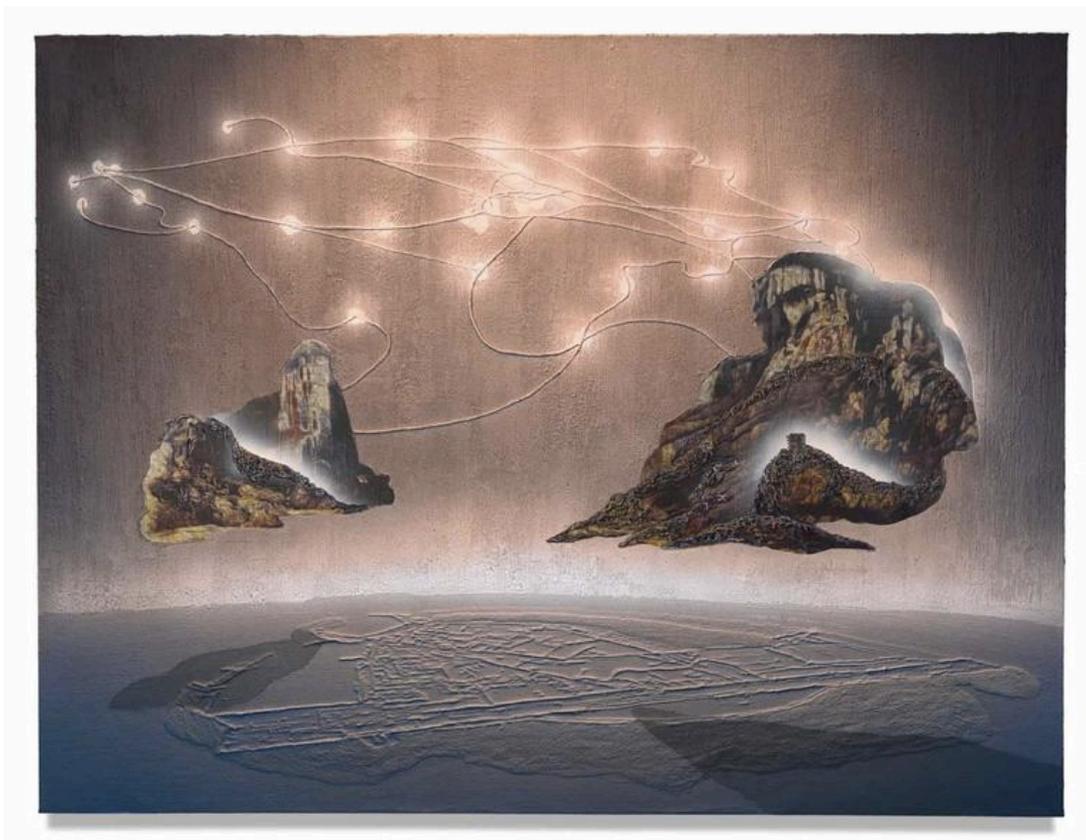


LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Jyoti, Kalsi. "Mapping the modern capitalist empires"
Gulf News (October 26, 2016)

GULF NEWS



Great Wall of Sand, financial newspaper, archival inkjet, acrylic, sand and pumice on canvas and sail cloth, 2016

Gordon Cheung's first solo exhibition in Dubai, "Lines in the Sand", presents a series of large scale multimedia works that explore the shifting boundaries of the empires of global capitalism, and the manipulation of cartography and geography by superpowers to gain control over new territories, resources and trade routes.

The artworks are poetic, profound and multilayered. In the British artist's signature style, the background in every work is a layer of varnished stock listings pages from the "Financial Times", arranged on the canvas. Over this, he has used acrylic paint, digital prints, sand and pumice to create magical landscapes, mythical creatures, interesting maps and surreal still-life compositions that link the past with the present and the future to tell stories about historical and contemporary geopolitical disputes, the power struggles arising from global capitalism and neo-imperialism, and the rise and fall of global empires.

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“I began using the stock listings of the ‘Financial Times’ in my work in the 1990s as a metaphor for the digital and communications revolution. I feel that the data flow of global financial markets visible in the background of my paintings works as a distilled symbol of the global information and data space. Similarly, the sand on my canvases is a metaphor for changing borders, and a symbol of the rise and fall of empires and the cycle of life. The sand also helps me to create interesting textures and a luminous moonscape-like effect in my paintings; and it is a poetic way to say that regardless of how great our civilisations may be, ultimately everything turns to sand,” Cheung says.

