

Gordon Cheung: Tears of Paradise at Edel Assanti, London

31 JANUARY 2020 BY [CHRISTINE TAKENGNY](http://www.contemporaryartsociety.org/author/christine-takengny/) ([HTTP://WWW.CONTEMPORARYARTSOCIETY.ORG/AUTHOR/CHRISTINE-TAKENGNY/](http://www.contemporaryartsociety.org/author/christine-takengny/))

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Gordon Cheung, String of Pearls, 2020. © Gordon Cheung, courtesy Edel Assanti



Installation view of 'Gordon Cheung: Tears of Paradise' at Edel Assanti, London

British-Chinese artist Gordon Cheung's (born 1975, London) exhibition *Tears of Paradise* at Edel Assanti bears witness to the the rapid development of China into a twenty first century global superpower, framing current events against the backdrop of the "Century of Humiliation", as the period of intervention and imperialism by Western powers in China between 1839 and 1949 came to be called in China.

Five colourful photo-collaged paintings invite the viewer to immerse themselves in vast aerial views of real and part prophetic landscapes, each of them relating to specific sites in contemporary China that collectively comprise the largest infrastructural project in human history.

Even though the sci-fi and video game inspired aesthetic of Cheung's paintings might make them appear fantastical at first, they are rooted in contemporary concerns. The artist appropriates images from online sources, rendering them as inkjet prints on collaged squares made of pages from the Financial Times, which creates a pixelated effect on the paintings' surfaces.

Each image is composed in a similar way. The foreground consists mainly of water, the middle-ground shows megalopolises such as the ever-growing Jing-Jin-Ji (the urban region of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei), that with a projected population of 100 million residents will form an area larger than Britain. Massive rows of mountains, that borrow from traditional Chinese dynastic landscape painting dominate the skyline in the background.

Different sections of the paintings are overlaid with imagery of recently unimaginable infrastructural endeavours, such as the longest high-speed rail network in the world, currently being built, or the monumental One Belt One Road trade route forming links with the rest of Asia and Europe. We also see depictions of giant bridges and world-conquering shipping routes.

The paintings are astonishingly beautiful. We are mesmerised by layers of shimmering colours, or moments of bright pink bursting out of an opium poppy for example in the painting *Tears of Paradise*.

However, the longer we look the more we can also get a grasp of the dystopian side of China's economic miracle and a glimpse into the country's dark history. Low-hanging haze forces us to consider China's environmental pollution, the layout of living quarters in the painting *Desert of the Real* represents – as the artist explains – a massive internment camp for 're-educating' the Muslim Uyghur minority in the province of Xinjiang.

All the paintings seem to be in a state of flux, hovering between the past and present. The poppy flower refers to the 19th Century Opium Wars with Britain but can be also read as a symbol of today's Trade Wars.

In contrast to the colourful paintings, a monochrome sculptural installation of traditional Chinese windows suspended in space at the back of the gallery invites the viewer to explore the intersections of old and new architecture in China's futuristic cityscapes.

Gordon Cheung's multi-layered works add a new dimension to our traditional understanding of what landscape painting can be today. The paintings in *Tears of Paradise* can be read as a modern-day equivalent of the sublime-seeking landscapes of the nineteenth century German Romanticists, such as Casper David Friedrich (1774 – 1840). However, instead of contemplating the majesty of nature, Cheung paintings invite us to contemplate the giant infrastructure projects for China and technological possibilities that seemed utopian until recently.

His painting put us into a state of shock and awe when we begin to understand the full scope of the human additions to a landscape and how these marks the speed of an unstoppable process. It's hugely impressive, but also terrifying, when we are left pondering the greatest paradigm shift the world has ever seen.

Christine Takengny
 Curator

Gordon Cheung will be in conversation with Mark Rappolt
 (<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/gordon-cheung-in-conversation-with-mark-rappolt-tickets-90310211273>), editor-in-chief of ArtReview, at Edel Assanti on Wednesday 19 February 2020

Edel Assanti, 74A Newman Street, London W1T 3DB. Open Tuesday-Saturday 11.00-18.00. Exhibition continues until 7 March 2020. www.edelassanti.com
 (<https://edelassanti.com/exhibitions/34/cover/>)