

HOWIE TSUI. RETAINERS OF ANARCHY (DETAIL), 2017, KEY FRAME DRAWING FOR ALGORITHMIC ANIMATION SEQUENCE. COURTESY HOWIE TSUI, CARCC 2019.

The Ottawa Art Gallery opened new exhibitions this week, and I'm trying to think of a time when it, or any gallery in the city, was so interactive.

Each of the four exhibitions involves interaction, and each in its own way is defined by that reciprocal engagement. Howie Tsui's *Retainers of Anarchy* reacts to your presence, as do Cheryl Pagurek's *Connect* and the group homage to Juan Geuer, *Carbon + Light*. It's a little different in Rosalie Favell's *Wrapped in Culture*, where nine artists interact with the object of their co-operation, but there too the interaction is fundamental.

Let's start with Howie Tsui. When the Hong Kong-born, Lagos, Nigeria-raised artist left Ottawa for Vancouver a few years ago, he was known around these parts for an eclectic and highly original oeuvre — battlefield scenes drawn on stretched animal hide, or field medicine brought macabrely to life in a refurbished pinball machine. *Retainers of Anarchy* is on a whole other scale and ambition. Its two components include a video animation and a wooden sculpture, each in its own room, as necessitated by their respective audio elements.





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The video is an animated scroll more than 20 metres in length and perhaps five metres high. Its narrative is inspired by mou hap, a popular (and for many years prohibited) fantasy literature about martial artists who defended chivalry in dark and unstable times. It's set in the very real Kowloon Walled City in Hong Kong, to where practitioners of mou hap were exiled. Though officially lawless, the walled city naturally organized itself, and that relative harmony, and the fantasy world of mou hap, is what attracted Tsui.

The video scroll is so full of life and action that initially it's overwhelming. Everything's in constant motion, even things that seem to be still. A vast bloc of apartments — with the front cut away so you can see inside each unit, like a cross-section of Bruegel's Tower of Babel — moves glacially across the screen.

Outside there's a running battle between an archer on a horse and a masked swordsman flying on a giant bird, a man balances on a bucket and rides the river, while another man kneels with arms tied and periodically gets swarmed by what look like bees, the poor bastard. Things fly through the air — an opened fan zips around like a deadly throwing disc, and a large passenger jet veers crazily close to the city, an allusion to the now-closed Kai Tak Airport. (YouTube it, as the real-life landings beggar belief.)

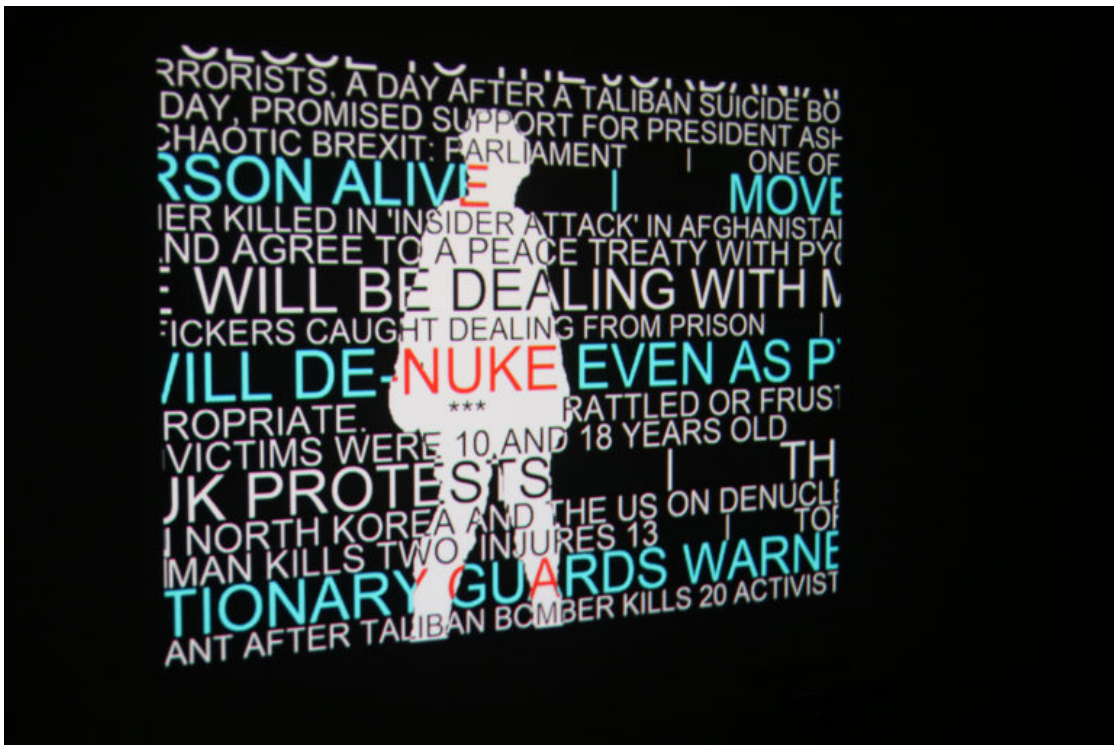
It's a lot to take in, and you need to sit for a spell and become immersed in the fantastical land — though you're unlikely to see all of it. The video is an essentially endless animation controlled by an algorithm and beamed through five projectors. The perspective zooms in, out, pans constantly and

seemingly randomly. Like a real city, like a real life, change and motion are constants, even if incrementally so.

In the next room is Tsui's Hei Gung Deviation. It's a muk yan jong, a wooden dummy used in training for Chinese martial arts. It's a stout cut of log, with several smaller protuberances as the limbs or weapons of an assailant. Tsui has burned designs into the wood — animals, hand positions, faces.

The sculpture makes sounds that reference the "wooden fish instruments Buddhists use to maintain rhythm while chanting, and the clacking sound a martial artist produces when training on the dummy."

The audio — sparse and percussive — begins as you approach the sculpture, which has hidden motion sensors, and gets more intense as you get closer. Stop moving and it goes silent, move again and it resumes, cautioning you that it's alert to your presence. I rounded it slowly, as if we were wary combatants, circling to the soundtrack of that simple, earthy beat. I felt pulled into the sculpture's orbit, drawn by its gravity. I felt like I'd have to fight it. I could have remained there — circling, circling — all day long, until I wore a track in the floorboards.



CHERYL PAGUREK, CONNECT, 2016-ONGOING, INTERACTIVE VIDEO AND AUDIO INSTALLATION. COURTESY OTTAWA ART GALLERY

In the next room, Cheryl Pagurek's Connect also senses your presence and is unsettling in a different way. Walk into the darkness and stand before a video screen that flashes with news-feed imagery — stock market updates,

crowded streets, breaking reports of migration and unrest. Superimposed over all this on the screen is — you.

Connect knows you're there and projects your profile onto the screen as you move about the room. Your shape is filled with more news imagery, which changes and flows in contrast to the shifting images outside of you.

The sound reacts to your presence and movement, until someone else enters the room and, as the most recent body detected, it reacts to their movement. This gave me a shivering sense of losing control of events, of being adrift in a world of unrest and information.

There's too much in the OAG's new exhibitions to cram into one column, so my next column will look at Rosalie Favell's *Wrapped in Culture*, and *Carbon + Light*: Juan Geuer's *Luminous Precision*. But don't wait for that before you go see it, all of it.

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Peter Simpson, a native of Prince Edward Island, was arts editor and arts editor at large for the Ottawa Citizen for 15 years, with a focus on the visual arts. He lives in downtown Ottawa with one wife, two cats and more than 100 paintings, drawings and sculptures.

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