

Globe Review

VISUAL ARTS » REVIEW

An artist's alternative map of the world

BY SARAH MILROY

The art of cultural diaspora is a genre unto itself: a mainstay of curatorial-studies curriculum and art fairs alike. Spawning a motherlode of postcolonial dreck, the genre also includes the odd dazzler, such as the work of transnational superstar Yinka Shonibare (a British-Nigerian artist residing in London), or Zhang Huan (a Chinese émigré in New York) – artists who have made cross-cultural drift a reigning preoccupation of contemporary art.

It is into this context that the 31-year-old Toronto artist Will Kwan inserts himself. Kwan came to Canada from Hong Kong at age 4, but his work is still backward glancing. These days, he teaches sculpture and



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In *Clocks That Do Not Tell the Time* (2008), the names of world capitals have been replaced by those with an industrial story to tell.

art theory at the University of Toronto's Scarborough campus, and his work is the subject of a concise exhibition at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at Hart House, curated by gallery curator-director Barbara Fischer. The show rounds up his major work to date, revealing an artist who articulates sharp cultural observations in the language of conceptual art. Occasionally, the work feels formulaic – his wall installation of ceremonial crimson *hong bao* gift envelopes emblazoned with the logos of various world banks, for example. Other works, though, are more inventive.

Clocks that do not tell the time (2008), for example, is a curious puzzle, seeming to be a bank of institutional clocks displaying the time around the world. But instead of the customary New York, Paris and Mumbai, we find place names like Alang, Punto Fijo and Bentonville. It's only upon reading Kwan's research (some of which he has pinned to the back of the display wall) that these locations are revealed to be hubs of international corporate commerce and industry. Why Wilmington? It's home to many U.S. head offices, Delaware serving as an on-shore tax haven for corporate America.

» SEE 'KWAN' PAGE 4

FROM PAGE 1 » KWAN

Work digs under consumer culture

» Sonapur? That's where the labour camp is for the 150,000 Asian workers who toil by day to build the glittering towers of Dubai.

Like the late U.S. artist Mark Lombardi, who made intricate, deeply researched charts about the flow of capital and influence between global corporations, Kwan offers up a kind of alternate map of the real world, evoking an unseen substructure of money and labour that lies beneath the surface of consumer culture.

Kwan's *Displacement* (with *Chinese Characteristics*), from 2006, also makes visible the invisible world of investment. The photograph documents an earthwork performance in Shanghai in which Kwan replicated the Bank of China logo out of rubble on a gargantuan scale, using the scoured ground where a community once stood as his canvas – a brilliantly concise comment on the ravages of rapid real-estate development.

The key work in the show, though, is Kwan's *Canaries* (the bank and the treasury), a 2007 still developing multimedia work that combines photography, performance and DVD projection in a visual essay on global finance. This a subject with which he has some familiarity; both of his parents worked for British banks: his father for Standard Chartered, his mother for HSBC.

Culling historical and contemporary imagery of Hong Kong and London (and a dash of Toronto), Kwan deploys the vertical compositional strategy of traditional Chinese landscape painting, stacking three moving images atop each other to create the work's central element. In keeping with the Chinese formal tradition, the bottom section grounds the image with an establishing shot, the middle section contains an upward-tending element and the top reflects the more ethereal realm.

This tri-part format permits Kwan to shuttle back and forth through historical time, and to consider his subject from a variety of perspectives. His camera roves the plazas below the Hong Kong headquarters of HSBC (designed by British architect Norman Foster) and scales its heights, looking out to the harbour laden with freighters. Next we find ourselves at London's Canary Wharf, scanning monuments to Oriental trading. In some sequences, 19th-century paintings of Hong Kong and archival photos of the top-hatted British bankers who



In his earthwork *Displacement (with Chinese Characteristics)*, in Shanghai (2006), Kwan replicated the Bank of China logo out of rubble (foreground, right) to indicate where a community once stood – a brilliantly concise comment on the ravages of real-estate development. Below, a detail from Kwan's *Endless Property, Eternal Accumulation* (2009).



colonized it, are interspersed with contemporary imagery of the city core. A bronze statue ennobles the memory of Sir Thomas Jackson, the first chief manager of HSBC; a few moments later, Jackson's pant leg is echoed in the fluttering trouser of a young businessman, and later by a detail from a group photograph of the compradores who negotiated trade between the Chinese and the Brits.

Another section of the work tours us through a warehouse where pink Styrofoam 1:400 scale models of Hong Kong's downtown core are stored, documents of the grand designs of capital that have now taken on physical form. Street displays of colourful paper consumer-product effigies – which are ceremonially burned in Taoist burial rituals – are shown hung out for sale in the street, and views from the steep hills around

the city glimpse the towers through dense tropical foliage, views that take on the quality of a lament for the real.

In the work's closing sequence, a cardboard model of the HSBC bank tower is set aflame in a Scarborough, Ont., parking lot. Like Foster's HSBC Hong Kong headquarters, Kwan's effigy was fabricated in sections – by artists in Hong Kong, Vancouver, London and Toronto, working to Kwan's specifications – and assembled on site. But his method also replicates the teetering towers of international investment that have proved so precarious. It's a mini-inferno worth contemplating as art, certainly, but also to prompt a check of our financial fire escapes.

» Will Kwan: *Multi-lateral continues* at Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto's Hart House until Dec. 20.