



Title

Trevor Yeung

Author(s)

Yi Ting Lee

Article DOI**Url**

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/articles/articles/trevor-yeung>

ISSN

2631-5661

Cite as

Yi Ting Lee: 'Trevor Yeung', *Burlington Contemporary* (7th December 2023),
<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/articles/articles/trevor-yeung>

About the author(s)

is the Editorial Assistant at Burlington Contemporary.

Cover image:

Trevor Yeung

by Yi Ting Lee • 07.12.2023

The titles that the Hong Kong-based artist Trevor Yeung (b.1988) gives to his works of art serve as an apt introduction to his practice. Often afforded a colloquial – and at times self-deprecating – tone, titles such as *All the Chinese boys he collected* (2015), *We are both loser* (2017) and *Gaslighting* (2023–ongoing) hint towards untold stories and uneasy situations. They contain language-specific references in both Chinese and English – a reflection of the artist’s bilingual education in Hong Kong, a city marked by its ex-colonial status. Or, in the artist’s words, they allow him to indicate his knowledge of both languages, while ‘not using it in the best way’.¹ Although his titles may resonate more with audiences from Hong Kong – which Yeung will represent at the 60th Venice Biennale in 2024 – the self-consciousness that his work foregrounds is nonetheless universally relatable.

Yeung constructs works of art with an acute sensitivity to the audience’s emotional response. He frequently draws on horticulture and botany, and his installations materialise the interrelationship between ecological actors in order to echo complex human relationships. He creates and manipulates spaces to amplify unspoken feelings of social anxiety and embarrassment, confronting the viewer with emotions that they often ignore in daily life. This approach is continued in his first solo exhibition in the United Kingdom, *Soft ground* at Gasworks, London (28th September–17th December 2023), which simulates the experience of locating the ‘fuck tree’ in Hampstead Heath, a landmark in north London notorious for gay cruising.²

The gallery spaces are lit by a combination of red and blue light, creating a dark shade of purple that dimly illuminates the space, so only the centrepiece of the exhibition is immediately visible: *Soapy Fuck Tree* [FIG.1](#), a life-size soap cast of a section of the tree. The seeming sparseness of the room and the difficulty to gauge spatial depth induces vulnerability. This heightens the visitor’s olfactory and auditory senses: a musky, grassy and bodily scent permeates the space; the occasional trickling of water from *Shy Fountain* [FIG.2](#) in a corner of the second gallery emulates the sound of urination; and *Scented Wonton* [FIG.3](#) adds a sickly-sweet scent to the malaise. Here, tissues are plastered to the wall with spray-on deodorant in white splatters, made to appear like body fluids. The suggestive associations can induce discomfort, hinting at sensations that are seldom made visible or addressed in the everyday.



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Trevor Yeung: Soft ground* at Gasworks, London, 2023, showing *Soapy Fuck Tree*, by Trevor Yeung. 2023. Soap, oak bark powder, moss, selection of essential oils, glitter, fiberglass and metal, dimensions variable. (Photograph Andy Keate).

The lighting in the gallery spaces mimics the effects of artificial moonlight in reptile vivariums. It is not designed to close off the visitor's sense of vision but rather, according to the artist, to open it up to new ways of feeling and seeing.³ In fact, the artist's use of purple light to reduce visual perception is informed by the lighting in red-light districts and the belief that it was used to obscure the symptoms of sexually transmitted infections.⁴ Recalling the experiences of cruising at the 'fuck tree', where darkness can serve as a protection of privacy and identity, navigating the exhibition requires a visual recalibration. Once the visitor has adapted to the surroundings and their vision has adjusted to the limited spectrum of light, *Seeds of Fuck Tree* **FIG.4** reveals itself. Oak seeds hang from the ceiling above, a reminder of the tree's life cycle – the ecosystem that exists alongside human activities of the gay cruising scene.

