



If the Hong Kong government isn't willing to address the city's human trafficking problem, the people—and the artists—may do it for them.

BY CHRISTOPHER DEWOLF

In an ordinary suburban highrise, an Indonesian maid is tortured and forced to work without pay. Across town, a young Thai tourist is kidnapped, raped and held as a sex slave. A Bangladeshi asylum seeker is smuggled into the city by boat, only to find himself mired in a dysfunctional refugee system that leaves him unable to work. These are just a few recent examples of human trafficking and modern slavery in Hong Kong, which international observers say is rife with such abuses.

Yet the Hong Kong government resolutely denies there is a problem. This posed a challenge for the Justice Centre, an NGO that helps asylum-seekers and victims of human trafficking and slavery. "We want to bring about policy change, but we also want to engage people and change public attitudes," says Aideen McLaughlin, the Justice Centre's director of external affairs. So the centre came up with a solution: an art prize. "Art is a better way to provoke dialogue and bring about greater understanding of an issue than you could get by hearing me talk for 10 minutes," she says.

The first Human Rights Art Prize was launched in 2013. Its second edition, last December, drew more than 40 entries from Hong Kong-based artists who tackled the theme of human trafficking and modern slavery. "People had for the most part to create new artworks," says McLaughlin. "They don't have art about human trafficking hanging around their studio." One artist, British-born painter Mark Standing, told McLaughlin he had always

been interested in the issue, but no commercial gallery expressed interest in such difficult topics.

They may be difficult to address, but they are also desperately urgent. Last year, Hong Kong was shaken by the story of Erwiana Sulistyarningsih, an Indonesian domestic worker who claims she was tortured by her employer, Law Wan-tung. She was allegedly deprived of food and water and beaten so severely she suffered brain damage. Law is now being tried on 20 counts of assault, failure to pay wages and other offences. Hong Kong police claim such instances of abuse are rare, but social welfare advocates say the vast majority of cases go unreported as helpers risk deportation if they leave their abusive employers.

Perhaps because of Erwiana's high-profile case, domestic workers featured prominently in the art shortlisted for the Justice Prize. The prize winner, *Can you see me yet?* by Australian-born photographer Katie Vajda is a series of two photographs depicting a domestic helper standing in a Burberry-patterned dress against a wall with the same pattern. In one photo, she is accompanied by an ornate feather duster; in the other, she is wrapped, mummy-like, in the patterned fabric. "I play with the recognizable and repetitive prints of an international luxury brand as the backdrop and landscape for this narrative of neglect, abuse and obscurity," says Vajda. Barely visible when working, and disguised when unneeded, the helper becomes one accessory among many.

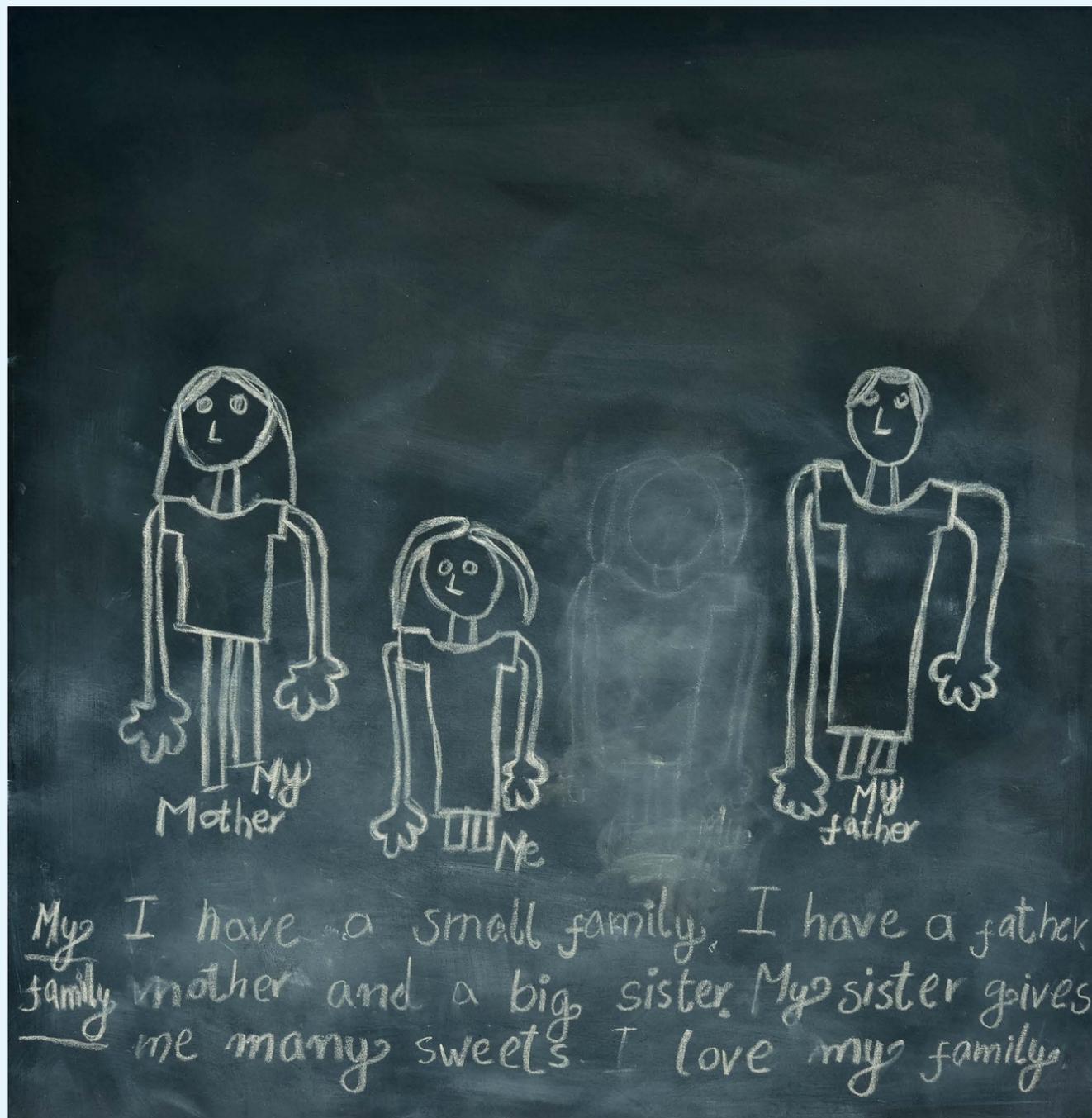
The prize attracted entries from a diverse



