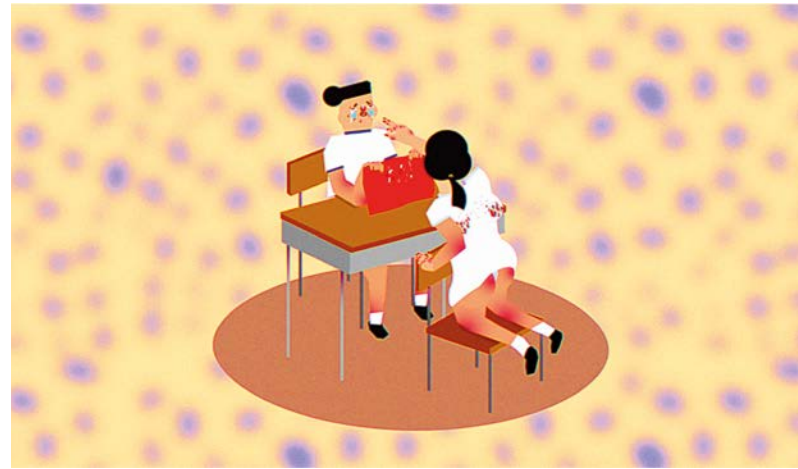
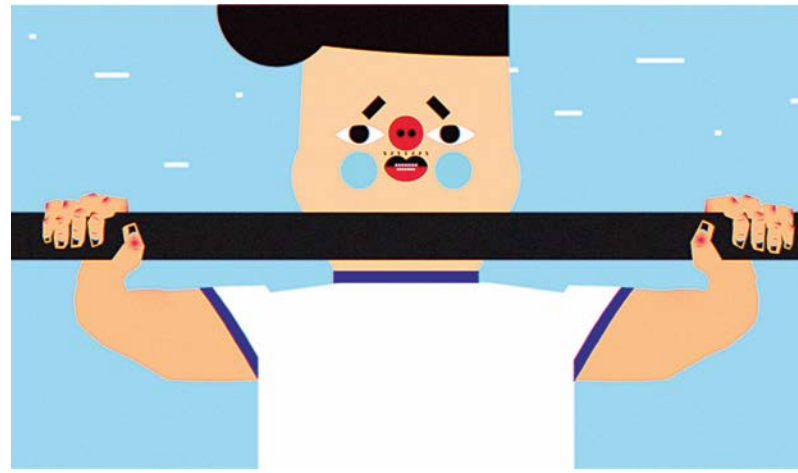
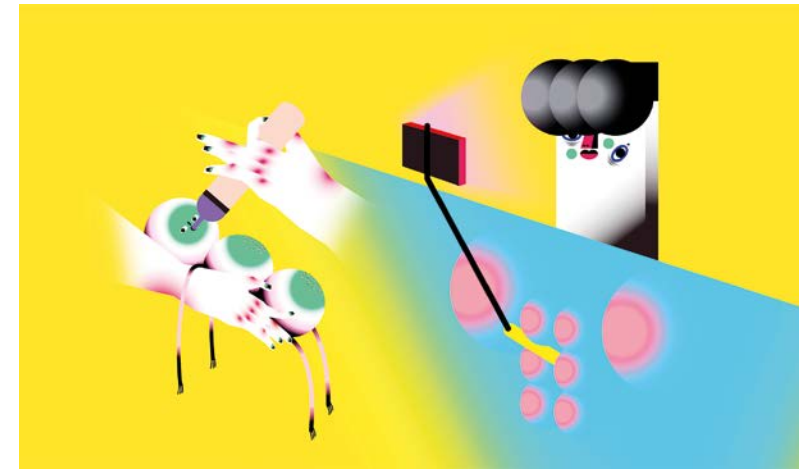




Dear, can I give you a hand? (still), 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong / Shanghai



Doggy Love (stills), 2015. Courtesy: the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong / Shanghai



Who's the Daddy? (stills), 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong / Shanghai



Slow Sex (poster), 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong / Shanghai

Wong Ping has been busy. Largely unknown even in his home city Hong Kong except in the independent music circle and online community until 2015, he has quickly ascended to the global stage for his singularly rich and pop-like visual language as well as seemingly absurd narratives that are replete with social critique.

Given the artist's penchant for the erotic and the perverse, Wong's work provokes polarized reactions. Some are instantly captivated by its seeming effortlessness and corrupt humor; others find it dreadfully inappropriate, even downright misogynistic. Following his participation in the New Museum Triennial as well as *One Hand Clapping* at the Guggenheim in New York, Alvin Li sits down with Wong Ping in Hong Kong over lunch and a beer to talk about his practice and interests.

