



BLANK
CANVAS

Tofu, Incense, and Sky

Solo exhibition by Charwei Tsai

5.7—31.8.2025

Supported by



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Often, I imagine how words can act as an equal companion to visuals. To strike a fine balance between texts and images is akin to an act of funambulism: Tilting a bit too far right, and the visuals become overwhelming, yet a bit too left-ward, and the texts turn didactic. Somewhere, at the in-between of such forces, art awaits.

Charwei's video works present such a conundrum for writers. Time acts like an agent, recording her brushstrokes against the mirror surface, the ashes crumbling from the Heart-Sutra-covered incense, or the decay of tofu matter, a sentiment of detachment, or expunction, lingers in the air. The camera angle allows only a corner glimpse of movements, as if we were all zooming in from the periphery of our eyes. An aesthetics of ephemerality, an embrace of things that quietly slip through our finger cracks.

There is a surreal jolt too, as we watch things disintegrate. To anticipate death, while we are still breathing, knowing that with each breath, we will be closer to death. A surreal existential dread and thrill, our mortality whispers. As if it is not difficult enough to write about death, without sending people running for the hills.

So I invited Charwei to play a game of Exquisite Corpse with me, on a fine afternoon. I in my living room cum workspace, Charwei in her bibliothèque. The game was popular among the Surrealist artists and writers in 1920's Paris--coincidentally the city in which Charwei is now residing--as a way to unlock their subconscious, the Surrealist's key to creative endeavors. Across a shared google doc, we contemplated her three Mantra videos, wrote sentences in white font to conceal them, and later combined them into poetry. Each open-ended poem that you find below corresponds to a work in the exhibition, and we hope that they will accompany you as you sink into Charwei's meditative videos.

Just maybe, in a fleeting moment of tranquility,

the ashes, the decay, the vastness will feel intimate.

Like an embrace of unknown echoes and unsung hearts.

Tofu Mantra

Rolling hills of silken thread, moths scratch the plate
Harbinger of death, rotten, oh come spring
Form is not separate from Void, Void is not separate from Form.

Words decaying.

My heart, a panna cotta chest, deteriorating into pallid softness
Decaying or growing?
The market, buzzing with odorless corpses, simmer in a coffee stain
Under a tree, not inside a temple

A fish bowl decay, its stench on your alabaster skin. Do you remember?
Solitude
Like moths to a cold flame, your strokes on my peregrine heart
Possible? Yes!

A niveous shrink. The scream of a mercurial block.
Space and luminosity
Your mucus deflates, beneath my seductive cadaver. Collapsing pearly milky
stars.
Expand, expand, expand.
Mind keeps expanding.

Spare me your bloodless promises, my scars like parasite on a tanned
membrane
From a drop of ink to the expansion of the universe
Exalted embalming, moldy chest that churns as the clock ticks once more

The heat of the sun, the current of the wind, the moisture in the humidity,
the solidity of the grain of soy, integrates and disintegrates, continuously.

Sky Mantra

Why must we kneel skyward to wait for the tempest?

At times there are clouds, at times there are no clouds

Vague soliloquy, atoms dropping, into a meandering mirage

Sometimes there are words, sometimes not.

Should our egos mimic the opaque squeeze of Heaven?

Is it only a reflection?

Oh glimmering pond, clenched between limbs entangled. An obsessive rhythm.

Or is it real?

An empty spectacle, foreboding. How do I forget?

Is it a part or is it whole?

Is this a time capsule? Its surface glimmers, ominous, dialed.

What is whole and what is a part?

Is it not the same?

Flat, sapphire tempest, honing velocity underneath the bell jar. My words.

If it is one, why does it appear to be separate?

If it is only an appearance, is it not also a part of reality?

Cobalt crack. Your words, glazed with tension, caress the facade.

Why reject the clouds when the sky will always remain as the sky.

We bend, tilt, and drift, across this silver pond made from clouds.

If the sky always remains, is it permanent?

The retreating garden of mirrors awaits. Sapphire vanity.

Nothing is permanent, but everything is continuous.

Incense Mantra

Scorched dream. Your cigarettes lit up the armchair corner.
Where is the beginning and the end?
I count the footprints in ashes, sprinkled on the floor.
The incense, the fire, the smoke, the ash.

Your fine-dust embrace, wrapping me in sooth, murmuring of a requiem.
Where do they go?
Your wisp of breath pulverizes mountains. Flakes of grey temples.
Are they still here?

Can we meet at the edge of the desert? Tree-bark parched, morsel of time.
What is the nature of existence?
A black planet encroaches, as your eyelids murmur a sound.
As the smoke ascends, the ashes descend.

