

Tsz Kam was born in the early 90's in colonial Hong Kong and grew up in the post-colonial period thereafter. At age 13, Kam moved to Houston, Texas. They went on to attend The University of Texas at Austin to complete the BFA studio art program, and have been living in Austin ever since.

Kam's work draws from their experience of being an immigrant and their experience as a non-binary person existing within two cultures. As a millennial who grew up watching VHS tapes on the weekends to witnessing the rise of smart phones before turning 20, Kam also draws on a feeling of consumerist nostalgia with their visual work.

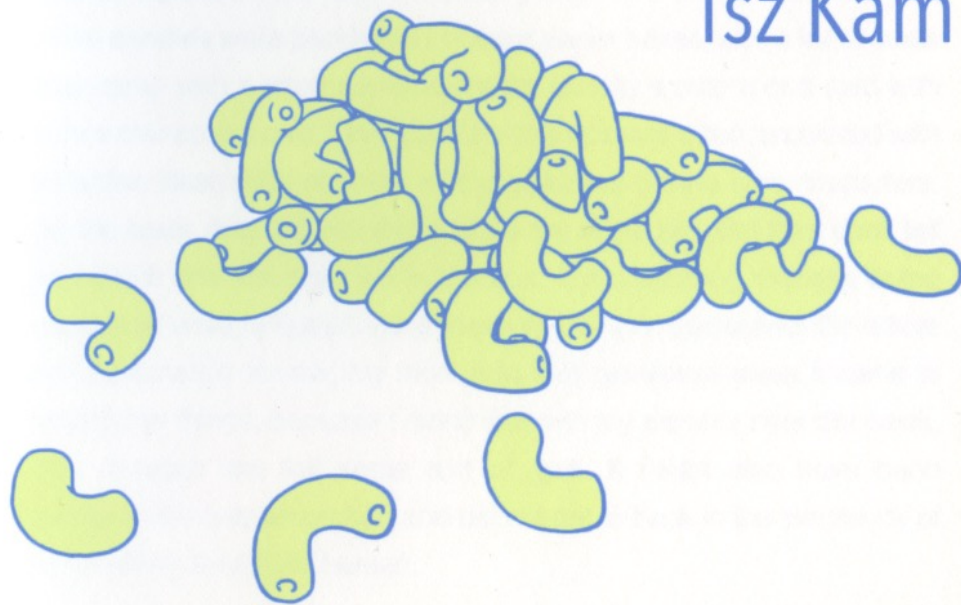
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癡夢

