

RANT | KATE WHITEHEAD

Escape plans

Remember in the olden days – a little over two years ago – when travel was something you did for fun? Not now, not if you're in Hong Kong.

The airport is bleak. The duty-free shops are shuttered and the place looks forlorn. Not that those boarding the handful of daily flights are in any mood to splurge; most are leaving the city for good or making a dash back home for a family emergency. Emigration and family crises top the list of stressful life events – combine that with travelling in the dynamic zero-Covid era and you have a recipe for mind-blowing anxiety. Can you get a ticket? Can you afford the escalating prices? Will the flight be cancelled at the last minute?

And if you plan on returning to Hong Kong it's a whole other headache. Anyone would think they wanted to discourage people from coming back. I have friends who



Hong Kong's once-buzzing airport lies almost empty as the city battles the fifth wave of Covid-19. Picture: Jelly Tse

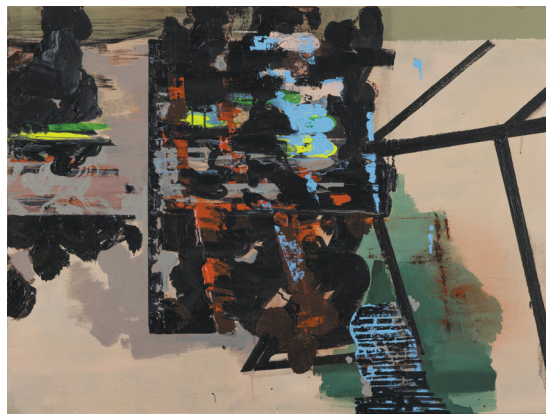
left for Christmas and haven't been able to return. Other pals are stranded in Thailand having gone for the required "washout" period, which has since been abandoned.

I need to get to the UK urgently for a family matter and the flip-flopping of policies is giving me whiplash. When I message a Cathay pilot friend hoping to find out if my return flight will fly, he tells me the crew roster will be out in a few days, "If it's listed there's a good chance, but it's not guaranteed."

Nothing is guaranteed. Uncertainty and anxiety are bedfellows and my trip has me suffocating under their covers. I can't hold out for that maybe-it-will-maybe-it-won't fly return journey without having a quarantine hotel lined up and I work my way through the list, my heart racing as I discover most are full for a few months ahead and the others have been turned into community isolation facilities.

Trying to explain what's going on to anyone outside the zero-Covid bubble is frustrating because there's no rhyme or reason to it. My sister in Scotland, used to me buzzing around the world, struggles to understand the challenge, "Hong Kong has the world's highest death rate and you still need to quarantine on arrival?"

She's right, it doesn't make sense and attempting to apply logic or scientific rationale is futile. What I wouldn't give for a good old-fashioned pre-pandemic holiday to recover from planning this trip.



ON OUR RADAR | MABEL LUI

Character driven

With a name derived from an old tale, "Sky Rains Grain" is a new series of paintings by Kurt Chan Yuk-keung that reimagines the birth of Chinese words in the style of Western "cold" abstraction, culminating in a fresh take on the timeless East-meets-West concept.

As the fable goes, the gods decided to rain grain from the heavens when the legendary figure Cangjie invented the first characters nearly 5,000 years ago, because they feared that humans would become too preoccupied with wordplay and the pursuit of wisdom to grow enough food for themselves.

For Chan, using a Western style of geometric, rational design to deconstruct Chinese characters – a visual wordplay in a way – can bring out new ideas about structure and meaning.

Notably, the exhibition forgoes wall labels: Chan says while some titles give away the Chinese character that a painting is based on, he wants viewers to come up with their own interpretation and not become obsessed with guessing the words in the pictures.

Chan was inspired by the calligraphy of ancient stone inscriptions predating the Tang dynasty (618-907), and decided to marry the style with Western abstraction through imaginative use of colour combinations, layering and repetition. And he chose to paint in acrylic, which provides more fluidity than oil.

In some of the works, Chan explores the duality between word components and meanings. For example, *Connection* plays with the fact that the Chinese words for "broken" and "continuous" are made up of similar elements even if their meanings are opposite. In others, he simply revels in the beauty of the form. A painting titled *as of*, for example, is based on a word that resembles the alphabet Z with a dot on top and could almost be a landscape painting.

Chan, who taught at Chinese University's art school for 27 years, is



Clockwise from top left: *as of* by Kurt Chan Yuk-keung; *Connection*, another of the artist's works; Chan's "Sky Rains Grain" series is showing at Contemporary by Angela Li; Chan says he wants to create art that has longevity.



a pioneer of Hong Kong contemporary art. His previous works have been mainly mixed media and installations, but his latest collection of acrylic paintings represents a significant departure. He attributes the change in medium to the unsustainable nature of his mixed media works.

"In 20 years, all the artworks I created couldn't be kept because of storage reasons," he says. "When they were completed, I'd throw them away. I felt that it was a shame, and I didn't want to keep making work that was not environmentally friendly and couldn't be kept."

Following his retirement in 2016, Chan has sought to create art that has longevity – works that can be revisited.

"Of course, the challenge now is how to translate my previous skills to my current work," he says. "[But] when I create pieces of work, I don't just look at the skills or style – that's not my interest. I'm most interested in the work's core ideology, and that isn't any different from my past artworks."

"Sky Rains Grain", by Kurt Chan Yuk-keung, is showing at Contemporary by Angela Li, 248 Hollywood Road, Sheung Wan, until April 26. Visit cbal.com.hk for details.