Charred. Do you still feel my dissipating voice, hills of scented grain?
As a thought forms, a gap also forms.
We leave behind the minutes, distilled into incinerated compassion.
Go beyond.

What if we drain the mountains of its ink? Then refill the oceans.
Where is beyond?
It cannot be thought of.
Let me sleep, at the tip end of your brush. A susurrating mirage, cliff
plunge.

The only path is to be GONE beyond.

Artist Statement

Penang reminds me of my childhood growing up in Taiwan. The fragrance of the incense from the temples, the taste of southern Chinese vegetarian dishes served every new moon and full moon, the sound of the trumpet coming from rituals performed in sacred spaces and the view of the harbor resting on a coast surrounded by mountains.

KY and I met in Paris where both of us reside half of the year. When we began conversing about the exhibition, we both reminisced about our childhoods in Penang and in Taiwan, where the invisible forces are what drives the visible. Gods, ghosts, spirits, mythical creatures and stories about them told by shamans, priests and soothsayers are what give forms to the temples, shrines and altars, all of which are still the most cherished in the midst of a concrete jungle. Incense, paper money, prayers, offerings, tropical fruits and flowers filled the offering tables set up in front of each shop and household during each festival. Temple processions, performers dressed in full makeup and ceremonial costumes, and firecrackers occupied the streets with crowds of followers. These spectacles fascinated me as a child and continue to be celebrated in my work.

The three video works that are presented at my first solo exhibition represent the core of my artistic practice, which is how ancient wisdom traditions could support us in facing the struggles of today's world. The Heart Sutra, which is a seminal Buddhist text, composed of 260 Chinese characters, is a text that I have memorized since growing up in Taiwan. Though my family is not particularly religious, I learned the text by heart and recited it as I face fearful situations as a protection of the

mind. As my life experience began to grow, now in my forties, the text continues to give me insights to day to day challenges. For example, how to practice not to be overwhelmed by overflow of information, thoughts and disturbing emotions. It is a text that transmits the experiential knowledge of emptiness that is the nature of mind. Here, emptiness doesn't mean nothingness, but rather it is a sense of spaciousness. The mind is not an independent and permanent entity as we often see it. It is constantly in flux and is both the observer and the observed.

In the three videos, where I wrote the Heart Sutra onto three objects, on a decaying piece of tofu, a piece of burning incense, and a mirror that reflects the ever changing sky, is the way that I contemplate on emptiness. My aspiration is that through the exhibition of these videos presented by Blank Canvas, the work could provide an opportunity to appreciate the profound wisdom traditions that we grew up with, and before they are completely erased by industrialization, how they could be transformed into a source of inspiration for creativity and spiritual transcendence, especially for the younger generation who will be running this world in the future.

Floor Plan

1) *Lovely Daze*

2) *Tofu Mantra*

Video

2 minutes

2005

Collection of Mori Art Museum,
Tokyo, Japan

3) *Sky Mantra*

Video

30 min 54 sec

2009

Filmed in Taipei, Taiwan
Commissioned by Sherman
Contemporary Art Foundation,
Sydney, Australia

