Warp Speed

By En Liang Khong for the exhibition catalogue, 'Gordon Cheung: Lines In The Sand', Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai, 2016

"Life is being phased-out into something new, and if we think this can be stopped we are even more stupid than we seem." – Nick Land, "Circuitries", 1992.

In order to broadcast his vision of hyper-capitalism, artist Gordon Cheung's starting point is to coat the stock listings pages of the Financial Times in varnish, before arranging them on canvas. Over this, he constructs sacred mountainscapes in layers of digital print and spray paint, and sculpts islets out of sand: a mirror for how new cartographies are constantly created between the superpowers of the US and China. In these white hot landscapes of new military and commercial frontiers, drenched in the data flow of financial markets, Cheung makes us wonder what it is we really feel: enchantment or corruption?

This exhibition, "Lines in the Sand", returns repeatedly to the idea of sand as an actual material for collage. But 100 tumultuous years after the controversial Sykes-Picot agreement, and as a new order unfolds across the Middle East, "Lines in the Sand" also interrogates narratives of imagining and demarcating territory. Cheung taps into the threatening rhetoric of 'crossing a red line', with its origins in 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 sources, and the red pencil that is said to have been used title-triptych, Lines in the Sand (Unknown Knowns), snaking Middle East oil pipelines morph into a map of ISIS-controlled territory, with national borders vanished. Splashed across the background, like a vaporous fata morgana, is Mount Sinai.

The South China Sea – said to be rich in resources – is where China is making up claims to territory, and creating new artificial islets (by dredging up coral and covering it in concrete) to bolster these claims. As China faces the US pivot to Asia, the South China Sea has become an arena for military manoeuvring and posturing. At the bottom of Great Wall of Sand, Cheung traces these man-made islands. Above, he places a floating halo – a diagram of trade routes – extracted from China's intended 'One Belt, One Road" project: a modern day 'silk road'. This constellation falls like a fisherman's net over the two landscapes cut out of the painting which hangs in Beijing's Great Hall of the People.

Of Hong Kong origin but born in the UK in the 1970s, Cheung's personal sense of flickering identity, of belonging and not, has pushed him into another world, where time and space become muddled. His way of stretching the definition of painting, influenced by a Chinese calligraphic tradition of 'painting without paint', produces throbbing frames that are populated by dense, digitally-manipulated photo- collages. Cheung begins to articulate a space "that's in-between – this information space, the landscape that is globalisation", as he tells me.

Into this world, Cheung introduces the traces of traditional Chinese landscape painting, which looks out onto the natural world as both philosophy and physicality. Called shanshui in Chinese, it is the art of mountains and water, composed through multiple perspectives of height, depth and distance that are meant to induce a psychic state of dream travel: woyou. "Unrolling paintings in solitude, I sit pondering the ends of the earty", wrote the celebrated fifth-century shanshui artist Zong Bing. In the twenty-first century, the appropriate and disruption of classical landscape painting has been a major site of exploration for contemporary Chinese artists, from Yang Yongliang's ink-wash forests of construction cranes, to the 'landscript' notebooks of Xu Bing, where the written word melts into Himalayan vistas.

In Cheung's A Thousand Plateaus, a traditional Chinese vista is pierced by the appearance of a 'nail house': the term for properties whose residents defy developers and remain where they are, while the old neighbourhood around them is destroyed. These real-world phenomena are named according to a Chinese proverb: "the nail that sticks up will be hammered down". This violent disruption of the structural space of shanshui, and its corresponding mental state of woyou, unravels the Chinese state's own embrace of the idea of an 'eternal civilisation' to legitimise its global rise, while the tragic aftershocks of transitioning to a mode of hypermodern capitalism are papered over: a process which Slavoj Žižek describes as "necessarily painful."

The figure of the cowboy is a favoured motif throughout Cheung's work, inspired by how David Lynch uses the cowboy as a threatening, dreamlike character. For Cheung, the cowboy offers both a metaphor for colonisation, as well as a haunting personification of the once great certainties of American culture.

In his piece When The Stars Bleed, the cowboy rides a snarling bull – a reference to the stock market – painted in colours that evince a feeling of hypnagogia, a sensation between dreaming and awakening. Behind them burns the red-hot glow of a dying sun.

Here Be Dragons is similarly bathed in the radiant ignition of an apocalyptic explosion. This piece takes its name from a phrase with dual meanings, used both by map-makers for unplotted territory, as well as programmers for complex or messy regions of code. In filigree flowers that curve out of the dragon-decorated vase Cheung reaches back to the still-life paintings of the Dutch Golden Age, and the 'tulip mania' of the seventeenth century, when bulbs were traded for increasingly extraordinary sums until the market crashed, and suggests where future economic bubbles may emerge.

Is this a critique of the world of globalised capitalism, or instead, sublime submission to it? Gordon Cheung's practice fosters a bitter anti-capitalist edge, while also luxuriating in it. Perhaps we can suggest a term for this hybrid sensation: accelerationism – the nightmarish philosophy that the sensuality and violence of capitalism should be urged on until we reach the only two possible endpoints of collapse or revolution. Which one will it be? We'll only know when we've pursued capitalism's relentless arc to its terrifying, thrilling conclusion.

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