

# Jeremy Epstein in conversation with Gordon Cheung

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## Jeremy Epstein: What does the title of your exhibition, Here Be Dragons, refer to?

Gordon Cheung: The title refers to the terminology originally used by mapmakers to designate unknown or uncharted areas around the eastern coasts of Asia on the Hunt Lenox Globe (c.1503–07). The term ties the limitations of human understanding to the creation of myths and fiction. 'Here Be Dragons' is also now used by programmers to refer to parts of computational code so complex that they require a warning. The exhibition employs maps to examine shifting geographies, and is conceptually structured around the historical and geographical passage from the Dutch Golden Age through US global hegemony to the rise of China as a 21st century superpower.

## How and why do you establish the relationship between the Dutch Golden Age, US hegemony and modern day China?

I'm interested in exploring the changing statuses of empires and civilisations. The Dutch Golden Age is considered to be the moment that witnessed the birth of modern capitalism with the rise of the first truly global multinational company, in the form of the Dutch East India Company. It was also the era when the first recorded economic bubble emerged through the unregulated speculation over tulip bulbs, which at the market's peak before its crash, were selling for the equivalent value of the average home. I then jump hundreds of years of history to a contemporary picture of global capitalism, drawing inspiration from the power struggles surrounding the 'New Silk Road', Middle East oil pipelines and the contested islands in the South China Sea.

## Here Be Dragons is also the title of two paintings in the show.

The Here Be Dragons paintings in the show employ imagery from the Dutch still life movement that coincided with the Dutch Golden Age, which inadvertently convey the story of Tulipmania through the shifting symbolism of the tulip within the genre. Whilst I draw on the Romantic symbolism of the fragility of life and futility of materialism, I am also interested in the historical significance of representing the birth of modern capitalism alongside the first recorded economic bubble. In these paintings the vases are exchanged for Chinese dragon pots, resting on the landscapes of the contested and partially artificial islands in the South China Sea. My aim is to raise questions around the trajectory of China's transition to authoritarian capitalism, looking towards where new economic bubbles might occur. The South China Sea is the site of the modern day maritime silk road, worth an estimated \$3–9 trillion in trade every year; whoever comes to dominate this path will be able to exert power over those reliant upon it. It also happens to be an area populated by oil and gas fields. As the US flexes its superior military might and opens new bases in the region, its foreign policy, called the 'Pivot to Asia' or 'Encirclement of China', suggests that new geopolitical lines are being tested and drawn, delineating possible future hot and cold wars.

## The landscape paintings in the exhibition also contain layered references to China – both overt and concealed, contemporary and historical – could you talk through these works?

Living Mountain and Forbidden City are composed with three sections: the middle section represents the land that has been harnessed by civilization for power, be it urban and political, such as the Forbidden City, that also includes Tiananmen Square, or geographical, such as the Three Gorges Dam as depicted in Living Mountain. In the background, there is a fictional floating world, or sacred mountains range denoting a divine space. In the foreground of each painting you observe physical rubble surrounding a 'nail house'. Nail houses are the last homes in a plot of land resisting to sell their properties to developers, so called due to the Chinese proverb: "A nail that sticks out will be hammered down." The developers will literally dig a moat around the house, cut electricity, gas and water to completely isolate the owners, eventually compelling the owner to sell. When the images of these properties went viral in China, the government censored them for fear of them becoming a symbol of rebellion. Within my paintings, they come to represent ideas of displacement in the face of overwhelming progress.

## The show purposefully positions still lifes and landscape paintings alongside imagery of subverted Chinese propaganda. This is not the first time you have allowed these two seemingly disparate genres to coexist within your work. Through overtly politicising seemingly "benign" art historical subject matter, are you trying to draw our attention to the way in which all pre-avant-garde art in some sense serves a pervading political agenda?

