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ARTS

MARKET GAINS

Using our own pink paper as a metaphor for the global age, Gordon Cheung has created a sublime visual language

By Jackie Wullschlager

The shares pages of this newspaper have never looked so bright – so high-gloss – so dizzying. Spray-painted, smeared with acrylic gel, drenched in Chinese ink, they appear at the exhibition "Hollow Sunsets", transformed into shuddering tower blocks, scorched deserts, surreal mountains, vertiginous drops. Get up close and regimented lines of stock market figures turn liquid, landscape dissolves into urban mirage, buildings crumple before your eyes.

A joke about share prices on a bad day, or art which has found a new visual language for the way we see now? In the painting "Rented Reality" outside creatures from *Planet of the Apes* march alongside Financial Times edifices. "City Limits" has cartoon characters from "Hello Kitty" scrawled like graffiti on crumbling FT walls. "Neon Oasis" is a Vegas-scape of shimmering palms and high-rises crinkling into a black gloss pool of fluorescent numbers. Welcome to the world of the techno-sublime, where, according to its creator Gordon Cheung, "information overwhelms the individual, causing a flickering perception of realities".

Ten years ago, casting about for a material which might be a metaphor for the global, high-density information age emerging with the digital revolution, Cheung began to make work out of the FT's Companies and Markets section. Now a modest, slight 20-something in pin-stripe black jacket and jeans – the foot-in-each-camp allusion to city and studio is probably intentional in this super-conscious artist – he stands before his giant canvases like a pale, walk-on extra. "Hollow Sunsets" is his first major solo show, and he talks unassumingly about "hyper-painting by numbers" in a low-voiced, south London twang.

He particularly remembers using the newspapers dated 1997 because, he says charmingly, "that was the year I got together with my wife – and also the year of Hong Kong". His parents, now Chinese



"Mycloptic Twitch", Gordon Cheung, 2004: waterfalls, rainbow and cacti are eerily symmetrical, mocking the nature that would never make them so

restaurant owners in Croydon, arrived in London from the territory in the 1970s. They tell him – he is tentative, not wanting to capitalise on it – that he was born in a Brixton squat. His energetic, witty work is a classic product of an urban 1970s and 1980s childhood, caught between the fast street-cred and blaze of cheap materialism outside and the inner world of computer games in which his generation was the first to grow up.

"Yeah, I still remember that thrill," he says apologetically. "I mean, it's crazy to think a game of space invaders could be something remotely entertaining, but it was – it was so futuristic: of a different dimension." At art school, he studied painting but the new communications landscape obsessed him. "I was sidestepping the modernist idea that painting had to be about itself – but what was happening around us was so important, it was impossible not to respond to it."

That engagement is Cheung's biggest strength. In "Colliderscape", news media, share prices, photographic and computer-generated imagery merge with landscape traditions in hallucinatory, kaleidoscopic visions. He has, he says, "a Utopian euphoria that technology will provide a truly global community". Think *Matrix* – the entire world as a computer construct –

His work is a product of a childhood caught between the street-cred outside and the inner world of computer games

crossed with David Lynch's surreal, dream spaces and the multiple realities in the novels of Philip K. Dick or J.G. Ballard, and you have the cultural background to "Machine Dreams", where a monstrous blackened tree grows out of dead ground before a collapsing housing block, or "Mycloptic Twitch", a parodic reconfiguration of the romantic sublime: it has sunset, rainbow, a share price mountain and tumbling cascades – where not nature but technology overwhelms us. Waterfalls, rainbow and cacti are all eerily symmetrical, mocking the nature that would never make them so.

The threat of apocalyptic collision is everywhere, but so is elation at a virtual world saturated in delirious colour and hyper-natural phenomena. From a distance Cheung landscapes evoke the geological drama and still sense of eternity in traditional Chinese brush and ink landscapes: highly aesthetic even as their contemporary tension between fracture

and cohesion clashes against the long slow measure of geological change. Cheung acknowledges the link to Chinese tradition, but thinks what is more significant is "the in-between-ness, something beyond language itself, rooted in me being a British-born Chinese, belonging to both cultures but to neither as well... I never took anything for granted".

Ambiguity, the illusion of the contemporary surface, shapes his work, which recalls Matthew Barney's multiple contradictions and references to the *emui* of information overload and, further back, the hovering between flicker and explosion, tightening and loosening, of Jasper Johns: both painters have had "a lasting impact". Exquisitely polite about any artist or cultural reference I happen to mention, Cheung is sufficiently confident to plunder when he needs to, while seeing the world through his own, removed vision of virtual environments. His is figurative art far from the psychological intensity of the 20th-century tradition, but individual nevertheless, as in the way he creates his paintings: "In my mind I see them as a network. Sometimes they snap into this really interesting pattern and that's when the work arrives."

"Hollow Sunsets", Houldsworth Gallery, London W1, 020 7434 2333, to November 13.

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