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Finding her own place



Spring into action

An arts venue in the heart of Wong Chuk Hang is inviting people from different disciplines to pool their talents, writes Richard Lord

Spring Workshop is rather enjoyably resistant to categorisation. A non-profit arts venue that isn't a gallery, it provides spaces for creators and curators – but not permanently.

Instead, it invites artists from all disciplines – from installations to video – as well as composers, writers and anyone else relevant, to take part in ambitious, multidisciplinary projects such as "Moderation(s)", a recently launched undertaking as difficult to categorise as the space that hosts it. To do so, it invites creative people to come and stay at the workshop, which as well as spaces for creating and displaying art also boasts some spiffed-up living quarters.

Spring is very much a reflection of its founder and director, Mimi Brown. She too has crossed artistic disciplines, training as a composer and working in the music world in New York, and spent time in Rome and California before moving to Hong Kong in 2005. Blurring boundaries is what she's all about, in the process interrogating the artistic process – pushing notions of creation in new, challenging and hopefully fruitful directions.

"Our aim is to experiment with the way art is produced, curated and supported. What's missing – we listen to that," Brown says.

The result is Spring. Housed in an industrial building on Wong Chuk Hang Road, its gigantic, tastefully minimal interior houses a variety of spaces including the four artists' studios-cum-living areas, various large communal spaces where works can be displayed, and a trio of terraces; the one overlooking the main flyover will soon be decorated with driver-distracting artwork. The car park even features walls daubed with Roy Lichtenstein pastiches.

As with other industrial areas, Wong Chuk Hang is increasingly dotted with the studios of artists driven away from the city's heart by rising rents.

"We moved into these premises sight unseen," says Brown. "We

were looking for adventure – we certainly found it. I'm a big fan of the textures of Hong Kong, and with Wong Chuk Hang, I was inspired by the neighbourhood. The sort of person who's excited by art is excited by Wong Chuk Hang."

She came to the art world after moving to Hong Kong, when she "had her antennae out" looking for a niche for her talents. "I realised my best days were the ones I spent with people from the art community; I found it very welcoming," says Brown, a director of the Asia Art Archive and an adviser to Para/Site Art Space.

"The confluence of cultures is something unique to Hong Kong. Even though you have to start a lot of things from scratch here, everyone has so much enthusiasm about it. I'd go to Para/Site's events, for example, and love them, and I thought: wouldn't it be amazing if we could put even more people together like that?"

Spring's inaugural event, in partnership with video art collective Videotage, involved hosting mainland artist Yang Fudong's work *The Fifth Night* – an ambitious undertaking given it's 21 metres long and uses seven video screens. Spring's next project, launched last

week, is even more ambitious: "Moderation(s)" is a year-long collaboration with Rotterdam contemporary arts centre Witte de With that will involve more than 50 artists and an ongoing exchange of ideas between artists and curators from the two cities. By the end of the year it will have produced, among other things, three exhibitions (two of them at Spring); a conference at Witte de With; three residencies; and a book of short stories.

There's also Bibliotheek, an ever-expanding list of books suggested by "Moderations(s)" participants that in the future will become a physical library at both venues. The project, Brown says, "is the outgrowth of Define [Ayas, Witte de With's director] and I spending years wanting to do something that thrills us – the process, the experimentation, the ability to bring artists together and exchange ideas, but not in a superficial way."

"I did my degree in music composition, and I wrote for theatre and commercially, and worked as an orchestrator. I still look at things through a musical lens – it's about taking one thing and using it elsewhere, putting something in a different context and asking questions about it. It gives us an



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MIMI BROWN (ABOVE)

opportunity to rub artistic disciplines against each other and find something new," she says.

At the moment, for example, Barcelona-based curatorial duo Latitudes are spending a month at Spring, working on "Incidents of Travel", in which artists Ho Sing-tung, Yuk King Tan, Nadim Abbas and Samson Young develop their own customised day-long tours of Hong Kong. In June, Dutch author Oscar van den Boogaard will be at Spring for a month, interacting with artists and overseeing a book of stories based on the experience.

In October, Spring will be transformed by artists in "A Constructed World in the Social Contract", for which visitors must sign a non-disclosure agreement

preventing them from talking about the exhibition.

"People are starting to see that we're super-interested in the audience experience," says Brown. "When you come to Spring, we involve you."

Unconventionally located it may be, but Brown says an increasing number of people are making the journey to Spring to look around – something anyone can do Tuesday to Friday afternoons.

"We get everyone from the expected crowd of art lovers, artists, students and teachers to open-minded young people, including a lot of international visitors, especially from Europe and Asia."

But Spring comes with an expiry date: it's a five-year project. "It's nice to have a little time pressure," says Brown. "It creates an urgency for us all to do our best work: how can we serve the Hong Kong audience and create new experiences?"

But she also hopes the time limit will intrigue potential visitors. "With a pop-up shop, you go because you know it's only going to be open for a month. Everything else in life is a foregone conclusion – it's so nice to have the space and time to see what happens when something isn't." thereview@scmp.com



Photo: Red Dog Studio