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Installation view of **CHOW CHUN FAI**'s solo exhibition at Eli Klein Gallery, New York, 2018. Courtesy Eli Klein Gallery.

CHOW CHUN FAI

[WEB REVIEW](#) BY MIMI WONG

ELI KLEIN GALLERY

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A born-and-bred Hongkonger, Chow Chun Fai has directed much of his creative efforts toward capturing his city's identity in flux. Chow drew from his first job as a taxi driver in his series of realist paintings such as "Hong Kong Taxi" (2003–05) and "Hong Kong Street" (2004–05), which depict the titular subjects. He's even been known to sit and paint with a canvas and easel amid Hong Kong's crowded roads.

His solo show at New York's Eli Klein Gallery presented the latest additions to his group of works "Painting on Movies" (2006–). At first glance, the 19 canvases on display appeared simply to be film stills reinterpreted through enamel and oil. But closer inspection revealed that these moments—accompanied by telling subtitles—are carefully selected to reflect Hong Kong's uncertain place in the world.



CHOW CHUN FAI, *Godfather II – Keep Your Friends Close But Your Enemies Closer*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 135 × 200 cm. Courtesy the artist and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.

The exhibition began with *Godfather II – Keep Your Friends Close But Your Enemies Closer* (2018), based on a scene from Francis Ford Coppola's famous *Godfather* trilogy. In the artist's tableau, he avoids an exact mirroring of the movie, adding texture to the backdrop and highlighting details that may not have been as prominent on screen, such as the wood paneling on the wall and the rust-colored fabrics of the chair and sofa. The subtitle and phrase, "Keep your friends close but your enemies closer," painted as part of the composition and made famous in the West by the character of Michael Corleone (Al Pacino), actually originates from Chinese general Sun Tzu. Singled out in Chow's work, the adage becomes apparently ironic—or perhaps appropriate—because it is suggestive of the position adopted by mainland China toward Hong Kong.

Chow repeatedly deploys this tactic of double meanings through paintings of other films. The paired works *Curse of the Golden Flower: You Can Only Have What I Choose to Give You* and *What I Do Not Give, You Must Never Take By Force* (both 2018) draw from the 2006 Chinese epic directed by Zhang Yimou. The two-part titular line spoken by Emperor Ping, played by Chow Yun Fat, to his son Prince Jai (Jay Chou), can be applied to China's paternalism toward its specially administered territory. Beside the artist's deliberate choice of dialogue, his eye for detail shines through in his meticulous execution of the actors' costumes—intricate armor plating embellished with dragon reliefs.



CHOW CHUN FAI, *Curse of the Golden Flower: What I Do Not Give, You Must Never Take By Force*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 100 × 150 cm. Courtesy the artist and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.



CHOW CHUN FAI, *When You Don't Take No for an Answer, There Is Still a Chance You'll Get What You Want*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 100 × 150 cm. Courtesy the artist and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.

By referencing canonical movies produced respectively for Western and Chinese audiences, the series reflects the cultural hybridity still negotiated every day in the former British colony. In some cases, Chow purposely juxtaposes two of these popular films in paintings placed side by side. The single tear that American actress Natalie Portman sheds in *Leon the Professional: I Want Love or Death* (2018) resembles the tear falling from the face of Chinese actress Carina Lau in *2046: When You Don't Take No for an Answer, There Is Still a Chance You'll Get What You Want* (2018). As seen in the emphasized teardrops, Chow's interpretative rendering of the original images uncovers the flexibility to construct meanings and draw parallels across cultures. The bilingual subtitles in both traditional Chinese and English included in the paintings serve as a reminder of the constant cultural translations and mistranslations that occur.



CHOW CHUN FAI, *A Better Tomorrow: We Were Scolded When We Were Bad. When We Turn To Be Good We Are Being Tracked*, 2013, enamel paint on canvas, 100 × 150 cm. Courtesy the artist and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.

Chow's strongest pieces in the show were the ones in which he hews closest to his roots and references Hong Kong filmmakers. In *A Better Tomorrow: We Were Scolded When We Were Bad. When We Turn To Be Good We Are Being Tracked* (2013), the artist recreates an iconic moment from John Woo's 1986 action thriller. To achieve the painting's glossy finish, Chow challenged himself by experimenting with industrial enamel, commonly used in old billboards and movie theater signs in Hong Kong. The medium's less precise quality lends an impressionistic feel to the painting, serving to heighten the anguished look of the main character (also played by Chow Yun Fat), while accentuating the effect of the background lights that appear out of focus. Again, the words can be read as a double entendre, alluding to Big Brother and the issue of censorship.



CHOW CHUN FAI, *The Grandmasters: The World Is a Big Place. Why Limit It to North and South*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 155 × 260 cm. Courtesy the artist and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.

The tone of Chow's work becomes philosophical in two paintings inspired by the oeuvre of Wong Kar Wai. *The Grandmasters: The World Is a Big Place. Why Limit It to North and South?* (2018) features yet another Hong Kong star, Tony Leung, as Ip Man in the biopic of the famed martial arts practitioner, facing off with his kungfu master. Compared to the dark atmosphere that permeates the source material, the painting's colors are brightened significantly. In this way, even as Chow borrows from the highly stylized images of auteurs, he succeeds in making the work his own. The question posed in the subtitle easily goes beyond martial arts rivalries to address greater geopolitics and the ways in which we orient ourselves. A close-up portrait of actress Zhang Ziyi in *The Grandmasters: Kungfu Is About Precision* (2018) similarly gestures to the sense of harmony for which the Daoist-influenced martial arts practice strives. That precision speaks to both the delicate dance that Hong Kong must perform in its current position and the fine balance that Chow strikes in his art that doubles as political critique.

Mimi Wong is a New York desk editor for ArtAsiaPacific.

Chow Chun Fai's *solo exhibition* is on view at Eli Klein Gallery, New York, until November 17, 2018.

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