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## Hong Kong

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# Women in the Arts

**Posted:** 14 May 2014

Amid the lure of the dollar, five prominent women in the non-profit scene tell Time Out about resisting the commercial side of creativity

Carving a pathway for a non-profit, non-commercial career in the arts was never going to be easy. Challenging, yes. Rife with bureaucratic roadblocks, yes again. But these women gracing [our cover](#) have fearlessly placed themselves at the heart of the matter – presenting, exploring and creating art for art’s sake – and the purity of that conceit shows in their individual verve, zing and, most of all, passion. Away from the grey-suited formalities of turning-profit art investments and the limitations of white cube presentations of art, these five women – Asia Art Archive’s Claire Hsu, Spring Workshop’s Mimi Brown, artist Annysa Ng, collector Monique Burger and Intelligence Squared CEO Yana Peel – are continuing to resist categorisation.

Each one is instrumental to our ever-evolving arts scene. And, honestly, they’re having a ball every step of the way. As Peel asks so aptly during our photo-shoot with her friends and contemporaries: ‘are we having fun yet?’

Words Ysabelle Cheung Photography Victoria Tang and Calvin Sit Art direction Jeroen Brule

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## Mimi Brown

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*Founder of Spring Workshop*



Bright orange cranes arc over Spring Workshop’s line of vision, criss-crossing the skyline of

Wong Chuk Hang. The currently under-construction area, if you haven't noticed, is going through a creative and urban revival at the moment, perhaps driven by an influx of artistic hubs such as Spring Workshop. The brainchild of California-born Mimi Brown, this non-profit artist residency space is but one cog in the machine here – but undoubtedly an important one.

Brown founded Spring Workshop in 2012 – her first professional foray not only in Hong Kong but in the realm of visual arts non-profit operations (she was formerly a music producer in the States). An unconventional residency space, Spring hosts both local and international artists, usually in guest rooms stocked with quirky paraphernalia to delight even the most discerning critic – everything from miniature trees to guitars and heavy tomes of literature to original artwork, make up the creative oasis that is Spring.

“Spring was created specifically in response to Hong Kong's landscape, with the mission to provide more space and scope to Hong Kong's existing non-profits, artists and people, as well as a platform for artist residencies,” Brown enthuses. Resisting conventionalism further, Brown states that Spring's doors are due to close in 2017, after just five years, which in a way creates an exciting, and different, kind of urgency.

Unlike other residency models, however, whose sole purpose is to create, create and create, Spring reins back on the idea of a ‘finished product’. “When Aslı Çavusoglu was here, she said ‘this is the first time I've ever had free space and time to do whatever I want without anyone asking me to produce work at the end. I'm suffering from a profusion of ideas!’” recalls Brown. Spring's most recent guests were Philip Wiegard and Christodoulos Panayiotou, two European artists who collaborated in a final exhibition that opened in early May and runs until July 13.

Remarkably animated and amiable, Brown is a fitting example of one of the most powerful Gladwellian archetypes – the connector. In the two years it's been running, Spring has galvanised a variety of things, from multi-disciplinary collaborative exhibitions to the ever-growing bridge between Hong Kong's local industry and its international connections (and even our Time Out cover photoshoot, generously hosted by Brown).

“One of Spring's best functions is as a hub for exchange,” Brown explains. “It's between international and local artists, it's between audiences and artists, and it's also between arts professionals and arts enthusiasts.” Because of this, one major advantage for Spring is the location, which is a great hangout area for creatives. “Someone in the neighbourhood will come over, and maybe our artist-in-residence will be looking for a photographer, and we'll all talk and two minutes later we'll have three fantastic photographers' phone numbers ready to call,” says Brown. “That's one of the unexpected characteristics about Spring. The casual lunches pay off beautifully.”

*For more information on Spring Workshop, visit [springworkshop.org](http://springworkshop.org).*

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## Monique Burger

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*Collector and founder of Burger Collection*



I constantly ask myself the question, ‘how can I make it right?’” says Swiss-born collector Monique Burger. Far from admitting the restrictions of anxiety, Burger is doing just the opposite in challenging the way she presents her 1,200 piece collection to the public – as her question is thrown out to the water, she casts her net further than the horizon can see. Burger and her husband, who she’s collected with since the early 1990s, have been consistently redefining the role of an art buyer and, indeed, the definitive nature of an art collection.

As early as 2002, Burger wanted to display the entire collection online, and make it available to the public (which she has now successfully done).

In 2009, along with curator Daniel Kurjakovic, she set up Quadrilogy, an ambitious four-part exhibition which aims to present contemporary art in diverse formats, across continents. Last year, as part of Quadrilogy, Burger presented I Think it Rains – a multi-disciplinary collaborative project incorporating a residency programme, participatory public activities, online documentaries and installations. “It was about being in touch with the local situation but also to connect the whole project with international audiences,” Burger explains of the one-month exhibition, which took place at Cattle Depot Artist Village.

