

THE POWER OF THREE

Photography, porcelain sculptures and quilts with a message head an international line-up of the summer's hottest art exhibitions, writes Enid Tsui

Hong Kong's commercial galleries have gone into hyperactivity, with one opening after another to catch visitors before the summer exodus begins. Don't know where to start? Here are three must-see shows by major international artists who have never had solo exhibitions in this city before.

Taryn Simon
Portraits and Surrogates
Gagosian Gallery
The American artist catalogues situations where the individual gets caught up in the power of the state, war, religion, capitalism and other overarching systems they have little control over, which means anyone, anywhere, can be her subject.

Indeed, the mini retrospective at the Gagosian Gallery covers a bewildering range: from the most mundane—a record of confiscated items at Kennedy International Airport—to the shocking—a project about albino in Tanzania killed for their body parts because with doctors insist they bring luck.

The latter is part of the series called *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVII*. Simon spent four years from 2008 to 2011 travelling around the world researching



Clockwise from left: Handbags, Hermès (counterfeit) (detail) by Taryn Simon; portraits of floral arrangements from Simon's *Paperwork and the Will of Capital* series; *Daphne* by Rachel Kneebone.

and recording families who have lost members to cruel superstition, to civil war, or in the case of feral rabbits in Australia, to biological warfare designed to wipe them out. Each panel has a photographic family tree with gaps representing the dead and the missing. The unsmiling faces of the three generations she photographed are as blank as the uniform, beige background.

Textual explanations on the other side provide the context.

This clinical presentation is provocative. By parodying the photographic records of, say, Victorian eugenicists and taxonomists, she insists on presenting her findings in an unsentimental way.

She adopts the same dispassionate gaze for *Contraband* (2010), a police line-up of more than 1,000 items seized at the New York airport.

It was an exercise similar to Dutch artist Christen Meindersma's *Checked Baggage* (2003) but there is one major difference. Where Meindersma found a straightforward way to buy the confiscated objects from Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, Simon negotiated with bureaucrats to gain access to the customs and border protection federal inspection site and the international mail facility at New York airport. Then, during five sleepless days she documented the around-the-clock operation.

Her *modus operandi* reveals a hidden passion beneath the cold erasure of emotion from the photos. She said at the opening of the exhibition that getting access for projects was often a test of endurance, and her battles with red tape should be thought of as performance art and a key component of her work.

Her *Paperwork and the Will of Capital* (2016) series required research rather than battles with bureaucracy. She studied photos of major international treaties being signed, and reproduced the floral centrepieces that are always a kind of silent witness to the proceedings. The exercise is reminiscent of Kapwani Kiwanga's *Flowers for Africa* (2014), a project recreating the floral arrangements at the declarations of independence for African countries, except Simon's focus on the flowers is a commentary on capitalism and an anti-authority gesture.

You may not be convinced by the intellectual contortions, but her work raises interesting questions about the role of the artist.

Gagosian Gallery, 7/F Pedder Building, 12 Pedder St, Central, Tue-Sat 11am-7pm. Until Aug 5

Rachel Kneebone
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unpredictable. Legs feature as a symbol of constant movement. Cracks and imperfections are allowed as a concession to how, as creator, she cannot have total control over reactions in the kiln.

"Ovid in Exile" at White Cube features nine sculptures based on the stories of the lustful, shape-shifting gods and nymphs in the Roman poet's *Metamorphoses*.

The titular *Ovid in Exile* (2016) is everything the mythological tales are: the liberating and destructive power of desire, death, transformation and rebirth, and the fluidity of identity. Exquisitely shaped, unsettlingly dismembered legs flail about in ecstasy, toes curled and entwined in vine and flowers on top of a cracked, sarcophagus-shaped base.

Daphne (2015) is all motion, with entangled torsos and legs thrusting skyward like the leaves of the laurel tree that the naiad was transformed into. And *Salmacis* (2016) is made with two halves, just as the nymph was merged with Hermaphroditus to become a half-woman, half-man god.

The show is accompanied by drafts that shed some light on how she composed the sensual, intricate, dancing limbs.

White Cube, 50 Connaught Rd Central, Tue-Sat, 11am-7pm. Until Aug 19

modern Iranian wrestling champion represents Rostam in the series of collages, which Ave is revisiting in recent years. The beefy hero is often seen in emasculating situations—running away from hyenas and vultures (as symbols of death), for example—or against the theme of the four seasons.

"The macho" has gone past its summer peak and gone to seed, as Ave attributes the subjugation of women after the 1979 revolution to fear.

The Rostam section sets a subversive tone for the main body of the exhibition, which, on first sight, may seem like a collection of quilts. Instead, it is an angry, and aching personal creation. Ave has covered traditional quilts with found images of bare-chested men, plus splashes of paint and fabric he has collected or inherited from his mother and grandmother.

