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# Art Radar

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## **Lord of the blowflies: Raymond Lam on Hong Kong – in conversation**

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**Raymond Lam camouflages thousands of blowflies in his canvases in a painstaking search for truth and identity – both Hong Kong’s and his own.**

*Art Radar* talks to the young artist ahead of his debut exhibition “Colourless”, opening at Koru Contemporary on 19 March 2016.



Raymond Lam, 'Split 1.2', 2016, flies, paint on canvas, acrylic, framed: 640 x 450 mm. Image courtesy the artist and Koru Contemporary Art.

In the tradition of 16th and 17th century Dutch still lifes, artists included flies and other fluttering insects in their paintings to represent the fleeting impermanence of beauty. Since then the fly has taken a backseat in the realm of visual art, except perhaps for **Yoko Ono's** infamous 'non-show' in 1971 – an exhibition that was advertised but which never really happened. Ono took out an ad announcing a one-woman show at **MoMA**, producing a catalogue that depicted her releasing an enormous glass jar of flies into the city. "But of course", **Ono reportedly said**, "there were no flies, and no jar. It was just in your mind". The show was never held, and visitors were greeted by a sign that read, "This is not here."

At Raymond Lam's (b. 1983) debut exhibition "**Colourless**" (until 21 May 2016), however, the flies are very much there. The Jiejiang-born, Sydney-educated, Hong Kong-based artist is presenting a series of paintings featuring thousands of preserved blowflies camouflaged in vibrant acrylic and paint. Painstakingly lined up in glittering rows, the armies of minute blowflies are simultaneously exquisite and uncomfortably evocative of decay. Such an uncanny and politically pertinent aesthetic is used in service of Hong Kong's complex search for identity and truth.



Works from Raymond Lam's "Colourless" (2016) at the Koru Contemporary Art. Photo: Michele Chan.

Lam asks in his artist statement: "Is it all over for Hong Kong, or is new hope waiting for us just around the corner?" *Art Radar* correspondent and fellow Hong Konger **Michele Chan** talks to the artist about his work, his life as an artist and his hopes for China's most controversy-laden city.

