

LOOKING AT THE SEA THROUGH A WINDOW

Land reclamation and installation art in Macao, China

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ABSTRACT: This research note provides an introduction to a collaborative art exhibition by two artists, Crystal W. M. Chan and Benjamin K. Hodges, entitled *Mountain Surrounded by Sea*. The exhibition, installed at the Creative Macau gallery in May and June of 2020, is a sound and installation work that centres on the ‘Macao New Urban Zone’ project which consists of five new islands currently being constructed through land reclamation in Macao. This special administrative region of China and (modified) archipelago at the mouth of the Pearl River Delta is bound by tight geographical constraints so has historically expanded through land reclamation. A new development project has been launched to specifically meet the future housing and infrastructure needs of the growing population. In the exhibition, two sculptural works and a unifying sound art piece evoke the affective landscape of these developments by highlighting the tension between environmental concerns and desires for new public and private space.

KEYWORDS: Land reclamation, installation, sound art, Macao, China

Macao is linked to its outlying islands by three bridges. For many residents, travel on them is a daily occurrence. They offer a brief reprieve from the density of the city. The Governor Nobre de Carvalho Bridge, the middle and oldest of these bridges, is reserved for public transportation, eg buses and taxis. The Praia Grande bay and the historic Avenida da Praia Grande waterfront of Macao can be glimpsed out of vehicle windows during this commute. Macao’s historic outer harbour once greeted ships arriving from Goa, Malacca and further afield; however, now it is largely obscured behind newer reclamation projects. What remains of the bay still symbolically represents Macao’s relationship to the sea and its outlying islands. The surface of the water reflects annual firework competitions, the city skyline and functions as an iconic image of Macao. Having lived in Macao since 2008, I have taken this bridge countless times shuttling back and forth between work and home. It was only in the winter of 2020 that I began to notice a change to this familiar route. This change was just the beginning of a large-scale reclamation project taking shape just to the east of the middle bridge in a previously undeveloped portion of the bay. Unlike most of the other reclamation projects in Macao, this new project is not an addition to an existing portion of land nor is it set further offshore like the reclamation projects for the now complete Hong Kong-Macao-Zhuhai Bridge. This project sits directly in-between the two main landmasses of Macao (Figure 1), so its appearance felt like a significant change; like someone deciding to build a new island between Brooklyn and Manhattan.

Kidder Hodges – Looking at the sea through a window: Macao

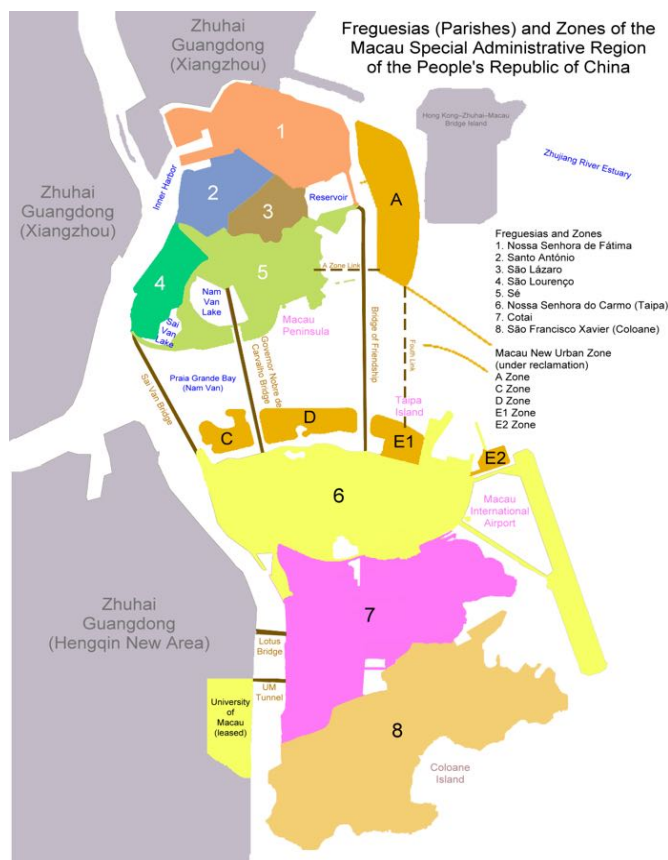


Figure 1 – Map of Macao with Macau Urban New Zone (Alan Mak, 2011, Wikimedia Commons).¹

