

PRICKLY AND JUICY

Gina Wong tells *Christie Lee* about low-budget projects, the two screening platforms she founded and deconstructing the usual film narrative, ahead of curating the Screen x Experimenta programme at Art Central's second edition this month.

"Give them pleasure. The same pleasure they have when they wake up from a nightmare," the great Alfred Hitchcock once said. This – or something along these lines – was likely what Gina Wong had in mind when she was trying to come up with a title for an independent film festival in 2011. The result was the Pineapple Underground Film Festival (PUFF) – a bizarre name for a festival that aims to bring experimental films from around the world to Hong Kong and Shanghai.

"You know how a pineapple is – prickly but juicy. I wanted the films we screen to give the same feeling!" says the 41-year-old, who is also set to curate Art Central's Screen x Experimenta section this month. "And I didn't want to take myself too seriously."

While PUFF was founded with the aim of bringing indie films to Asia, Experimenta is an art space that blurs the line between art and filmmaking through screenings, exhibitions and live performances. The 320 videos in the Experimenta library, accessible to its film club members at its Central gallery, are sourced from Wong's annual trip back to London, where she still runs an office and studio space.

PLANTING THE SEED

Despite a CV that might suggest an abrupt career switch from banking to filmmaking, Wong says it was all intentional. "I've always known that I wanted to do literature, or something arts-related, but I figured if I was to make that my lifelong career, I needed to do something completely different for university," she notes wisely. A degree in monetary economics and political science from the London School



of Economics was swiftly followed by a short but nevertheless successful career as an investment banker. "I knew that those 10 years would be the subject of a novel," says Wong – who now divides her time among Hong Kong, Shanghai and London – clasping her hands dramatically.

Comfortable with her life and work experiences by the mid-2000s, Wong became a board member of Para/Site art space on a friend's recommendation and secured funding from the Hong Kong Jockey Club to set up a curatorial training programme. She started Experimenta during the same period, and also snagged a Master of Arts in comparative literature at the University of Hong Kong in 2007. "I used to skip all the lectures in my university days, but I went to every single class for my master's," she says.

"Hong Kong has always been a filmmaking capital, with figures like Jackie

Chan. It's always been more of a popular culture – not that I'm saying it's not important – but hopefully, with more people going to university, they would know to appreciate films not only for entertainment. The films that Experimenta hopes to promote are a bit synonymous with literature. Rather than having a lot of people go see them, they're about creating an alternative narrative that captures the moment of the times and will hopefully become historically relevant," says Wong, who broke into directing with *Shanghai Saga: Other Skies, Other Lands*, the feature-length film she co-directed with Hong Kong academic, curator and artist Linda Lai in 2009.

"I picked up the technical aspects of filmmaking while I was assisting some indie filmmakers in the '90s, one of whom was my boyfriend at the time," she says, smiling. "That's always the best way to learn..."

Shanghai Saga weaves together quotidian images of the metropolis with poetry and strong feminist undertones running throughout. It was followed by *Orient Top Town*, a feature-length documentary about Shanghai's real estate industry that won Wong a Best First-Time Director nod at the 2011 Yosemite Film Festival.

THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE

The female gaze is a theme that pops up frequently in Wong's repertoire – hardly surprising, given the one film that she still remembers from her teenage years is *Tess*, based on the book by Thomas Hardy. "I can't remember who the director was (later confirmed to be Roman Polanski), but it was just so rare to have a movie centred on the life of a female protagonist," she recalls.

While *Tess* was helmed by a male director, Wong is taking the programming



for Art Central's Screen x Experimenta further four decades later – by deliberately focusing on experimental films directed by women. "The act of a woman picking up a camera to tell a story is a statement in itself," she says. "Many women have amazing stories they want to tell but feel that they aren't worth telling."

Screen x Experimenta comprises three sub-programmes: X Screen World Drama, X Screen Poetry and X Screen Stage. Handpicked by Wong from the Experimenta library, highlights from X Screen World Drama include *Song*, which opens with the seemingly banal shot of a Bahrain woman cooking in the kitchen. X Screen Poetry spotlights two minority female filmmakers, while X Screen Stage pairs and contrasts two films – one evoking the mystery and glamour of an 18th-century traditional Japanese kabuki stage, and the other an expansive snow-white landscape in the United States.


ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES

What is the difference between video art and experimental cinema? "Video art is more a visual picture, and a camera is the medium [the artists] use. It's about expressing a concept, be it consumerism, globalisation, alienation of living in a city, what have you. An experimental film deconstructs the usual film narrative. For example, one that involves a hero or heroine, a set of problems, this person's other half and a lot of bad guys. It usually ends with the protagonist sailing off into the glowing sunset," Wong explains. "I know it's a simplistic version of things but amazingly, the last five films I saw had that kind of narrative."

Wong opens a notebook to illustrate. "You must forgive me. I watch 300 indie films and 80 mainstream films a year," she says. "The last movie I watched was *Mad Max: Fury Road*. I loved the sets – the desert landscape, all those big trucks," she enthuses. Not the storyline though? She shakes her head slyly.

Speaking of the *Mad Max* franchise, Wong's next film – or its condensed version – *The Road to Day Dream Mine*, premiering at X Screen World Drama, was shot on the same piece of land as the first *Mad Max*. Set in Australia's Broken Hill – site of the historic Day Dream Mine – *The Road* conveys the sense of loss and loneliness one feels leaving home for a foreign land.

As keen as Wong is about embracing change, she is also all for low-budget films. "*Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino's 1992 crime thriller) really changed my perspective on low-budget films. I realised that it was a more democratic way of making films, as it allows people with less money and fewer connections to tell stories. Low budgets don't equate to low quality," she concludes.

Always on the lookout for her next move, Wong is also teaming up with an online portal for a curated channel that screens experimental films from around the globe. "It's a more respectful way of presenting your film to a potential donor. If you put it on YouTube, it'll get lost amidst the masses of cat videos, which I love by the way – sometimes I think the Internet exists solely for that," she jokes. "Aside from the annual cash prize, I also want to give these directors assistance in co-producing their next film. Say they want a contact in Ecuador, I'd likely be able to get them one." 

ART CENTRAL 2016

WHAT TO EXPECT? Aside from the 11 films in the Screen x Experimenta programme, look forward to a profusion of art presented by more than 100 galleries from 20 countries. In addition to focusing on up-and-coming artists, the art – if last year's inaugural edition is any indication – boasts edgier aesthetics than that seen at Art Basel. Large-scale installations scattered throughout the fairgrounds include Thomas Canto's laser-cut *Suspended Landscape* and Hong Kong-based materiologist Elaine Yan-ling Ng's *Sundew*.

WHEN? March 23-26; Vernissage on March 22

WHERE? Central Harbourfront Event Space, 9 Lung Wo Road, Central. See artcentralhongkong.com