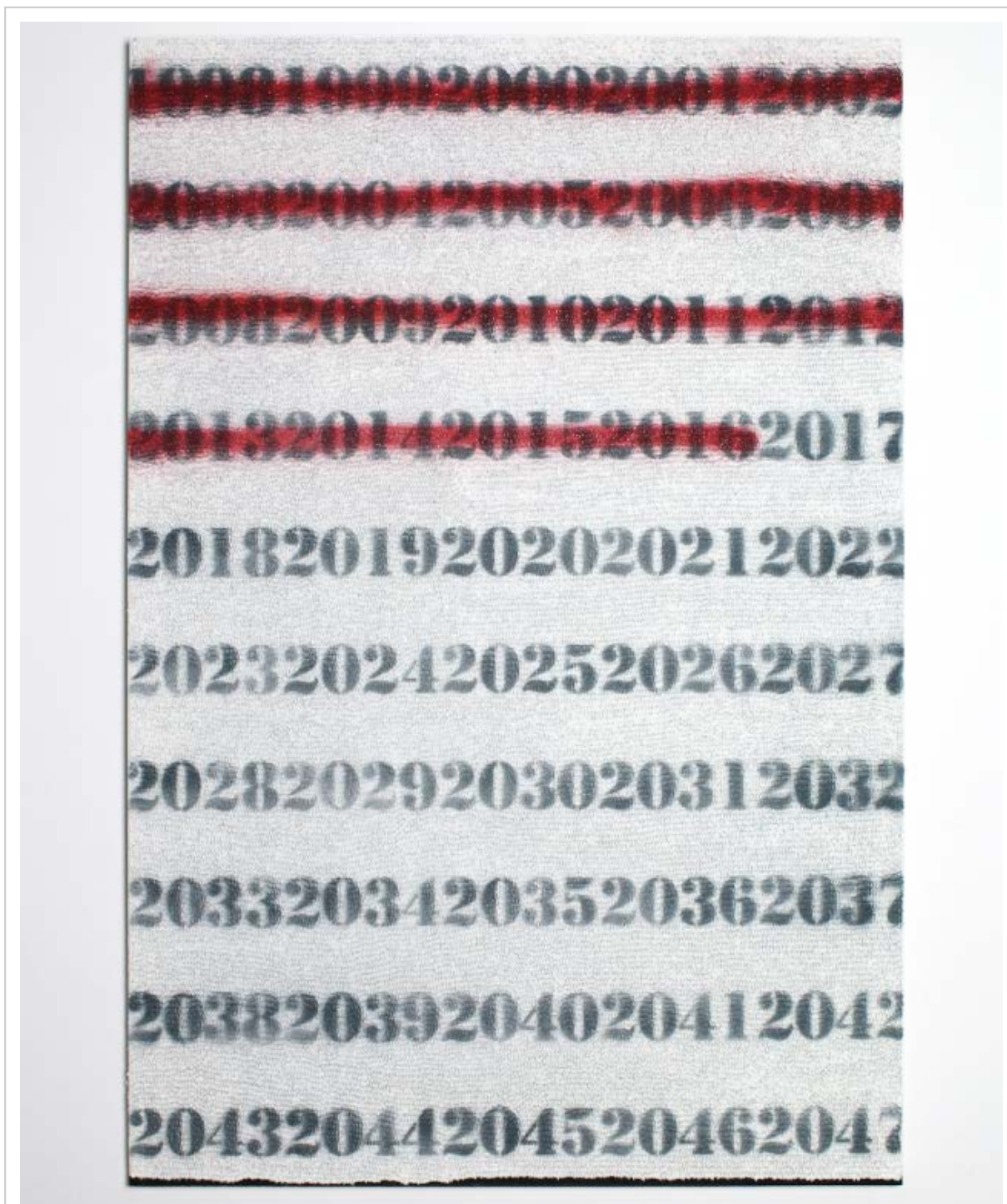
## The Flies

**Let's start with the obvious: you use flies – blowflies, to be specific – as a primary material in this debut series. It's not a very typical choice of material. When and how did the idea occur to you?**

The idea came to me during a hot day in Hong Kong in summer 2014. There were flies buzzing about, and as I swatted at them I thought about what they represented, i.e. the ugly, the dirty, the filthy and the decaying. It was then that I began exploring the possibility of using them in art.

At that point I was lost and disillusioned, unhappy with my love life and, by extension, life in general. I was asking a lot of big questions, like, "What is truth?", "What is life?" or, "What do I want from life?" and I kept getting stuck. I began to realise that, because we live in such a finance-driven city, our wants and desires are heavily conditioned. Even ostensibly innate needs are driven by social expectations, with the entire city, and indeed the world, obsessed with appearances. I wanted to tear down the façade in order to arrive at what was within me – in order to arrive at the 'truth'.

And that's when I encountered those flies. I thought to myself: if I painted over them, and made them look nice, what would happen? From afar you'd see a perfect glossy finish; then you'd look closer and discover the flies. My works recreate the façade and the pretence whilst almost immediately exposing the interior, hopefully serving as a reminder urging people to look closer – to look beneath impeccable surfaces and to question superficial appearances.



Raymond Lam, '50', 2016, flies, paint and acrylic on canvas. Image courtesy the artist and Koru Contemporary Art.

**Can you tell our readers how exactly you collected so many flies, and the methodology involved in these pieces?**

There are over 3,000 different types of flies, and I chose the blowfly. It's larger than the housefly and very common. At first I tried to catch them myself, but pretty soon I realised it would take forever to amass the number I wanted for my concept to work. I started doing research and discovered there were farms in China that breed flies. Yes, there is such a thing! Flies recycle nutrients and their larvae is a low-cost, high-protein feed for livestock. They're really rather environmentally friendly, actually.

So I phoned up this farm in Guangxi. They had no idea what I wanted – they must have thought I was crazy! In the end I made a trip up to the farm. I explained what I wanted, and at first they gave me pupas (the life stage after larva) to breed in Hong Kong. I actually built a cage in my studio to incubate the pupas, but due to temperature issues the results weren't great: out of 10,000 pupas, only 1,000 flies were

successfully bred. Also the smell really wasn't great at all...

In the end I arranged for the farm to breed and kill the flies for me, but I had to teach them how to preserve and sterilise the dead flies. The flies are sterilised once in the farm, immersed into a mixture of alcohol and Polyethylene glycol PEG-600, and I repeated the process when the flies arrived in Hong Kong. This was partly for sanitary reasons and partly to achieve the dried up, brittle, glittering effect. It takes a week to sterilise them and another week for them to dry properly. Here are some samples, if you want to take a look.



