: Form Society offers lessons in DIY; Alex Lai and a hand-pressed pour at Common Room & Co.