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## Interview: Henry Hussey and Vanessa Wong

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Emerging artists **Henry Hussey** and **Vanessa Wong** tell Alexis Lai about their bold looks on life, evident in their works currently on show at The Cat Street Gallery

The title *Young Blood* evokes both youth and freshness – both of which are in abundance in the first commercial gallery showing of works by emerging artists Henry Hussey and Vanessa Wong. While Hussey, a textile artist from England, and Wong, a painter from Hong Kong, may not share an obvious connection, their works form a cohesive exhibition at The Cat Street Gallery on Hollywood Road with their bold vibrant colours, sharp conceptual focus, and deep personal inspiration.

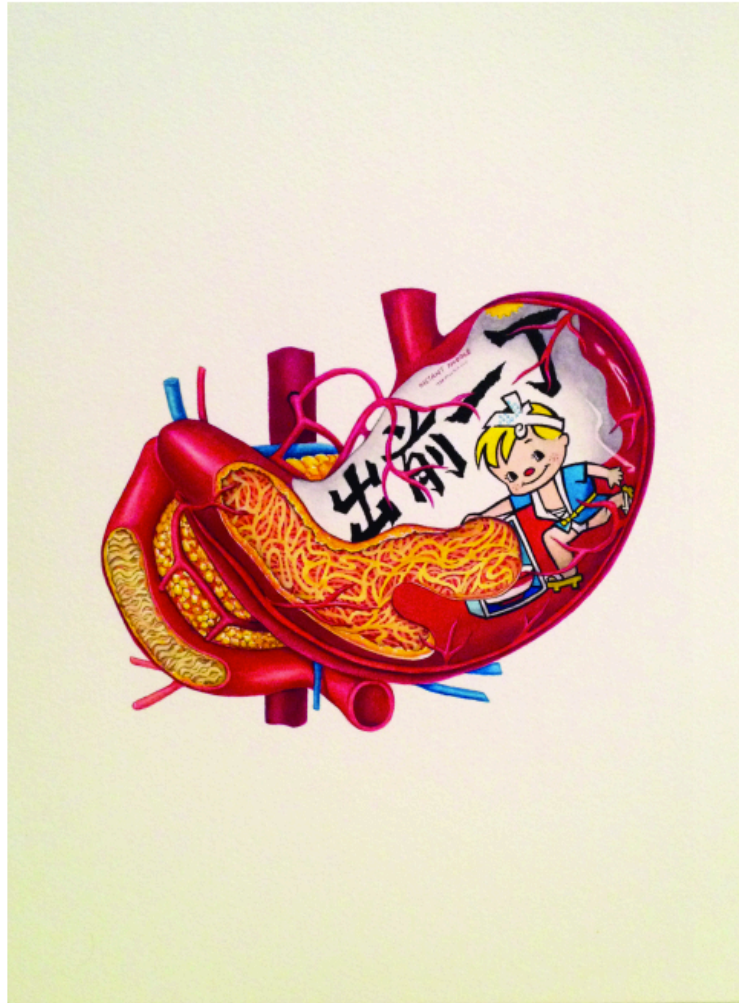
Mostly executed with watercolours on paper, Wong's clean and colourful drawings possess an easy appeal. A graphic designer by day, Wong returned to school and earned a bachelor of fine arts in painting from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 2012. Since then, she has quickly found success, participating in local shows, selling several pieces from her *Entity* series, and attracting Cat Street's attention at the Affordable Art Fair in March. Begun last year, *Entity* features clever pairings of consumer goods and human organs. The goods seamlessly comprise parts of human organs in extreme yet delicate portrayals of their inextricable role in daily life. Objects closely mirror the textures of the depicted organ - instant noodles replicate the thin wavy fibres of the stomach while M&Ms and cornflakes make up nodules of heart muscle.

