

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Khong, En Liang. "Here Be Dragons: Gordon Cheung's daring collages critique China's authoritarian capitalism by subverting traditional artistic genres." *The Economist* (June 2016).



In his mission to render the history of global capitalism as a sequence of shimmering, troubled techno-vistas, the artist Gordon Cheung has repeatedly, even obsessively, pushed the idea of what a painting can be. He begins with cascades of stock listings taken from the *Financial Times*, which he coats in varnish and lays out on canvas. He digitally constructs and fragments images of snaking Middle East oil pipelines, mystical Chinese mountain-scapes and 17th-century European still lifes, then prints them on to the listings. Next, he applies layers of spray paint and sand until the highly charged frames seem to pulsate, inducing a sense of information overload. These dense collages are a play on the Chinese calligraphic tradition known as “painting without paint”, in which inked characters hold both visual and textual power. Cheung’s ink is the data flow of financial markets.

His latest exhibition, “Here Be Dragons”, on show at Nottingham Castle, takes its name from the phrase used by cartographers for dangerous, unexplored regions, as well as the one used by programmers for as yet uncharted areas of code. Over the last few decades, Cheung – who was born in 1975 in London to parents from Hong Kong – has watched China emerge from the economic and cultural periphery to occupy a privileged position in the global imagination. In “Here Be Dragons”, Cheung focuses on the contested spaces between China and the west: disputed territory, virtual worlds, all thrown into tension as the epicentre of global capital accumulation shifts.

These ideas manifest themselves throughout the exhibition in “digital drift” effects that distort and corrupt historical artworks. Cheung feeds images of Maoist propaganda and epic 19th-century American oil paintings into an open-source code that subjects them to a “pixel-sorting” process, resulting in ruptures where the traditional pieces appear almost to melt away. Alongside this, there are repeated references to the military manoeuvres and power-plays taking place across the South China Sea. And in charting the tragedies inherent in the Chinese trajectory towards a mode of authoritarian capitalism, Cheung’s work seems to exploit the naturally collage-like nature of Chinese urban development itself: two decades in which small villages have emerged as bloated metropolises, and more than 100 cities have tipped the 1m population mark.

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“Here Be Dragons” (2016)

Cheung begins with a little time travel. This piece evokes the still lifes of the Dutch Golden Age and the history of the first recorded economic bubble: the “tulip mania” of the 17th century, when bulbs were traded for feverish sums before the market collapsed. Painted filigree petals blossom out of a dragon-adorned vase, a nod towards China’s own capitalist turn – and a warning about economic bubbles to come. All is bathed in the radiant glow of a nuclear explosion.

“Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan (after Liu Chunhua, 1967)” (2016)

China’s Maoist tradition has steadily been erased ever since Deng Xiaoping opened up the economy to market forces in the 1980s. Here, Cheung reflects on the way in which the revolutionary legacy has become spectral, haunting. He takes Liu Chunhua’s iconic 1967 oil painting of Mao Zedong astride a mountaintop (an infamous piece of propaganda used in elite power struggles during the Cultural Revolution) and feeds it into an open-source algorithm. The programme splits the image up into pixels, and then rearranges them into a kind of digital smear or “glitch”.

“Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (after Caspar David Friedrich, 1818)” (2016)

Cheung complements Liu’s propaganda painting with his version of Caspar David Friedrich’s “Wanderer”, which he also subjected to a pixel-sorting process that seems to push the piece into a state of entropy. The paintings share a strikingly similar visual vocabulary, and are informed by an understanding of how the Chinese revolution, and the cult that grew up around Mao, was influenced by European Romanticism and its heroic vision of guiding the people to victory through sheer individual will.

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“A Thousand Plateaus” (2016)

The principal obsession of classical Chinese painters is landscape painting, a tradition that conceives of the natural world as both philosophy and matter. In Chinese, it is called *shanshui*, the art of mountains and water, and with its emphasis on distance, height and depth, it is meant to provoke a psychic state of dream-travel. In Cheung’s appropriation and corruption of this genre, the cruelty and artifice of modern Chinese development seems to threaten the eternal realm of traditional Chinese landscapes. In “A Thousand Plateaus”, Cheung traces the mannerisms of just such a classical landscape, but in the right-hand corner, he has introduced a contemporary disruption: a “nail house”. These buildings, the residents of which refuse to give way to developers, are small symbols of resistance to the triumphant inevitability of Chinese hyper-modernity. They are named according to the proverb: “The nail that sticks up will be hammered down.”

“Great Wall of Sand” (2016)

Throughout the exhibition, Cheung returns again and again to sand, both as a physical material used for collage, as well as something more conceptual (his “glitching” technique produces a kind of digital “sands of time”). The name of this piece points to the islets in the South China Sea that China has artificially made, by dredging sand up from the bottom of the sea floor, in order to bolster its territorial claims. The suspended tangle of flares at the top traces the paths of China’s proposed “Maritime Silk Road”, a trade route cutting through the eastern Pacific and Indian Oceans whose commercial goals may mask its military ambitions. This map hangs like a fisherman’s net over two floating landscapes which have been cut out of a painting that hangs in Beijing’s Great Hall of the People. In his many references to contested territories and grand geopolitical narratives, Cheung identifies hotspots for future conflicts.

“Living Mountain” (2015)

Here we see *shanshui*’s emphasis on multiple perspectives: the backdrop posits a fantasy mountain range, wreathed in sacral mist, while another nail house is brought to the foreground, underlining the tragedy of China’s capitalist development. The middle layer, taken from the section of the Yangzi river that hosts the Three Gorges Dam, is drenched in a flickering violet that brings to mind a kind of closed-eye hallucination. The hydropower plant’s construction created displacement and devastation on a vast scale, forever changing the geography and culture of surrounding regions: a perfect encapsulation of the ambition and destruction fuelling Chinese modernity.

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