In a way I think of all art as being political, regardless of whether an artist intends it or not. History decides what artworks, along with their intellectual, cultural and philosophical values, should be elevated to represent the civilisation, nation or race that produced them. Chinese propaganda appears overtly political to us because we easily recognise the message being conveyed and the agenda that is being projected; yet when it comes to recognising our own Western produced propaganda, there is not such an open mind to seeing it. Take for example the Romantic Sublime: beyond individual artists and the majestic beauty of breathtaking romance, collectively and from a wider perspective, the genre is arguably an ideological cultural laundering of genocidal colonial conquest. If we consider in particular an American sublime landscape painter, one might note that there are relatively few depictions of Native Americans. For example, in Course of Empire by Thomas Cole, The Savage State is the first painting in a progression of five in which the process of "civilising" is enacted.

The so-called "savages" have literally been erased from the land and historically subjugated under the amnesiac gloss of the Romantic Sublime. The awesome grandeur of the virgin vistas of nature at the brink of terror brings us closer to a God, although his hidden hands are soaked in blood. I don't think of myself as overtly politicising "benign" art, but rather knocking out or unveiling what is already embedded in the works or genres themselves. For example, a vase of Dutch Golden Age flowers placed on a marble top, overflowing with luxuries from around the world is not as benign as one might think, once it is considered that many of those objects are the fruits of colonial conquest and a desire to flaunt the wealth, power and status accrued from it. I also think that this does not necessarily only apply to pre-avant-garde art either. For example, Robert Hughes called Abstract Expressionism a cultural weapon against the Soviet Union, and he was not wrong. The CIA helped fund the movement under a secret policy called "The Long Leash". As Clement Greenberg said, the avant-garde is attached to the elite of the ruling class by "an umbilical cord of gold."

**How do these paintings, and the eastern art historical tropes they address, relate to your earlier landscape works and their primary grounding in a European romantic sublime genre?**

Twenty years ago at art school, when I decided to 'paint without paint', I wanted to simultaneously circumnavigate and stay inside the framework of western Modernist purist painting, and question what it meant to paint for myself. Removing paint itself meant I had to search for a substitute, and eventually distilled it to the stock listings of the Financial Times to initially create abstract compositions. I wanted to establish a language that I felt could address the communications and digital revolutions around 1995. To me the spirit of this increasingly technology-dominated era meant we had to instantaneously adapt to a new landscape, where we teleport at light speeds into electronic spaces constructed of zeroes and ones. The way I was employing collage to 'simulate' painting was, for me, an invented variant of Chinese calligraphy ink painting, where the brushed ink is simultaneously word, image and poem. Instead of ink I was using the texts of the markets, simulating painting with financial information as my pigment. The invisible meta-systems we inhabit are where I try to create a flickering space of perceptions in perpetual flux – hence my use of different processes and materials that move in and out of physicality, versus the illusion of image; the virtual and the actual. This flickering perception of reality is what I seek to capture with multi-layering within the work. The dominance of global capitalism, accelerated by new technologies, constantly moves trillions of dollars in an instant. This virtual world of data carves out data-scapes of utopias and dystopias. I refer to this landscape within my work as the 'Techno- Sublime', and within this discourse, the work asks the question: if God was manifested as overwhelming awe of nature in the Romantic sublime tradition, then if there is a deity within the Techno-Sublime, what shape or form might it take?

**It seems as though in this body of work you have become comfortable tackling Chinese identity politics in the most direct way you have done to date. Does your Chinese heritage make this subject particularly personal or emotional, or is it just an area that happens to interest you?**

To an extent, my heritage means I am drawn to Chinese subjects, but it's really just another dimension in my work that, depending on the series and ideas I am compelled to work on, may or may not come to the fore. I think my work increasingly interrogates the contemporary world order we exist in, attempting to map the fracturing of world power.

**You have often spoken about the influence of science fiction within your work, and in many instances made reference to specific texts. Are there any such inspirations that informed this body of work?**

It's true that science fiction plays an important role in my work. Along with mythology, it is a primary lens that I use to project my ideas. Authors like JG Ballard, with his exposure of fragile societies collapsing into a feral hierarchy, Philip K Dick's multiple paranoid dimensions, Ridley Scott's Blade Runner, questioning what it means to be human, and Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey, with its journey from pre-dawn to space age man all played a huge role in inspiring previous bodies of works. Although they are always there, humming in the background, the type of research I engaged in for Here Be Dragons was centred around investigative journalists, documentaries and think-tank reports. Reality can be stranger than fiction.

