

Artist: Wong Mei Yin Hazel (**HW**, hereafter)

Coordinator: Chinatsu Igarashi (**CI**, hereafter), Sapporo Tenjinyama Art Studio

CI: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

HW: Hello, everyone. I'm Wong Mei Yin Hazel. I'm from Hong Kong. And I graduated from Hong Kong Baptist University's Academy of Visual Arts in 2015. My art practice is always focusing on painting and zine making -- zine making is like an independent publication. I like printed matters like papers, books, and magazines, and also music and nature. My personal interests are thinking, walking, eating something, or sleeping! Now I am studying Japanese and having a half-year residency in Tenjinyama. So, now it's about five months already.

CI: Thank you for the introduction. Can you tell us how and when did you start making art?

HW: I started learning to draw when I was three, but it's not making art -- it's just that I started drawing! (laughing) But then I started making art seriously when I was about 18 years old. I was in senior high school. And that school is really good -- it's taught me a lot about how to think critically or why we have to be concerned about the political issues about our city, Hong Kong.

CI: So, it was not an art school?

HW: It's an art school, an art high school!

CI: Oh. It's very interesting that an art school teaches you how to think critically about the local political climates.

HW: Yes. It's because that school was very different from other schools in Hong Kong.

CI: How different?

HW: Because, normally in Hong Kong high schools, teachers don't teach students how to think critically. We only learn from academic books. But in that school, they see creativity important as it's important for the arts. So, they hire some artists and art-background teachers to teach us more about [critical thinking]. I was influenced by that school a lot!

CI: That's very interesting. Your first medium from when you started making art -- or drawing -- were... pens or watercolors?

HW: It was acrylic paint.

CI: How was it different from, for example, anything spacial or sculptural?

HW: It was different because I am better at working on 2D arts than 3D objects. I have no idea how to make 3D works... 2D artworks, like taking photography or films and then transforming them into paintings or zines, are my best way.

CI: What's the main concern about your work?

HW: My works are always about experience, feelings and imaginations of my surroundings and the urban life. Mostly I try to use storytelling [as a method], or create a series of productions to transform those experiences and imaginations from reality into paintings and zines. On the materials I use for paint, I always

choose wood panels. I use them instead of paper or canvas -- I don't like to use canvas -- maybe because the wood texture fits my way of painting. I always rub my paint [onto the support] and only wood can let me do so. I always rub again and again until the final version of the painting, so I like to paint on wood.

CI: I see.

HW: Besides materials, my works are always very tiny. Very small. I think maybe it's for my personality -- because of my way of painting. Because I always rub paints [and it limits the scale of working areas on the surface of works]. I always focus, or look into, the tiny things or the details. That's why I think I like small art pieces more than one big art piece. For example, this is my zine -- and it's very small!

CI: Handy!

HW: Paintings, too. They are all very small. It's really difficult for me to make big paintings. I tried before, but it wasn't a fit for my personality.

CI: That's interesting. The size of the support is correlated to the artist's personality. When you deal with the themes mentioned earlier, like urban living and everyday life, what's your perspective?

HW: As I've already said, I like to walk, and I like to think. I always walk on the streets -- well, maybe this says more about how I make works in Hong Kong, but -- I always look into the tiny things, maybe just the facial expressions, small gestures of some people, or what they did in the city. And the cityscape -- there are so many interesting things in Hong Kong, so the cityscape [attracts me]. I feel "Oh, it's so interesting". Maybe sometimes I just have some ideas and some imaginations in my mind that I want to transform from reality to my imagination. Then I choose to paint and choose to make a zine. But it depends on the medium I want to express with -- because in some thinking, maybe it's better to put it into my book, but in another idea, maybe it's better to just paint to show it. Oh, maybe I can talk more about the paintings I've done recently in Tenjinyama.

CI: Please.