Sticky Dreams

memories of art & sugar

Tsz Kam



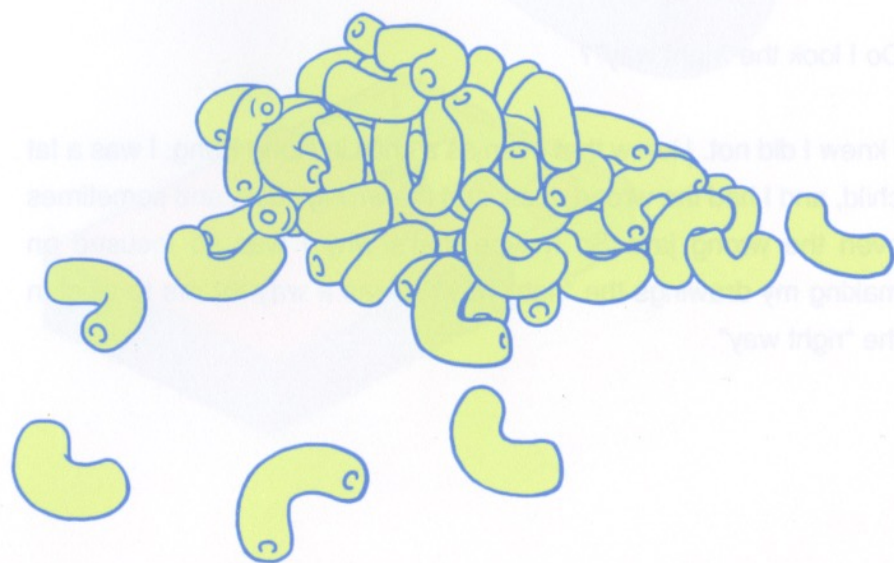


I remember going out on the weekends with my mom as a child in Hong Kong, she always took me to this candy store called 優の良品 (*Aji Ichiban*, which translates to “the best and superior”). They sell mostly snacks imported from Japan; I loved going there for the candies. A lot of the candies were packaged in clever paper boxes, and a lot of times they came with a small souvenir inside, usually a charm or a card with anime characters on it. The outside of the box was often decorated with attractive illustration of some anime or kawaii Sanrio type characters. On the back, they tell you which ones are in the set. But they don't tell you which one you may get in the box. The marketing strategy being you would want to keep buying these boxes until you collect the whole set. Fortunately for me, my mom was very generous when it came to buying me things, because I didn't live with my parents over the week, so I imagine she felt some sort of guilt. It might also have been because she was an orphan and did not get to bask in the simple joy of materialism as a child herself.



On the other hand, I could also get American snacks when I visit the grocery store with my uncle, who was always prone to spoiling his nieces and nephews, since he didn't have any children of his own back then. Kit-Kat and Hershey Kisses tasted good, but they all looked the same, each wrapped in identical plastic bags with sawtoothed edges on both ends, and there were also no toys inside. We didn't even have KING SIZE back then. I never found out if it's because KING SIZE only came out after I moved here or if they knew Hong Kong people are not into that kind of overindulgence when it comes to sugary chocolates.

What about Hong Kong snacks you ask? Well, most of my memory of traditional Chinese snacks is usually from Chinese New Year. Each household is supposed to keep a 全盒, which translates to "complete box". It's a round tray with compartments and we usually put sugar preserved dried fruits and nuts or melon seeds in them. Needless to say, it's not very attractive to a child, but I did like the box and the compartments. It was a neat little device. I liked how it separated things. Trail mix would have upsetted me a great deal.



I never went to any art museums or galleries as a child, no one ever took me, not even for a school field trip. Or maybe there wasn't one in Hong Kong back then.

My childhood experience of aesthetic mostly came from my consumption of anime and these Japanese snacks. Things were supposed to look a certain way in order to be attractive. It seems like people fantasize about how children make art with absolute freedom; I question if I ever did. My earliest memory of attempts at drawing has always just been me trying to make things look a certain way, the "right way", even with my limited spatial understanding at that early age.

Something I was so sure I knew as a small child, I have so much doubt over what it is now. What is the "right way"? I still have a vague belief in the "right way" now, but where does that put *me*? See, here lies the irony of the American snacks' packaging— we aren't all the same. There is no single "right way" and America is the place that forced me to come face to face with that fact.

Do I look the "right way"?

I knew I did not. I knew that even as a child in Hong Kong. I was a fat child, and I had the wrong eyes, and the wrong nose, and sometimes even the wrong jaw. So maybe that's why I was so focused on making my drawings the "right way", it was a way for me to exist in the "right way".





And it worked! I tried so hard to make art the “right way”; I tried drawing anime and fan art, fantasizing about becoming an internet famous illustrator, then I went to art school, I tried making contemporary art, the way it appears on those blogs. I exhausted all the categories of “right way” that I knew of, until I realized I was always meant to be a mixture of things. The place I am from took that path in history, and it’s only natural that my life will also unwittingly take the same path.

I don’t dare to say there is no “right way” anymore, some things from childhood will always stay with me. I enjoy some aspects of the “right way”, like paying attention to craft and taking time to plan.

A lot of the illustrations in this zine did not first exist as pretty pastel pictures on my photoshop. They existed as pencil sketches first in my graphing notebook, then they were traced onto cotton fabric to be hand-embroidered. I crafted each of them into a patch, each stitched over the course of weeks or months. They now exist as a collection of badges of honor on my vest and jacket. I wear them, and they remind me that I have made myself beautiful with hard work.