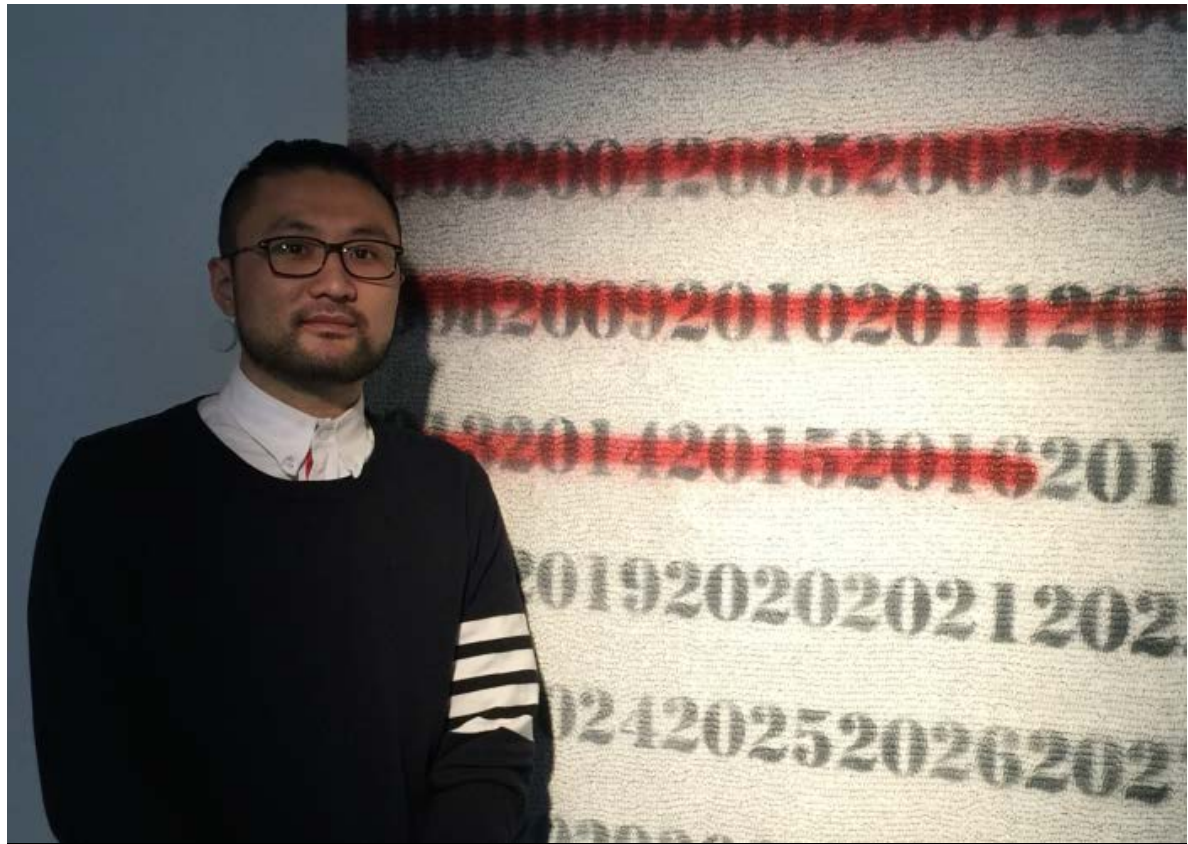
The preserved flies used by Raymond Lam. Photo: Michele Chan.

**They are rather beautiful, actually, in their own way. All sparkly and delicate.**

Yes, they are. The next step was to glue them onto the canvas, one by one, one lined up after another, to create the images and symbols I had in mind. This was a long, painstaking process – the largest piece, 50, took me three full months. I can glue around 250 flies in an hour, and I discovered my limit was 6 hours a day. After that I'd get too tired, and my back and shoulders would start to hurt really badly. Anyway, after I finished gluing I would spray paint.

**One of the most immediate impressions your works give, especially before viewers realise the involvement of flies, is the vibrancy of colour. And yet you named the series "Colourless". What does colour mean to you, artistically and philosophically?**

The theme "Colourless" comes from a line in the Buddhist sutra "Colour is emptiness; emptiness is colour" (translated by the Chinese translator Xuanzang). I borrow this concept in hopes of conveying the message that everything we see is shrouded by a layer of false colour. So it's the finish that appeals to me – the role of colour in covering up the rotting and the unwanted. Colour was involved in the concept right from the beginning, even before I thought about using Hong Kong and colonial symbols. At first I planned to do just abstract forms – it was only later that the Hong Kong element came to me.



Raymond Lam next to his work '50' at Koru Contemporary Art. Photo: Michele Chan.

