

## Wonderland.

### MAK2

We talk to the thought-provoking artist about *The Sims*, creating her collection of triptychs, and blurring the lines between virtual and reality.

April 21, 2023



In a space online, where you can recreate everything in physical life, can you recreate love and intimacy? Mak2 addresses this question with *Love Pool*, her first solo exhibition with Peres Projects. The collection features a series of bold, compelling triptychs with a commentary about real and fake connection. The artwork shows pixelated lovers in their home environments, staring off into space and disconnecting from one another and their surroundings. A poignant representation of the monotony and disappointment of digital dating — a space that promises connection and often leaves users exhausted or wanting more — the rooms and figures themselves appear interchangeable. Sparking conversations about superficial intimacy and blurring the lines between virtual and reality, the brightly coloured collection is as thought-provoking as it is eye-catching.

Mak2's production process further speaks to the themes of human interaction vs. digital connection that the art itself evokes. Starting by creating scenes in *The Sims*, she then screenshots them and divides them into thirds. She sends each piece to a different e-commerce artist, who recreates it via the medium of their choice. Mak2 then pieces them back together, though the sections never match up perfectly — highlighting how digital spaces can imitate life but never truly replace it. Where art often brings the physical into a digital realm, Mak2 brings the digital into a tangible space with *Love Pool*. Viewers watch the *Sims* as they would on their screen,

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striving to delve into their lives and learn more.

We speak to Mak2 about her one-of-a-kind production process, captivating collection, and what she hopes viewers gain from Love Pool.

Mak2's Love Pool was open from 24th March to 21st April at the Berlin gallery.

Read the interview...



## **When did you start creating art?**

I was very interested in acting when I was in secondary school, and had the idea of becoming an actress. During my secondary 5 summer holidays, I joined an acting technique class that had a profound impact on me. I still remember how the teacher didn't do a self-introduction when I walked into the classroom for my first lesson. Instead, the teacher started drumming on the djembe and quietly asked us to imagine ourselves as particles walking in space. No scripts were given to us in the class I took, only encouragement from the teacher to explore our bodies, space and time, as well as ways to convey and receive information. After the class, I started to participate in the activities of my school's Drama Society, and tried to write my own play. I didn't know what art was then, but I think that was when I started to create art.

## **Has your process or subject matter changed over time?**

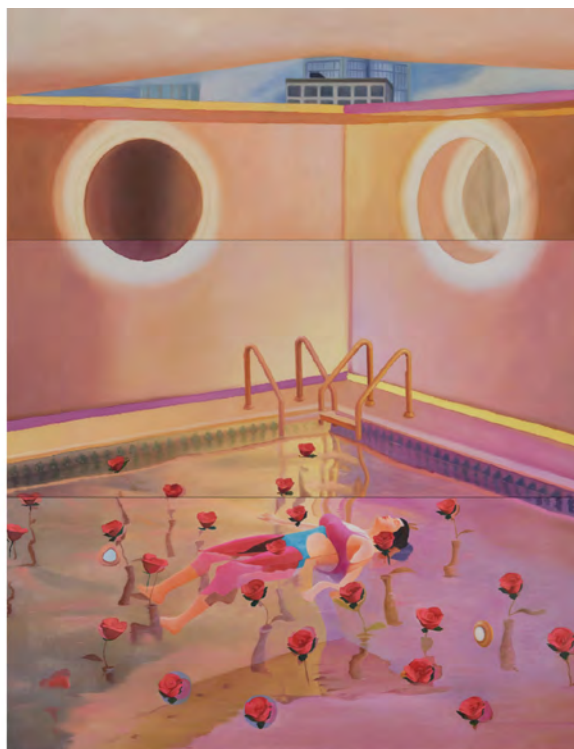
Of course. If you look at my earlier works, they mainly dealt with contextualising everyday objects and turning them into themes. For example, in 2013, I did a work called Sterilization in which I sterilised a strawberry. I expanded my themes into broader areas in my later works, like starting to explore social systems. One example was my 2015 work: We Are All Equal. I went to the supermarket and bought products that were of the same height so as to show the way capitalism deceives us into believing that we have freedom, which is not true. After that, I started to create some works that critique the influence technology has on us. For example, in my 2017's You Better Be Careful, an inflated crystal ball was filled with QR codes. When a viewer scanned a QR code, their mobile phone would show an image of them being recorded on a CCTV camera behind them. What I wanted to say was, even when you thought that you were outside, in reality, you were still caught within a system that was monitoring you.