How exactly did I make myself beautiful with hard work? My embroidery is not magic, and I can't spin gold thread out of nothing.

My hypothesis went something like this: If I am able to turn ordinary materials into beautiful works of art with hard work, why can't I do the same to myself?

I have always had issues with beauty standards in general. I can't pretend I don't participate, so I will just accept its existence and spend my life running away and towards it at the same time.

If I have come to the conclusion that there is no "right way" to live, beauty standards tell me otherwise. To be beautiful is to be superior, and to be superior is to be perceived as being on the "right" side. Most Western historical and fictional accounts tell us beauty is associated with moral superiority.

Even if I say I don't need to be superior to live a happy life, I am still accepting that there is a hierarchy. I won't go into length my issues with hierarchies yet; but hierarchies do provide structures, and I do like structures. I like structures because they are supposed to serve us by helping us to categorize. But I don't like it when I am the one being categorized into a structure where I cannot change my position. There is no real freedom to pursue happiness in a hierarchy based on ranking physical features.

If you tell me I am poor, I can at least try to be rich someday, but if you tell me I am ugly, I can't change my DNA to produce the kind of features that are considered desirable. Yes, I could get plastic surgery, but my DNA won't change. Getting plastic surgery not only requires me to revoke inherent parts of myself, it requires me to revoke those who gave those parts to me, and it requires me to revoke those who share similar parts as me. In extreme circumstances, I can see reason to the first two, but it's the latter that pains me most to think about. Body dysphoria is valid, resenting abusive family is also valid, but abandoning and rejecting those who look like me is despicable. I would basically be telling them something is wrong with them, just as others told me once. I refuse to be like my haters.

I will be honest, I probably would have gotten plastic surgery if I stayed in Hong Kong. I only started to believe I was beautiful after

hearing it from my American friends. I was presented with an alternate hierarchy when I started to live in the US. Once where there was only one single hierarchy, now endless possibilities took over.

So how am I supposed to deal with this? I am ugly in Hong Kong, now I am beautiful in America as an embodiment of "otherness". Which side do I pick? Should I believe in the hierarchy or should I abandon it? If I choose to believe, I also have to accept I am only beautiful as a fetish. If I choose to abandon it, do I also have to revoke all hierarchies of aesthetic? How am I supposed to do that as an artist?