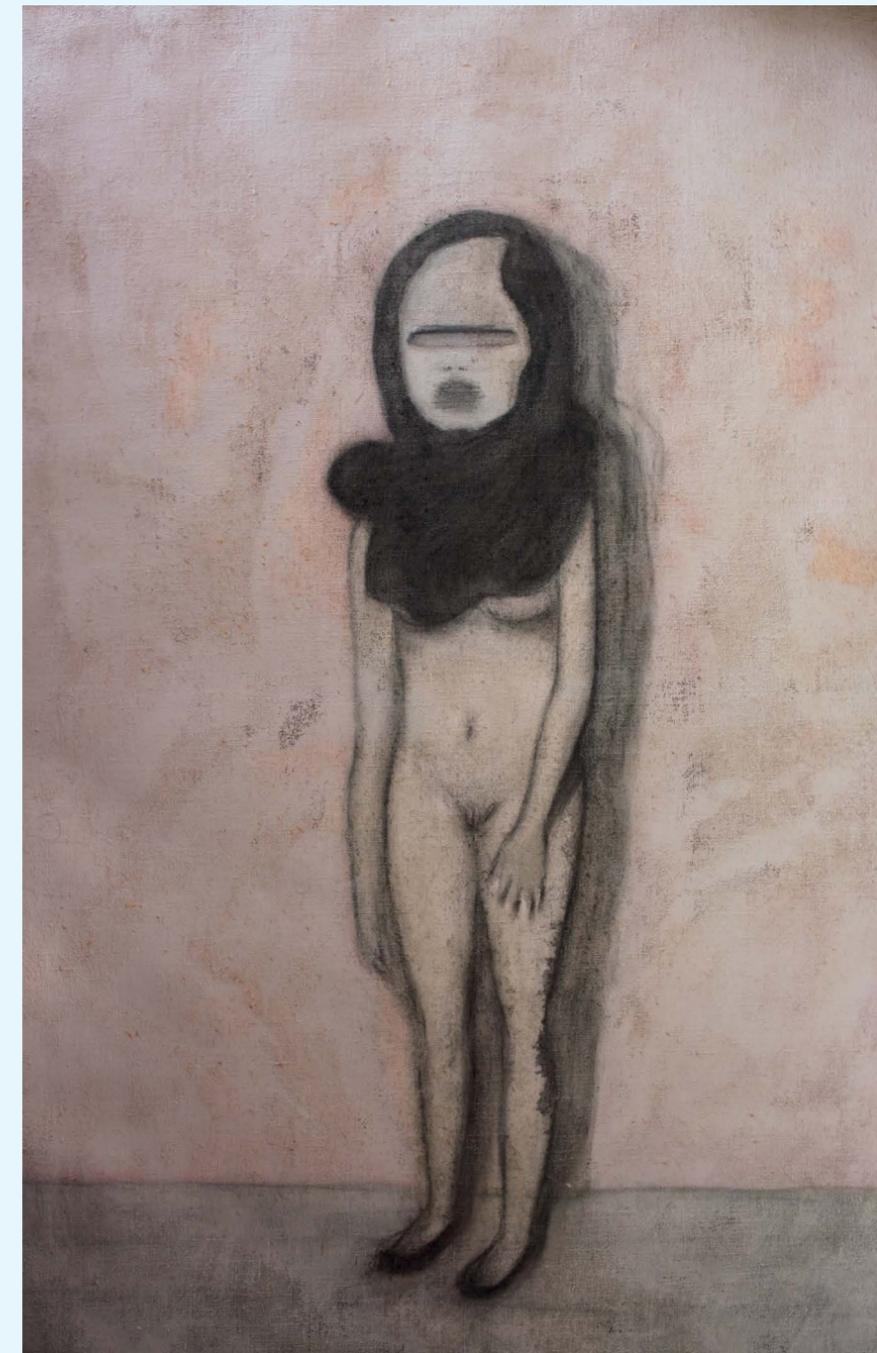
(THIS PAGE) Tiff Chan and Shawn Griffin, *Bless the Souls Who Made Our Clothes 2*. (OPPOSITE) Parry Chin Tang Ling, *Best Before*.



