

[Skip to main navigation](#) [Skip to Content](#)

[University of Toronto](#)

[NEWS @ THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO](#)

Everything is political -- especially art -- in Will Kwan's world

By [Tammy Thorne](#), posted *Tuesday, November 24, 2009*

"But why is it art?" is a question a layperson might ask about the work of contemporary artist Will Kwan, but it's actually the name of a course he teaches at Uof T Scarborough.



The UTSC alumnus turned lecturer said he hopes viewers of his art will think about when -- and how -- certain icons become invested with political meaning.

The symbolic embodiments of globalization are subverted and put on display in Kwan's first major solo show, *Multilateral*, on display until Dec. 20 at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at Hart House.

Kwan's work often takes recognizable forms and changes their purpose or context. "I work with materials that I find in the world and a lot of them are iconic kinds of things -- things that have a lot to do with our idea of globalization and the symbols associated with that. I

work with material that is very standardized, or, you might call it universal," he said.

For example, a photographic image of a series of flags imprinted with cropped images of burning flags culled from the international press, which is now installed in the Great Hall at Hart House.

"I didn't burn the flags," said Kwan, referring to the politically charged piece *Flame Test* (2009).

"We use flags in a very mindless way -- as a sort of default symbol of patriotism. Yet, when they are burned they become politically charged."

He started working on *Flame Test* while living in Europe. The controversial cartoon images of Muhammad were published during that time, first in 2005 in a Danish newspaper and subsequently in other European dailies. The images used are of protesters burning the Danish flag in various cities. "For me, this image visually stood in for the debate."

Another one of these culturally provocative works is *Endless prosperity, Eternal accumulation* where gallery goers are faced with a wall of 80 framed photographs of red envelopes.

"You see this field of envelopes in front of you and it becomes a kind of map of the reach of the transnational corporations but also of the transnational reach of the Chinese diaspora," said Kwan, who was born in Hong Kong. "It is a blurring between cultural identity and corporate identity."

It is tradition in Chinese culture to use red envelopes to give money at celebrations like Chinese New Year and these envelopes -- called hongbao -- are now printed by banks as a marketing tool, he said. "They haven't always been printed by banks. It is a very ancient practice. Now we see this combining of corporate logos with ancient Chinese script."

Curated by the gallery's executive director, Barbara Fischer, the work fits naturally with the Barnicke mandate. As Fischer put it, Kwan's work "is contemporary in all respects." Fischer added, "More important, he's really an acute observer of contemporary culture. He does very interesting research and makes observations that are sometimes only apparent through an oblique lens."