## The City

**Moving on to the Hong Kong element... Are you in effect comparing Hong Kong people to flies? Your artist statement reads, "What makes these flies special is their love of the scent of decay. [...] In the ugly side of human nature we find similar predilections for all kinds of drugs, money, power, carnal pleasures – aren't these just our rotting flesh?" Would you say that you are a pessimist on the subject of human nature – an extreme cynic?**

No, not at all. I'm quite the optimist. I just want to show people that even ugly and dirty things can be packaged with a beautiful exterior. The fly metaphor – it's less an analogy for human nature than a warning. Once people give up trying to discern what is true and what is merely surface, they end up chasing all the wrong things, and fighting for all the wrong ideals. They become like flies, dancing and whirling around rotting food...

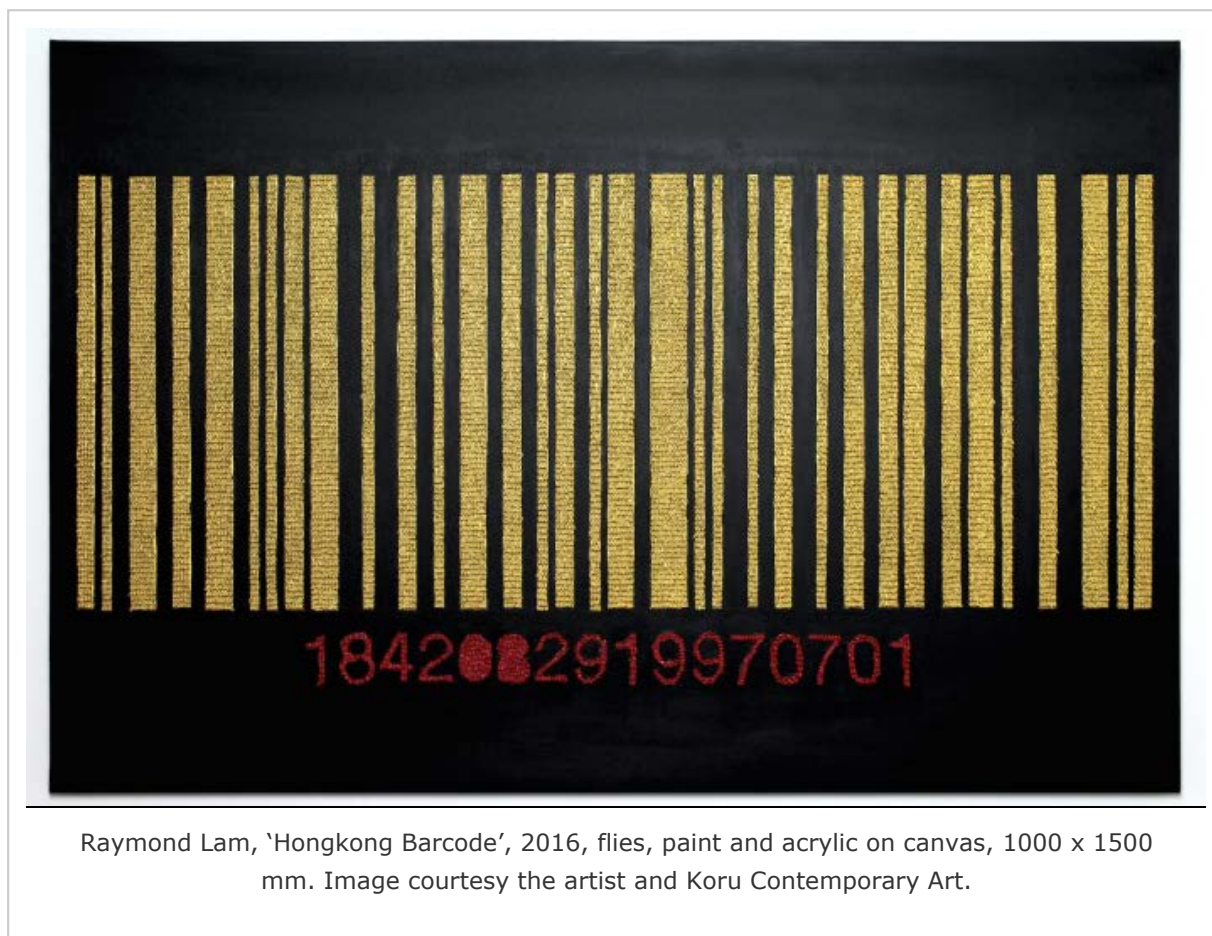
**That's quite a powerful image. What's your view on the situation in Hong Kong in recent years, and how do your works relate?**

I returned to Hong Kong in 2008 after eight years in Sydney. I'd missed the 2003 SARS epidemic, and by late 2008 the economy had started to take a turn for the worse. I came home to a drastically different social atmosphere – a very negative one, to be honest – with widespread discontent, anger and frustration. The worse thing was – because there's actually nothing wrong with being angry and frustrated per se – that people didn't know what they wanted. I couldn't see what people were fighting for, and they didn't know themselves either.

