

MATRIX 284

SIN WAI KIN

THE STORY CHANGING



Victoria Sung: You started off in the experimental drag scene in London and created a robust onstage persona called Victoria Sin about a decade ago. Can you talk about how you began performing drag?

Sin Wai Kin: When I got into drag, I wasn't thinking about it as part of my art practice. It was something that I was doing to be part of

my community. My first performance was in the basement of The Glory in London for an open mic night. I remember being really nervous because it felt so personal—so much of what I was doing then was about trying to unpack my relationship with Western femininity. From there, I continued to explore drag and created what ended up being my first concrete character, Victoria Sin.

VS: What does this character represent for you? I imagine that's changed over time.

SWK: At the time, my name was Victoria Sin, and I only started calling the character that after I decided to use my Cantonese name, Sin Wai Kin. It wasn't until I started making other characters that I realized that I was using Victoria Sin to unpack my own socialization in a Western context. It was through this process of putting on and taking off this really exaggerated femininity—bringing it to the skin and then literally wiping it off—that I realized I wasn't a woman.

VS: This concept of having to put something on in a deliberate and exaggerated way to be able to strip it back and take it off is fascinating: that you have to build up the accretion before you can really wipe it away.

SWK: I think drag is like a magnifying glass: to make something so extreme is to look at it more closely.

VS: At what point did you start to merge drag—something that you saw as existing outside of your artistic practice—with the works you were making?

SWK: I realized that drag allowed me to do all of the things that I was trying to express in other mediums. Once I started to

develop a language specifically through writing and filmmaking, creating characters and animating them, I realized that I could more effectively describe what I was trying to get at.

VS: How many characters have you created since Victoria Sin?

SWK: It's hard to say. Some characters are more than one because I'm interested in undoing binaries. I often have one character who's more like two characters trapped in an internalized yet externalized false dichotomy. I like that there can be one, but also two, and there are versions of each because that slippage is true to what it's like to exist as a person in the world.

VS: Can you talk a bit about two of the characters in your BAMPPFA exhibition: The Storyteller and Change?



SWK: The Storyteller is a character I use to think about how storytelling not only depicts, but also creates, reality. Storytelling is a tool that we use to figure out our relationships to our context and our place in the world. History is storytelling. Science is storytelling. Religion is storytelling.

The Storyteller was born in 2020 as a news presenter in *Today's Top Stories* because it was a time when everybody was watching the news and trying to figure out what was going on. The Storyteller helps us think about a binary of subjective and objective knowledge, and how storytelling nowadays often produces false dichotomies. We're witnessing this in the political moment now. And I created Change to think about how to bring about change within the hegemonic narratives that we exist in.

In bringing these two characters together, I'm interested in thinking about how narratives are embodied, how we absorb them without knowing, without thinking, and then reproduce them. But if we have some awareness of this process, then we have the opportunity to change it at some point along the way.

VS: In *The Breaking Story*, are the characters aware of being part of one another? Are they aware of their multiplicity?

SWK: In *The Breaking Story*, the characters exist in parallel universes, and they aren't aware that they have other selves that exist in different worlds. They're trying to figure out whether their reality is real, what makes reality real, and what the role of storytelling is in that.

In all of my works, the characters are grappling with what their relationship is to their context, to each other, and to themselves. And sometimes there is a little bit of awareness, and sometimes

there's none. I want people to go on that journey with the characters because, to be honest, I feel like I'm constantly renegotiating these relationships myself.

VS: So many of your works touch on larger existential questions of whether or not the real is real or the subjectivity that's embedded in what we perceive to be objective. What are the influences you draw from when making your work?

SWK: I'm always drawing inspiration from science fiction authors to think about the process of world-building. At the moment, I'm doing a lot of research into the idea of time because I'm trying to think about how time relates to storytelling. Just as a Western conception of time is linear, so is a Western structure of storytelling. In Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," she talks about the hero narrative and how it's like a straight line: It starts somewhere and ends somewhere, it's very one dimensional, and it always involves a hero that has something they have to overcome.

I'm trying to use the theory of general relativity and quantum entanglement and the idea that time is not absolute and everybody has an individual experience of time to think about how everybody also has an individual experience of reality. Many queer theorists and postcolonial theorists deconstruct how time constructs reality and how a Western idea of time is so drilled into us that we can't conceive the possibility of storytelling from a different perspective.

Both of the works in the exhibition are circular narratives that don't have a beginning or an end. It seems to make sense when you think about the way a clock works: we return to the same point, but we arrive each time changed.



VS: What resonances or reverberations do you hope to create by showing the two works together?

SWK: With *The Breaking Story*, I hope that people think about their relationship to the idea of authenticity and performance, what's fantasy and what's reality, and who gets to define those things. Reality is constructed when we agree on what that is. It's not something that underlies our everyday. It's something that we create.

And with *Dreaming the End*, I'm interested in examining how speaking the English language, for example, also reproduces the power structures that have shaped it. The ideas of colonialism and capitalism and patriarchy are embedded in language, and we reproduce them when we speak it.

I want people to see these works and be immersed in their worlds, but then also to become aware of all of the things that construct them. I think being able to take a step back, and look at how we contribute to or are part of these systems is really important.

VS: Language is such a powerful tool in terms of how it constructs our worlds, but also how it can constrict our worlds. And I like that you find so much expansiveness within the worlds that you create that are not necessarily related to the verbal, but that you provide other tools of communication, visual and otherwise.

SWK: Absolutely. I think we live in a constructed reality. So by constructing a fantasy world, I'm trying to also lay bare how constructed our world is and how much choice we have in places we didn't realize before.



Exhibition Credit

MATRIX 284 / Sin Wai Kin: The Story Changing is curated by Victoria Sung, Phyllis C. Wattis Senior Curator.

The exhibition is part of BAMPFA's ongoing MATRIX series of contemporary art exhibitions. Founded in 1978, MATRIX provides artists with an experimental platform to make and show new work. The MATRIX program is made possible by a generous endowment gift from Phyllis C. Wattis.

Works in the Exhibition

Sin Wai Kin

Dreaming the End, 2023

Single-channel video

(color, sound, 21:06 min)

Courtesy of the artist and Fondazione Memmo, Rome

Sin Wai Kin

The Breaking Story, 2022

Six-channel video

(color, sound, 6:31 minutes)

Courtesy of the artist, Sunpride Foundation
and Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong

The logo for BAMPFA (Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive) is a dark red, rounded square with the word "BAMPFA" in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters centered inside.

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