HW: Recently, I created a series of paintings about what I saw here in Spring. It's about flowers, trees, and plants... because I think they are quite special. In Hong Kong, I think spring is so different. Four seasons are almost the same, but in Hokkaido, it's totally different. Spring here is just, "Wow, it's amazing". It's crazy! There are so many kinds of flowers and nature [and that] makes me have a strong feeling inside. And then, I take those sceneries mixed with my feelings of Hong Kong, or maybe with my recent feelings. And I created a series of paintings about the spring in Hokkaido. They will be shown next month in Hong Kong.

CI: When you make works, do you usually make them on your own? Do you have co-workers or collaborators?

HW: For paintings, I make most of them alone. But for zine making, because I have a brand called *otto* (reads "o-t-t-o") founded by me and my friend called Tiffany in 2017. It's been about four years already! We participate in different art

book fairs and some exhibitions, and yes, we make these together. We also make our own [individual] zines to sell and share.

CI: You said you started as a painter. And that you started with drawing. How did you end up with zine making?

HW: I graduated in 2015 and then in the first two years [after the graduation], I participated in some exhibitions with my paintings and my “artworks”. Very normal “artworks”. And then, during those two years, I felt there’s not enough opportunity for me to tell my story, or to tell what I thought. There, because I’ve loved papers and publications, I thought maybe I can just try to make my own brand of zine then so that I can have the freedom to publish. To publish my artworks and show them whenever I want. I don’t have to follow the rules of the exhibitions or galleries or to wait for the people’s invitations. So, that’s how I started making zines, three years after graduation.

CI: That sounds very clever.

HW: Actually, recently -- in the last three years -- we have had more and more people doing zines. Maybe it’s because we don’t want to just stay into the commercial art world in Hong Kong. We can create some ways by ourselves.

CI: Alternative ways of presenting artworks.

HW: Yes, there are so many ways, actually!

CI: That’s very interesting. Other than publications and museum exhibitions, where have you presented your works?

HW: I have been in different places, but mostly, I focus on the independent spaces in Hong Kong. My zines or paintings are always shown or sold at some independent bookstores or the independent spaces because I like the smaller spaces more. It’s much more flexible and people there are good.

CI: I see, humans are very important. What’s the motivation or inspiration for your work?

HW: Let’s talk about motivation first. While I have so many thoughts about the world, I’m not very good at expressing them by language. Even in my language or in any language, I’m not good at it. And so, for me, art making is the best way for me to express myself, my wills, my emotions like sadness, anger, or my love towards something I am concerned about. That’s the motivation --because that’s what I can only do! And then, inspiration. Maybe I’ve talked about this before, but to be simply, inspirations of my works are mostly my daily life. Just some little, critical moments from it. Not anything big, but I think they are important.

CI: I see. Smallest things matter.

HW: Yes.

CI: How did you learn about Tenjinyama Art Studio? What was the primary factor that brought you here?

HW: Maybe I should talk about why I love Japan first, so that it will bring the reason why I came here. In 2016, I had my first time traveling to Kyoto and the Setouchi International Art Festival. Do you know the festival?

CI: I do, it’s a huge art festival.

HW: Yes, it was a very powerful art festival for me. [There,] I found myself totally obsessed with the Japanese prints and their aesthetics, the philosophy of its beauty, “Bigaku” of Japan. I loved it so much -- the publication, and the arrangement of the space, how they used the art space to present the artwork - - it was so attractive to my practice. And I’d never had this vision before, so I felt so powerful. That’s why I started to search for an artist-in-residence program on the internet. And then I found Tenjinyama by chance, and actually, before that, I had never been to Hokkaido or had no idea what it was. I was just looking at a photo and I found the location looking so good! So, it brought me here. That’s how I ended up here in summer 2018, my first time to be in Tenjinyama.

CI: You’ve explained the influence from the aesthetics you’d found in Kyoto and Setouchi. Can you tell us a little more of what kind of aesthetics you found relatable to your own practice?