ALVIN LI

Last time I saw you was in May, at the KTV party after the opening of *One Hand Clapping* at the Guggenheim. Perhaps we can start with your most recent work, *Dear, can I give you a hand?* (2018), which is in the show. It tells a dark tale about an old, lonely porn addict living in Hong Kong who falls for his daughter-in-law, which eventually leads him to a nursing home. The story alludes to a host of social issues concerning elderly care, urban apathy, and the implications of technological development for the future. How did the script come about?

WONG PING

It was inspired by a real encounter on the street in Hong Kong. I was biking in a park after lunch, and I saw this old guy in a wife beater leaving a huge black trash bag by the garbage dump. I was curious, so I waited until he left and opened it. It was full of vintage porn VHS tapes. I had been thinking about the problems of elderly care since my family sent my grandmother to a nursing home in Hong Kong a few years ago. The place is dark and suffocating. And every time I go visit her, all the old people living there get so excited, as if no one has visited for years. At the Guggenheim, the smooth and rounded spiral ramp reminded me of the safety features of a nursing home, and pushing my grandmother around in her wheelchair. So I put these thoughts together into a work.

AL

As your work travels to the United States, it's being read as an emblem of Hong Kong youth culture today. But what is your relationship to Hong Kong? I know you were away for school in Australia for some years, and you didn't really start making work until just a few years ago. And you've got many friends who've left.

WP

My parents sent me to Australia for high school because my grades really sucked in Hong Kong. I picked multimedia design as my college major because it was the only one that didn't require admission exams, and I somehow managed to graduate. When I moved back to Hong Kong I spent months looking for jobs, and the first and only one I found was at a print shop. It was kind of like a factory, with an in-house team that designs lousy event posters for the government. My job was to find images online and make posters out of them. I had to work till nine or ten o'clock every night, and I left the job after a few months mostly because I started having blurry vision due to the insane work hours. It was a really depressing period for me; sometimes I would hide in the bathroom after lunch

just to nap. It was also during this time that I started writing, without any purpose in mind. It just made me happy.

AL

What sorts of stories?

WP

I guess we can call them fantasy short stories. The script for *Doggy Love* (2015), a love story about a horny male teenager and a girl who has breasts on her back, came from this period. I still almost exclusively write short stories today, I guess because I don't have the patience for anything longer. So I had no idea how to draw or make animation when I was still at the print shop. As I was leaving the job, motion graphics were really hot. So I went to the library and borrowed a book on video making, hoping it would help me find a job. That's how I ended up at TVB (Television Broadcasts Limited, a Hong Kong-based company) doing postproduction, mostly retouching female celebrities' boobs and adding extra smoke to fight scenes. After they fired me, I started working for Cartoon Network as a freelancer, and that's where I learned a lot of the skills that I use in my work today. I started drawing and making flyers for the protests taking place in Hong Kong. One day, out of boredom, I made a one-minute video with motion-graphic software about a nipple. I posted it on Facebook, a Hong Kong indie band contacted me to make music videos for them, and that's how it all started.

AL

Are we talking about *Under the Lion Crotch* (2011), for the band No One Remains Virgin?

WP

No. I had made two music videos for a different band before No One Remains Virgin reached out to me. But *Under the Lion Crotch* was the first work where I took time to think about how to express my own feelings. As you know, the song is about Hong Kong. I'm friends with the band members, who were all disappointed with the political reality of Hong Kong and decided to move to Taiwan after finishing the album. I started experimenting with drawing and video at some point between the protests against the demolition of the Star Ferry pier in 2007 and the anti-Hong Kong Express Rail Link movement at the end of 2009. What's interesting about these events was that they raised a kind of shared political consciousness in my generation. Because of Hong Kong's modern history, first under British rule and now under PRC rule, we didn't have many ideas or experiences with political intervention. We've all heard the cliché that Hong Kong citizens are extremely practical and only care about money. This may have some truth value for my parents' generation. But these protests in the late 2000s marked a turning point. They produced many images of forced evictions and violence that shook us. They also gave us a kind of faith in our collective movements, which, just like the more widely known Umbrella Movement, eventually all failed.