Of course, this project didn't emerge *sui generis* from the sea. It is one of five new islands proposed as part of the Macau New Urban Zone project. Since January 2020, Zone C of the project has been under construction between Taipa island and the Macao peninsula. This involves a slow process of barges of sand being brought into the area to pump their cargo into the shallow bay. This same central location was previously proposed in 1918 by a group of Canadian engineers as a reclamation site to be called Ilha Rada ('Port Island') (Haberzettl and Ptak, 1991: 303). That project was never realised, but numerous other reclamation projects have redefined the shape of Macao. What is striking about this current project for five new artificial islands is that they are independent islands being added to Macao's waters instead of extensions of existing land masses. Also, Zone C will be situated directly across from Ocean Gardens (which promotes itself as Macao's "premier luxurious development") an extensive complex of 34 residential buildings and 21 villas replete with all the amenities from shopping to schools to parks, and a "tranquil waterfront promenade." This kind of pedestrian-friendly promenade can be found along Macao's historic Praia Grande waterfront but is otherwise largely absent in the previous reclamation zones of Macao and

¹ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Administrative_Division_of_Macao.png – accessed 28th August 2020.

Taipa where development has largely faced inward toward the urban interior. A recent redevelopment of this Taipa waterfront park with wider jogging and bicycle paths is a sign of things to come as the new island projects also promise to offer residents more venues for leisure near the sea. In the meantime, you can already find kids whizzing past on rented bikes, ambitious joggers braving the heat and domestic workers taking a break from their labour along the Taipa waterfront park. All the while, the terrain of the new artificial island slowly accumulates just offshore.

The Macau New Urban Zone is a large-scale reimagining of the city's relationship to the sea and *Mountain Surrounded by Sea* is an artistic response to this physical transformation of the landscape. The aim of the exhibition is to provoke contemplation about the 'islandness' of Macao and the affects of desire and longing that emerge alongside the promise of a new island home and lifestyle. The title of the exhibition is a literal translation of the Chinese character for island (島) and evokes the experience of living on an island or enclave bounded by borders both natural and man-made. In the exhibition there are two main spaces: one is a recreation of a model home (Figure 2), as if an apartment for sale on the future reclaimed islands, and the other is a reconstruction of the kind of fresh seafood displays common in front of the city's traditional seafood restaurants (Figure 3). These spaces represent two different poles of Macao's development, one its shrinking traditional fishing industry and the other increasing pressure to meet the future housing needs of its growing population. Throughout the space a surround sound piece plays a layered mixture of field recordings of nature and the urban environment. Sounds of the shoreline, birds and water intermingle with the sounds of the city, overheard arguments in neighbourhood restaurants and crowded street-life. A haunting, almost submerged, quality is achieved through the use of a surround sound system constructed of pink insulation foam together with transducers. Standing in the simulated empty room of the ersatz model apartment and listening to the sound piece is meant to be like taking a tour or walk through Macao, hearing its audible urban density and seeing a promise of island life off in the distance.



Figure 2 – *Mountain Surrounded by Sea* exhibition image (author's photo, 2020).