The centrepiece of the show, “Lines in the Sand (Unknown Knowns)”, is a monumental triptych depicting a vast desert, on which the artist has piped sand with an icing bag to trace out a complete map of the oil pipelines snaking across the Middle East and Africa. While he has erased all national borders from the map, territories occupied by Daesh (the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) are marked with sand. Far away in the background looms the holy mountain, Mount Sinai, appearing almost like a mirage in the desert. The stock listings, looking like pixels of information from the global stock market appear like a subliminal presence in the background.

“Hundred years after the controversial Sykes-Picot agreement, and as a new order unfolds across the Middle East, this work interrogates narratives of imagining and demarcating territory, and taps into the threatening rhetoric of ‘crossing a red line’, which originated from the 1928 Red Line Agreement, drawn up by American, British and French Petroleum companies to decide the fate of the former Ottoman Empire’s oil resources,” Cheung says.

In another work, “Great Wall of Sand”, the artist, who is of Hong Kong origin, moves to the South China Sea, which has become an arena of military posturing. In this resource-rich area, China is making claims to territory, and creating new artificial islands by dredging up coral and covering it in concrete to bolster its claims. Once again, Cheung has used sand to trace out these artificial islets in his painting. Floating above the tiny islands are two serene Chinese landscapes appropriated from a painting that hangs in Beijing’s Great Hall of the People. And in between floats a map of China’s One Belt, One Road project.

“Great Wall of Sand was a phrase used by an American naval officer to describe the artificial islands. China’s proposed One Belt One Road project is designed to be the modern Silk Road, a maritime trade route connecting China with Europe, which is worth \$3-\$9 trillion [Dh11-Dh33 trillion] in trade, in addition to the oil and gas reserves under the contested areas. I depicted it as a constellation in the sky, but also like a fishing net because fishermen were the first people to protest about China’s claims and actions in this contested area,” Cheung says.

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The artificial islands also appear in a set of paintings titled “Here Be Dragons”, as mounds of sand around flower-filled vases decorated with dragons. “Here be dragons is a phrase used by mapmakers for unexplored and possibly dangerous territories. But the phrase is also used by computer programmers for complex or messy regions of code. Interestingly, one area that was so described by early cartographers happens to be the south coast of China, which is where the next cold and hot wars may take place. The flowers in the vases are inspired by still-life paintings of the Dutch Golden Age, and the tulip mania of the 17th century, when bulbs were bought and sold for extraordinary prices until the market crashed. So this work is about the contested islands near China, but also about the birth of modern capitalism going back to the days of the Dutch East India trading company, and its transition to the authoritarian capitalism in China today,” Cheung says.

The artist references the title of a well-known critique of contemporary capitalist culture written by philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in “A Thousand Plateaus”. This work features a traditional Chinese vista, but the beautiful landscape of mountains, trees and waterfalls is interrupted by an image of a “nail house” – a solitary hut standing high on a mound of earth.

“A ‘nail house’ is the last house whose owners defy developers and remain where they are as the neighbourhood around them is destroyed. It refers to a Chinese proverb that says ‘the nail that sticks up will be hammered down’. This particular nail house had gone viral in China and became such a symbol of resistance to capitalism that images of it were censored by the government. In my painting the mountains, illuminated with the lights of the city, and the building like columns of stock listings in the background represent the skyscrapers of progress, that will be built by pushing down all resistance; and I want to invite viewers to contemplate our idea of progress and our place and role in the big plan of progress,” Cheung says.

The most colourful and eye-catching works in the show are from the “Minotaur” series, featuring a cowboy riding a snarling bull on a barren landscape. The cowboy is a recurring motif in Cheung’s work as a metaphor for the American conquest of land, and the bull is an obvious reference to the stock market. The series incorporates various monetary and mythological references to current and historical global economies, and their volatile nature. “The classical Greek myth of the minotaur, which was the part bull and part man offspring of a queen who was cursed to fall in love with a bull is an apt symbol for our contemporary condition. So I have depicted the cowboy almost merging with the bull, becoming a kind of modern day deity of global capitalism,” says Cheung.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts-enthusiast based in Dubai.

“Lines in the Sand” will run at Leila Heller Gallery Dubai, Al Quoz until November 7.