

THE SPIRIT OF HIGH SOCIETY

# HONG KONG TATLER

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# THE ART ISSUE



YANA PEEL ON LAYING THE  
FOUNDATIONS FOR HONG  
KONG'S ARTISTIC FUTURE









# Art Springs Eternal

WATER PISTOLS, BUTTER DANCERS AND METAL FORESTS GREET VISITORS TO **MIMI BROWN'S** ART SPACE, SPRING WORKSHOP. YSABELLE CHEUNG HEARS HER REMARKABLE FIVE-YEAR PLAN

**T**HERE MUST HAVE BEEN golden groves of real bamboo here once upon a time," says Mimi Brown as she looks down on the industrial district of Wong Chuk Hang from her non-profit arts space Spring Workshop. The area is now riddled with construction sites for the new Aberdeen MTR station and surrounded by drab concrete industrial buildings, but Brown had a different landscape in mind for her creative hub. Seeking to restore the natural beauty of the neighbourhood, Brown commissioned her friends Eric Schuldenfrei and Marisa Yiu, who make up local architect duo ESKYIU, to craft a piece of installation art on the venue's outdoor terrace. The result is the *Industrial Forest*, made from hundreds of slim, upright metallic poles, which was installed at the time of Spring Workshop's opening late last year.

It was nature itself that inspired Brown when choosing a name for this 1,500-metre experimental art space. "Spring is a time of growth, for trees and flowers. There's that idea of renewal," she explains as she offers a guided tour of the main gallery and its three residential artists studios. "A spring is also a metal coil that holds energy within it and a source of fresh water that comes out of the earth from an unexpected place." Although hard to pigeonhole, this vibrant venue is more a bohemian hangout than a traditional gallery. It welcomes everyone from visual artists and performers to writers to take up temporary residence within its four lily-white walls and create freely.

A creative tour de force, Brown was instantly adopted into Hong Kong's thriving cultural community when she moved here with her husband eight years ago. "I immediately fell in love with the city and wanted to find a new way to engage with the arts," says the former music producer who was born in the US but has also spent time living in Rome. After befriending Claire Hsu, the founder of Asia Art Archive, and the curator for M+ museum Tobias Berger, Brown's web of art relationships grew exponentially. She was appointed as one of the directors of the Asia Art Archive in 2011, along with Lane Crawford CEO Jennifer Woo, and was made an adviser at Para/Site art gallery.

Inspired by the visionary projects of her new friends, Brown wanted to break the mould and create something that would take people by surprise. The venue itself – a nondescript industrial building in Wong Chuk Hang – is the first unexpected twist. Next is the buzzing atmosphere once you step inside.

Instead of silently perusing the pieces on display, visitors are invited to chat with Brown about current works: the water gun installation by G.O.D. founder Douglas Young, for example, or an upcoming talk or film screening. You're welcome to sink into one of the many chairs with a book from their 'bibliotheek' collection – a selection of recommended reads handpicked by international artists and writers. The library was compiled in collaboration with Rotterdam contemporary arts centre Witte de With for an ongoing project called *Moderation(s)*. The same inspirational reads are available at both venues.

It's not only visitors to the gallery that are made to feel at home; Spring's artists' studios look more like boutique hotel rooms and include bathrooms, kitchen space and stylish lounge areas. One of the most colourful guests to take up residence was Indonesian performance artist Melati Suryodarmo, who is best known for her highly energetic, traditional dance on thick blocks of butter. "It's been such a delight to meet all sorts of

## AT A GLANCE

### BAMBOO NINJA

A mystery attacker climbed onto Spring's terrace while the *Industrial Forest* was being built and chopped down some of the supporting bamboo scaffolding with a machete. The culprit was never found

### MUSIC MAKER

Brown studied music and comparative religion at Harvard College and worked as a music producer for several years before moving into non-profits and the arts

### WATER FIGHT

One of the art pieces in Spring is an installation made of 1,800 plastic water guns by Douglas Young

PEOPLE  
Who's Who

# FACES



*Hard to pigeonhole, Spring is more of a bohemian hangout than a traditional gallery*

people that come through our doors to stay here," Brown says. "I've been amazed by their creativity and openness. To be able to experience their art first-hand is amazing."

Creativity also spills out onto both of Spring's spacious terraces. There is a second large outdoor area where Brown hosts an array of lively parties, private dinners and show openings for the art community. Hong Kong architect William Lim recently contributed a series of wooden tables for the outdoor space, displaying an etched map detailing Wong Chuk Hang's numerous galleries and studios. Accompanying the map are signatures by Yana Peel from Intelligence Squared and Lars Nittve, the executive director of M+ museum, amongst other friends of Brown. Even Lim's son Kevin added his artistic touch, with a cartoon of himself waving from his father's private studio, just next door.

After a long day at Spring, Brown steps from one art-filled space to another: her home. She and her husband promote local artwork, although their collection also includes pieces from around the globe. Brown says that she doesn't collect with a logical pattern in mind, but instead follows her instinct. "I feel the important thing for us is to have a collection that speaks to us on a personal level,

free of value judgement." This unfettered view on art is what makes Brown a paragon of the open art movement blossoming in Hong Kong. "I think that the creatives here are all striving towards a common goal in building up the arts community," Brown adds. "Everyone has been working hard for many years and now, we are deservedly seeing that work come to fruition."

That much can be said for Spring, as it hosts a whole range of experimental projects and installations this year. In June, Dutch novelist Oscar van den Boogaard will be Spring's writer-in-residence for *The Fictional Residency* workshop series. He will lead discussions, inviting 15 Hong Kong artists and writers to create a short story collection. Later on in the year comes the intriguing *Social Contract* installation, in which Australian artists Jacqueline Riva and Geoff Lowe make visitors swear to secrecy after seeing the piece. "This kind of experience creates an intimate kinship between the participator and the artwork," Brown explains. And in celebration of Art Basel this month, Brown invited contemporary Chinese artist Qiu Zhijie to reimagine the workshop with his large-scale ink maps and varying spheres of glass, wood and stainless steel.

Despite working hard to attract visitors, artists and collaborators, Brown plans to close the workshop in 2017. "It was always our intention to have a five-year plan," Brown explains of this unusual concept. "Our mission is about being experimental – we want to organically evolve and to create a sense of urgency with our programmes. But while we're here, we want to support the local arts scene as much as possible." Hopefully, we'll see a change in the seasons. ■

#### FOUR SEASONS

Mimi Brown in her arts venue, Spring Workshop in Wong Chuk Hang