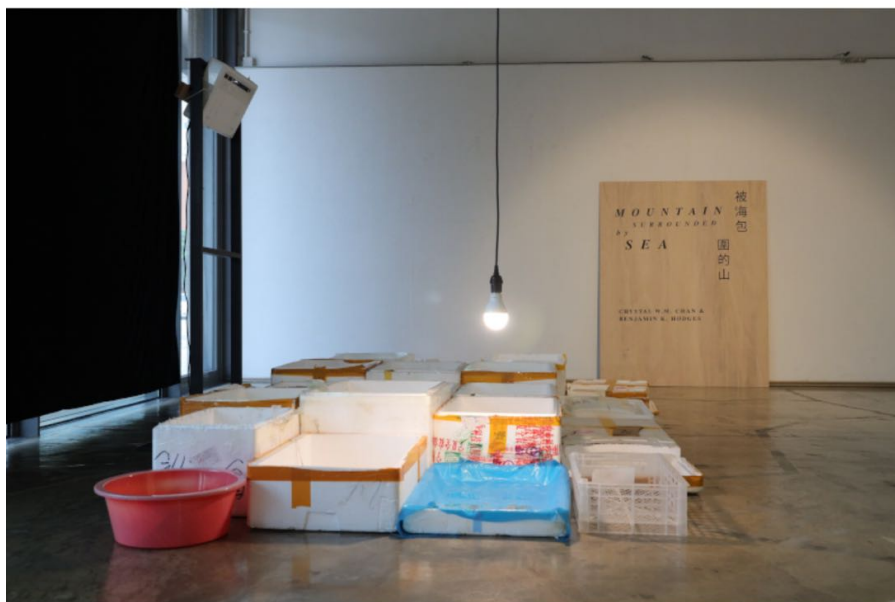


Figure 3 – *Mountain Surrounded by Sea* exhibition image (author's photo, 2020).

This use of sound art to engage with the urban landscape can also be seen in the audio-walks of Janet Cardiff in which she guides listeners along a chosen path through various cities. Like a museum walking tour gone astray, Cardiff provides running commentary and fictive interventions that overlap with the listeners' real-time experience of the space. In her work, *The missing voice (case study B)*, for instance, she narrates the listener's walk through London starting off from the crime section of the Whitechapel Public Library (Pinder 2001). The auditory experience of Macao is already dissonant with sounds of everyday conversations regularly intermingling with the banging and metallic sounds of construction and traffic. Unlike many of the construction and infrastructure projects in Macao, the ongoing five island projects are not spaces that are typically heard or experienced first hand; they are more seen at a distance, off-shore. The land emerging from the sea in a slow process of accretion doesn't make much noise. In this way, these reclamation projects are not heard so much as seen, like a slow-motion mirage appearing on the horizon. Other projects like the Macau-Hong Kong-Zhuhai bridge and the rapidly developing high-rise towers of the neighbouring island of Hengqin also have this quality of being large scale developments happening at a distance on the horizon. Our exhibition seeks to put together these two qualities and experiences, the auditory density and diversity of Macao with the distant abstraction of large-scale development happening just out of earshot.

Macao is certainly not the only urban island or archipelago that has expanded through reclamation. Hong Kong was planned from the beginning with this kind of expansion in mind while other former islands like Dejima in Nagasaki, Japan have been subsumed into the mainland. Other urban island cities have also tended to face inward away from the sea. Manhattan itself developed away from its shores and early oyster industry (Grydehøj, 2015). Island studies has shown that the island is not just a location and set of physical dependencies and assemblages. It can also be a collective imaginary, with islands "considered as much a product of affective and imaginative engagements with both past and present as

they can products of location alone” (*Shima* Editorial Board 2007: 3). In the specific case of Macao, to understand the significance of these new islands one must consider them in historical context and ponder how they circulate in an affective and imaginative space.

Once a small fishing village, Macao has steadily increased in both physical size and population since the Portuguese came in 1557 and made it the first trading port between Europe and China. It subsequently played an important part in the 18th Century rise of the Canton system that both regulated foreign trade in China and made Chinese goods increasing available to global markets (Dyke, 2011). Macao’s global significance was eclipsed by the emergence of neighbouring Hong Kong in the 19th Century whose deepwater bay made it better equipped to host larger cargo ships. Over the years, the Portuguese administration struggled with plans to address this inequity by dredging the inner harbor of the silt that made it so shallow and inconvenient for modern shipping. These dredging projects, interestingly, assisted some of Macao’s earliest land reclamation projects (Daniell, 2018). Macao’s shipping industry never returned to its former central position in global trade but the Macao government did continue to expand through numerous land reclamation projects. Now two-thirds of the land in Macao is reclaimed land. This history of land reclamation is so pervasive that it often goes unnoticed.