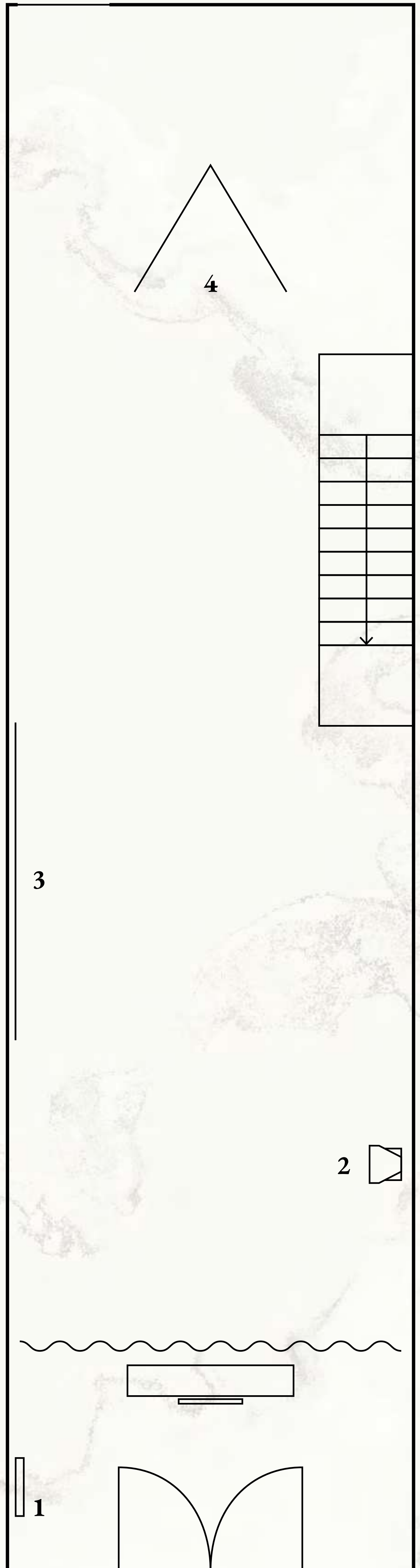
4) *Incense Mantra*

HD video with sound,
black and white

8 mins

2013

In collaboration with
Tsering Tashi Gyalthang



Artwork

Hailed as the single most commonly recited, copied, and studied scripture in East Asian Buddhism, the *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya*, translated as *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom* and more popularly referred to as the *Heart Sutra*, revolves around the teaching of the fundamental emptiness within all phenomena. For artist Charwei Tsai, this universal *Sutra* held a personal importance to her, as she used to recite it to calm her nerves from a young age, despite not growing up in a Buddhist household. As she moves through different stages of life and continues revisiting the *Heart Sutra* through lived experiences, Tsai recognizes that all forms, feelings, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness – the ways by which we relate to the world – are interdependent. Therefore, the state of emptiness is an understanding of the interdependence between oneself and the universe, and the transient nature of this relationship. Each work presented in this exhibition allows us to contemplate a single moment in which Tsai ponders the *Heart Sutra*'s essence through textual performance, installation, and video.

Lovely Daze



Photo courtesy of the artist

Lovely Daze is a curatorial journal of artists' writings and artworks published twice a year in limited editions by artist Charwei Tsai. The publication aspires to provide a platform for artists to present, first hand, their writings and artworks and to explore conversely how theories substantiate practice, and thoughts corporealize through writing and making art. The selection of works is based on concepts, techniques, and aesthetics in relation to the topics of each issue.