(THIS PAGE) Katie Vajda,
Can You See Me Yet? 1 and 2.
(OPPOSITE) Xyza Bacani, *BURN.*



(THIS PAGE) Siddharth Choudhary, *My Family*. (OPPOSITE) Ringo Cheung, *Standing In the Pink*.



range of artists. Hong Kong-born Ringo Cheung contributed *Standing in the Pink*, a stark oil, acrylic and charcoal portrait of a child prostitute he encountered on the street in Pattaya, Thailand. Veiled and faceless, only her naked body can be seen in detail. Another Hong Kong-born artist, Rik Yu, submitted *A Somatic Dialogue*, a series of five videos that contemplate the submissiveness engendered by power and social norms. In 78, digital artist Ellen Leung interwove the faces of 78 living Japanese women born in 1944 with the image of a pregnant comfort woman, used as a sex slave by Japanese soldiers, taken in the same year.

A special prize was given to Xyza Cruz Bacani, a 27-year-old domestic worker from the Philippines who moonlights as a street photographer. A recent *New York Times* profile compared her to Vivian Maier, an American nanny who quietly documented life in Chicago's streets, but she has forged her own path with a new series on the lives of Hong Kong's domestic worker. Her photograph *BURN* depicts a helper named Maria who suffered third-degree burns after spilling a pot of boiling soup. "Her employer did not give her proper medical treatment, made her work in pain and kicked her out of her job even with her sufferings," says Bacani.

While Erwiana's case dominates the headlines, many more incidents go unreported, says McLaughlin. In addition to abuse at the hands of their employers, many domestic workers are charged high fees by unscrupulous employment agencies, forcing them into debt bondage. A 2013 report by Amnesty International titled "Exploited for Profit, Failed by Governments" catalogued the many abuses that occur in the hiring and employment of Hong Kong's 140,000 Indonesian domestic workers, including debt bondage, physical and sexual abuse, poor living conditions, illegal overtime and unpaid wages. Last year, the US State Department noted that "Hong Kong authorities do not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking" and recommended the enactment of a comprehensive anti-trafficking law. Hong Kong's government responded by denying that trafficking is a problem in the city.

"Hong Kong is very far behind other countries," says McLaughlin. "Most other countries have something like a national plan of action, but Hong Kong doesn't have it because they say there is no trafficking here." Though many of the Justice Centre's resources are dedicated to helping individuals, McLaughlin sees policy change as the only sustainable solution to the city's problems. For that to happen, the centre needs data, so it is embarking on a two-year study to determine the exact extent of human trafficking among sex workers, domestic workers and asylum-seekers. "Once we have the data, no longer will the Hong Kong government be able to deny there is a problem," he says.

In the meantime, there is art. Last year's prize attracted three prominent judges—Asia Art Archive director Claire Hsu, High Court judge Kevin Zervos and artist Kacey Wong—and support from auction house Christie's, which arranged a silent auction of the shortlisted works. Since the rise of the pro-democracy

Umbrella Movement, which occupied Hong Kong's streets last autumn in a frenzy of improvised art and demonstrations, McLaughlin thinks artists are becoming more politically and socially engaged. "One of the judges, Kacey Wong—he said art for him is a weapon of protest and change," she says.

Wong thinks the Umbrella Movement has given art new relevance in Hong Kong. "I think after the Umbrella Movement, not only are the artists finally more willing to engage in the topic of politics, but also the general public begins to accept art as a legitimate tool to express their individual political viewpoints," says Wong. That could signify an important turning point for Hong Kong, because if the government isn't willing to address the city's problems, the people—and the artists—may do it for them.