AL

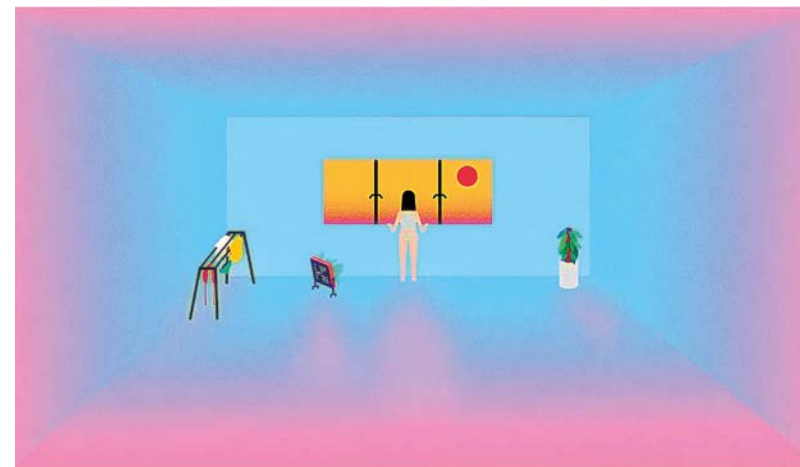
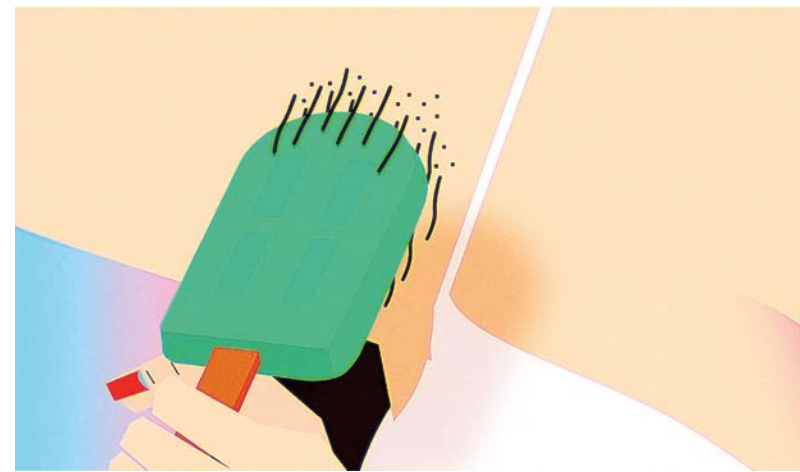
I read somewhere that you've been thinking about moving.



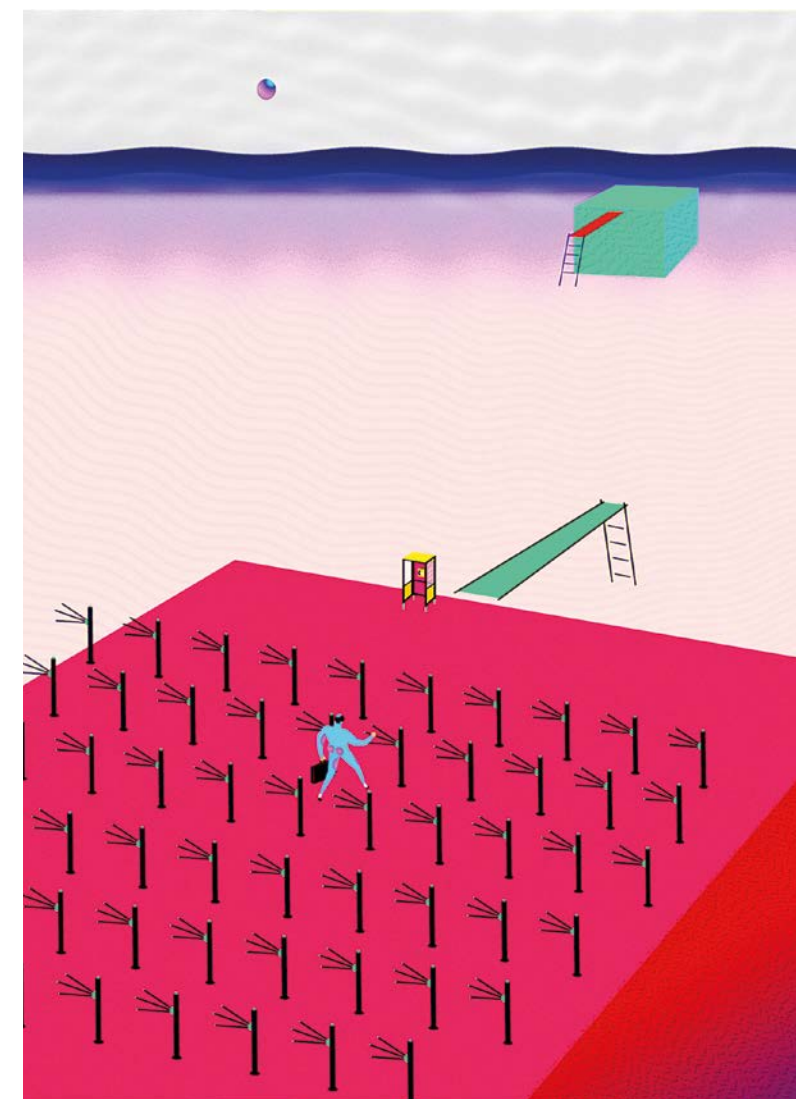
Dear, can I give you a hand?, 2018, *One Hand Clapping* installation view at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2018. Courtesy: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Photo: David Heald