Tofu Mantra

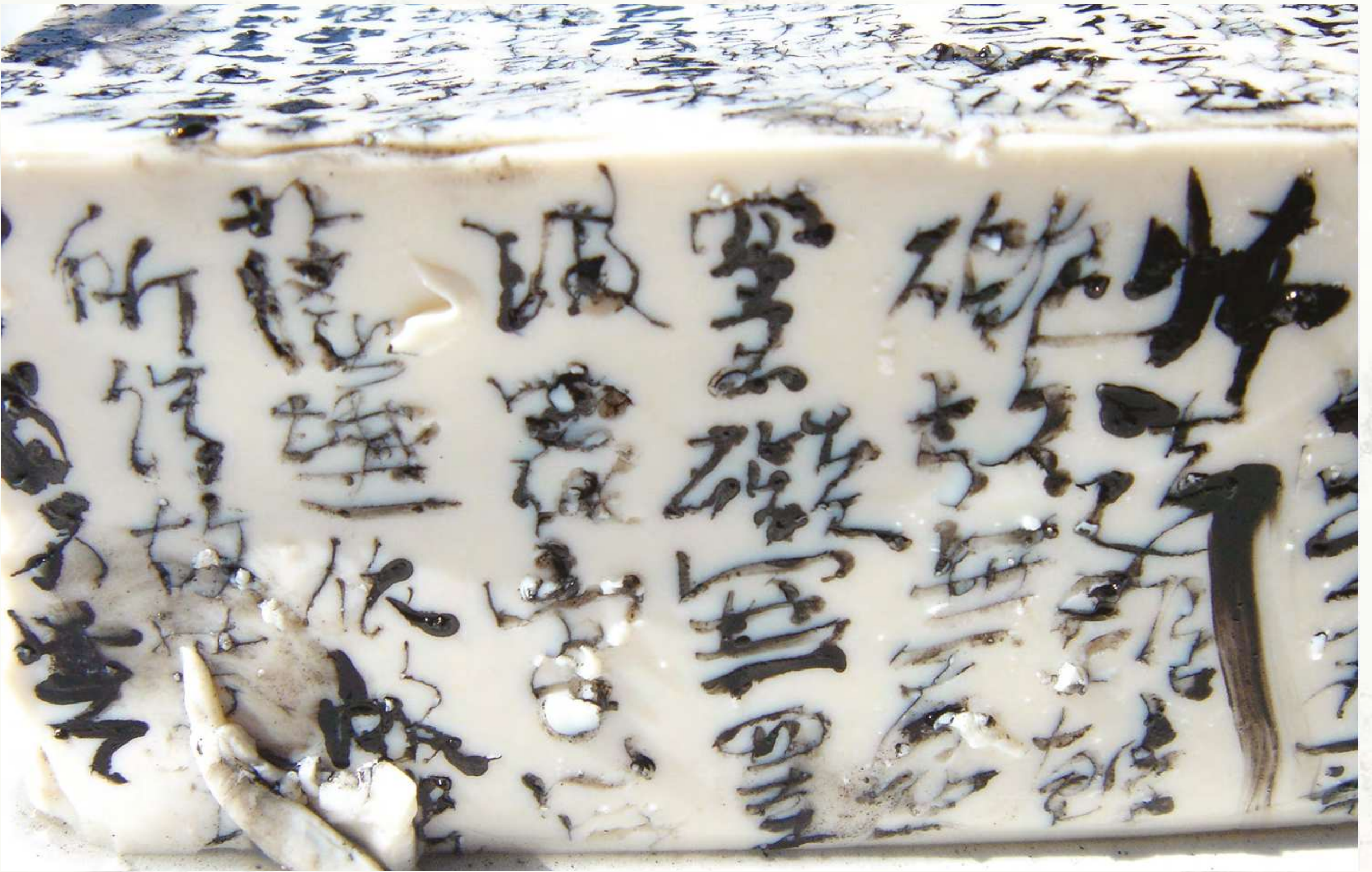


Photo courtesy of the artist

Tofu Mantra

Video

2 minutes

2005

Collection of
Mori Art Museum,
Tokyo, Japan

Tofu Mantra started as a writing performance, in which Tsai wrote the *Heart Sutra* in Chinese calligraphy on a fresh block of tofu. As the lines began smearing on the moist and squiggly texture of the tofu, so too did their meaning become indecipherable. Within ten days, Tsai observed the block's material decay, the pearly tofu skin shrunk and rotted. This process was captured in a time lapse video, as the characters that made up the Sutra physically decomposed—their attachment to material form also the cause of their disintegration. The work thus uses an ephemeral material to reflect on the process of change when a spiritual belief becomes materialized.

Sky Mantra



Photo courtesy of the artist

Sky Mantra

Video

30 min 54 sec

2009

Filmed in

Taipei, Taiwan

Commissioned

by Sherman

Contemporary Art

Foundation,

Sydney, Australia

Extending her textual engagement with the *Heart Sutra*, Tsai placed a large mirror on the ground and recorded herself copying the scripture on its sleek surface. As the characters materialized, the mirror also recorded fleeting movements of Tsai's surroundings: a puff of cloud passing, the sky churning a gray tempest, the artist's white dress fluttering in the strong wind, her own body in parallel motion with the written words. These transient moments disappeared as soon as they appeared, thus alluding to the Sutra's concept of impermanence: Through the void emptiness of the mirror, all things become interdependent.