Soapy Fuck Tree explores the physical manifestation of human desire in the environment, as encapsulated by the original 'fuck tree', which gained its title from repeated usage as a support for sexual activity, altering its growth and shape. The exhibition will travel to Para Site, Hong Kong, in 2024, and in considering this change of setting, the artist finds an unlikely affinity between the London tree and the Lam Tsuen wishing trees in Hong Kong.⁵ There is a long-standing tradition of wish-makers visiting the trees. After writing a wish on joss paper that is weighted by an orange, they would throw it towards the branches; according to folklore, if it did not fall down, the wish would come true. In 2005 one of the branches eventually broke from the weight it was bearing, and the authorities discouraged the continuation of the practice. Human desire – of different kinds – has shaped both the

'fuck tree' and the wishing trees, disrupting their natural form.



Fig. 2 *Shy Fountain*, by Trevor Yeung. 2023. Reclaimed rock, basin, pipe, synthetic moss, pump and water, dimensions variable. (Photograph Andy Keate).

The larger rendition of the 'fuck tree' at Gasworks evokes this quality through the artist's choice of material. Without prohibition, visitors are invited to touch its smooth surface and feel the lingering waxy texture on their fingers. Each touch slowly erodes the surface of the sculpture. The scent of the soap was concocted by the artist using oak bark powder and different essential oils in order to relay his experiences of the heath.⁶ First guided by a friend – without whom he would not have been able to locate it –

Yeung visited the 'fuck tree' in the dark, as an outsider from Hong Kong, where there 'will always be light'.⁷ Despite being infamous, the specific location of the tree is not commonly known. In the gallery, Yeung creates a controlled environment that gives form to intangible and often unspoken sensations. In *Silent Sweat* (2023), sweaty t-shirts are inserted into the gallery vents, adding to the scent-scape and stimulating subliminal signals in the body, such as pheromones.

The use of scent as an unconscious influence on human behaviour draws from gay saunas, which often diffuse eucalyptus oil for its antimicrobial, deodorising and stress-relieving properties.⁸ *The Helping Hand* (2018), Yeung's contribution to the *Cruising Pavilion* exhibition at the 16th International Architecture Exhibition at Venice in 2018, foregrounds these effects and their association with the facilitation of sexual activities. A reptile humidifier emits a mist infused with eucalyptus at face-level, obscuring one's immediate sense of sight and smell. A piece of red string is tied to the diffuser, an allusion to the red thread of fate in Chinese folklore, which is supposed to form a link between destined soulmates.

Soap also reoccurs in Yeung's earlier works, signalling intimacy and complicated relationships. In *All the Chinese boys he collected* **FIG.5** a soap-bar-shaped alabaster sculpture is camouflaged among a pile of hotel soap bars. The real bars connote privacy and perhaps illicit relationships; the 'collector' in the title determines an unequal power dynamic with 'all the Chinese boys', who are unidentified and represented by the small, uniform bars. Although alabaster, like soap, is water-soluble and will slowly disintegrate upon contact with water, here its singularity makes it unique.⁹ The difficulty for the viewer to locate the lone alabaster bar echoes the fixation for some of identifying their one 'special' person in a romantic sense: of being the 'collector' or the 'collected'. Similarly, *Chicken Ribs* **FIG.6**, a piece of alabaster sculpted in the form of a used soap in a dish, expresses a disintegrating or ambiguous relationship, which one holds on to despite it no longer functioning or serving its original purpose. 'Chicken' is sometimes used as a slang word for young, or young-appearing, gay men, and in Chinese it is used colloquially as a stand-in for female sex workers. More specifically, Yeung's title refers to a Chinese proverb: 食之無味，棄之可惜, which translates as 'tasteless when eaten, but would be a pity if discarded', describing the human irrationality of retaining something even if it is worthless.¹⁰

