

OCULA

INSIGHTS



Conquering the Ghosts of Empires in Hong Kong

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A reconciliation occurs in *Ghosts of Empires*, a group show curated by Ghanaian-American curator and critic Larry Ossei-Mensah as a transgressive tool to keep the past relevant, not forgotten nor misremembered.



Adam de Boer, *Fool's Cap Map of the World no. 2* (2022) (detail). Batik, crayon, and oil paint on linen. 101.6 x 116.8 cm. Courtesy the artist and Ben Brown Fine Arts.

Staged at Ben Brown Fine Arts in Hong Kong (22 March–14 May 2022), recent works by 12 artists from African and Asian diasporas reflect on collective histories of colonialism, trade, and migration, including Delphine Desane, Hurvin Anderson, Chris Ofili, Maia Cruz Palileo, and Miguel Angel Payano Jr.



Exhibition view: *Ghosts of Empires*, Ben Brown Fine Arts, Hong Kong (22 March–14 May 2022). Courtesy Ben Brown Fine Arts.

Opening the white-cube space is documentation of the African diaspora by Paul Anthony Smith, whose photograph series, 'Ladbroke Grove' (2021–2022), captures crowds at Notting Hill Carnival, a Caribbean festival staged in West London annually since 1966.

The street festival is rooted in an exuberant celebration of a community linked to the Windrush generation—those invited to the United Kingdom from the Caribbean after World War II to ease labour shortages, who experienced rising levels of racism after landing.





Paul Anthony Smith, *Ladbroke Grove #2* (2021–2022). Picotage on inkjet print, on museum board, dibond. 101.6 x 152.4 cm. © Paul Anthony Smith. Courtesy the artist and Ben Brown Fine Arts.

The photograph captures a street crowd smiling and dancing under the sun; it was made using a picotage printing method of stippling that creates highlights and shadow patterns similar to Caribbean breeze-block fences, altering the focus to two figures.

The use of picotage to scarify the image is an attempt to control the external gaze, the artist says; a 'veil to disguise [my] figures within those moments'.



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Framing Smith's work, two small watercolour portraits of African women, *Untitled* (2001) by Chris Ofili, show a series of Black figures, the latter part of a larger collection of 30 portraits of African women, all subtly different, challenging identity through representation.

With equal care, Jeanne F. Jalandoni tracks the collective trauma following Spanish rule in the Philippines, showing the power of history to define contemporary lives.



Jeanne F. Jalandoni, Binondo Church, Manila, Philippines (2021). Dye-na-flow on cotton warp, screen-printed jusi, organza, cotton fabric weft. 109.2 x 137.2 cm. © Jeanne F. Jalandoni. Courtesy the artist and Ben Brown Fine Arts.

The artist's work *Binondo Church, Manila, Philippines* (2021), shows an early 20th-century postcard image of the ancient cathedral erected during Dominican rule in the 1500s to convert the local Chinese population, painted on a large-scale weaving of torn cotton fabrics.

Such colonising efforts have been seen throughout history, from the Caribbean to Southeast Asia, and have come to affect traditional Filipino naming customs, overwriting names once adopted in relation to childbirth, valiance, and poetic titles from renowned actions.



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In Jalandoni's composition, the left side of the church spells out Spanish surnames in red, alluding to christianised Filipinos who assumed saintly names, recorded in the book of names *Catálogo Alfabético de Apellidos*, following an 1849 decree by the Spanish Governor.

Jalandoni's work speaks deeply to the transcendental power of colonial rule on identity, with the artist holding a name of Spanish descent and the Philippines

boasting over a 90 percent Christian population.



Livien Yin, *The Clock-Tower* (2022). Flashe and acrylic on canvas. 137.2 x 152.4 cm. © Livien Yin. Courtesy the artist and Ben Brown Fine Arts.

These layers of influence continue in a re-imagination of John Thomson's 1868 photo *The Clock-Tower, Hong Kong* by Livien Yin, in *The Clock-Tower* (2022). The former photographs a Sikh police officer and two Chinese sedan-chair labourers in central Hong Kong, when man-powered transportation was a common sight.

In Yin's flashe and acrylic on canvas painting, three characters sit on a rooftop. A British colony since 1841 and a Commonwealth state, the territory's native inhabitants were forced to follow colonial laws and policies since its occupation

during the Opium Wars. The sunset is a critique of the British curfew on Chinese migrants in the 19th century.



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With that in mind, the scene depicts a form of speculative resistance in imaging a Sikh officer and Chinese migrant sitting arm in arm, back when Hong Kong's police force was divided into an ethnic hierarchy and Sikh officers commonly enforced law onto the Chinese.

Rooted in the same era is Yin's *Nightstand* (2022), an acrylic on canvas painting that shows feet on a nightstand besides stained bottles of liquor and tea, drawing from mandated medical check-ups for Chinese prostitutes and brothels serving European clientele.

There was an intentional indignity to these exams, which, alongside curfews and physical discipline, criminalised and marginalised Cantonese and Chinese-descending ethnic groups.

But in spite of it all, says Mensah, 'There [are] a multitude of communities that have been oppressed because of colonization and imperialism ... that have been able to thrive.'



Delphine Desane, *How do you wish to be remembered?* (2022). Acrylic and oil on linen 121.9 x 91.4 cm. © Delphine Desane. Courtesy the artist and Ben Brown Fine Arts.

Illustrating this is a work by Delphine Desane, *How do you wish to be remembered?* (2022), an acrylic-and-oil portrait of a seated African woman against a red sun and blue sky. Her expression and red lip are inspired, as the artist explains, by images of Black life and motherhood: an act of representation that is missing in

mainstream media.

There is poetry in the new 'trade' route Mensah has created here, which offers a glimpse into the lived histories of colonialism as experienced by those bearing its burden today, be it from Afro-Caribbean or Asian perspectives. —[O]