HW: Maybe it’s also because of my personality, but I like things that are very subtle and small. And I can find the beauty of subtleness in Japan. I love it so much. During the art festival I saw some museums, and there was this one museum that inspired me a lot -- It’s Chichu Art Museum in Naoshima. That museum is, wow, my favorite museum. There were only three works inside, but they were presented so well. Also, combined with nature, it’s really good. You can google some photos online. I really loved this museum.

CI: I see... From the photos from the website of Naoshima, I can see the museum is in the middle of the forest...

HW: It inspires me a lot because it’s very powerful. I don’t know how to express it in language, but... It changed the way I think of how to put artworks into a space. I really want to learn more about it. And yes, that moment I was there, I thought it was very nice, the aesthetics of Japan. I’ve also mentioned that Japanese publications influenced me a lot. In Kyoto, there was this independent art bookstore, and it was very nice. The store had many independent publications and some prints. I spent a lot of time in that bookstore, and it was when I thought “Oh, books here [in Japan] are really nice. I love it. I love these so much”. And because of that, I started to think “Ah, I want to learn Japanese!” because I wanted to know what was inside of them, what they were talking about. Yes, that was the moment!

CI: Sounds very nice.

HW: But I don’t know why I finally came to Hokkaido! Haha. But, but, I like Hokkaido more than Kyoto.

CI: Haha! Then, what was the most significant difference you saw between Sapporo and Kyoto?

HW: Because I had no idea of Hokkaido before I actually came here, I had no expectations. I just knew that in Hokkaido, it is always snowing.

CI: That’s the very accurate, general image of Hokkaido.

HW: Yes. But when I came here, it was totally out of my expectation. Maybe because it's half city and half nature, and that I love nature so much. Also, there is no actual independent bookstore here in Sapporo, isn't there?

CI: I'm sorry I am not very familiar with that, but I personally have never heard of one.

HW: Yes... Last five months I kept looking for one, but I could only find small second-hand bookstores... There are only a few art independent bookstores! I felt "Wow, why?"

CI: That's very interesting, actually. Because I think that's true. We don't really have many around here.

HW: Every time I went to Tokyo, there were thousands of independent bookstores. There were many publications, and I was like "Oh, I love this so much". Those small, local art spaces, I mean... but here! Not many. But I still love this place. I don't know why. (laughing)

CI: Oh (laughing)

HW: Maybe because of nature? For me, it's art already. It's [*nature in Sapporo is] much more treasurable than [nature in] any other Japanese city.

CI: Probably because you can be aware of subtle things more in nature than in the developed environment?

HW: Probably. Because in Hong Kong -- I'd already lived there for so many years --, it's a very busy city. We have so many choices in Hong Kong. Of course, in Hong Kong, I have so many local bookstores and shops I like, but I'd never tried to live in nature. But here, it's so different. I'm living in nature, but I can also very easily go back to the city, maybe to buy things and materials. I love this pattern. I love this kind of living more.

CI: Thank you. This is your second time staying/working at Tenjinyama. How would you describe your first stay, probably in comparison/relation to the second one? Has it had any influence on your life and career? We will dive deeper into this topic next time, so for this session, you can just share some brief thoughts.

HW: The first stay here was just so perfect. I can say it was perfect because it was totally out of my expectations. And, it definitely influenced my life and my career a lot! I can explain a little bit more. As I said, I really love nature, the living style, and the rhythm here. They totally shot my characteristics. And I think it is so different compared to the different cities in Japan, also. When I came here for the first time, I stayed here for around a month, and that made me think about what I would do for my life. But it was just one month and was too short to really think about that. It wasn't enough for me. I wanted to explore the city more and know more deeply about Hokkaido. Maybe the feeling of the first stay was just... fantasy! Because I didn't have any deeper knowledge about here. So, yes, that's one of the reasons why I wanted to come back and find the answer. And then when I came back to Hong Kong, I started to think about how I can stay here [in Sapporo] longer. I thought about working holidays, but I didn't like working

holidays, then came “maybe study?”, but I couldn’t find any art school here! (laughing)