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## What was the initial idea behind Love Pool and how did it come about?

Home Sweet Home is an art project that I began in 2019 and Love Pool is one of its subseries. In this project, I make use of the virtual world of The Sims to construct various scenes in a place that closely resembles Hong Kong. These scenes are sometimes fantastical and sometimes dreamlike. After constructing the scenes, I export them as a picture, dividing it into three parts and then sending these three parts to three different artists I found on Taobao to have them draw their assigned part.

What I'd like to point out is that the home I've imagined in the virtual world isn't completely the same as what it actually looks like in real life. I've been developing this series for quite some time now, so I'd like to explore some new possibilities in the game, just like how an artist explores possibilities in their drawings. An artist might seek for breakthroughs in their colours or brushstrokes. As for me, an artist who creates through games, I'd always want to be able to see new things within the scenes. That is why I've used a lot of innovative lighting and architectural structures in this Love Pool series.



## Can you speak about the reference to The Sims and your views on how virtual and tangible spaces can intertwine?

During that year when I was creating Home Sweet Home, I lived in a public housing estate in Hong Kong. I didn't have my own studio then, so a lot of my creations could only be done on the computer. In the end, I used The Sims as a tool for my creations which, on a certain level, actually reflected my reality of not having enough space. Other than space, our lives and creations are also highly subjected to restrictions and limitations in real life. For example, we might be limited by our financial means, where we aren't able to buy the materials and equipment we need. Our social class might limit us from getting sufficient approval or support. Our culture, education and personal backgrounds might limit our access to different art forms and paradigms of thought. All these restrictions will affect our creations, limiting us from fully showcasing our creative abilities and manifesting our imagination.

The virtual world, on the other hand, gives us a relatively more open and liberated creative space. In the virtual world, we can create freely and not be limited by time, space and personal backgrounds. We can make use of all kinds of digital tools and software to manifest our imagination and bring our creations to fruition.



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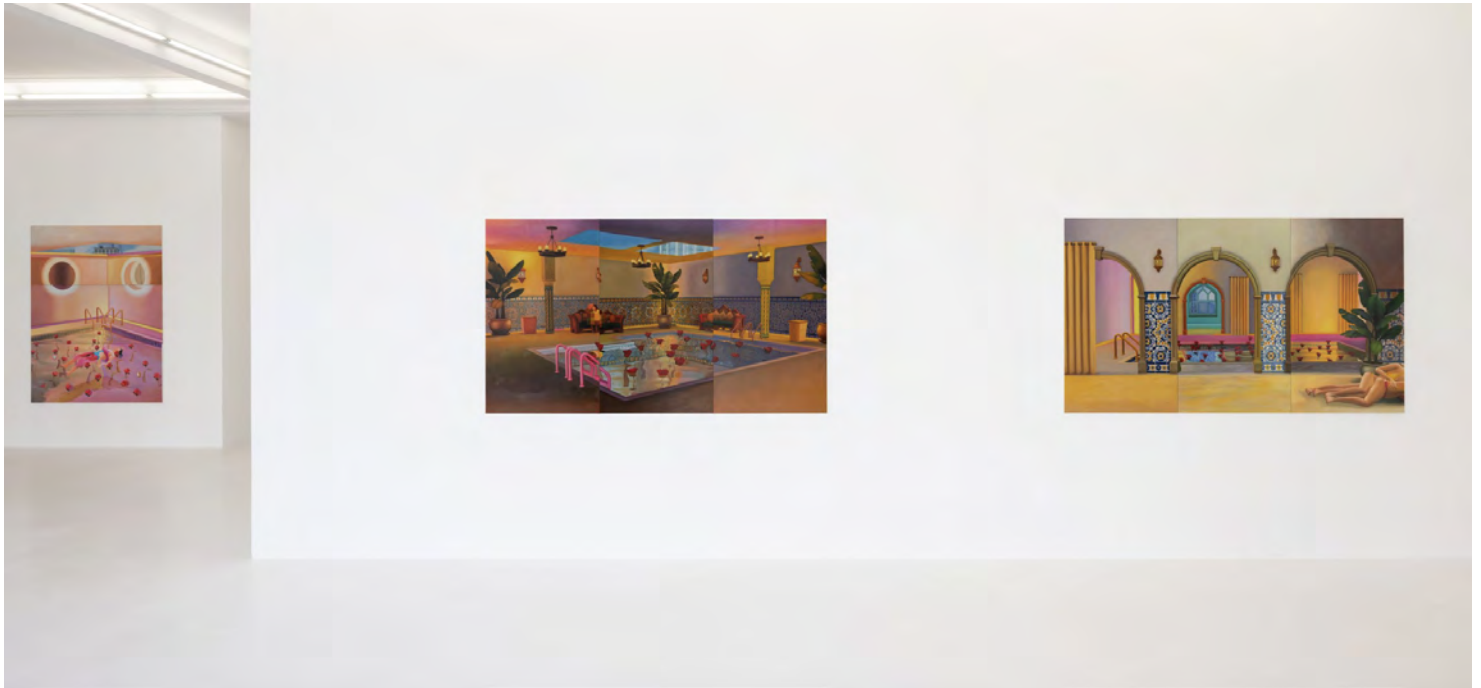
Other than that, in virtual space, we can experiment and try out all sorts of innovation through the marrying of virtual space and physical space. We then bring those innovations into the physical space to materialise and complete them. A merging of this sort helps us to better explore and discover the potential of space.

