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"WHEN PEOPLE COME
HERE IT'S MEANT TO BE
A DEEP INTERACTION,
AS OPPOSED TO JET IN
AND JET OUT"

TEXT / PAYAL UTTAM

Mimi Brown

Creative Capital

WHEN CALIFORNIAN COMPOSER Mimi Brown moved to Hong Kong in 2005, she immediately felt at home in the local arts community. "I was very excited to experience the city and learn about everything going on, but after my first few years, I realised that the best days I spent here were with the artists and arts organisations," she says.

The idea to open Spring Workshop, a non-profit art space, was born when she came across a converted book warehouse in Wong Chuk Hang last year. "It felt like the perfect opportunity," says Brown, who decided to turn the sprawling 14,500-square-foot facility into a creative hub. Working with a local architect, she created four artists' studios, a massive exhibition area, two kitchens, a communal living zone and two terraces.

A five-year privately funded initiative, the experimental art space now hosts artist residencies, lectures and conferences, as well as large-scale exhibitions. Brown describes it as an environment where "open-minded, culturally interested people" can gather.

Last year, for example, Brown invited MAP Office, the local artist duo, to arrange a two-day series of film screenings and artist talks for which they constructed quirky cardboard furniture and she served meals. "Instead of going to a talk for three hours and coming out exhausted, you would come out and have a bowl of pad thai and a beer and chat with someone," says Brown. "We're really trying to create an enjoyable, comfortable multidimensional art experience."

What are Spring's main activities?

Our main activities are that we have an artist-residency programme. We do programmes such as talks, films, exhibitions and performances. We also had quite a few conferences, so when an arts organisation wants to do an off-site or some sort of event where they invite more speakers to discuss something, we're happy to host them here. We're constantly looking to see what sorts

of ways we can partner with other arts organisations and artists to be useful to the city.

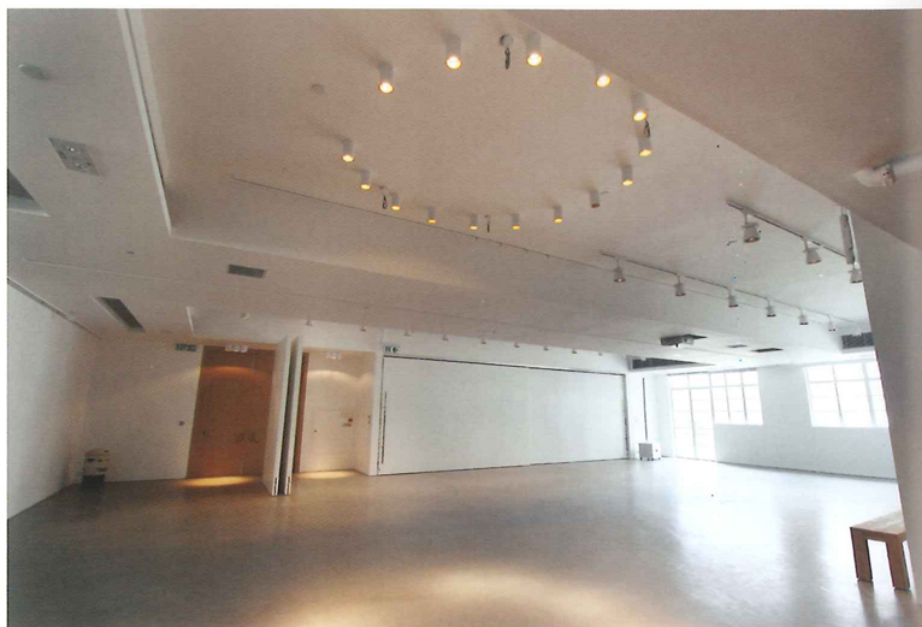
Who is one of the most interesting artists you've had in residence so far?

We had two Barcelona-based curators called Latitudes; they were here for one month. That was one of my favourite projects. They invited four Hong Kong artists (Ho Sin-tung, Nadim Abbas, Yuk King-tan and Samson Young) to lead them on intimate city tours in an artwork called Incidents of Travel. These weren't your everyday tours, they were very personalised tours of the places in Hong Kong that inspired the artists. So Nadim, for example, took us all over the city to remote corners of Hong Kong that you might drive past every day that you haven't set foot in. Then he would tell us about that spot from a historical viewpoint, but also tell us as an artist why he finds that inspirational.

That was an interesting project because it encapsulated one of the things we tried to do at Spring, which is to provide support and exposure for Hong Kong artists abroad, and also to bring curators, writers and artists from abroad who then get to engage with Hong Kong. When people come here it's meant to be a deep interaction, as opposed to jet in and jet out.

Why Wong Chuk Hang?

In my first few years in Hong Kong I found myself frequently going out to Kwun Tong or Cattle Depot and loving the rawness of those neighbourhoods. Then, lo and behold, a friend told me about Wong Chuk Hang. When I came here I was surprised to find a neighbourhood with so much texture right in Hong Kong Island. It's a fantastic location on a logistical basis and in addition to that, the neighbourhood has all these layers so you see the history of it as a fishing village,





the temples, Aberdeen Harbour with the sampans, old print shops and factories. So you have these past elements then you have this beautiful present going on where there are all sorts of new cultural players here, architects, writers and curators. The future aspect is also spectacular because our MTR will be finished in two years.

What makes you open your eyes every morning? What inspires you?

I'm very curious about the ways other people see the world and I think a lot of art is about having the opportunity to look into someone else's world view. Being involved with Spring provides me a daily platform to engage with artists, thinkers or writers who want to communicate about their world view and who want to have a discussion about what it means to be alive and what this world looks like through their lens. Another thing I think that drove me to create this space is that I also love to share this sensation with other like-minded people. I think it's really exciting when you have a programme to have a room full of people who are all equally excited to be there.

What are the biggest challenges you've faced?

Luckily, because Spring is an experimental project, when faced with a challenge we can head down whichever path works. We're unencumbered by limitations that other organisations might have to deal with. Funnily, so much of what we do is about process, whether that's fostering artists' process or fostering exhibition process. I used to say so much of life is about process, so if we don't enjoy the process we won't end up enjoying anything. So even the process of setting up Spring has been really interesting and mostly positive.

What will you be doing in May during the art fair?

We'll have an exhibition where the leading Chinese teacher and thinker Qin Zhijie will be taking over the whole space. He's doing an enormous installation across the walls and floors. He likes to map histories of world thought and philosophy, and simultaneously mix them with found objects. So it's this beautiful melange of the abstract and concrete, the philosophical and the realistic. He'll be using some ink paint, but then he'll also be doing spheres made of stone, plaster, paper, glass and steel. You'll be able to move each sphere in the exhibit and each one represents an individual navigating this world that he's created. ■