Building bridges between Hong Kong and the rest of the world is an important mission in Burger’s interaction with the collection, no doubt shaped by her own nomadic travels across the globe, with longer stints in Europe, America and now Hong Kong. “We have been exploring how one relates to artists from different regions in the world, and to bring these types of concerns to the table, from the perspective of a private collection,” says Burger. “I guess we’re trying to seek out sensible ways to contribute to the larger multi-regional picture of the art world today.”

Indeed, Burger has proven to be a driving force in Hong Kong’s non-profit arts scene, well noted in her work with local organisations such as Soundpocket and 1a Space. “Our art patronage spans various types of projects such as the funding of non-profit art organisations, artist publications, cross-cultural programmes, and studio grants, as well as the production of artworks,” Burger says. “Our role in Hong Kong is consciously twofold: as supporters, but

also as agents.”

As the Burger Collection continues to reach a wider audience, Burger and her small team also continue to develop the organisation’s programming. “This month, we are publishing Silver Silence/Golden Speech with five candid conversations by Hong Kong artists,” she says. “It is a supplement to our avant-garde magazine Torrent.” The entire first issue of Torrent is also available to read online.

Remembering her first art purchase – a David Hockney poster in 1979, way before the Burger Collection even began to take shape – Burger doesn’t quite know when her focus shifted from private collecting to public presentation. It all goes back to her original question of whether, or how, she can make things ‘right’ with the collection. “I don’t know really,” she considers. “And I think that the fact that this question has been unanswerable for me has been a gratifying challenge.”

*For more on the Burger Collection, visit [burgercollection.org](http://burgercollection.org).*

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## **Claire Hsu**

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*Co-founder and director of Asia Art Archive*



Fourteen years ago, a slim stack of books was placed on a shelf by the then 24-year-old Claire Hsu. It would be poetic to say that that’s how the non-profit organisation Asia Art Archive was

born but, as Hsu and her colleagues know, narratives are never that simple. The books just anchored a dock for what AAA was soon to become – a connecting point for thinkers, artists and the public – and what AAA was about: rethinking art history and narratives.

Created out of Hsu's personal desire for knowledge and education about Asia's vast but (until 2000) largely undocumented art history, AAA's primary role is as a physical library, open to the public. Its location on Hollywood Road reflects the area's intersection of art, old and new – you're just as likely to find references to Qing Dynasty porcelain in the collected materials as you are to the Frog King's outlandish public performances. The point is to encourage discussion about the way the public view, consume and create art, and, from there, AAA becomes much more than just a library and a collection. Ongoing research projects include the 'Bibliography of Modern and Contemporary Art Writing of India', an ambitious long-term undertaking in which AAA aims to extract writing in India from the late 19th century until 1990, and to document those narratives in 13 languages. "We're trying to open up different languages, different writings, micro-histories, less visible narratives, to basically make it possible to write multiple histories to open this very dominant way that we see things and challenge those in different ways and enrich them," Hsu says. Although AAA has now gained extraordinary momentum, made possible by the individuals who each have a defined role within AAA's cultural and academic archipelago, Hsu never allows herself to simply coast. Deeply committed to AAA's cause, she is always at the centre of each strand of development, from the research projects to physical and digital archiving (85 percent donated from the community) and even budgeting – as only seven percent of AAA's annual budget is supplemented by the government, the team are constantly raising funds. "Every day is a learning process," she says.

"We have an amazing team, everyone's so passionate and critically engaged, and I think we're trying to be very self-reflective – we're critical of ourselves, always feeling out what to do next." As director of AAA, Hsu's insight into the non-profit industry and histories of Asia have led to other appointments: as a committee member of M+ and The Foundation for Arts Initiatives, and as a consultant for the

Central Police Station redevelopment project.

Hsu hopes AAA will exist long after her, and her associates, are gone. "Right now, I'm thinking, can art really change the world? Can it really change society? I believe that all of us who are working in the non-profit field feel it can," muses Hsu. As well as looking into the past, AAA is also very much involved in the present, but there's much to be unearthed. The rest, as one might say, is still largely unwritten.

*For more on the Asia Art Archive, see [aaa.org.hk](http://aaa.org.hk).*

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## Annysa Ng

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*Artist and co-founder of Tomato Grey collective*



It wasn't until Annysa Ng became a foreigner that she truly came into her identity as a Hong Kong artist. "It was at a party in New York," recalls the Hong Kong-born, New York-based Ng. "Someone came up to me and asked where I was from. I told them 'China' - 'Hong Kong' and they looked confused and replied 'you don't seem very 'Chinese'. I didn't take offence to it. I just went home and thought about it for a while. I really started to think, well then, 'who am I?'"

