Here Be Dragons

Here Be Dragons and Here Be Dragons II are no ordinary flower paintings. First, the method of construction. Sculpted from paint filigree petals and stems combined with soft, seductive foliage melting into a misty background. The flowers seem to be derived from still life painting from the Dutch Golden Age – Balthasar van der Ast, or Roelant Savery, perhaps. Dragons skirt around a Chinese vase of a type that Savery or van der Ast might well have painted; exotic wares imported by the Dutch East India Company at the beginning of the Seventeenth Century.

But things soon turn more sinister. Beneath the vases topographical shapes refer to contested territories in the South China Seas, and in turn to China's controversial economic expansion and political dominance in the region. Through the hazy background can be seen newspaper stock listings, those mind-numbing pages. The Dutch East India Company, it might be recalled, was the first multinational, and the first company to issue stock. The whole is bathed in a strange artificial light; a harsh backlight could be blazing sunlight or a nuclear flare.

Like much of Gordon Cheung's work Here Be Dragons reflects on the difficult relationship between east and west, and in particular the rise of China as the apotheosis of capitalism, in a world for decades dominated by the United States. Grand themes indeed, delivered in a high-apocalyptic register. Cheung's imagination works on the level of civilisations but never loses sight of the individual.

At stake also are the difficulties of creating a bridge between eastern and western artistic traditions. Take landscape painting, for example. The earliest surviving Chinese landscape paintings are from the tenth century, made during the T'ang Dynasty. Painted in ink on silk, these imaginary landscapes appear flattened, unreal, but based on close observation of nature. There is no linear perspective, or narrative, or composition in the Western sense of picturesque framing devices. Distance is shown by planes receding into mist. Where Western landscapes are horizontal, Chinese landscape painting is often vertical, showing the distinction between mountains and water. The Chinese name for landscape painting is simply Shan-shui, or 'mountain-water' picture.

For all these reasons Chinese painting has not always been understood in the West. It seems so remote, so different to western traditions that we might feel we are dealing with an entirely different concept of art. It has been suggested (Hegel did) that the intricacies of Chinese painting are examples of the sublime, and it is true that the opposition between man and nature is a strong feature of Chinese art and poetry. In the late T'ang period nature provided a refuge for painters and poets alike from turbulent times. Is this then a point of contact, the sublime being the key concept in a tradition of European landscape painting that arose in the eighteenth century? To a certain extent, we might say – yet nature in Chinese painting is never imbued with the same sense of overwhelming threat, or indifference to human life – it is always contained within the bounds of human imagination.

Cheung collides the scale and emotional energy of the sublime with an eastern view of the natural world. A Thousand Plateaus stitches together a number of details from Chinese paintings, separating them with a numinous glowing mist, the whole superimposed on the stock listings that form the ground for much of his work. Instead of a Buddhist temple nestling in the misty crags, however, we see nail houses, those tragic symbols of individual resistance to economic expansion and government- sponsored development, which have appeared in a number of Cheung's recent paintings.

In European painting the romantic sublime reflected the experience of being overwhelmed by nature, by the scale of natural scenery, standing in front of a ravine, for example, or at the irrepressible force of nature, the drive to survive and to propagate: the rite of spring. Have we created a new sublime in the digital world of the Internet? Where does it stand in relation to nature? Can it claim the same level of complexity and power? Cheung has described it as 'a new virtual world of data that carves out a new landscape', and as a 'techno-sublime' with the numinous, even theistic qualities of the romantic sublime. Is there a digital god?

It is the kind of question one might find in a science fiction novel. Where the golden visions of a painter such as Turner were derived directly from an experience of nature, the golden light of Cheung's paintings reminds us more of the dystopic world of Blade Runner, of a golden sunlight filtered through a post-industrial digital haze: a raking light that glistens in the foreground of A Thousand Plateaus, a burnished glow giving a sense of unnatural age.

It is also the gold of sand, the 'lone and level sands', perhaps, that cover the wreck of a civilisation in Shelley's Ozymandias. Sand is highly charged in Cheung's work, a material charged with the vast stretches of geological eras, within which the rise and fall of civilisations are mere pulses in time. In Great Wall of Sand Cheung points to the land reclamation campaign by the Chinese govern- ment in the South China Sea, conducted by dredging sand onto coral reefs to create artificial islands.

