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Pictorial Deconstruction



Currently on view at Edel Assanti, London, is Gordon Cheung's latest exhibition *Unknown Knowns*. It takes Slavoj Žižek's observation that Donald Rumsfeld's theory of knowledge omitted a crucial fourth category: unknown knowns – that there are things we don't realise we know; the unconscious beliefs and prejudices that determine our perceptions and actions. From this, Cheung examines the impact of what he refers to as 'cultural amnesia' and the illusory narratives that result in the same economic and ideological trappings of history.

Cheung's paintings are complexly constructed and can be almost sculptural in their delivery. He collages found imagery from newspapers, museum archives, maps and the internet to create a background on which to paint dystopian visions that harbour the very real possibility that they might, one day, become true. In the triptych *A Thousand Plateaus* (2016), *flatly painted mountainous forests rise majestically out of a densely sculpted foreground of sand and pumice*. This gives the viewer a strange sense of being both a part of this vast landscape but also being acutely aware that they are in fact only able to peer into it. The plumb sky and the moist green and dark brown mountain ranges are outlined by thinly spray-painted white bands that Cheung calls 'neon mist'. Underneath the mountain ranges the viewer can see layers of Financial Times markets pages. "In Calligraphy", says Cheung, "the brushed ink represented poem, text and image all at once. The stock market listings were my pigment and technology was my brush. I wanted to create a language that could reflect the digital and communications revolution from which we became part of an accelerated global information landscape."

Yet, it is where Cheung's "subversion of classical Chinese landscape painting" takes place, that this work comes into its own for the viewer. At first, it is alluringly escapist. But on closer inspection the viewer notices nail houses, images of which are now censored by the state after going viral, where pagodas, once used to "existentially meditate about our relationship to nature" would be. The name nail house is derived

from the Chinese proverb: the nail that sticks up will be hammered down. These are the last houses to hold out against the rapid rise of state-sanctioned developers. With this in mind, a section of mountain range across the top of the work appears as if it has been stretched vertically on photoshop creating a pattern of vertical stripes emulating tower blocks and becoming a visual metaphor to “contemplate our relationship to the idea of progress.”

Cheung was born in London 1975. His parents emigrated from Hong Kong to the UK in the late 60's and they lived around parts of London that were susceptible to race riots. “Being both British and Chinese, of both belonging and not, to both cultures, has created a sense of being in-between which draws me to those types of spaces in my work”, says Cheung.

His glitch works reinforces this. Produced concurrently to his paintings, his glitch works are displayed across the ground floor and basement galleries. In these, Cheung takes high-resolution photos of historical paintings and posters and applies a freely available algorithm to them that reorders the pixels throughout the composition. The reordering of pixels is a fundamental syntax in Cheung's visual vocabulary. They hold a dual interpretation – that in reordering the pixels, we are able to revise and relearn to a greater understanding our histories yet at the same time we as a civilization are forever doomed to simply repeat ourselves over and over again. These works are subtler than his paintings partly due to their smaller scale but also because of the sleekness of the Glicée prints. Their glossy, impossibly perfect flatness acts as a wolf in sheep's clothing. The works are tantalizingly beautiful and can initially come across as just that but Cheung is ever the master of redirecting the viewer to new points of interpretation and interconnectedness.

For example, in the basement gallery is *Woman (after Rembrandt Harmenszvan Rijn, 1639)* (2017), a portrait thought to be of Maria Trip, the daughter of a wealthy Amsterdam merchant, drips down the canvas. Her angelic features and alabaster skin, her expensive clothing and accessories break away into the seductive black background like ashes thrown into the wind. To the right, *Turkey Carpet, 1650-1680 (after Francesco Fieravino)* (2017) sees the explosion of a still life: ripe fruits and a lavish red, blue and yellow carpet cascade down the canvas as individual pixels of colour illuminate the black background like a supernova. The glitches “encourage a deconstructive reading” says Cheung, “where perception traverses layers to question interwoven narratives.”

On closer examination, this can be seen through the flaunting of wealth in the still life and portrait. Yet the original works never reveal how the subjects acquired these symbols of luxury. “The Dutch Golden Age Still life genre ideologically launders its darker history of civilisation with its militarised trade routes, colonisation, and slavery,” says Cheung, and we the viewer know this but rarely acknowledge it. The same can be said of the widespread speculation on tulip bulbs which brought about the first ever economic bubble and lead to the collapse of the Dutch Golden Age. One only has to look as far back as the tech stock crash followed by the millennium bug, then the collapse of Enron and Worldcom before the 2008 Financial crisis to see just how susceptible we are to the same mistakes.

It is in his swansong, looking at the surmounting tension in the South China Sea in *Great Wall of Sand (Unknown Knowns)* (2017), which Cheung is so effortlessly able to navigate the past, present and future to create an operatic masterpiece. ‘This redrawing of geopolitical lines will be where some of the 21st Century's political dramas will be’ says Cheung.

The tones used are darker, more stringent. Across the bottom half of the canvases are a thinly raised layer of sand and pumice painted a dark, murky blue that shows the *Nine-Dash Line map that has been used by China for their claims to a large area of South China Sea since 1949*. The textured surface almost glimmers resembling waves breaking on the surface of the ocean. Suspended above this and again, raised off the pictorial surface, Cheung carves the white hot outlines of artificial islands currently being constructed and militarized by China in the region. In doing so they become a magnetic focal point directing the viewer's gaze across the composition as their dark shadows ominously fracture the map below. The first island was constructed in 2015 as a response to the US's *Pivot to Asia* campaign, which saw a dramatic increase in the US's military presence in the area as a deterrent to China's developing assertions over these contested waters following the discovery of vast oil reserves in the 1990s.

A white spray-painted neon mist envelops the horizon point across the centre of the image out of which billows dusty red clouds and layered fragments of the Financial Times market pages. The collaged fragments are brought out by Cheung's flatness when painting this section and, as a result, the squares of text mirror the reordered pixels in his glitch work. Two grey, snow peaked mountain ranges – mount Sinai

and mount Song – loom out of this and stretch to the very top of the canvases facing off from one another. Cheung's flat representation and contrasting colour palette gives the mountain ranges an inflection of heroism yet at the same time presents an icy soberness. Weighted by the opposing ideologies each mountain stands for, Cheung places a *constellation* of China's proposed map for the One Belt One Road Initiative, a maritime silk road and the official reason for the artificial islands being constructed, *forebodingly in the blackening sky between them*. Are we able to learn from our histories or are we doomed to repeat them yet again, Cheung's works thrive in being deliberately undecided. "It is this in-between space, including the histories in flux that compels me to make art profoundly rooted from the core of my identity."

Gordon Cheung: Unknowns Knowns runs until 13 April at Edel Assanti, London. For more information:

www.edelassanti.com

William Davie

Credits:

1. *Jumping Through Hoops on the Ground*, (2016) Glicée on canvas. Courtesy of Edel Assanti.

Posted on 11 April 2017

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Global Discussions

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The East End Film Festival (EEFF) is now one of the biggest international film events in the UK. Their six day programme features documentaries and shorts, including 14 world premieres.



Marina Abramović, White Space, Lisson Gallery, London

Initially realised in 1972 at The Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade, White Space was a room lined with white paper containing a tape recording of Marina Abramović repeatedly saying "I love you".

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