Identity is an integral theme in Ng's oeuvre. Her most prominent works include featureless silhouettes, rejecting traditional physiognomy, wearing traditional Elizabethan dresses decorated in intricate Chinese patterns. Her background – formative years in Hong Kong, art training and education in New York and Stuttgart, Germany – dictates much of her life, not only in her creative work, but in her way of thinking. "I had already developed my own watercolour style in Hong Kong. I was happy, but I wanted to start over, so I moved to New York without a single piece of my work. It was so full of people, museums and culture," she remembers. "Then I went to study in Germany. It was so, so quiet and I was quiet. I meditated. That solitude changed me and, from that point, I started to learn how to think from my heart and my unconscious mind."

It was also in New York that Ng met five other Hong Kong artists living in the city, and they consequently formed multimedia artist collective Tomato Grey. All share a common thread in their narratives: their intersections between Hong Kong and New York, culture and identity. They presented their first group show in New York's White Box gallery in 2010.

Now, most of the Tomato Grey members have moved back to Hong Kong, but the group is still active in promoting Hong Kong and Chinese art to Western and American audiences.

"Tomato is an interesting word," says Ng. "People think it's a vegetable, but it's actually a fruit." This observation, along with the colour grey, highlights the amorphous cultural state of Hong Kong, and of these artists' works.

"Hong Kong artists are, still, kind of off the radar so we think we need to do something to raise our voices," Ng says. She considers this point more, mentioning Hong Kong's years and years of colonial rule. "But it's difficult. Sometimes I feel we are quite powerless when we are under this



history, this huge history tracing you, like a huge monster at your back, every minute eating.”

Trying to pinpoint exactly what makes a Hong Kong artist so ‘Hong Kong’, Ng is no closer to the right answer than she was all those years ago, when a stranger questioned her identity in the New York gallery. But she does have something to say. “To me, art is really pure, really beautiful things,” she says. “I prefer to be subtle and to have more layers in my artwork, instead of just putting something up there that punches you in the face. There’s already too much noise and politics in the world.”

*For more on Tomato Grey, visit [tomatogrey.org](http://tomatogrey.org).*

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## **Yana Peel**

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*CEO of Intelligence Squared Group*



Catholics being humiliated by Stephen Fry. Germaine Greer turning her nose up at the idea of porn actually being good for us. Jeffrey Deitch turning negative ideas about the art market on its head. These gems of events could be fodder for a scripted satire sketch, but in actuality, they’re simply talking points at past events of popular debate forum Intelligence Squared, of which Russia-born Yana Peel is the CEO.

Peel started her professional life as a Goldman Sachs banker in London, but even during her investment and wealth management days, she was always at the fore of the contemporary arts scene, citing a love of Russian literature and art as an early influence. Soon, she eschewed a life of crunching numbers and suits for a career in non-profit arts, and set up Outset Contemporary Art Fund in 2003, a philanthropic organisation supporting new art. “What brought me to start



Outset was the desire to bridge the gap between culture and commerce, to share these relationships I had with artists like Antony Gormley, with artists like Jake and Dinos Chapman, and to find bridges where you could catalyse a lot of funding, support and enthusiasm and engagement with the arts,” she says. Five years later, Peel, along with her family, moved to Hong Kong, changing course once again.

Upon arrival in our city, Peel, who had also been a patron of the honoured Serpentine Gallery in London, immediately started reaching out to others. This led to her position at Para Site as co-chairman of the board of directors and as adviser to Asia Art Archive – and soon after, to the birth of Intelligence Squared in Asia. The debate forum hosted its first event in Hong Kong, ‘Finders, not keepers! Cultural treasures belong in their country of origin’, in 2009, and has since gone on to perform surgeries on the complexities of the art scene, throwing out debate topics such as ‘You don’t need great skill to be a great artist’ and ‘Contemporary art excludes the 99 percent’.

“Six years ago I thought, what is really missing in this landscape?” says Peel. “It’s some of the not-for-profit activities. It’s the discussions, the debates, the discourse and the performances that I thought I could complement the ecosystem with by bringing these kinds of talks to Hong Kong.”

This month, Peel goes against the grain even further with Intelligence Squared’s most specific and controversial topic yet: ‘Asia should house its poor before it houses its art’. The discussion touches upon, among other topics, the government expense of M+. “The challenge here is that art is expensive and sometimes does not make initial economic sense but, for me, museums are the cornerstone of culture in any community,” Peel says. “I’ve never been engaged with the commercial or industry side of art. It has always been about the not-for-profit, about the public, about bringing art to museums and public spaces.”

A debate in its most stripped down terms is simply an expression of different opinions. Maintaining close friendships in wider circles of the art scene, from fair directors to gallerists and artists, Peel’s intention with the debate, and indeed with Intelligence Squared, is not to blindly negate either side, but to open up exploratory discussion in a timely manner. “I think it’s great that we have Para Site, Asia Art Archive and the chance to see guests like Ryan McNamara perform in contexts that are ephemeral and not just something you can acquire or look to as an acquisition,” she says. “It’s not just what you can buy at the fair but also what you learn there and how what you see on the walls challenges that.”

In essence, the challenge is good for us. And on that topic, we are definitely for the motion.

*For more on Intelligence Squared, visit [intelligencesquared.asia](http://intelligencesquared.asia).*