The quilts were bought in Tehran's bazaars and are the kind found in many Iranian households. "Above the Blankets, you see a happy, warm family. What happens under the blankets, you never talk about," he says.

The title of the exhibition, "Shah Abbas and His Page Boy", refers to a 17th century painting that shows the much-feared Shah Abbas I in a tender moment with a young cup-bearer, and refers to the artist's borrowing of Persian tradition to tell of forgotten stories and suppressed desires and identities in modern Iranian society.

The splashes of paint are sexual and bloody, a nod to Ave's formative friendship with Cy Twombly, with whom he once shared a studio.

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Fereydoon Ave with his *Lahaf 17*, made from a traditional Persian blanket and a patchwork of fabrics.

Rachel Kneebone
Ovid in Exile
White Cube
The British artist destabilises power with the most unlikely of materials: white porcelain. Her colossal *399 Days* (2012-13), a five-metre-high tower of coveting, writhing limbs, fluttering petals and semi-concealed nubs is standing in its full subversive exuberance amid the historic white marble sculptures at London's Victoria & Albert Museum.

Kneebone said on a recent visit to Hong Kong it took 399 days to complete her largest work to date and that it was about absolutely nothing. But against the cast of the Roman Trajan's Column at the London museum, her hollow and divided column is a wicked rejoinder to the permanent collection of imperious, static emblems of authority.

Kneebone describes a world that is ever-changing and



Rachel Kneebone

Fereydoon Ave
Shah Abbas and His Page Boy
Rossi & Rossi
The Iranian artist started his *Rostam* series soon after his home country became an Islamic republic in 1979. As a Zoroastrian, he was seeking a national identity outside of Islam that he and other religious minorities could relate to, and the tragic hero from the Persian Book of Kings became his muse.

A newspaper photograph of a

Rossi & Rossi, 3C Yally Industrial Building, 6 Yip Fat St, Wong Chuk Hang, Tue-Sat, 11am-6pm. Until Jul 29

Hong Kong Ballet names new artistic director

Kevin Kwong
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Septime Webre, former artistic director of the Washington Ballet in America's capital, will succeed Madeleine Onne next month as artistic director of the Hong Kong Ballet, the company announced this week.

The 55-year-old Cuban-American beat 70 applicants from the city and around the world for the position.

"We were most impressed by his artistic vision, international presence, choreographic prowess, leadership experience, as well as his great passion and energy during the search process," says Daisy Ho Chiung, chairwoman of the Hong Kong Ballet board of governors.

"With the company's vision and missions refocused in 2015, Hong Kong Ballet has taken an exciting new direction.

"With the solid artistic equity the company has established through the wonderful work by the previous artistic directors, the board concurred that Septime is the perfect candidate to open the next chapter of our very fine ballet company."

Webre was artistic director of the Washington Ballet between 1999 and 2016, and prior to that performed the same role for six years at the American Repertory Ballet in Princeton, New Jersey.

The *Washington Post* last year said his "high energy, charisma and large-scale ballet making spurred [the Washington Ballet] to unprecedented financial and artistic growth."

In his time at the Washington Ballet, Webre created many works for the company, including *Carmen* (2001), *Cinderella* (2003), *State of Wonder* (2006) and, more recently, *Alice in Wonderland* (2012). He is also known for his contribution to education, and

enrolment in the Washington School of Ballet has quadrupled, from 325 to 1,500 students, during his tenure. Webre said last year he wanted to spend more time in the studio, making new

ballets and working with dancers. Of his Hong Kong appointment, he says "It is an honour to be leading such an exciting organisation and I look forward to partnering with its superb

artists, visionary board and outstanding staff, as we grow the company's local impact as well as its global reputation."

Anna Chan Chung-ying, head of artistic development (dance) at the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority, says she looks forward to working with Webre. "He'll have new ideas for the Hong Kong Ballet, and with new changes there will be new opportunities for future collaborations," she says.

Helen Ng Han-bing, a veteran arts administrator who was chief executive of Hong Kong Ballet from 1997 to 2007, says she hopes the company will collaborate more with Hong Kong dancers and choreographers under Webre's leadership.

"The ballet is a



Septime Webre (right); a scene from his production of *The Nutcracker* for the Washington Ballet (above). Photo: Alamy

Hong Kong company, after all," she says.

In an interview with the *South China Morning Post* before the announcement, Yuh Egumi and Ricky Hu Song-wei—two upcoming Hong Kong choreographers with Hong Kong Ballet—said they hoped the new artistic director will have new vision for the company's repertoire.

"Right now, overseas, there are so many good choreographers, very young ones," Hu said. "If I have a new director who has vision, maybe we can invite some new blood to bring some new ideas, some new repertoire to our company."

The 38-year-old Hong Kong Ballet is a government-supported performing arts company and receives an annual subsidy of HK\$38 million.