

I Don't Know How to Love You Teach Me to Love

Ailsa Wong, Jennifer Poon, Jessie Cheuk Lam Tam, Man Pan Lau, Man Wai Se, Rose Li



May 31 – June 29 2024

Das Esszimmer – space for art+, Bonn, Germany

Group show curated by Struggling Art Space

**Love is Encounters, Departures, and a See-Through Veil
Triptych on I Don't Know How to Love You Teach Me to Love¹**
by Elisabetta Cuccaro

Between May 31 and June 29, the group exhibition *I Don't Know How to Love You Teach Me to Love* showed the works of six invited Hong Kong artists - Ailsa Wong, Jennifer Poon, Jessie Cheuk Lam Tam, Lau Man Pan, Man Wai Se and Rose Li - in the galleries of the non-profit off-space² Das Esszimmer, in Bonn, Germany. As the concluding episode of Das Esszimmer's thematic exhibition program *Friends of Friends of Friends of...* (conceived by Sybille Feucht, the art space director, to address friendship in the context of resistance to the structural competitiveness of the art field), this group exhibition was an occasion for artist Jessie Cheuk Lam Tam to further the investigations of her artist-run initiative Struggling Art Space - a project she started in 2021 with artist Tianyi Zheng as a possible structure for gathering fellow artists to find their position in the field through acts of reciprocal support and the acceptance of fears and failures.

In the frame of friendship, collaboration, resistance, and struggle, *I Don't Know How to Love You Teach Me to Love* sought to explore the multifaceted nature of love and the resilience needed to navigate the fragility of relationships. This text aims to echo the centrality love plays in the exhibition through a threefold interpretation of love - love as encounters, departures, and a see-through veil - to cover three aspects of the exhibition: its relational premise, the first exhibition room, and the second.

exhibition view: Rose Li, *100 Days of (Winter)*, 2024, a set of 100 envelopes, images of sky and text from friends / Lau Man Pan, *In a Summer Afternoon with Two Girls*, 2024, oil on canvas, 30 x 24 cm / Ailsa Wong, *The Black*, 2024, acrylic on canvas, size variable / Lau Man Pan, *Fabricating Permanency*, 2024, paper clay, pigment, inkjet print, tracing paper, aluminium frame, size variable (left to right)





exhibition view: Ailsa Wong, *Webbing*, 2024, mixed media on fabric and plastic ants, size variable (detail)



Encounters

The love in the title is not only the hard-to-define content investigated by the works but also the unspoken origin of the relational network at the base of the exhibition. In other words, the exhibition can be seen as resulting from friendships, an occasion to manifest the supportive structure that friendship can become, not only emotionally but also materially. Jessie Tam extended the invitation she received to others, succeeding in seizing, once more, the opportunity to challenge the structural problem of resource scarcity within the art system through a reallocation - a redistribution - of resources and possibilities.

In 2022, a similar form of gathering was experimented with Struggling Art Space's project *May the Art World Tear Us Apart Til We Meet Again*, a group exhibition gathering 12 artists/friends who shared common struggles within art-making in the art spaces of Bierumer School, in Bierum, the Netherlands. On that previous occasion, the budget offered to invite two artists was redistributed, along with the possibility of having a show. Not only do these two projects have the strategy of resource sharing in common, but they also share most of the participants: the majority of the artists of *I Don't Know How to Love You Teach Me to Love* were part of the previous show. In this perspective, *I Don't Know How to Love You Teach Me to Love* has acted as a new chance of meeting, an encounter point made possible within the relational and temporal structures that at once have formed and preceded it (and will, hopefully, continue after). As a gravitational center, this exhibition has occasioned a physical reunion, in time and space, of people whose relations exceed the offered platform and its visibility.

In addition to this relational premise, friendship has also played a role in influencing the type of working mode for the exhibition production. From the curatorial ideas to their realization, this exhibition was the result of a collaborative process that brought forth challenges related to questions of power and organization. Starting from the title devised by Jessie Cheuk Lam Tam and in the framework

of Struggling Art Space, the conversations between all the artists were the scaffoldings that generated the exhibition themes and steered its production. This decision to work collectively and horizontally introduced challenges related to negotiation and communication that a hierarchical structure might have concealed. These challenges also highlighted differences between Hong Kong and European art scenes and the ways of inhabiting them. Navigating these differences and challenges highlighted the inexhaustible conundrum posed by being a collective, whether temporary or not, and how it should operate. Regardless of these issues, the participating artists' strong bonds offered a means to traverse any encountered struggle and accomplish the production of an exhibition where the dialogue of a fellowship of equals was central.

