

AMBIGUOUSLY YOURS

GENDER IN HONG KONG POPULAR CULTURE



Some Hongkongers reminisce about the “Golden Age” of Cantopop. In the 1980s and ’90s, the Frangrant Harbor shaped pop culture in East and Southeast Asia, and had the third-largest film industry in the world. Unwittingly tapping into that nostalgia, M+ mounted “Ambiguously Yours: Gender in Hong Kong Popular Culture” at the institution’s temporary exhibition space M+ Pavilion, questioning prevailing perceptions of gender by looking at examples of Cantopop’s androgynous and gender-fluid past.

The show was timely, and, in theory, could chime with global conversations about gender and sexuality. It set out to challenge Hong Kong’s conservative character by shining light on topics that are often deemed too provocative for open discussion, and gave voice to people who do not fit into the typical constructs of male or female. M+ Hong Kong visual culture curator Tina Pang was the brains behind “Ambiguously Yours,” and may have organized the show with good intentions, but the result was a convoluted presentation of more than 90 works—costumes, photographs, sound recordings, film excerpts, magazine covers and music album art—that lacked a cohesive narrative.

Though the mirror-clad Pavilion is architecturally striking, its one-room exhibition space is tiny—a fact that was even acknowledged by Pang. This limitation exacerbated the fragmented and stifling curation of the show’s four sections. The first, “I Am What I Am: Performing Cantopop,” presented costumes and photographs of emblematic singers who embodied alternative male and female identities, such as the flamboyant “Godfather of Cantopop” Roman Tam; openly gay and cross-dressing bon vivant Leslie Cheung; and the empowered, unapologetic vixen Anita Mui.

Visitors saw Tam’s cascading, floor-length peacock coat worn at his farewell concert, exhibited alongside Mui’s two-piece Elizabethan showgirl

outfit accented with exuberant, black and green feathers and hundreds of pearls. The costumes were exquisitely designed but had nothing to do with the gender issues that Pang set out to query.

The same misstep occurred in the show’s other chapters. The film section, “He’s a Woman, She’s a Man: Role Play,” presented a wall of film stills. Among them was a frame showing Hong Kong actor Tony Leung Chiu-wai playing with a stuffed animal, plucked from Wong Kar-wai’s seminal 1994 film *Chungking Express*. Pang suggested that Leung is like a little girl talking to a doll, but the idea of reversing gender roles does not take root. Forty beautifully shot covers for the progressive culture publications *City Magazine* and *100Most* were found in the next chapter, “Graphically Yours: Art, Design and Commerce,” yet their cold arrangement gave off the air of a publisher’s reception area. The final section, “Pop Goes Culture,” was meant to chart Hong Kong pop culture’s influence in East and Southeast Asia, but ended up being a confusing mishmash of work by Asian artists, such as Singaporean cross-dressing performance artist Ming Wong and postwar Japanese Pop artist Keiichi Tanaami, whose associations with the city’s gender-identity issues are tenuous at best.

Altogether, the costumes and other items on show at the M+ Pavilion formed a sampler of Hong Kong pop culture, with only a flimsy connection—if that—to the overarching theme. Pang said that she “didn’t want the exhibition to be nostalgic,” but the Cantopop memorabilia and scattered display of other items sparked no other reaction from ardent fans, particularly those born and bred in Hong Kong. “Ambiguously Yours” brought me back to my teenage years, but only because the show mirrored the awkwardness and confusion I experienced as a young adult.

Certainly, the exhibition marked an effort by the organizers to thrust a discussion about gender identity into Hong Kong’s mainstream discourse, but the effort was tone-deaf, muddling issues of gender with those of the LGBT community. By channeling pop icons and film stars, the stated message of “Ambiguously Yours” was tempered, and the show’s edge was dulled. The exhibition missed the opportunity to dismantle misconceptions about gender and reflected a timidity in the organizers of the show, who, despite the best of intentions, struggled to keep up with those who advance the conversation on gender-related issues.

ARTHUR TAM

Opposite page

CHEN CHENCHEN

The Mercy of Not Killing
2017

Site-specific installation, mixed media, dimensions variable.

Courtesy the artist and Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing.

This page

Installation view of “I Am What I Am: Performing Cantopop” section, “Ambiguously Yours: Gender in Hong Kong Popular Culture” at M+ Pavilion, Hong Kong, 2017. Courtesy M+, Hong Kong.