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Samson Plays to His Strengths

The Must-See Show in Hong Kong



Installation view of Samson Young, *Palazzo Gundane (homage to the myth-maker who fell to earth)* (2017)

By  Michele Chan

researcher, Sotheby's Hong Kong

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It is well worth venturing across the harbor to visit “[Samson Young: Songs for Disaster Relief World Tour](#)” at the [M+ Pavilion](#) in West Kowloon, especially for those who missed the Hong Kong artist's much-admired presentation at the Venice Biennale last year.

The Pavilion, which opened in 2016, is the first completed M+ space (the museum proper is scheduled to open next year), and the journey from Kowloon Station is a complex meander around a partial construction site. Once inside, your efforts will be rewarded.

“Songs for Disaster Relief World Tour” is theatrical and seductive—a multi-sensory environment at once eclectic and elegant, kitsch yet complex. It is assembled around the unlikely theme of 1980s charity music singles such as *Do They Know It's Christmas*, written by Bob Geldof and Midge Ure for Band Aid in 1984 as a fundraiser for famine relief in Africa, and *We Are the World*, produced by Quincy Jones, co-written by Lionel Richie and Michael Jackson and featuring 46 stars under the name United Support of Artists for Africa in 1985. Here, Young reimagines the songs to create a dense and intricate orchestration of sonic and video work, sculpture, performance and installation.



Installation view of Samson Young, *Palazzo Gundane (homage to the myth-maker who fell to earth)* (2017). Courtesy the artist

The first chamber of the five-roomed exhibition resembles the foyer of a music theatre with plush pink carpeting, music posters on the walls and a soundtrack of relaxed jazz. The centerpiece, a 3D-printed sculpture housed in a glass vitrine, is a bizarre amalgam of historical references including the Hellenistic sculpture, *The Winged Victory of Samothrace*, the Ancient Greek philosopher Pythagorus, the 40th President of the USA, Ronald Reagan, a generic spaceship and a military bugle. The large and arresting work teeters between somber grandeur and tacky vulgarity; positioned sideways in the vitrine, as though fallen, it suggests the decline of neoliberalism and questions the notion of “progress”.



Installation view of Samson Young, *Carillon* (2018). Courtesy the artist

A padded stage door leads to a second chamber that is dimly lit in purple hues: an eccentric hybrid nightclub-cinema-living room scattered with random furniture and peculiar knick-knacks. On small TV screens computer-generated animations tell the story of a fictional schizophrenic musician obsessed with Christmas-related songs; while velvet curtains, emblazoned with tongue-in-cheek lyrics printed in gold, swirl hypnotically around the room. Young conjures a disorienting, carnivalesque disquiet, an offbeat vibe underscored by a crooning soundtrack—the artist's repurposed renditions of the 1980s charity pop anthems.

In the next room a hush descends. The Kwan Sing Choir, comprising members of the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions—which will perform at Art Basel Hong Kong—whispers, rather than sings, *We Are the World*.



Samson Young, *We Are the World* as performed by the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions Choir (2017)

Elsewhere, Young covers Simon & Garfunkel's 1970 hit, *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, but replaces the lyrics with nonsensical numbers sung in Cantonese—his take on the Cantonese version sung by Hong Kong pop stars in 1991 to raise funds for Eastern China flooding relief efforts

Despite their good intentions, these pop initiatives are problematic because of their First-World condescension and the ways in which they manipulate our emotional response to human suffering. In his parody of these charity singles, Young addresses the humanistic premise of culture, questioning whether art or music really can save the world. In his interrogation of “feelgood” idealism, Young directly implicates the complacency of viewer: in the final room, a luxurious leather couch beckons, suggesting we just sit and enjoy the music.