It was not until the liberalisation of the gaming monopoly license in 2001 that Macao returned to international prominence as a global leader in gaming, with revenues that have far exceeded its closest rival, Las Vegas. Many of the mega-resort complexes and gaming rooms are themselves located on a stretch of reclaimed land between the formerly detached islands of Taipa and Coloane now dubbed the Cotai Strip. This stretch of land reclamation was originally intended to serve as a new residential district but starting with the Venetian in 2007 it was transformed into a new centre for the gaming industry and tourism (Simpson, 2014). None of these large casino complexes address the surrounding sea; they all face inwards encouraging potential players and shoppers to direct their attention to gaming and shopping rather than outward to the surrounding natural environment. Unlike the Cotai Strip, this new group of five islands currently under construction are meant to have a waterfront and a relationship to the sea. In the final proposed plans that were in part influenced by a 2011 public consultation project, it was determined that the waterfront “will be entirely devoted to green space and will not have motorised transport unlike present-day Macao” (Zacharias 2015: 5). The new islands are meant to address the housing needs of the local population and offer a different form of leisure than those on offer on the Cotai Strip. It should also be noted that the new reclamation project does not feature any spaces specifically designated as gaming facilities.

The Macao government and the private gaming and tourism sector are regularly promoting two different imaginaries or visions of Macao: one is an image of Chinese and Portuguese heritage and the other is a contemporary vision of luxury attached to its mega casino-hotel complexes and the real estate market. The Venetian, with its themed resort spaces and virtual canal, started a trend of combining these by offering artificial environments that present an air-conditioned version of heritage. The Venetian has little to do with the historic downtown of Macao but does represent a model that has been repeated with the Parisian Resort and forthcoming Londoner rebranding of the Sands Cotai. These venues provide tourists with convenient enclosed spaces that are separate from the natural world and the sea that surrounds them. There is no wildlife in the Venetian, at least nothing intentional. In these interior themed spaces, local heritage is also occasionally on display in seasonal themed spaces and products. The new Lisboa portion of the Lisboa Cotai Resort, which is expected to open in the second half of 2020, will feature its own version of traditional sites

from around Macao, like the Hotel Estoril, the floating Macau Palace casino and the iconic former Central Hotel. The very city centre itself can also be seen as a kind of themed space that sells a version of heritage to tourists. Senado Square and the crowded path to the iconic Ruins of St. Paul's are a mixture of the old and new. The area contains UNESCO recognised heritage buildings and stonework that was newly created to evoke a feeling of old Lisbon (Simpson, 2019). The historic centre of Macao is also full of the same shops and reconstructed heritage that populate the Venetian and other themed resorts of the Cotai district.

Our exhibition is an intervention into this kind of themed environment. It is meant to evoke the feeling of a mirage or distant future that is at once visible on the horizon but not quite clear. In the model home space this is further evoked through a picture window that recalls a tradition of dioramas and museum displays (Figure 4). In our version, the matte painting and foreground of sand create an odd distorted view in which the sea is not quite visible. A lone insect populates the otherwise barren terrain. This is not the idealised sea view that is sold with many luxury apartments. In writing about the subject of urban expansion through reclamation, Grydehøj has noted that the English term reclamation is “singularly inappropriate” as it “does not typically seek to ‘reclaim’ lost ground at all but instead to extend solid ground out into new frontiers” (2015: 99). In the case of Macao’s new urban expansion, the land is not reclaimed from the sea, it is rather made anew by sand shipped in from distant shores. For those who are witnessing their construction, it is more like some kind of unseen force pulling the land to the surface rather than a more proactive act of reclaiming or taking back something that has been lost.



Figure 4 – *Mountain Surrounded by Sea* exhibition image (author's photo, 2020).