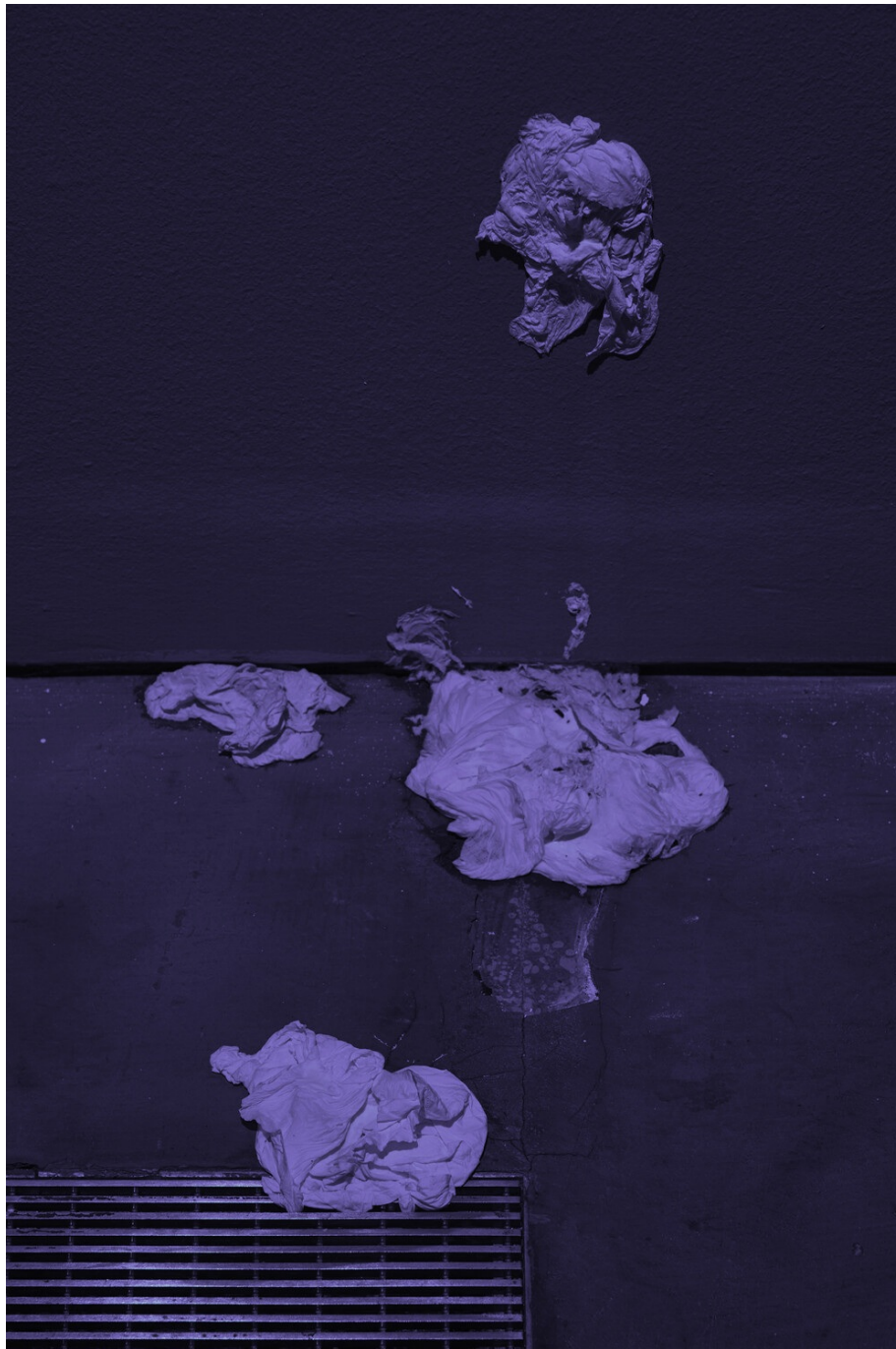


Fig. 3 *Scented Wonton*, by Trevor Yeung. 2023. Toilet paper and deodorant, dimensions variable. (Photograph Andy Keate).

Yeung's attunement to interpersonal relationships, particularly awkward encounters, may stem from his background as an immigrant to Hong Kong from mainland China. This is explicitly addressed in the title of his work *Live in Hong Kong, Born in Dongguan* [FIG.7](#), an immersive fish-tank installation that was first shown in the group exhibition *A Hundred Years of Shame: Songs of Resistance and Scenarios for Chinese Nations* at Para Site in 2015, where it likely resonated with a local audience receptive to sensitivities surrounding migration from areas of China under jurisdiction of the Chinese Communist Party. Although Hong Kong was transferred back to China in 1997 after British colonisation,

the area was designated a special administrative region, allowing the city to maintain a separate political and economic system from the People's Republic of China (PRC). The city's complex ties to China and fear of an encroachment of its autonomous rule underlies a general hostility towards the PRC, especially in recent years amid rising political tensions. These sentiments extend to social and cultural interactions with immigrants from neighbouring cities in PRC, who usually grew up under a different system and spoke Mandarin, a variant of Chinese to the Cantonese spoken in Hong Kong, or who spoke in a different Cantonese dialect.