**Democracy, universal suffrage, political autonomy, and so on?**

The way I see it, it's all about personal interest rather than ideals, and about profit rather than identity. It's always been that way. From its colonial days to its return to Chinese sovereignty, Hong Kong has never had its own identity – it's always been about commerce. All these recent political demonstrations, and the annual July 1st marches – I admire them, and in fact I used to attend them myself. But I began to see the invisible forces lurking behind the high-minded ideals. In the end it's all about commercial interest, at the level of corporations, and in fact personal interest as well, at the level of the individual. We

all just want to live well, live better...



**And there's nothing too wrong with that, is there? We want affordable housing, better living standards...**

Yes, there's nothing wrong with that, but I guess my point is that people need to look beyond the surface, to really understand what they're fighting for, how they're fighting for it, and in the end, what they really want. Instead of just creating noise, or acting unknowingly in service of larger commercial forces.

My work *Hong Kong Bar Code* (2016) deals with this. A bar code represents commerce, product, and the exchange of goods, and for me Hong Kong is precisely just that: a mere product being traded between two countries. I used the numbers 1842082919970701 to generate the code pattern: the Treaty of Nanking, signed between Britain and the Qing Empire, was dated 29 August 1842, and Hong Kong was returned to China on 1 July 1997. It's nearly ten years since the handover and we are still trying to find our way.

**Do you have hope? That things will get better?**

Actually I do.

**You do! So you're an idealist.**

Yes, I suppose you could say that. Even flies are useful, you see! But people need to wake up, and perhaps that's what I'm trying to do. To wake people up.



Raymond Lam, 'Split 3.2', 2016, flies, paint on canvas, acrylic, framed: 640 x 450 mm. Image courtesy the artist and Koru Contemporary Art.

## The Artist

**You mentioned just now that the Hong Kong element was the last element to enter the concept. So "Colourless" started from the personal and extended into the political. Can you tell us a little more about yourself?**

I'm a bit of everything – I used to do design, and then I realised I was too stubborn for it. I wanted to do my own thing instead of just acting as a tool for clients. So I switched to study fine art, majoring in video. But even then, I never planned on becoming a full-blown visual artist. When I came back to Hong Kong I went into advertising for a while and then into gallery work.

So "Colourless" is my first ever solo exhibition as an artist – and it originated simply from that random idea and urge to make something out of flies. Nothing was deliberate and nothing was really planned – and yes, it started from the personal and extended into the political. The art I made when I was younger, in art school in Sydney, was also very personal – much more so than these works. I'm not ambitious, and I'm not looking for fame. I'm just trying to work through things, and to understand myself more through my art, I guess.

**After creating these works in "Colourless", do you feel any closer to establishing your own identity?**

I think you could say that. As I said, the process of creating these works was long and arduous – I nearly got a back injury from the endless hours of gluing flies to the canvas – but it was also very meditative and soothing. In the repetitive act of arranging and gluing the flies it was like I was communicating with the



artwork, and I discovered how organic art was: the concept for the exhibition developed and matured gradually even as I glued the flies, almost as if it had a life of its own. And of course, I gained quite a sense of personal satisfaction simply from forming a concept, completing the works and holding my first own exhibition.



Raymond Lam, 'Split 4.2', 2016, flies, paint on canvas, acrylic, framed: 640 x 450 mm. Image courtesy the artist and Koru Contemporary Art.

### **Congratulations again! Finally – what is it like being an artist in Hong Kong?**

As I'm sure you're very much aware, it's very, very hard. The environment and atmosphere in this city just isn't right for artists. I'm still working full time, and I created "Colourless" in my spare time after work. It can get very draining and discouraging. But to be fair, there's already a whole lot more support today for artists – more funding, more platforms to exhibit, and more attention. So it's all good. And I'm sure it'll get better.

**Michele Chan**

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*The interview was conducted in Cantonese and translated into English by the author.*

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