Departures

The first room of *I Don't Know How to Love You Teach Me to Love*, the Showroom, functions as the departure point of this lambent and subtle quest around love, setting its general tone while focusing on disclosing other more specific qualities the term 'departure' can convey. At the entrance of the exhibition, all of its written apparatuses are present on the right (the wall text with the exhibition statement, the exhibition plan, and a series of hung clip-ring booklets containing artwork recipes with stories, ingredients, steps, and tips around art-making and feelings). On the left, Ailsa Wong's *Lump* (2023) offers a dream-like portrayal of the mental and emotional activities that happen just below the threshold of consciousness. It is a starting point both in the exhibition logic and in the travel about emotions, showing the ever-present influence of our subconscious. A single-channel video presented on a flat TV monitor placed on the ground and leaning on the gallery wall, this work points at the secret and innermost place where any expressed emotions originate from, bringing attention to the self and the raw materials that constitute emotions before differentiation and separation. In the room, two other works by Ailsa Wong, *Webbing* (2024) and *Unrest* (2024), articulate

exhibition view: Jennifer Poon, "I would like her best", 2024, wooden frames, wood table, clay, digital print, beads, plastic fork, wooden spoon, size variable (detail)





exhibition view: Jennifer Poon, *Photo Album*, 2024, wooden frames, digital print, plastic key tags, image transfer, size variable / Ailsa Wong, *Unrest (Night)*, 2024, mixed media on metal plate, 30 x 30 cm (right second work)

the space and reprise that disorder is a generative force as well as the primeval state of all that enters existence.

Their darkness and informalist quality are a counterpoint to the aesthetic qualities of Man Wai Se's and Jennifer Poon's works while revealing their hidden pain. Both works are dainty and minimalist installations that punctuate the walls with minute interventions. Man Wai Se presents "*Gong Dai Wa, Luck Dai Ngai*" (*You lose teeth if you tell lie*) and *What Does Lie Taste Like?*, both related to a story of broken trust and betrayal. The core element of both pieces lies in the lost tooth the artist collected from the liar of her private story, a story hinted at as a context but left concealed in its private details. This tooth is part of the installation, presented inside a transparent glass funnel container; and it haunts all the other elements - three floating teal-blue plaques, one hung and the others used to display lollipops and the video part of the work. Both the wall surface between the interventions and the repeated gypsum words "liar" are splattered with molds of the very tooth.

The reference to (bitter)sweet candies connects this installation to Jennifer Poon's "*I would like her best*" (2024), through the most colored element of her multi-piece installations - a light blue cake topped with bright red cherries on a small wooden table. Made of clay and other ready-made objects, this work twists and suspends time provoking a sense of anticipation for something that will never happen (again). Silently recalling memories of celebrations, the cake's stillness is echoed by a clock (made from a found drawer) and is reinforced by the encasing frames with fragments of pictures and writing, which continue in the series *Photo Album* (2024). Both works are an attempt to process the passing of the artist's grandfather; within a broader reflection on the family's trauma and history. Fragments of the photo album are extracted, protected, and limited, trying to contain and control through a process of objectification the feelings of loss, navigating the correct distance between closeness and alienation. Jennifer Poon's and Man Wai Se's works deal with departures, as parting or separation, as the materialization

of the struggles of letting go and grieving something lost forever; a state of things that can never come back.

The first room of *I Don't Know How to Love You Teach Me to Love* comes to draft an intimate and individual state of facing the hardship of love and grief when they appear in the immediate surroundings - from the subconscious to the physical proximity of family and households, in the process of defining and identifying these emotions to come to a sense of closure - or its impossibility.

See-Through Veil

From the Showroom and its focus on emotions as personal concerns born within specific dynamics of particular and closed situations, the exhibition takes a leap - literally passing through the interruption lent by an urban patio - and slightly shifts the focus on love with the works exhibited in the second room, the Atelier, of the exhibition. In this larger and square space, the quest for love touches on themes related to a broader understanding of love, its role in building our sense of identity, and how it can redefine us as persons. These works touch upon belonging to and identifying with systems larger than us, to love as a commitment to beliefs and collectivities.