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Trevor Yeung: Soft ground* at Gasworks, London, 2023, showing *Seeds of Fuck Tree*, by Trevor Yeung. 2023. Oak tree seeds, hooks, nylon and water-soluble thread, dimensions variable. (Photograph Andy Keate).

Yeung moved to Hong Kong from Dongguan early in his childhood and experienced anxiety and stress as a result of attempts to fit in under societal prejudice.¹¹ *Live in Hong Kong, Born in Dongguan* is an expression of his desire to seek comfort in these circumstances, recalling what was a newfound interest in fish tanks. In a conversation with the curator and writer Qu Chang, Yeung explained that the visible improvements to the physical condition of well-kept fish were rewarding, unlike the uncertainty of attempting to foster relationships with people. He also described the fish tank as being 'like a Chinese garden', whereby the miniature encapsulation of an ecosystem allows the outsider to imagine themselves as actors within the system.¹²



Fig. 5 *All the Chinese boys he collected*, by Trevor Yeung. 2015. Hotel soap and alabaster, 30 by 30 by 10 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong).

In *Live in Hong Kong, Born in Dongguan* visitors are invited to stand in the middle of six fish tanks. This physical proximity engenders an affiliation with the fish – of various species and habitats – and the apparent ease with which they swim in their artificial living spaces. The seemingly arbitrary inclusion of a foam box – the kind commonly used in wet markets in Hong Kong – is in fact a reference to Goldfish Street where there are many shops selling fish, which are known to be primarily frequented by local middle-aged men. Yeung's work invokes the complex history of the migration of things, but also of people in Hong Kong. The connection to Goldfish Street is a reminder that the fish originating from different regions are now very much part of Hong Kong's cultural landscape; their 'natural' habitats are shaped by the artificial methods of breeding that cater to the norms of the city.

Yeung describes the experience of engaging with his work as akin

to interacting with a personality who ‘has a fear of rejection’. Therefore, it is those who attempt to foster a reciprocal relationship who will connect with it most deeply. Considering the plants or animals in his work as ‘performers’, they are often imbued with a strong sense of agency.¹³ However, they are never explicit or blatant in their expression. Just as first-time cruisers must navigate the dark, unfamiliar environment to reach the ‘fuck tree’, visitors to Gasworks must adapt to new sensorial stimulants before they can assess the environment that Yeung creates in *Soft ground*. Indeed, some works require such attentive engagement that it is possible to completely miss them: the intervention of painting the gallery walls in *Soft Gaslighting (Twilight)* (2023), for example. ‘The goal is not to touch everyone’, according to the artist, but to seek a deeper connection with willing audiences.



Fig. 6 *Chicken Ribs*, by Trevor Yeung. 2018. Travertine soap dish, alabaster and hair, 8.6 by 13.2 by 2 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong).

In other recent works Yeung restages situations in which people are forced into making decisions about their own engagement. In *The Queue* (2023), which is informed by his experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and is part of his presentation for the Sigg Prize 2023, visitors can either queue to enter a room or completely bypass a section of the exhibition.¹⁴ This echoes the travel restrictions that were implemented during the pandemic. In Yeung’s installation, those who choose to enter the room experience mandatory quarantine. Inside are two works, one of which – *Mr Cuddles in a Hotel Room* **FIG.8** – is a suspended pachira aquatica plant, also known as a ‘money tree’ in Chinese culture. The bands tied around the plant draw an emotive connection between the limited and liminal state of being under quarantine and the slow suffocation of the plant caused by the artificial

braiding of its trunk – a common treatment for aesthetic appeal and associations with fortune in Chinese culture. Similarly, in his 2016 exhibition at Magician Space, Beijing **FIG.9**, visitors were given the option to don ‘staff t-shirts’ in an installation that replicated the space of a gay sauna. Those who chose to put them on in the ‘changing room’ were given special access to parts of the exhibition.