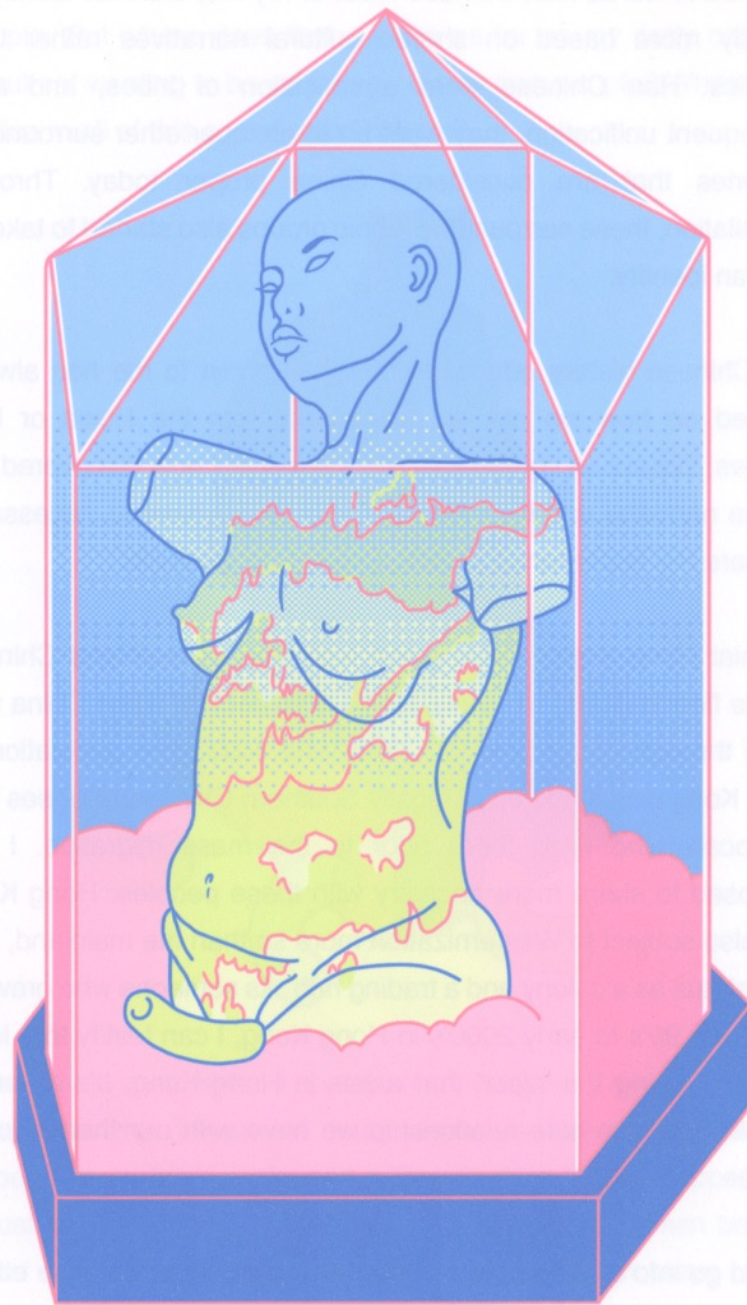
First, I could go beyond the hierarchy, and ask what dictated that hierarchy. Secondly, I could try dissecting the nature of appearance, which is the basis on which we judge beauty.

In my case, my appearance is judged based on four beauty standards, depending on which cultural context I am interacting with—

1. East Asian female amongst East Asians
2. Chinese female amongst Chinese people
3. Hong Kong female amongst Hong Kong people
4. Asian American female amongst Americans

For the purpose of introducing materials that I find the least talked about in current discourse, I will only be covering the second type and the third type.

The Chinese and Hong Kong beauty standards are closely intertwined in history. I recently started to examine the anthropology



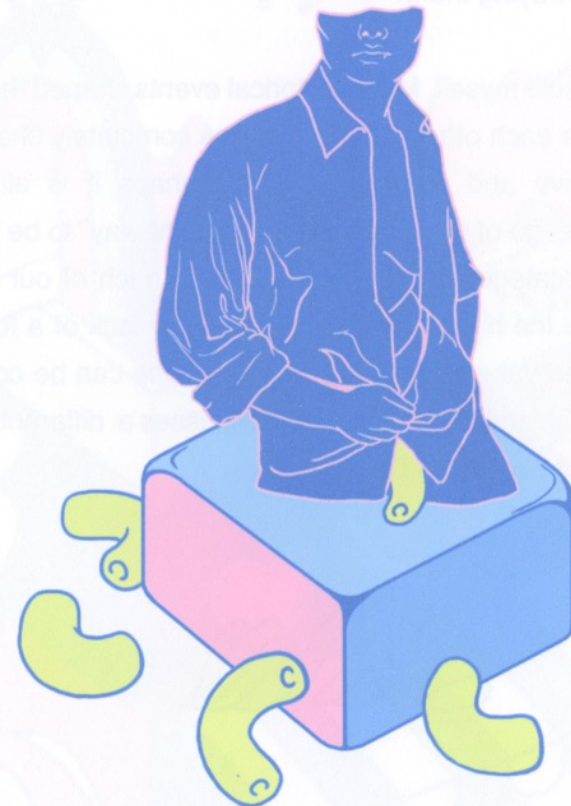
of Chinese ethnic groups. Through this, I discovered that while I have identified as Han Chinese most of my life, the Han identity is actually more based on shared cultural narratives rather than genetics. Han Chinese were a collection of tribes, and after subsequent unification, they went on to conquer other surrounding territories that are considered China proper today. Through assimilation, these surrounding ethnic groups also started to take up the Han identity.