CI: Right, there is no art college here in Sapporo (laughing)

HW: So, I didn’t know why I had to come here. (laughing) But because I really wanted to come here, I found a way. “Maybe study... Japanese?” It was sort of an excuse for me to come back here, but this time, for a year. That’s how I started to plan this [*the second residency] after the first stay. However, after the first stay, Hong Kong had a major political dispute. And then I just put this plan away. Also, after that, because of the coronavirus, I totally couldn’t plan the future. I think everyone in the world was also like this. So, at that time, as I put the plan away, I thought maybe I could come here for a short period. But, suddenly, maybe because of chance or luck, I could come here again in January. Sometimes, I still think it’s so unreal. But I’m here now!

CI: Yes! It was interesting to know that your trip to Japan before Tenjinyama, which I think was to Kyoto and Naoshima, had you grow broader curiosity about Japan than just arts and crafts. It introduced the Japanese language to you through the bookstores.

HW: Yes, yes. Ah, it’s destiny! (laughing)

CI: Indeed! (laughing) Shall we move onto the next question... Can you please tell us about your thoughts on the idea of art residency in general? Would you support the necessity of it? What has it meant to your practice?

HW: I think artist-in-residence is really good for all the artists. Actually, I have just been to two residencies in my life. One is Tenjinyama and the other one was in Iceland. I went to Iceland the following year of my first stay in Tenjinyama.

CI: In 2019?

HW: Yes, 2019. And both experiences changed my life and career a lot. I love the residency in Iceland, too. As I’ve said, I’ve travelled to Japan so many times, but I really like to use the identity of an artist to explore the city, more than just as a traveller. It is because with the artist’s identity, I can know more deeply about the culture and places. It is also a very good excuse for me to explore the city, to the places and to the people here. In both residences, I also met some important people --friends and artists who have influenced me a lot. It’s “wow” and it’s important. When we meet different people, we can share our thoughts and stories about different countries, and we can learn from each other. They give me visions of the other world that I didn’t know before. I think it’s so good.

CI: I see.

HW: Also, both residencies -- of Iceland and the second stay here -- are after the demonstration in Hong Kong. So, for me, it’s a way to take a distance, to look back at the situation of Hong Kong. It’s given me a chance to try something new. Because when I was in Hong Kong, I was too concentrated on the headlines everyday. But now that I’m here, because I have a distance, I can try to be independent. To think more as an outsider. I’m of course still very concerned about things in Hong Kong, but it’s quite interesting to use this distance to look

back and create some works about Hong Kong. Residencies are also a very good platform for me to talk with different artists. Or, not just artists, but sometimes I talk with the citizens here.

CI: You do?

HW: I do -- sometimes I meet people on the streets when they talk to me!

CI: Does that happen?

HW: Yes! Maybe it's because sometimes I go out and take photos... I have moments, suddenly, these strangers talk to me, and they keep talking in Japanese with me -- out of where I can just understand thirty or forty percent -- and I keep listening, then at some point I tell them "Actually I'm not a Japanese, I'm from Hong Kong". And most of the citizens here, they answer me "Oh, Hong Kong! Things are tough over there, aren't they?". And then I feel "Oh, people know what's going on in Hong Kong". It is very interesting.

CI: Yes... That you get people to talk to you...

HW: Because, from my face, they can't recognize that I'm a foreigner! Also, with the mask on...

CI: Ah, I see...

HW: They just wonder why I'm so quiet and why my Japanese is so weird (laughing)

CI: Oh.

HW: Even though my Japanese is so weird, they don't see I'm a foreigner! They just don't know why! (laughing)

CI: Well, it should be because your Japanese is better than you think?