Rose Li's *100 Days of (Winter)* (2024) faces the entrance with its collected and quiet demeanor; serving at once as a bridge between the two sections or an open-ended conclusion for the entire exhibition (as closing a text with a semicolon instead of a full period). A set of 100 small envelopes of the most transparent shade of light blue are collected in a box on an unassuming shelf, or placed on the floor; standing vertically as people in line leaning on each other. Each envelope in the box contains a picture of the sky and a written message. The artist invited their friends to write to another person from whom they were temporarily separated. This work brings us a chorus of emotive gestures, presenting a multiplicity of experiences centered on a shared living condition of sudden changes, departu-



exhibition view: Lau Man Pan, *Fabricating Permanency*, 2024, paper clay, pigment, inkjet print, tracing paper, aluminium frame, size variable / Jessie Cheuk Lam Tam, *Once Upon a Time There Was a Baker Who Wanted To Be an Artist*, 2024, acrylic on Cardboard, PVC and glass, hooks, mirror and plastic film, size variable (left to right)



res, and distances. The work shifts the focus from the self and departure toward the others and the web of connections they form in the face of conditional separations.

Another relatively direct reference to friends and moments spent with (thinking of) them is suggested by Lau Man Pan's *In a Summer Afternoon with Two Girls* (2024), a small painting presented with a minute graphite text on transparent paper and displayed on the same wall, like *The Black*, the last of Ailsa Wong's nocturnal works. The rest of the Atelier is occupied by a spatial installation by Jessie Cheuk Lam Tam, *Once Upon a Time There Was a Baker Who Wanted to Be an Artist* (2024), and Lau Man Pan's wall installation *Fabricating Permanency* (2024).

Lau Man Pan's work builds around a framed email exchange with Janfer, a friend who also moved out of Hong Kong to go live in Singapore, and develops on most of the wall, covered with bright red paper clay speckles. Like skin rash or measles spots, their spread thins out the more it expands outlining a rectangle remnant of a flag. The work deals with identity and its construction through beliefs such as national cultural identities, and the need to create anchors, or places to belong to. The work navigates notions of love as permanence, both as perseverance - an attitude of ongoing search - and the need to affirm an "object" - that of Hong Kong identity - as worthy of existence, even though the very object appears ghostly or hard to define.

Similarly, Jessie Cheuk Lam Tam's *Once Upon a Time There Was a Baker Who Wanted to Be an Artist* tackles love as a transformative energy structurally related to our own sense of identity, and how what we love builds who we are. Through a speculative narrative, the work brings us into the inner universe of a want-to-be artist, merging dream and reality. In the spirit of a fairy tale, a bakery workshop is transformed into fragile artworks, made of paper, cardboard, PVC, and plastic film. Words are written on surfaces, almost disappearing within games of reflections and transparency. The title of the whole work appears on a framed mirror as if dusted off its surface. Also onto other objects, a similar effect is created, and

words such as "better" and "don't cry" emerge. In the delicate space dominated by whiteness and small pastel color interventions, plasticized paper kitchen utensils - oven mitts, potholders, an apron - are displayed, with a few other more delicate interventions around a big slice of bread, on which the words "how to love myself like loving a burnt toast" are almost spelled. The work renders with child-like delight the persistence needed to succeed in transforming a wish into a lived life, the bitterness and the failures encountered along the way into a desire for and of the art world, as well as hinting at the unspoken courage needed to embrace art-making as self-love and transcend the omnipresent doubting related to such a precarious career. The last element of Jessie Cheuk Lam Tam's installation is a transparent and fragile plastic film, hung from the ceiling creating a sort of curtain system to activate the space. This see-through veil almost seems to materialize the last metaphor of love hinted at by the title of this text.

Considering love a see-through veil highlights the gaze we cast upon things that we love (or link to love). This game of transparency given by something that at the same time covers and exposes makes this loving-gaze-at-love tangible: looking at that love - be it our desire to be an artist, or the longing for a place to belong to, or simply the bonds that survive space and time - we can see what it tells about ourselves, and in so doing, who we really are - creatures of love.

1. When I was asked to write an interview/review of the exhibition, I did not realize how it would have challenged me, forcing questions on the nature and meaning of love in my own life. The text title is borrowed from a poem/song, *Osore Zan Revoir*, found in the anime series *Shaman King* (in its 2022 remake), a shonen series in which love and the heart as the only true compass in life are core values. I felt like this verse encapsulated the depth of love's nature, and how multifaceted it is in relation to the works in the show.

2. Term used to refer to artist-run exhibition spaces.

exhibition view: Rose Li, *100 Days of (Winter)*, 2024, a set of 100 envelopes, images of sky and text from friends (detail)



I

Don't Know

How To Love You

Teach Me

To Love

Ailsa Wong | <https://ailsaw.com> | [@ailsa.wong](https://www.instagram.com/ailsa.wong)

Wong focuses on image-making including paintings and videos with different methods, exploring ways to express consciousness with primitive emotions and fill the vacuum of belief. In the creation process that is non-research-based yet introspective, a narrative structure is almost nonexistent. To verify and communicate emotions, images were extracted from fragmented life experiences, as meanings disappeared and were re-established repeatedly.