In the second installation space, a version of Macao's fading heritage has been recreated. In this case it is not an architectural heritage but instead the intangible heritage of Macao's

fishing industry. The exhibition uses a mixture of everyday objects from a local seafood market or restaurant and video projection to recreate the experience of buying seafood. Rows of white Styrofoam containers are typically used for food transport and also for the display of fresh seafood in local markets. The seafood in the installation is constructed using 3d animation and projected as a looped video into the containers (Figure 5). This creates a ghostly image of sea life. The animated images of lobsters, oysters, geoducks, and mantis shrimp are typical local seafood but are no longer fished from local waters. Like mirages seen at sea by sailors and fishermen on the distant horizon, these artificial versions of the natural world are seen and desired but not in reach. The idea of the mirage also harks back to Chinese folklore and to the *shen* (蜃) ('clam monster') whose breath was thought to create mirages of cities seen at sea.

Of course, Macao is not a mirage, but it is a city built of both real land and artificial visions. What is interesting about this new five island project is that it preserves Macao's 'islandness' by maintaining a wet border. This speaks to the value of the sea and waterfront from residential developers' and homeowners' perspectives. The value of the sea view is being maintained and amplified. This is a change in approach from earlier reclamation projects that added land without necessarily adding new waterfront spaces. The Nam Wan and Sai Wan lakes were created through land reclamation projects that began in 1991. They did preserve the historic waterfront of the Avenida da Praia Grande but the stretch of new reclamation that sealed it off has been in a perpetual state of transition. Its multiple new commercial spaces have alternately laid empty, served as a safe fireworks zone during Chinese New Year celebrations and as a depot for Macao's large fleet of buses. These functions differ greatly from the park, running trails and bike paths that are proposed for the new waterfront.



Figure 5 – *Mountain Surrounded by Sea* exhibition image (author's photo, 2020).

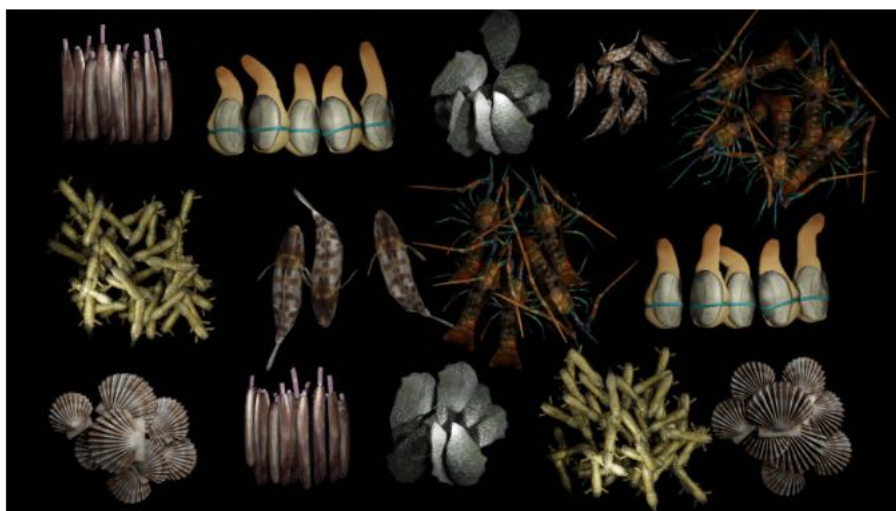


Figure 6 – Frame from looped 3d animation at *Mountain Surrounded by Sea* exhibition (2020).

The Macao peninsula itself used to be an island, but through natural processes and land reclamation it has become an island attached, a *presqu'île*, an almost island, attached physically and through infrastructure to mainland China. Macao's new islands and reclamation zones, nonetheless, offer a certain vision of 'islandness' of escape, leisure and increasingly luxury sea views. This imaginary and real relationship to the sea is one of the things that Macao provides to the Greater Bay Area. These imaginaries and physical realities can sometimes be forgotten in a city designed mainly to face inward, away from its borders and shoreline. To quote our exhibition literature, "[t]o live on the island, is to sometimes forget the sands beneath and the sea that surrounds us." Our installation is designed to provoke contemplation about these connections and the precarity of the relationship between land and sea.

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