Incense Mantra

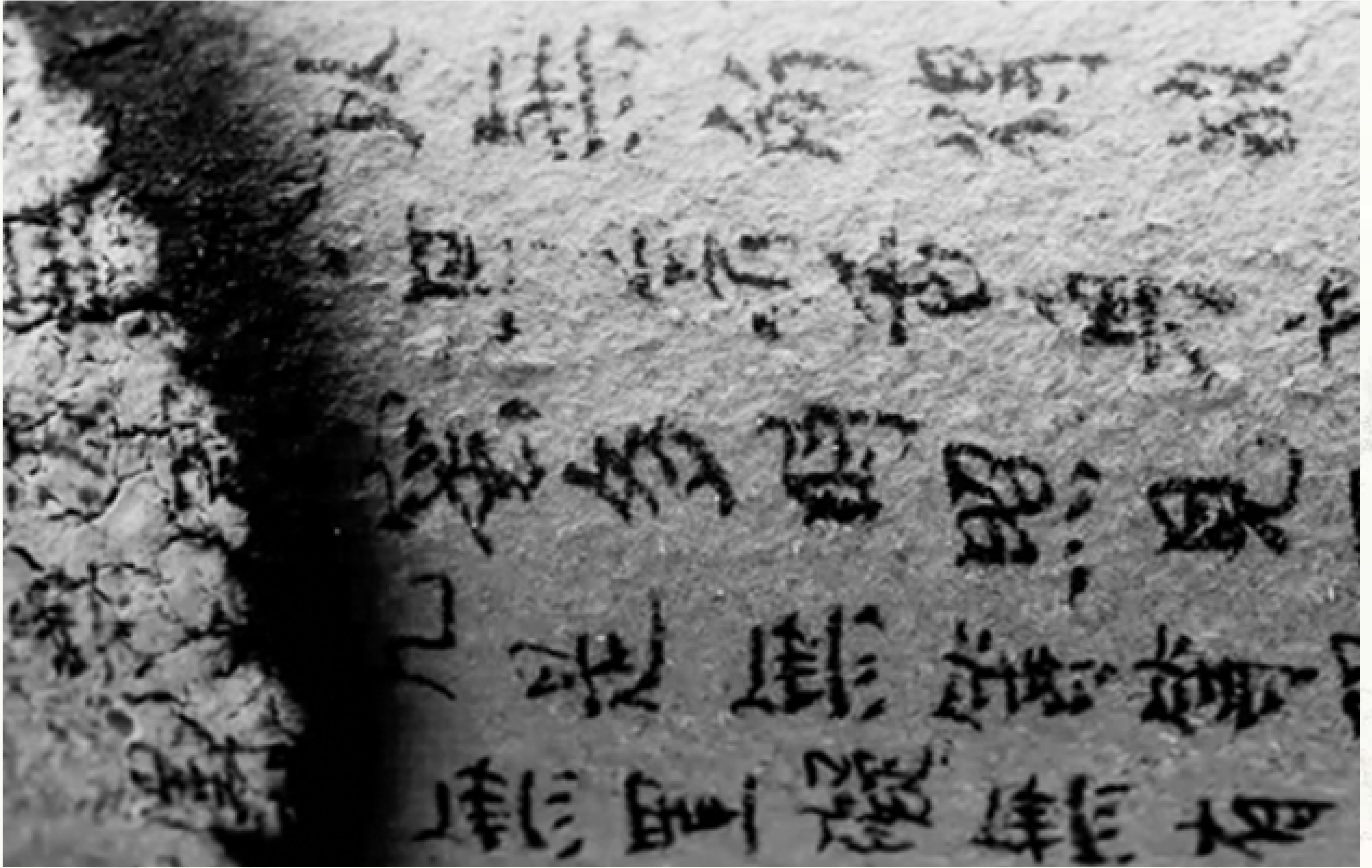


Photo courtesy of the artist

Incense Mantra

HD video with sound,
black and white

8 mins

2013

In collaboration
with Tsering Tashi
Gyalthang

The time-lapse video of an incense burning was inspired by the history of Hong Kong as the “Fragrant Harbor” based on its large production of incense from locally grown sandalwood. For this project, Tsai sourced a large piece of incense from a local store on Queen’s Road West, an area in Hong Kong known for its sales of objects for religious and ceremonial offerings, and wrote the *Heart Sutra* on it. She then lit the incense on a mirror reflecting the sky as an offering to the city. The work encourages a moment of contemplation on the spiritual significance of the sacred text while the physical form of the text transforms into ashes and smoke revealing the backdrop of the city’s celebrated skyline. Through the opportunity of working within a local context in Hong Kong, Tsai expands on her exploration of making works of art as objects of meditation and tools for spiritual and social practice.

Public Programme

Opening Night

Date : 5 July 2025 (Saturday)

Time : 6pm–8pm | 7pm Introduction

Closing Weekend

*Edible Mantra - a live performance
by Charwei Tsai*

Date : 23 August 2025 (Saturday)

Time : 3pm

*Artist Dialogue
Charwei Tsai and Ain in conversation,
moderated by KY Leong*

Date : 23 August 2025 (Saturday)

Time : 4pm–5pm

Artist



Courtesy of Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, France, 2005

Charwei Tsai (b. 1980, Taipei) is a multidisciplinary artist based in Paris and Taipei. Highly personal yet universal concerns spur Tsai's multi-media practice, which explores the complexities of cultural beliefs, spirituality, and transience. Geographical, social, and spiritual motifs shape her work, encouraging viewer participation beyond passive contemplation.

She completed her studies at the Rhode Island School of Design (BFA, 2002) and École des Beaux-Arts, Paris (2010). Her work has been exhibited at the Islamic Arts Biennale (2025), Palais des Beaux-Arts de Paris (2024), Gwangju Biennale (2023), and Mori Art Museum (2022). Tsai's works are in major collections, including Tate Modern, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, and M+. She also publishes *Lovely Daze*, a curatorial journal held in the libraries of MoMA and Pompidou. Her work has been featured in *Artforum*, *Frieze*, and *The Guardian*.

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