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Review of Gordon Cheung, Breaking Tulips, Alan Cristea Gallery, London



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A disdain and distrust for the futures-style trading which led to, arguably, the first recorded speculative bubble and subsequent crash, provides the nucleus for Gordon Cheung's *Breaking Tulips* at Alan Cristea Gallery. The instability and fluctuation that economic markets grip our social and cultural wellbeing by are mixed calculatingly with socio-historical reference material to create a body of work that is both seductively elegant and steeped in angst and forewarning.

Using as a starting point, Dutch painter Hans Bollongier's 1639 painting *Floral Still Life*, Gordon traces the beginnings of the glory days of Dutch Tulipomania. The painting is a bold, still life consisting of white tulips marked with blood-red stripes, known as broken tulips. Connoisseurs, lacking in knowledge in regards to how these particular tulips became striped, utilised their uniqueness to inflate their value and artificially increase their value. So much so, that in 1637, two years prior to Bollongier's *Floral Still Life*, 99 broken tulip bulbs sold at an auction in Alkmaar for 90,000 guilders, nearly £6,000,000. However prices were not sustainable. This, as well as bankruptcy claims and unfulfilled payments, caused the futures-style trading of tulip bulbs brought the glory days of Dutch Tulipomania to a crashing end.

Hans Bollongier I (2014) from Cheung's *New Order* series, sees Bollongier's *Floral Still Life* reimagined in a twisted chaos with the help of a freely available image manipulating algorithm. Pixels are repositioned as Cheung employs the algorithm over and over and over again. Cheung places himself in a position whereby, like the tulip connoisseurs, he is corrupting, beyond its necessary function, Bollongier's work, for his own gain. In doing so, the new order series radically addresses the still commonplace of practice of negligible trading. The repetition of the algorithm lays bare the ability to pass judgement that we as a society are going to be victim to these pitfalls without drastic change.

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Tulipmania, the name of Gordon's 2012 series of works on paper, sees 12 individually hand painted tulips in varying states of flower. Displayed in three rows of four works, each uses the Financial Times stocks and shares listings as its background. The tulips are rendered in psychedelic colour palettes; wild, unruly and entirely unnatural – echoing their, at the time, elected social status. Each flower casts an exquisitely realistic shadow, lifting them out of the Financial Times stocks and shares listings. By using this combination Cheung brings to attention the parallels between the symbolisms of Bollandier *Floral Still Life* and negligible trading to create unsustainable bubble markets, such as the subprime mortgages which were deliberately traded leading to the global economic crisis that left the world reeling in 2007/8. Cheung augments the sentiments of Bollandier's still life – a symbol of the power the Netherland's trading ability, seemingly unstoppable, it was an arrogant admiration of a false idol. In Cheung's work the two are locked for eternity, underneath the glass, in a poisonous marriage. It is here, where the crux of Cheung's exhibition is at its most unreserved and infatuating: The susceptibility of the human condition, profiled; entwined in beautiful majestic visuals yet exposing a specific social problem at its most vicious and toxically self-serving.

William Davie

Gordon Cheung, *Breaking Tulips*, ran from 11 September – 6 October 2015, Alan Cristea Gallery, 31 & 34 Cork Street, London, W1S 3NU.

For more, visit www.alancristea.com.

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Credits

1. Gordon Cheung, *Breaking Tulips*, installation view, Alan Cristea Gallery, London.

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With Sculptors in Mind, Alan Cristea Gallery, London

With *Sculptors in Mind*: Sculptors' Prints at Alan Cristea Gallery, London, brings together works on paper by nine sculptors. Until 23 December.



Inner-City Cohesion

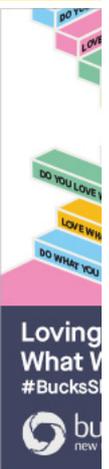
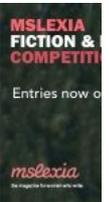
'Access For All: São Paulo's Architectural Infrastructures' shows how the city copes with human demand through communal architecture.



Joaquín Torres García: Latin American Modernism

Joaquín Torres García (1874-1949) is slowly claiming his place as a universal modern master whose work is alongside the key figures of 20th century art.





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