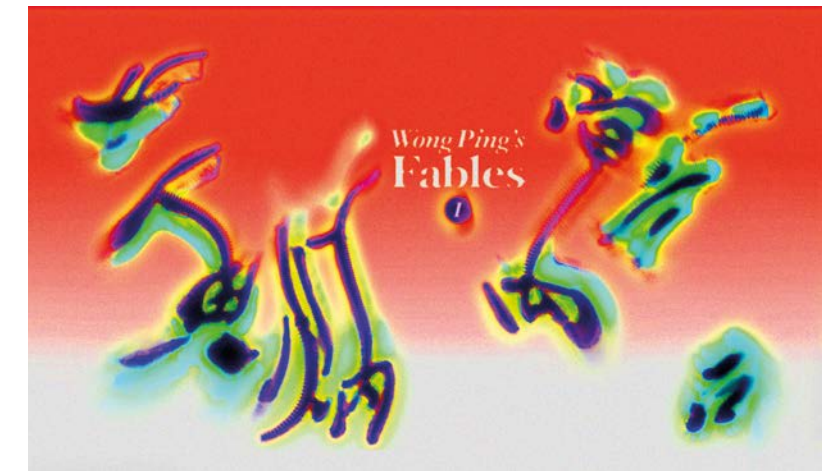
Top - *Jungle of Desire* (poster), 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong / Shanghai
Bottom - *Jungle of Desire* (still), 2015. Courtesy: the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong / Shanghai



Stop Peeping (stills), 2014. Courtesy: the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong / Shanghai



The Other Side (stills), 2015. Courtesy: the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong / Shanghai



Ping's Fables 1 (stills), 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong / Shanghai

WP Well, not really, but I was envious of my friends’ prudence in doing so. I don’t come from a family that’s good at planning. I think of my work *The Other Side* (2015) as a kind of sequel to *Under the Lion Crotch*. I was seeing many friends who, after leaving Hong Kong, still share articles and leave heated comments about Hong Kong on Facebook every day.

AL The diasporic experience is often pervaded with a sense of nostalgia and lost attachment.

WP Right. Once I had a friend visiting from the UK, who told me he really liked Hong Kong and would like to move here. I asked him why, and he gave me a whole list of cons of living in the UK, which to me sounded exactly like what Hong Kong is going through. Then I had the thought that maybe wherever they move, it’s still going to be futile, because what’s suffocating them is a global condition. You want to leave, but you have nowhere to go—that became the central theme of *The Other Side*.

AL Why animation?

WP I wasn’t thinking about that so much when I started. On one hand, I’ve always been a one-man team, which makes it hard to actually shoot something in a place like Hong Kong. On the other hand, after freelancing for Cartoon Network, it felt only natural to make use of that expertise. To be honest, I don’t even watch animation that often. However, I did realize in retrospect how the deployment of cartoons in my work is especially effective in masking the dark and the absurd beneath a candy-coated facade.

AL Like camouflage, or a buffer.

WP Yes, something like that. I sometimes feel like I’m exploiting the medium.

AL Do you watch a lot of movies?

WP Not really. Why?

AL Although you work almost exclusively in animation, I see in your work many tropes of comedy films and erotic films—classic genres of Hong Kong cinema from back in the 1980s, the heyday of Hong Kong’s film industry. As that industry began to wane in what film critics call the “post-integration era” due to competition with Hong Kong–mainland coproductions, many local filmmakers consciously returned to these classic genres to appeal to audiences’ collective memory of “regional flavors.” More importantly, this aesthetic return became a soft-power strategy aimed at cultural preservation and mobilization. Do you share the same intention in your deployment of erotic narratives and corrupt humor?

