



PF25 cultural projects October 2023 Programme
Residency, Exhibition, BASEL

Ellen Pau: Speculative Generations of Flora Zero
Presented by PF25 and curated by Angelika Li

Vernissage: Friday 20.10 19-21h
Open Studio: 21.10 12-18h
Exhibition until 3.11. Viewing by appointment only: team@PF25.org
Atelier Mondial Studio 3
Freilager-Platz 9, 4142 Münchenstein/Basel (Tram 11 to Freilager)

Curatorial Notes
Angelika Li, Autumn 2023

Ellen Pau is one of the most influential pioneering video artists and an active catalyst for advocating the development of media art in Hong Kong. In this exhibition, PF25 is delighted to present her latest video installation entitled 'Speculative Generations of Flora Zero' – a genome project of *Bauhinia x blakeana*, commonly known as the Hong Kong Orchid Tree. The narrative of this work revolves around the fact that the plant cannot self-propagate without the horticultural practice of grafting and rooting cuttings. The plant was a serendipitous discovery by Jean-Marie Delavay, a French Catholic missionary along the shoreline of Pokfulam in colonial Hong Kong during the 1880s. This botanical rarity, now known as *Bauhinia x blakeana*, was formally named *B. blankeana* by botanist S. T. Dunn in 1908 in honour of Sir Henry Blake, who served as the city's British Governor from 1898 to 1903.

The 'x' indicates that the plant is a hybrid not typically found in nature. It is not considered a species but rather an artificially maintained cultivar, as explained by the research paper by Carol Lau, Lawrence Ramsden and Richard Saunders from the Department of Ecology & Biodiversity, The University of Hong Kong (HKU)¹. This sparks the nurturing of speculative generations of Flora Zero, deeply rooted in its parental species which are both confirmed not indigenous to Hong Kong.

The incredible resilience of the plant was recorded to have survived a typhoon in 1906 and was subsequently chosen to propagate new trees to be planted across the city. Designated as the emblematic city flower in 1965 and known as '洋紫荆' [joeng4 zi2

¹Lau CPY, Ramsden L and Saunders RMK, 2005. Hybrid origin of 'Bauhinia blakeana' American Journal of Botany, 92: 525-533: <https://bsapubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.3732/ajb.92.3.525> (cited on 7 June, 2023),

ging1) 'in Chinese. According to Saunders, Professor of Botany at the HKU who is also the co-author of 'Portraits of Trees of Hong Kong and Southern China' (2019), this characteristic could be seen as an inauspicious symbol for a city that embodies a blend of Chinese and British heritage. Yet, the plant's prominence flourished after Hong Kong's 1997 handover to China, adorning coats of arms, flags, and coins. Since then, the official Chinese name has been reduced to '紫荊' in the Basic Law, while '洋' is scrutinised due to its connotations of 'foreignness'. Professor Jim Chi Yung, from the Department of Geography at The University of Hong Kong, clarified in an interview with Hong Kong 01 that the two species are in fact very different and surmised that the word in question might have been removed due to political concerns.²

Within the mysterious origins of this plant, intriguing historical connections to Basel emerge. Botanic research conducted by former PF25 resident artists Luke Ching and Mei Cheung reveals that the Swedish botanist and explorer Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) attributed the genus *Bauhinia* to the Bauhin brothers - Johann Bauhin (1541-1613) and Gaspard Bauhin (1560-1624), both botanists from Basel and the latter was the first professor of Botany at the University of Basel, and one of the most prominent plant systematists of his time³. The *Bauhinia x blakeana*, beyond its aesthetic charm, holds potential for respiratory health and tuberculosis, still fueling botanical interest and research around the world.

Drawing inspiration from historical contexts, the enigmatic nature of the flower, and the transformative potential of genome technology, alongside the rapid advances in AI, Pau embarks on a journey to delve deeper, experiment, and cultivate the imagination of hypothetical 'Flora Zero' within the AI-generated realm. The audience can experience a fraction of the genome sonification from the *Bauhinia x blakeana* in this installation.

