

# CUT FROM A DIFFERENT CLOTH

The Centre for Heritage, Arts and Textile officially opens at The Mills this month with lofty ambitions and a sophisticated agenda that goes far beyond archiving and exploring the history and future of fabric arts. **Christina Ko** gets a first look



**MATERIAL GAINS**  
Huang Po-Chih's installation  
*Production Line* (2014–2018).  
Opposite page: Teoh Chin-chin  
and Mizuki Takahashi,  
co-directors of Chat

IMAGES: MOSES NG (PORTRAIT); HUANG PO-CHIH, *PRODUCTION LINE* (2014–2018), COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART, KOREA, AND THE CENTRE FOR HERITAGE, ARTS AND TEXTILE



Tsuen Wan West is an unlikely spot for a world-class museum, but that is exactly what's popped up, part of Hong Kong's latest heritage conservation project, The Mills. Buildings that until recently sat almost abandoned, where Nan Fung textile mills once operated, now house shops, cafes, office spaces and a contemporary art and design facility called the Centre for Heritage, Arts and Textile, or Chat.

It's no accident that the term "textile" is used without an "s". This was a conscious decision to distance the institution from a restrictive connection to a singular practice. Make no mistake, Chat is not an archive site tracing the history of fabric manufacturing in Hong Kong, nor is it a showcase for the wild array of textile arts created by artists and artisans from ancient to contemporary times. It's your average, avant-garde, forward-thinking, agenda-pushing contemporary arts space, a white box both physically and philosophically.

“People always ask us, ‘Why do you say textile and not textiles?’ And that’s actually a huge difference,” says Teoh Chin-chin, one of Chat’s co-directors. “Textiles, people associate with a material, fabric, cloth. So if you think of textiles, that’s actually a noun that describes a material. And we actually don’t want to be restricted to that. So we are not exhibiting only fashion items or the royal gowns, that’s not our mantra. Our mantra is to explore textile as a subject matter.”

To Teoh and co-director Mizuki Takahashi, that means the thematic range could extend from sustainability to economic production, and from the role of technology to the intangible, indomitable spirit of Hong Kong’s workforce. It’s precisely what the granddaughter of Nan Fung founder Chen Din-hwa, Vanessa Cheung, wanted to do when she spearheaded the project, the seeds for which were sown many years ago. “[When I was in school], I chose [the topic of] cotton spinning [for] a school project and interviewed my grandpa,” Cheung recalls. “That day, grandpa walked me around the factory floor and taught me that textiles was more than just cotton spinning but also weaving, dyeing and sowing. After the walk, I understood that it was the hard work and dedication of the entire generation that made Hong Kong one of the best textiles export places in the world.”

“I joined Nan Fung in 2013, and while reviewing our portfolio of businesses I found out that the buildings of the original mills 4, 5 and 6 were still standing, functioning as warehouses. Knowing how many lives these factories and the industry touched, I wanted to preserve these buildings while reimagining the future of the textile industry.”

Though the centre only officially opens this month, Takahashi and Teoh have been at work for more than two years, setting the direction and curating off-site initiatives that offer a preview of Chat’s breadth of programmes, which have been divided into three seasons that will cycle annually. Spring offers a contemporary art focus, showing mainly Asian artists in thematic exhibitions; summer will see

the launch of a solo-artist project with a participatory angle; and winter will focus on design and innovation, highlighting traditional skills and crafts.

As Takahashi explains, Hong Kong’s textile history is multifaceted and, at its heart, is not so much about beautifully crafted cloths as it is about economics and industry. “I joined this project in 2016 and at that time I didn’t know anything about the Hong Kong textile industry,” she says. “Even when I started working on [Chat], [information was] very difficult to find. I really wanted to reiterate the story behind this heritage, but my background is as a contemporary art curator, [so] I don’t want to be only trapped by this nostalgic feeling. How to reactivate or how to update this historical context to communicate it to a contemporary audience, [that] is a challenge.”



**FROM THE GROUND UP**  
Clockwise from left: A still from Jung Yeondoo’s video work *A Girl in Tall Shoes* (2018), which was filmed at Chat while the building was under renovation; another video work, Liu Chang’s *Special Economic Zone* (2018), features in Chat’s inaugural show; Vanessa Cheung, who was featured on Hong Kong Tatler’s 2018 Generation T list



IMAGES: MOSES NG (VANESSA CHEUNG); JUNG YEONDOO, *A GIRL IN TALL SHOES* (2018), COURTESY OF THE CENTRE FOR HERITAGE, ARTS AND TEXTILE (2018); COURTESY OF THE CENTRE FOR HERITAGE, ARTS AND TEXTILE

## UNFOLDED

Four artists to check out at Chat's coming spring exhibition

### SATORU AOYAMA ▶

Using an old Singer sewing machine as his primary tool, Satoru Aoyama embroiders intricate designs onto vintage prints whose subject matter could range from a simple street scene to colourful textiles being sewn to a world map. The meticulous manner in which he executes his foregrounds draws attention to the unique brilliance of handiwork.