Jennifer Poon | www.tumblr.com/blog/view/poonhiuyingjennifer | [@jennifer_poon](https://www.instagram.com/jennifer_poon)

Jennifer Poon graduated from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, majoring in Fine Arts. During her university years, she began to explore different art forms and from then on developed a special interest in image making and creating mixed media installations. Her art pieces are often inspired by Joseph Cornell's wooden box assemblages and Wes Anderson's movies. The wooden boxes and the movie scenes that they created house a world and story of its own, which inspires Jennifer's artistic expressions in the way of storytelling.

Jessie Cheuk Lam Tam | <https://www.jessiecheuklamtam.com> | [@jessie_tam](https://www.instagram.com/jessie_tam)

Jessie is an interdisciplinary artist from Hong Kong. Her work explores displacement, identity, and the evolving concept of "home", shaped by her diverse cultural experiences. She completed her MFA in Painting at the Frank Mohr Institute (2021) following her BA in Fine Art from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her practice has transitioned to include sculpture, site-specific installations, and multimedia elements like soundscapes and light. This approach allows her to explore and amplify the memory of space, addressing relational dynamics from both personal and political displacement.

Man Wai Se | [@semanwai](https://www.instagram.com/semanwai)

Man Wai Se, Van was born and lives in Hong Kong. After graduating from the Department of Fine Arts at The Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2019, she worked at a non-profit arts and disability organization and an exhibition production company. Her artistic focus lies in molding and casting, low technology, and ready-made materials, through which she shares various frustrations and mishaps she encounters in her daily life. She loves discovering tiny things in different corners of the city and enjoys collecting fragments of the urban environment. Recently, she discovered that "Doing things foolishly, yet seriously" is her life motto, and she hopes to share humor and jokes with the audience.

Lau Man Pan | <https://www.laumanpan.com> | [@manpanstudio](https://www.instagram.com/manpanstudio)

Raised in Hong Kong, Lau Man Pan gained his Bachelor's degree in Visual Arts from Hong Kong Baptist University in 2012 and his Master of fine art in painting from the Frank Mohr Institute in 2022. His multidisciplinary practice revolves around painting as a medium to convey his view on self-identity and freedom. He explores the notion of emotional memories and the mnemonic nature of objects, finding traces of human existence in the distance between reality and its depiction. "The human" is a main subject that his works always seek to discover and reveal, especially through engendering recognition via images.

Rose Li | [@roselizr](https://www.instagram.com/roselizr)

After a decade of studying art in tertiary institutions, Rose looks upon the sky and wonders if it is clearer than before. In 2024, they accepted the challenge to learn and began practicing what seem to be unrelated to art making: Noh, Hong Kong Sign Language, Kundalini yoga and dubbing. During the process of acquiring new skills to express, they moved on from being a self-proclaimed "voyager" in an infinite holiday to an artist who is taking nourishments in a long vacation. They used to perform monologues on an empty stage. Lately, they wish to incubate a space where all could come forth — one with text, sound and motion.



<exhibition view: Man Wai Se, "Gong Dai Wa, Luck Dai Ngai" (You lose teeth if you tell lie), human Tooth, gypsum moulding, video, size variable/ Man Wai Se, What Does Lie Taste Like?, sugar and some sour-bitter-sweet, size variable (top to bottom)



front page:

exhibition view: Lau Man Pan, *Fabricating Permanency*, 2024, paper clay, pigment, inkjet print, tracing paper, aluminium frame, size variable (detail)

back page:

exhibition view: Ailsa Wong, *Webbing*, 2024, mixed media on fabric and plastic ants, size variable / Jennifer Poon, *Photo Album*, 2024, wooden frames, digital print, plastic key tags, image transfer; size variable / Ailsa Wong, *Unrest (Night)*, 2024, mixed media on metal plate, 30 x 30 cm / Jennifer Poon, "I would like her best", 2024, wooden frames, wood table, clay, digital print, beads, plastic fork, wooden spoon, size variable / Man Wai Se, *What Does Lie Taste Like?*, sugar and some sour-bitter-sweet, size variable / Man Wai Se, "Gong Dai Wa, Luck Dai Ngai" (You lose teeth if you tell lie), human Tooth, gypsum moulding, video, size variable (left to right)

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