This artistic journey offers an evolving exploration of the captivating *Bauhinia x Blakeana* flower, connecting past, present, and future in a poetic way. This new exhibition in Basel marks the third chapter, focusing on the future. This work develops upon the artist's previous two projects - representing the present was 'F10ra 0' (2022), known as '靈基因' in Chinese, which involves a 3D audio sonification of the *Bauhinia x Blakeana* genome, as part of 'Hylozoism' exhibition at the Hong Kong Design Institute in 2022/2023. The work derives its name from the perspective

² 【回歸20載】洋紫荊被去洋化變紫荊花 學者：兩品種極大分別原文網址:香港01 撰文：張雅婷 24.6.2017 https://www.hk01.com/article/97709?utm_source=01articlecopy&utm_medium=referral (cited on 6 Oct, 2023)

³ University of Basel, Department of Environmental Sciences, Bauhin 2022 – Conference website: <https://herbarium.unibas.ch/en/bauhin2022/> (cited on 6.7.2023)

of the genome being a divine code, akin to something bestowed by the Divine. This notion aligns with the belief that the genome embodies the essence of the flower and carries a profound message to the people of Hong Kong.

Pau's generative audio and video installation, titled 'Emergence (A Work in Progress)' (2016) was presented at the Hong Kong Heritage Discovery Centre in the same year. This installation embodied the past, drawing on elements including the I Ching, the DNA of plants, and the concept of hybridity. The sound piece was created through algorithmic mixing, fusing the national anthems of the United Kingdom and China with field recordings from Pokfulam and also the audible environment of the exhibition venue through a microscope.

About the artist

Ellen Pau, a self-taught artist, is a pioneering figure in media art in Hong Kong. Alongside her artistic pursuits, she is also a professional radiographer. Her artistic journey commenced as a videographer for Zuni Icosahedron, where she was instrumental in producing performance documentations and videos. Notably, in 1986, Pau co-founded Videotage, an early collective of Asian video artists.

In 1992, she received the Asia Cultural Council Fellowship, which enabled her to create the iconic video piece, 'Song of the Goddess'. Pau has also contributed to independent films, worked with cantopop groups, and exhibited internationally.

Among her recent works are 'The Shape of Light' (2022) at M+ Museum, '52Hz' (2023) at Tai Kwun, and her involvement in 'Awakening, Art in Society in Asia 1960s-1990s' at the National Gallery Singapore in 2019. Her early works can be found at Vidéo Bureau and Centre Pompidou.

The Asia Art Archive has introduced the Ellen Pau Archive, which holds a wealth of her artistic legacy, and her video works are now part of various esteemed collections.

Acknowledgement

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About PF25 cultural projects

Pfeffergässlein 25, 4051 Basel, Switzerland www.PF25.org connect@PF25.org

PF25 cultural projects is a Basel-based non-profit organisation which aims to build mutual understanding, to develop an intercultural network and to generate creative energies between Hong Kong and Basel - extending to other regions in Switzerland. Our cultural exchange and research approach is on-the-ground and about daily life, observed and engaged through a wide range of activities. We bring people together in workshops, talks, screenings, exhibitions, field trips, interviews, pop-ups, publications and more. This allows PF25 to foster dialogues and deepen understanding between the two city-regions, welcoming diverse stories and wide perspectives across generations. We strive to discover connections through reflections, to expand our spectrum of imagination and to explore possibilities of living for the future.

PF25 October Programme

OTHER HIGHLIGHTS

Radio X_Arts Festival

Menhir Tapestry Community Project by Hedy Leung

October 16th and 17th | 12H - 19H

Radio X at Freilager-Platz

Festival Opening Performance by Hedy Leung

October 20th | 1730h | Transbona-Halle

PF25 programme team

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