

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



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Venice Biennale show of Hong Kong's Samson Young explores the ground between utopia and dystopia

The Hong Kong Pavilion is showing a dense and detailed body of work, sarcastic and yet tender, which examines the way good intentions can go bad and the relationship between privilege and poverty.



Visitors to Hong Kong's presentation in this year's Venice Biennale are likely to feel a bit discombobulated, rather like the uneven, oddly shaped choir platform in the courtyard that resembles an unfinished game of Rubik's Snake. *Risers*, as the work is called, may offer treacherous pitfalls, but its velvety, primary coloured covering still makes it inviting and cheerful, and it's a great place for exhausted Biennale visitors to perch and bask in the Italian sun.

That's basically Samson Young Kar-fai's exhibition in a nutshell. You emerge from "Songs for Disaster Relief" and its intriguing, surreal symbols not entirely sure whether his is a benign world or a dystopia.

The ambiguity reflects Young's own views. He told the *Post* in an earlier interview that the project originates from the uneasiness he feels towards charity singles – songs recorded by celebrity musicians to raise money and awareness about victims of natural disasters and other causes. These include *Do They Know It's Christmas?* and *We Are the World*, recorded to raise funds for the relief of the Ethiopian famine of the 1980s, and Hong Kong's own examples, such as a cover version of *Bridge Over Troubled Water* that was recorded for the eastern China floods in 1991.

"My feelings about these songs are complicated," he said. "There are obvious critiques, such as imperialism and how the increasingly globalised music industry has profited from them. But what I really feel conflicted about is how an act that was driven by the wish to do good always appears problematic in hindsight."



He is determined not to dismiss such efforts wholesale, but a rather cynical alter ego called Boomtown Gundane dominates part one of the Venice show. The name isn't original. Young had read on the internet that a Cape Town singer-songwriter of that name had written a song in response to the patronising tone of *Do They Know It's Christmas?*, cheekily called *Yes We Do*. That turned out to be a piece of fake news on a now-defunct South African satirical website, Hayibo.

But Young was so enamoured of the idea of Boomtown Gundane that he decided to flesh out the character and make him the star of this show. His Boomtown Gundane lives in the Palazzo Gundane, located in Williston, North Dakota, a town that sits above America's largest oil deposit, which has only been accessible since the arrival of new fracking technology about a decade ago.

Young arranged for his previous collaborator, singer Michael Schiefel, to play Boomtown Gundane in a video filmed against gas flares in Williston. In it, he sings a version of the 1984 Band Aid song, with that astonishing lyric: "Thank God it's them instead of you." He has made animations based on two blond children taken from the original single's cover, showing them to be disorderly and disobedient.



The collaboration with the pro-Beijing FTU requires the artist and singers to “cross the aisle” politically

The videos show on multiple screens inside a section done up as Boomtown Gundane's sitting room, and the personal effects here and in the adjoining room tell of a schizophrenic, struggling musician who has been let down by his belief in Pythagoras's philosophy of a logical world running on mathematical principles, and Ronald Reagan's small-government, low-tax and free trade economics – we know this because there is a sculptural collage representing Boomtown Gundane that is made up of the two men's busts, a fallen Winged Victory of Samothrace, a space station and a military bugle. The falling may have to do with the plunging oil price that caused Williston to go bust in 2015 and 2016.

Boomtown Gundane is sticking with the seesawing boom-and-bust town of Williston, even though the only gigs he gets are in a local strip club these days. The title of this group of work is *Palazzo Gundane (Homage to the Myth-Maker Who Fell to Earth)*, a reference to the David Bowie film *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, in which an alien arrived on Earth and formed attachments, especially to money. Gundane morosely sticks to a repertoire of Christmas-related songs and insists it's his favourite holiday.

This may seem to be an elaborate set-up for something as niche as charity singles. But the songs are rare moments when people of all stripes supposedly come together over a good cause, and the way they work prompts bigger questions about foreign aid in general and whether it merely strengthens the divide between the privileged and underprivileged; and whether such charity songs still represent a precious humanism that seems to be in short supply in this age of growing insularity and xenophobia across the world.



Young attempts some kind of reconciliation with charity singles in the next room, where a screen shows the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions choir whispering *We Are the World*. This is similar to his previous works in the “Muted Situation” series, such as when a lion dance troupe and a string quartet perform in silence as a way to draw attention to all the other aspects of such performances.

But here, there is an extra layer of meaning. As Young and curator Kwok Ying explain, the collaboration with the pro-Beijing FTU requires the artist and singers to “cross the aisle” politically, and by asking the singers to suppress the sung notes, the resulting soft sound, they say, suggests a tenderness. (Though that may sound different to different ears. The mass whispering can be unsettling, too, like a room full of secrets and gossip.)



Young also made his own charity cover version for the show. In 1991, Hong Kong’s top stars sang a Cantonese version of *Bridge Over Troubled Water* to raise funds for the Eastern China flooding relief efforts. In *Lullaby* (2017), Young is filmed singing the same song in a sampan, but with the lyrics replaced by Cantonese numbers.

He says it is a nod to Hong Kong’s heartfelt efforts to help victims in the mainland regardless of the political divide between the two places, and how the hosts always remind viewers on television of the donation hotline. This, too, is a performance that is full of tenderness, making it less a sarcastic remark on Hong Kong’s capitalistic society and more a Pythagorean dream of utopia.



Speaking of utopia, there is a neon sign on the wall behind *Risers* in the courtyard. It reads: "The world is yours, as well as ours, but basically yours," a quote attributed to an address by former Communist leader Mao Zedong to Chinese students studying in Moscow. Eagle-eyed visitors will spot another quote fixed to the other side of the canal that may be a response to Mao's promise. It reads: "Why have you forsaken me?" And we are back to feeling ambivalent about the world, and that, after all, is exactly what art tends to achieve.

*Samson Young: Songs for Disaster Relief, Campo della Tana, Castello, Venice,
10am-6pm, Tue-Sun. May 13-Nov 26 (except May 15, Aug 14, Sept 4, Oct 30 and Nov 20).*