The Chinese history education that was given to me has always focused on how we are all descended from the Huxia or Han peoples. We are all supposed to be the same. I now discovered it is a false narrative and it gives me a way to not have to necessarily compare my appearance to that of all Chinese people.

Colonial Hong Kong was a place where most mainland Chinese people fled to during the early to mid 20th century when China was going through major political unrest and wars. The population of Hong Kong was made up of mostly Southern Chinese refugees and the locals who lived there prior to the mass migration. I am supposed to share more ancestry with these peoples. Hong Kong was also subject to Westernization more so than the mainland, due to its status as a colony and a trading hub. As someone who grew up in the late 90's to early 2000's in Hong Kong, I can testify to a level of "worshipping the West" that exists in Hong Kong. It's a sort of complicated love-hate relationship we have with our then colonial master.

I could go into depth about the intermixing between Chinese ethnic groups over the last two thousand years, and I could go into depth the influence of Westernization. I could be even more diligent and

investigate the history of rapid and forced modernization of our social structures and its effects on the cultural attitudes of my people. But where does that get me as far as my petty concerns about not wanting to be called ugly by my own people? Where is my justice in all of this complicated history?



I have always understood appearance through my experience as an artist and my interaction with digital media as a millennial. Appearance is light, angle, and makeup; which is to say appearance is just all perception. I don't deny psychology and human behavior affect what we think of as attractive, but perception plays a major role in how we receive something. Digital media do a lot of the perceiving for us today, and it is why even Beyoncé is capable of

looking ugly for one split second in a live music video while in the middle of emoting a fierce expression. Then again, how many of us have actually met idols of beauty up close in person? How do we know they are beautiful if we are only perceiving their image through a medium? Are we actually receiving their beauty or just the beauty of the medium portraying them?

Now I may console myself. Many historical events shaped the way my people perceive each other. The Digital Age completely changed the way we perceive and receive beauty. Perhaps it is all relative. Perhaps I can let go of the mentality of the "right way" to be beautiful. Beauty can be categorized, but if we change each of our assigned value to it, then the hierarchy will topple due to lack of a foundation based on shared values. The only way everyone can be considered beautiful is if each and every one of us possesses a different and ever changing way of perceiving beauty.



Extrude from our candy stone wall monument,
our happiness and our grief.

Let this soft served ism slide down its pink silky throat.
The kitten beast that will forever be on guard at the foundation.



The Chinese title 癡夢 roughly translates to “Delusional Dreams”. 癡 is a Buddhist concept called “moha” in English translations. Moha is one of the three poisons that are considered the root cause of suffering. In English, moha is often interpreted as “delusional”, and takes roots from meanings like “vain, empty, useless, foolish and unreal”. However, my understanding of 癡 is intertwined with the Hong Kong Chinese cultural context, which is separate from my understanding of the word “delusional”.

癡 and the word “sticky” in Cantonese are also homonyms.

The title is taken from a Cantonese song composed and written by 黃霑 James Wong Jim, sang by Cantopop star, 張國榮 Leslie Cheung. Wong Jim was considered one of the four best literary talents Hong Kong has ever produced and wrote lyrics for over 2000 songs. Leslie was considered one of the founding fathers of Cantopop and an absolute queer icon. The song was written for a Hong Kong film called “A Chinese Ghost Story”. You may look up the song with this title if you are interested in listening. The following is a verse from the song with my English translation.

紅塵裡
美夢有幾多方向
找癡癡夢幻中心愛
路隨人茫茫

In the red dust
How many directions does this wonderful dream go
Trying to find love in this delusional dream
The road and people are just as blurry