HW: No, it's still really bad (laughing)

CI: Okay...? Another thing that was interesting was that you've been "taking distance" from disputes in Hong Kong. When you take distance from something, what you see becomes relatively small. And earlier, you talked about how small things interest you and they become the subject of your work. It's just my assumption, but I found it interesting because it actually might be the process of making your own situation related to your country a subject of your art.

HW: Yes. And [taking distance from Hong Kong was important] also because after the demonstration in Hong Kong, many young people left the country. Some of them can't go back to Hong Kong. Before I came to Tenjinyama this year, I couldn't imagine how they felt. What is it like never to go back to your home? How do you feel when you live alone in foreign countries while keep seeing the news about Hong Kong? And this time, maybe I have a little bit of feeling of what they [should] feel now. Of course, it's so different [since] they can never go back, and I can still go back. But this is also a time for me to think of how Hong Kong people outside of Hong Kong feel.

CI: That's interesting. I remember at the Art and Breakfast Day we had last summer, you said you enjoy observing foreign cities with a foreigner's gaze. Now you're gazing at your country with distance. Here your perspective might be

alternating into the one similar to the foreigner's while you keep looking towards your home. Some things might be changing.

HW: Yes, those experiences are very weird to me.

CI: I see. Now, let's move onto the last question. How have you been understanding the impact to your practice, especially to the residency project, of the COVID-19 pandemic?

HW: I think there are both positive and negative impacts, at least to me. But I think the negative impacts are bigger...

CI: How so?

HW: Well, I want to talk about the positive impact first... I think this period is really really weird. It's hard to feel again. There are no other travelers in Hokkaido and no one can come visit me. The streets are always so quiet and not crowded. Only Japanese [are out there]. So, it is a very different chance to feel Hokkaido. And I actually quite enjoy it. Last month I went to Otaru for the first time, and before the trip I didn't really want to go there because I'd always heard that in Otaru there are many travelers and it's so crowded. And then, I went there last month, and there were no people.

CI: Was that so?

HW: Yes, it was almost scary. But I enjoyed the scenery.

CI: That sounds very unusual...

HW: Yes, it was unusual, but I thought "This is, maybe, Hokkaido. I love it". And for the negative impact, I think the thing I hate the most is the mask. I really hate it because I can't see people's facial expressions. It's very hard to communicate now. Every time I see you or new friends here, the only thing I can remember is the face with the mask. Some new friends, I don't even know their faces because they never take off their masks. Masks are really a trouble for people to communicate... and I don't like it. Also, there are many events in Hokkaido now being cancelled, and many places are closed, like museums and libraries... Ugh I feel so sad! (laughing) Because I can't go to libraries and museums! Also, in Tenjinyama, three years ago there were different kinds of gatherings and some sharings and exhibitions. But now, there's totally not... because no one can come. So, I feel a little disappointed, but I think this is also an interesting way for me to be here. In this situation. Maybe I just try to live along with it. It's also an experience, a very treasurable experience.

CI: But you're not enjoying Tenjinyama with fewer people and fewer events?

HW: No, no, no! (laughing)

CI: It's acceptable, but not enjoyable?

HW: Yes, it's acceptable, but not enjoyable.

CI: I see. Traveling to Sapporo was harder with Covid, wasn't it?

HW: Yes. But travelling "in" Sapporo is much better than three years ago. Because, now, no people are here.

CI: Do you mean being a traveller in Sapporo?

HW: Yes, yes, being a traveller is so good now.

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CI: A convinced that you are a part of this local community because now we have fewer foreigners and most of the people here are the locals?

HW: Yes. And that's what I wanted actually. I wanted to know deeper -- my answer -- three years ago. That's why I came back here, and then, yes, I'm actually learning more about it. With no more travellers. And I don't like crowded places because in Hong Kong it's always crowded. I like quiet. Even when I go to the popular spots for travellers in Hokkaido, there are no people or just a few, so I can just enjoy the scenery. Truly, it's very nice.

CI: I see. That is very interesting. Thank you so much for your time, all the questions for the first half are now answered.

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