## **What was the meaning behind the three pieces not matching up? What was the decision behind this and what do you hope viewers will get from it?**

I try to leave some room for randomness in my work. Other than exploring the differences between virtual and reality, I also hope that the works will prompt viewers to think about things like copyright, originality and authenticity etc. for discussion. One time, a parent asked me to teach his daughter how to draw; but after I told him that I was actually not great at drawing, he was shocked and disappointed. This obviously didn't tally with his expectations of artists and art, and that also left him in a state of confusion about how drawings come about.

Yet, there are some viewers who think that this doesn't affect the work's authenticity, as this is simply part of the work's concept.

Whether it's the divergence of expectations or a viewer's affirmation of me as an artist, I find these viewpoints very interesting. They prove that the work has successfully prompted the viewer to think deeper.



## **How did philosopher Jean Baudrillard's ideas on simulations influence your work?**

I once heard a friend use a simple example to explain Jean Baudrillard's theory. He said that the sexy models in Calvin Klein ads aren't exhibits of sex but are in fact concepts of sex. That's what they are actually presenting. To an artist, this kind of talk actually brings a lot of possibilities to their creations. We aren't just presenting a reproduction of reality, but we can also present our concept of reality. As we continue to explore what this concept is, what form to present it, and what this "reality" represents, the possibilities for showing that become dynamic and variable. Is it a virtual reality or is it the reality that we are presently in? This train of thought could lead us into a realm of creativity that is limitless.

## **Can you speak about the significance of the themes of intimacy and concealment prevalent in the work?**

During the period when I was working on Love Pool, I was also reading Eva Illouz's *The End of Love*. This book talks about how social structures contribute to the ending of love. Under the influence of capitalism and

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consumerism culture, personal choices could also be affected on an unconscious level. An awareness of equal rights as well as the prevalence of social software gives people more choices and more room for imagination when it comes to romantic love. However, this also raises some issues. Even though sexual freedom has liberated both the male and female genders, it has also challenged love's more traditional forms, finally becoming the cause for "the end of love".

I did not deliberately use my art to present the relationship issues that are caused by this social structure, but since the virtual reality is combined with the physical reality, I've subconsciously shown modern love's bafflement in The Sims space. In the game, a lot of things like furniture, house design, and even relationships can be simulated. However, "love" and "intimacy" seem to be hard to simulate in the game. This kind of "dissimulation of love" is what I hope to express through the images.

## **How did you design the installation?**

Compared to my previous works, I spent a very long time designing this particular installation. In the past, I used to think that there must be some overlooked evil systems at work or conspiracies in our day-to-day lives, and I wanted to explore these issues through art. However, I recently discovered that these controls and conspiracies are no longer lurking, but have openly shown themselves in our lives. Therefore, I felt torn; I didn't know what else I could do. This work called SFW seeks to express such a state of helplessness: "I already know that you are monitoring me, but I still can't do anything about it. Before I'm uploaded, I have to do some self-censorship in the hope that no mistake is made in the censorship process."

## **What are you working on next?**

I'd like to learn architecture, since I often have to construct buildings in the game. I hope to construct some uniquely styled buildings in the game one day. Other than that, I hope that learning architecture can help me better understand architectural design and the building process, so I can explore even more spaces in the virtual world.