If one enters into Yeung’s works with a spirit of reciprocity as intended, the artist’s references to personal narratives, visceral responses and moments of vulnerability come to function as an invitation for the viewer to mirror this openness. At their very core, Yeung’s works offer comfort to those who actively seek it. At the entrance of *Soft ground*, an unnamed work from *Night Mushroom Colon* **FIG.10**, an ongoing series of night lamps in the form of sprouting mushrooms, emits a soft glow for those who, like the artist, are scared of the dark.¹⁵ Mycelium tends to shy away from sunlight, and the quiet and reassuring presence of the illuminated mushrooms is a reminder that ‘it is ok to be lonely’; indeed, one can thrive in the dark.



Fig. 7 *Live in Hong Kong, Born in Dongguan* by Trevor Yeung. 2015. Aquarium system with macropodus, mikrogeophagus ramirezi and scleropages formosus, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong).



Fig. 8 Installation view of *Sigg Prize 2023* at M+, Hong Kong, showing *Wall of a Hamster Cage (Mira Moon)*, by Trevor Yeung. 2022. Pencil and tea on paper, 145 by 367 cm; and *Mr Cuddles in a Hotel Room*, by Trevor Yeung. 2023. Pachira aquatica and straps, dimensions variable. (Courtesy M+, Hong Kong; photograph Dan Leung).



Fig. 9 Installation view of *Trevor Yeung: The Darkroom That Is Not Dark* at Magician Space, Beijing, 2016, showing *Staff*, by Trevor Yeung. 2016. 10 screen-printed t-shirts, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong).



Fig. 10 Installation view of *Trevor Yeung: Soft ground* at Gasworks, London, 2023. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Trevor Yeung).

Footnotes

- 1** Unless otherwise stated all quotations are taken from a conversation between Trevor Yeung and the present author, 11th September 2023.
- 2** According to the exhibition handout, the park has been part of London's gay cruising scene since the nineteenth century, see exhibition guide for *Soft ground*, Gasworks (September 2023), available at www.gasworks.org.uk/2023/10/02/Trevor_Yeung_Handout_FINAL_V2.pdf, accessed 5th December 2023.
- 3** Trevor Yeung, in conversation with the present author, 11th September 2023.
- 4** *Ibid.*
- 5** *Ibid.*
- 6** *Ibid.*
- 7** Trevor Yeung, quoted from 'Video: interview with Trevor Yeung', Gasworks (November 2023), available at www.gasworks.org.uk/exhibitions/trevor-yeung, accessed 5th December 2023. In the interview, Yeung says that he visited the site over twenty times, trying to capture the physical presence of the space.
- 8** Yeung, *op. cit.* (note 3).
- 9** *Ibid.*
- 10** *Ibid.*

- 11** Yeung did not explicitly mention prejudice against him but expressed difficulty fitting in as a new immigrant and stress from handling interpersonal relationships and social systems, see 'Intimate systems: Trevor Yeung in conversation with Qu Chang', Asymmetry Foundation, London (23rd May 2023), available at www.asymmetryart.org/film-audio/intimate-systems-trevor-yeung-in-conversation-with-qu-chang, accessed 5th December 2023.
- 12** *Ibid.*
- 13** Trevor Yeung, quoted from 'Trevor Yeung: hanging in limbo', M+ (25th September 2023), available at www.mplus.org.hk/en/magazine/trevor-yeung-artist-interview-sigg-prize-2023, accessed 5th December 2023.
- 14** The Sigg Prize is open to artists born or working in the Greater China region. The six shortlisted artists for Sigg Prize 2023 are Jes Fan, Miao Ying, Wang Tuo, Xie Nanxing, Trevor Yeung and Yu Ji. The winner will be announced in early 2024.
- 15** The work is unnamed and not included in the floor plan given out at the entrance of the exhibition.

THE
BURLINGTON
MAGAZINE

© The Burlington Magazine Publications Limited. All rights reserved
ISSN 2631-5661

The Burlington Magazine
14-16 Duke's Road, London WC1H 9SZ