WP To be honest, I rarely watch films. Maybe more often now, but when I first started drawing and making videos, I was in a kind of isolated state, where I wasn’t interested in art or design or film. When I write a script for my work, I always make sure that it relates to my personal experience. And I guess that’s the hardest part, to weave my personal thoughts, whether about society or politics, into fantasy narratives. It’s a time-consuming process.

AL What also fascinates me is how you aren’t afraid to delve into cultural taboos that belie complex layers of social problems that demand parsing with care. In *Who’s the Daddy* (2017), for instance, the narrator—a masochistic man who ends up becoming a single father after a failed Tinder-initiated relationship—delivers a controversial rant about pedophilia, claiming that “labium is the borderline, this (when the baby is out) is criminal, this (when the baby is still inside) is legal.” While certainly disturbing on first viewing, it can also be read—to me at least—as a slapstick metaphor for the legal and ethical ambiguity inherent in the ongoing project of defining and regulating pedophilia. I am reminded of an infamous 1998 scientific study on child sexual abuse using college samples in the prestigious *Psychological Bulletin*, published by the American Psychological

Association, which concluded that childhood sexual abuse does not generally cause lasting psychological harm, and argued that classifying behavior as “abuse” merely because it is considered illegal or immoral, even in the absence of harm, is not scientifically valid. This caused severe outrage in America because the findings seemed to imply that pedophilia is not psychologically harmful—basically, this would amount to saying that incest is not always bad. APA eventually blinked and rejected the article’s basic conclusions. This was ideologically against APA’s modus operandi: for decades, their fight for the rights of disenfranchised populations—homosexuals, single mothers (who are disproportionately headed by African Americans)—and against the primacy of the traditional nuclear family had been based on the premise that moral judgments and social policy-making must be dependent on psychological studies. Psychiatrist G.E. Zuriff famously read the APA’s radical reversal as a political move—to declare that pedophilia is psychological harmless would alienate most of the U.S. population as well as the Federal government which regulates the practice of psychotherapy and professional associations, including the APA, controls Medicare and other insurance payments for psychological treatment, and funds psychological research and training. I appreciate how your work reveals and challenges the entanglement of commonsense ethics and the varying institutions of contemporary society.

WP Some people think I simply cannot touch on some subjects. Or that I should be more careful not to cause offence.

AL Perhaps the inclusion of such subjects in your work can be mistaken as a sign of endorsement, or obsession.

WP Which is not what it’s about. I am using these metaphors to talk about law, sometimes religion, and other widely accepted cultural conventions that are tinged with absurdity.

AL From what I’ve heard, you are really into music. Have you ever thought about experimenting with that, besides making videos?

WP Well, the guitar in the soundtracks of my works is all me playing, except for one or two of them because I was too busy. Most of my friends are musicians. I have a few close friends in the art circle, but I don’t really go to openings to socialize. After I came back to Hong Kong, I became really shy and afraid of expressing myself in public. I dabbled in music with some friends and tried some band practices, which didn’t really work. But on a related note, I have been thinking about the question of value a lot.

AL You mean of art?

WP I’m talking very specifically of my work. Sometimes I worry about the honesty of its form. I find performance artists much more honest, and I really think music is the best form—not in terms of political mobilization, but in how it so directly engages with our emotions. When I’m on the metro and realize I left my headphones at home, my ears get itchy, and I just have to buy a new pair. People rarely feel the same about animation, or video art. When performed live, music becomes another form that triggers another set of sensations. I hope my work can eventually be like that.

Wong Ping (1984, Hong Kong). His animations have been commissioned by M+, NOWNESS and Prada, and he was awarded one of Perspective’s “40 under 40” (2015). He presented a solo project at NOVA Sector, Art Basel Miami Beach (2016), and held a residency at the Chinese Centre for Contemporary Art (CFCCA) (2015). His work has been exhibited in Manchester, Hong Kong, Istanbul, Berlin and Paris, amongst other locations. His animation films have been presented in numerous festivals (Belgium, UK, Mexico and Australia) and have been reviewed in *The New York Times*, *Wallpaper*, *LEAP*, *ArtAsiaPacific* and other publications. Wong Ping’s work is held in several permanent collections including M+, Hong Kong.

Alvin Li is a writer, and contributing editor of *frieze*, based in Shanghai, China. Li is the co-founder of CINEMQ, an unrefined queer collective known for hopping around clubs to screen curated content from around the world, with a focus on Chinese and East Asian queer visual culture. CINEMQ also publishes weekly articles and throws badass parties.



An Emo Nose (poster), 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong / Shanghai



Under the Lion Crotch (stills), 2011. Courtesy: the artist; No One Remains Virgin; Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong / Shanghai