



■ Clockwise from left: *The Evening Dress*; *The Great War*; *The Treachery of Images*; *The Child of Space*; artist Ernest Chang; *The Lovers II*; and *The Son of Man*.



Space, the final frontier

Disu Dang

Imagine if we humans finally achieve our dream of living in space. That's the world Ernest Chang has conjured up in *Space Rich*.

And the picture he has painted in his solo exhibition of 14 paintings and four sculptures is not a positive one: even if we're physically in outer space, our minds will probably still be preoccupied with smartphones and advertisements, just like on Earth.

After his previous series *Bling Dynasty*, which grabbed attention through its mix of traditional Chinese painting style and modern pop symbols, he shifted the focus to space after going through a period of depression in 2021.

"During the pandemic, I felt depressed a lot of times and just wanted an escape. Space is my place to escape," he said.

"From a young age, space has been a place for me to think of reality in a different perspective. It's like there's almost an infinite universe, and Earth is just a tiny blurred dot in the middle of this galaxy."

But even if we do manage to escape into outer space, we cannot really run away from our problems on Earth, he added.

"SpaceX founder Elon Musk once said Mars can be a plan B for humanity, but I feel like wherever humans go, we'll also bring human problems with us," said Chang.

"The possibilities are we're finally able to travel to space but only billionaires like Musk can afford it."

Escaping into an alternative reality in painting, however, has always been the way artists express their discontent with the world.

On his journey to escape, Chang found the works of Rene Magritte, the Spanish surrealist artist, extremely relatable.

"It's probably because he also lived in a time of political turmoil, so his unsettling feelings about the world resonate with my feelings during the tumultuous 2022."

In fact, all of the paintings on exhibition are inspired by Magritte's paintings, with an added touch of pop culture.

In Chang's favorite work, *The Son of Man*, Morty, from the futuristic cartoon *Rich and Morty*, stands on Mars, with an iPhone floating in front of his face.

The painting is Chang's take on the most famous



painting by Magritte of the same title, in which a bowler-hatted man's face is blocked by a green apple.

"I resonated with the idea in his painting, that objects can obscure a person. And it came to me that the apple can be replaced by an Apple iPhone, and it's like he's standing in the middle of Mars and still have an iPhone stuck to his face," said Chang.

In *The Lovers II*, Magritte's painting of the same name is recreated in a space setup. A veiled couple are kissing but if you look closely, you can see they're both captivated by their phones.

Chang said this was inspired by his observation in the subway.

"You can always see couples cuddling on the train, but sometimes you'll find one of them just looking at the phone behind the other's back," he said.

If you're a fan of cartoons, you'll probably be thrilled by all the references in Chang's works. From *Rick and Morty* to *Sailor Moon*, the artist is fond of having his favorite characters make appearances in his paintings.

"Cartoons represent a part of me," he said. "They're the last island I cling to that makes me happy. I find a lost part of myself in every character I chose to paint."

For example, Morty in *The Son of Man* represents the part of Chang that feels like a clueless teenager, following whoever has the most authority around.

On the other hand, Lana Kane, a female character in the animation *Archer* who was featured in another painting, *The Great War*, represents the aggressive feminine spy character hidden in him.

"I relate to the characters because the world is like a crazy place, but despite all the craziness, they still manage to survive." The exhibition title, *Space Rich*, is also an ironic play on words to express his concerns about the craziness in the real world.

"Space can mean outer space but it can also mean the space we're living in," he said.

"In Hong Kong, we're not rich in space, everyone is living in tiny places. You can own bigger spaces only if you're rich."

If you want to dive into an alternative reality with cartoon characters in space and ponder some real-life issues, check out *Space Rich*, which is on show at the Stallery WCH in Wan Chai until June 4.

Beyond expectations

Believing that Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* will resonate with the younger generation facing the growing inequality in today's world, Peter Jordan directs the first-ever Cantonese version of this famous tale.

He hopes to get his audience thinking about what we should value in life.

When: April 14 to 16

Where: City Hall Theatre, Central



Chatroom shorthand revived

Before social media took over the internet, strangers in online chatrooms used the question "A/S/L?" to quickly learn the age, sex, and location of the person they were conversing with.

Decades later, Chinese artist Wang Jiajia is rekindling the question with his latest exhibition, *A/S/L*, examining the way we connect with people now in a digital world.

When: until April 29

Where: De Sarthe, Wong Chuk Hang

Dancing with Stella

StellaLou will join dancers from Hong Kong Ballet to fulfill her dream of doing a recital in *StellaLou's Wonderful Wishes Ballet*.

There will also be special items on sale at the park's stores – from a ballet costume, hairband and bag to a limited-edition pin in the shape of StellaLou's ballet slippers.

When: April 5 to 10 and 14 to 16

Where: Hong Kong Disneyland
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