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Entity 003 by Vanessa Wong

"It seems that many objects and our lives cannot be separated," the 31-year-old Wong said. "It's very natural that we have to consume things... these are not essential items, but we use them every day." All of the goods featured – junk food, high heels, cosmetics – have all been part and parcel of her daily life, she added. The most personal work is perhaps *Entity 011*, an enwombed fetus curled in a bottle of Johnson & Johnson's baby oil, inspired by her current pregnancy and her childhood enjoyment of the oil's fragrance.

The series could easily be read as a consumerist critique, but Wong denied any critical intention, describing her works instead as "playful." "I didn't think it was a critique as I was making it; I think of it as a reflection of my life, not necessarily good or bad. Some things you can't avoid."

At the same time, her drawings can be undeniably direct. The newly-completed *Entity 012* and *Entity 013* feature consumer goods that Wong acknowledged as "sexual" and "feminine," qualities brought to full effect by the male reproductive system fitted into a Chanel No. 5 bottle and the female reproductive system encased in an eyeshadow compact.

Fresh from completing his master's degree in textiles at London's Royal College of Art last year, Hussey similarly brings careful consideration to all elements of his textile hangings. At the age of 24, Hussey already possesses a remarkable maturity of thought. His works, which can come across as crude and plain collages, are deep meditations on memory, narrative, and emblematic significance. Several are inspired by the near-fatal illness of his grandfather a few years ago, an experience that opened up a new chapter in their relationship. One such piece is *Grasping*.

A collage of embroidered and digital images specifically layered on a damask canvas, *Grasping* explores the formation, fragmentation, and fading of memories that his grandfather began to share with him only upon his illness. "I learned more about him than I ever had...it takes someone almost dying to get stuff out of them—I found that almost harrowing," Hussey said. Anchored on an eye situated in its center, *Grasping* is based on "the idea that he's reaching back into the past, trying to grab hold of his memories," Hussey said. Memories are not static and whole however, as reflected in the embellished, fragmented narrative.

Hussey's strong preoccupation with aesthetic centering continues in *Wolfe*, an embroidered self-portrait framed by a spiked ring, a Chinese weapon he came across at an Oxford museum. The ring and the red and gold colours are Hussey's rather reductivist attempts to pay homage to Hong Kong. In *Unchartered*, he appropriates an embroidered photo frame he found in Oxfam that was made in Hong Kong in 1950 for a British soldier. His use of the frame to illustrate his own inaugural journey of visiting the city is much more interesting. After completing his master's degree, Hussey said he was suddenly gripped by a desperate and inexplicable need to get away.



*Transition* by Henry Hussey, 2014

"I thought where is the furthest I could go culturally and realistically and I ended up in Hong Kong," he said. He contacted The Cat Street Gallery as it had previously exhibited works by English ceramic artist Dan Baldwin, with whom he shared a similar aesthetic. Upon returning to England, he will have his second gallery exhibition in a group show at London's Collyer Bristow Gallery. The same aesthetic treatment appears in *Untitled 1*, which employs the pointed floral motifs of an old tablecloth to frame an embroidered portrait of a young actor who resembles his grandfather. "The flowers give him focus, his significance, this is his Roman wreath," Hussey said, in a nod to Greek narrative friezes. Conceptually, he also maintains a central focus in his works, preferring one-word titles. "The title acts as an umbrella, I can begin piling ideas underneath of it."

*Untitled 2* - which he describes as his "rare fun piece" - is the most delightful work, a vibrantly-embroidered version of a black-and-white image of his grandfather as a young boy. "I've taken his gloomy childhood and made it brighter," he said. "We've now got a relationship," he said of his grandfather muse, who loves his work. As the first artist in a long line of working-class labourers, Hussey sees his approval as especially significant. "For (my grandfather) to engage in what I'm doing is a really big thing for me."

Gallery director Fiona Ho said Cat Street sees great promise in both young bloods and hopes to exclusively represent them in Hong Kong.

***Young Blood*** *The Cat Street Gallery, until Jul 12; [thecatstreetgallery.com](http://thecatstreetgallery.com).*

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