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Adrian Wong is the first sculptor to win the Sovereign Asian Art Prize

Adrian Wong turned to art as a career after a life-changing experience working with orphans. Now a key shift in his work has resulted in him winning a prestigious prize, writes Catherine Shaw



Untitled (Grates III/IV Golden Electrical Company/Sheng Kung Hui Kei Yan Primary School) was inspired by a metal fence at a school on Hollywood Road, Central.

Hong Kong-based artist Adrian Wong Ho-Yin could be forgiven for sounding surprised when he won the 10th edition of the Sovereign Asian Art Prize with his sculptural piece - as the annual award has always been associated with paintings.

But his winning work - *Untitled (Grate III/IV: Golden Electrical Company/Sheng Kung Hui Kei Yan Primary School)* - impressed because it marks an important departure in Wong's work, says judge David Elliot.

"Previously, he was interested in the interaction between popular culture and kitsch. This work, however, a kind of minimal sculpture, is embedded in the architectural and social history of Hong Kong yet is also an intriguing aesthetic entity in its own right," Elliot says.

It's about taking something thought of as banal and giving it a new platform

ADRIAN WONG

The abstract layered installation of steel, plastic and enamel grates (measuring around 152cm by 152cm) was inspired by a metal fence Wong saw at an elementary school on Hollywood Road in Central.

The grates, the artist says, act much like a psychological and physical "filter" or obstacle that separates different urban activities. "What really catches my eye is looking for patterns and repetition in things that seem very utilitarian, like a cover for an air conditioner or the skeleton of a garbage can. There is a very interesting hidden language behind a lot of these things that you can miss if you are not looking for it."

Metal security bars and grills are ubiquitous in Hong Kong, despite being one of the world's safest cities, says Wong, who earlier in his career explored the notions of anxiety and fear and their impact on the broader social context.

"So many buildings have security guards and security grates on their doors. There is almost paranoia. I find that very interesting without making any judgment about whether it is a good thing or bad thing. There is also something about the physicality of steel that really resonates and speaks for itself."

"It's about redirecting attention and taking something that would ordinarily be banal and giving it a new platform," says Wong. His *Untitled (Grate X: Quan Ju De Famous Duck)* artwork on show at Art Basel Hong Kong with Chicago art gallery Rhona Hoffman was quickly snapped up by a Hong Kong collector.



Adrian Wong turns to art as a career after a life-changing experience working with orphans.

Untitled (Grates III/IV), combining replicas of the Hong Kong school fence with an air conditioner grate found in San Francisco, is the first time Wong has worked with welded steel and derives from previous investigations where he explored patterns that appear not only in Hong Kong but also in the diaspora communities overseas.

Born in Chicago in 1980, Wong originally trained in research psychology, receiving a master's degree from Stanford University in 2003 and a master of fine arts from Yale University in 2005. More recently, the artist co-founded Embassy Projects, an arts consultancy and independent production studio in Wong Chuk Hang.

He divides his time between Hong Kong and Los Angeles, where he teaches sculpture and critical theory at the University of California. He has exhibited extensively on the international stage, with recent shows at the Hong Kong Sculpture Biennial, the Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen and the Bangkok Experimental Film Festival. The career shift from psychology to art came while Wong worked with orphans in Armenia and Azerbaijan as part of his thesis project. Frustrated by the shortage of translators, he turned to art to help him better understand the children. "It was an amazing experience," he says. "Art really helped go beyond logical and tangible elements. It was about finding a way to reach the children."

Wong says his work develops from "meandering" through the city making sketches and notes, and taking photographs and leaving them to "marinate until the combinations start to reveal themselves".

"I've always thought that you can appropriate the language of architecture into contemporary art and design in a very enriching way," he says.

The Sovereign Asian Art Foundation also awards the Schoeni Prize to an artist chosen by the public. This year's winner, Filipino Anton Del Castillo, won the same honour in 2010, and receives US\$1,000.

The winners were unveiled on May 9 at a charity auction and dinner where finalist artworks (except the winning piece) were auctioned by Christie's. It raised a total of US\$285,400, which will be divided evenly between the artists and charities the foundation supports. A total of just over US\$500,000 was raised on the night.

The winning piece becomes the property of the Sovereign Art Foundation, which lends the work out to patrons, partners and institutions. The charity was established in 2003 and has raised more than US\$4.5 million for charities worldwide. It funds projects using art as education, rehabilitation and therapy for disadvantaged children