**Do the materials and methods you are employing relate directly to the subject matter of the work?**

I use the stock listings of the Financial Times as a metaphor of the information landscapes we exist in. These are coated in multiple layers ending up with a special type of varnish that allows me to print directly onto them. The images are constructed on the computer, and then printed onto gridded sections of the collaged sheets of stock listings; then they are jig-sawed back onto canvas. From there, I paint, spray paint, apply ink and add sand, spraying it with paint from different directions using a car spray gun.

These multiple layers, processes and techniques that I undertake aim to encourage a deconstructive reading of the paintings, reducing them to their multiple dimensions. I have always been interested in new technologies as a way of expanding the language of painting, which means that although I have core systems of working, I am always refining, developing and searching for new modes. After all, it's the breakthroughs that are the most exciting moments in making art, because they open up future pathways.

**Although the work has always retained a certain psychedelic colour scheme, it seems to have become slightly more muted than in previous years. Is there a specific reason for this?**

It's possible that moving to a new studio and having beautiful light streaming in through its massive windows might have had a deep effect on my palette.

It's hard to pin down a specific reason, other than perhaps thinking a lot more about twilight, dusk, light pollution, cityscape artificial lighting, auroras and nuclear light. Thinking about it now, it's often the sprayed areas of colours that take the longest to complete, as they radiate an emotive state.

**Could you describe the process behind your glitch works? What inspired you to make these works?**

I use an open source code to glitch images appropriated from museum archives, propaganda and art historical sources. Essentially the code re-orders all the pixels into approximately 4000 different images, resulting in the sensation of the imagery dissolving and disappearing into digital sands of time. The process is a metaphor for the transformation of time and space in the digital age, and a gesture raising questions about the transient repetition and revisionary nature of history. A glitch ruptures the image, revealing the underlying structures of how and why an image is constructed.

**The most major works in the show seem to be meditating on contemporary paradigms of good and evil, weighing topics such as Guantanamo, ISIS, Chinese authoritarianism alongside the Throne of King Solomon and classical ideas of a connection with God through the sublime. There is a sense in which through this flattening of history and geography, the moral compass has lost its coordinates – as your quotation of Nietzsche in the title of The Abyss Stares Back implies. What role does morality play in your work?**

It is more a question of how the moral compass has been distorted or even manipulated that I am interested in. To continue with your apt metaphor, I would also point towards a financial "compass", that allows us to chart the flow of capital – to follow the money. The trouble with the narrative of good versus evil is that it tends to simplify events into acts of morality, when the motives have complex roots and intentions. My painting entitled Lines in the Sand maps Middle East oil and gas pipelines over an Institute of War map delineating ISIS territory as of January 2016. I have removed the borders of nations, so that the pipelines demarcate the land like the Nazca lines, against a backdrop of Mount Sinai. I sourced the image of Mount Sinai from Google Earth, and rendered it like a hovering Fata Morgana. Under the freedom of information act, a US organisation called Judicial Watch obtained documents that included memos from the US Defense Intelligence Agency, in which they refer to ISIS as a "strategic asset". As Nietzsche cautioned: "He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And if you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you."

**Through situating contemporary issues within the context of their historical precedent, you seem to suggest that human history is caught in a cycle; yet simultaneously, much of your work is about speculating towards an extraordinary, unprecedented future. How do you balance these two ideas within the work?**

Years ago I gave a talk about my work at a US museum show, and at the end someone asked me: "Where is the hope in your work?", I didn't mean to depress that person, as I think I generally have a very optimistic outlook, and so I answered with a cliché: 'Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.' Admittedly it was preachy, but it does sum up part of my compulsion to look at histories to understand contemporary issues. Besides this, one of the reasons why I tend toward sci-fi is due to how it extrapolates what could exist in the future from what already exists. Hope lies in looking at an unvarnished history, devoid of nostalgia, to build a brighter future.

**Across your practice, and especially within Here Be Dragons, you frequently draw our attention to the fact that there are no fixed meanings across history and geography – that is to say, a flower, a shack, a seemingly generic landscape or indeed the moral value of a course of action can and are interpreted in a range of ways. Could you describe how your work engages with this idea of political / historical truth, and art history's role within this subject?**

As Walter Benjamin said: "History is written by the victors."