A floating diagram indicates the trade routes comprising China's new Silk Road and Maritime trade routes; it hangs above landscapes taken from a colossal painting hanging in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, into which Cheung has added a nail house. Where Blake saw the world in a grain of sand, Cheung sees the fate of individuals in the face of the great drifts and dunes of civilisation.

Sand appears not only as a real substance in Cheung's painting, mixed with paint to form a textured impasto, but also in the striated drifts, or 'glitches' that appear on his versions of Thomas Cole's The Course of Empire, a series of five paintings, now in the New York Historical Society, which show the rise and fall of a city, implying that it was destruction was due to the trappings of civilisation and wealth, overlaying a more benign pre-lapsarian 'Arcadian or Pastoral' state. Cheung's versions use a digital process of 'glitching', or Pixel sorting (an open source application for digital manipulation) that he describes as an 'algorithmic version of Richter's blur' to interfere with the images, creating sandlike drifts. They symbolise, for Cheung, the 'repetition of history re-ordered into the digital and modern age'. As a pioneer of the use of Internet imagery in painting, Cheung's painting opens a window onto the digital space of the Internet.

Cheung takes the pixel sorting technique into a further dimension with his digital films, based on images of paintings from seventeenth-century Holland, as well as propaganda posters for Mao. Cheung explains his use of old master paintings as a response to the increasing number of museums willing to release online high resolution image of collection paintings. Almost imperceptibly the images transform into gradations of 'pixel-sorted' colour, a strangely grotesque vision of abstraction, as if the image were buried beneath a sand dune. The paint is not only de-mixed, separated pigment from oil, but the oil and minerals returned to the ground, paradoxically abstracted in the process.

I asked Cheung if he felt his art was more European or Chinese. His Chinese ancestry has meant he has never felt entirely British, where in Hong Kong, he tells me, he is hardly seen as Chinese, paradoxically belonging and not to both cultures – an important and positive situation, in his eyes. Hanging between these two cultures, halfway down the Silk Road, perhaps, the virtual world provides an in-between space – a world of digital images and exchange that recognizes no borders, unless of course it comes up against government censorship. All art, it might be said, is made from a sense of not quite being in the right place, of being displaced. In this situation the digital world becomes a potent source and workshop for images. In Cheung's case it is a workshop on the end and ends of civilisations.

But there is more profound, more historical shift, beyond that of artists to the online world, one in which power is moving back to older regions, from West to East, along the old Silk Roads. Central Asia, once the source of the Tulips that became so valuable in seventeenth century Holland, is now the source of oil and gas reserves, as well as other natural resources that are the basis of vast new wealth and power in the region. In its 'One Belt, One Road' plan, China is bidding to become the tollgate for a new Silk Road, and a maritime Silk Road that will bypass the unstable regions of Central Asia – the 'One Road One Belt' scheme that Cheung shows in Great Wall of Sand. Where once on the global map Europe stood at the centre, between the old and new worlds, it now finds itself at the western fringe, a peninsular on the Eurasian landmass.

These vast economic and geo-political realities are not easy to encapsulate in works of art, and this is not Cheung's purpose. It is rather, through subtle combinations of imagery, to ask questions and provoke thought. Evoking Tulip mania, alongside the 'Great Wall of Sand' scheme to reclaim territory as a form of economic expansion, raises the question of how a Chinese tulip speculation bubble might appear, and the axiom that there has never been a boom without bust. How will the transition of China to authoritarian capitalism affect our vision of the world in the twenty-first century? Just as the first works of cubism in the years before the First World War seem now a premonition of the century to come, so now it is only in works of art that we might get some sense of our shared future.

And only with the new and often startling techniques derived from the digital world can we begin to imagine what brave new image world might arise from this new interconnectedness, and shift of power from west to east. 'Here be Dragons' is also used by computer programmers to indicate complex parts of a code, a sort of dark and mysterious area where reality might easily slide into myth. These are the areas Cheung's paintings and films inhabit: here indeed be dragons.