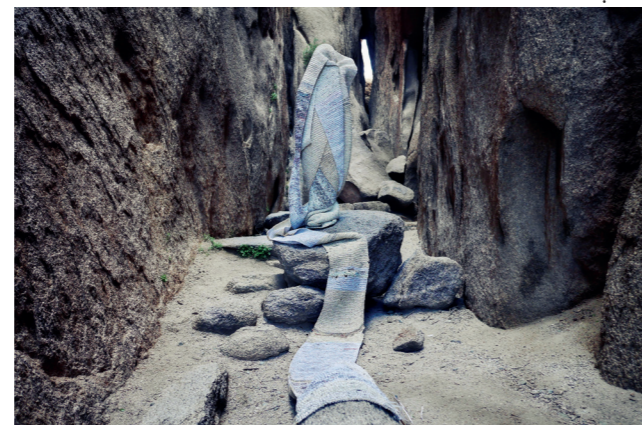


### DAYANITA SINGH ▲

Few photographers choose to transform their final output exclusively into books, as Dayanita Singh does. These “book objects”—crossovers between book, art object, exhibition and catalogue—allow her to play not just with the image in question, but their interpretation through format, layout, sequencing and re-sequencing.

### RAQUEL ORMELLA ▼

Activism is at the centre of Raquel Ormella's practice. The Australian artist uses multimedia to address social issues of all types, ranging from environmental to economic, analysing not simply the issues themselves, but speaking to the wider discourse of what activism is at its heart.



### MOVANA CHEN ▲

You could pigeonhole her as a textile artist, but Movana Chen's work is much more multilayered than that. Using shredded paper from books as her yarn, Chen “knits” items such as her wearable Body Container, but also more sculptural installations, as well as involving audiences in participatory events and even executing performance pieces.

*“Textile art is [seen as] craft—female work. I really want to challenge this kind of assumption”*

Thus far, her strategy has been to veer far from the expected. Last winter's programme included a photographic exhibition, Archiving The Mills Through The Lens, a group show featuring work from local photographers interpreting the creation of The Mills and the changing urban landscape around it. Michael Lin, an artist known for his work reproducing kitschy and culturally stereotyped fabric prints in unorthodox ways, gave a talk and unveiled a new, site-specific installation. And Filipino visual artist Alma Quinto took up a three-month residency at Chat, the fourth consecutive artist to do so, during which she worked on a piece engaging local domestic helpers. “Women came out to work in the '40s, '50s, '60s in the textile mills as a means to support family income,” explains Teoh of the link. “Women still come out to work [today], because the domestic workers support them, to help Hong Kong's economic engine keep going. [Quinto's piece] celebrates the unsung heroines of Hong Kong.”

This month, Chat launches its spring exhibition, Unfolding: Fabric of Our Life. “We are going to invite 17 artists from the Asia-Pacific region to showcase diverse ways of using fabric, and [show the artists'] engagement in the textile subject matter as well,” says Takahashi. “[But] if you expect only to see textile art, that assumption will be betrayed. One artist is showing only photographs, another is a performance collective, doing martial-arts performances in the hall. One Chinese artist is a video artist.”

There is, however, one thing that links them. “All of them somehow address the issue of labourers in the textile industry,” says Takahashi. “This is also a homage to the labourers who worked in this factory, because they were kind of overshadowed. I want to enhance the awareness of the labour and the people still working in textile factories with harsh environments.”

Is the approach too cerebral for a facility

located far from Hong Kong's art-buying crowd in the centre of the city? Tsuen Wan West isn't just a geographic distance from the gallery district of Central, it's a mom-and-pop community with arguably little interest in exploring boundary-pushing contemporary art.

“In London, New York, there are always radical things happening off-centre,” suggests Takahashi. Adds Teoh, “In some sense it's good that art is no longer a subject that is the monopoly of people who live and go to Central and Admiralty. To get more of Hong Kong to be more in touch with contemporary art and design, these places should be in the suburbs and neighbourhood. Hopefully it will be a place of civic pride if you live in Tsuen Wan. We want that to permeate the air.”

That's why Chat's innovative summer participatory programme is so essential. Last summer's Let's Build a Textile Village saw 11,000 participants assist Taguchi Yukihiro in creating a dragon from recycled fabric. Around 8,000 of those budding artists came from the immediate community. “A key part of revitalisation is about preserving one's history and showcasing it through art and education,” reminds Cheung.

That, explains Teoh, “is why we call it Chat. It's a two-way conversation, not one way.”

“Chat is a place open to everyone,” adds Takahashi. “Now cross-disciplinary is a kind of trendy word in the art world, but I still can see the borders. Textile art is [seen as] craft—female work. I really want to challenge this kind of assumption about a textile museum or textile art, and to show that we really want to make a cross-disciplinary institution—and a new model of an art centre.”

*Unfolding: Fabric of our Life runs from March 16 to June 30 at Chat, The Mills, 45 Pak Tin Par St, Tsuen Wan. For more information, visit [themills.com.hk](http://themills.com.hk)*

IMAGES: MOVANA CHEN, TRAVELLING BOOKSHELF - JOSHUA TREE (2017), PERFORMED BY MOVANA CHEN; PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT GOLDBERG; DAYANITA SINGH; MUSEUM BHAVAN; BOOK PUBLISHED BY STEIDL, 2017. © DAYANITA SINGH; RAQUEL ORMELLA, POETIC POSSIBILITY #2 (2013), COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MILANI GALLERY; SATORU AOYAMA, EMBROIDERERS (DEDICATED TO UNKNOWN EMBROIDERERS) #5, PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIYAJIMA KEI, COURTESY OF MIZUMA ART GALLERY, © SATORU AOYAMA