

In Plato's Cave

By Dr. Satish Padiyar for the exhibition catalogue, 'Gordon Cheung: The Solar Cry', Edel Assanti, London, 2012

"It seemed to me that I was confined in the place known as Plato's Cave. It was a long dark cavern. I was seated there along with a multitude of men, women, and children. All our hands and feet were chained and our heads so well secured by wooden restraints that it was impossible for us to turn them...Behind us were kings, ministers, priests, doctors, apostles, prophets, theologians, politicians, cheats, charlatans, masters of illusion, and the whole band of dealers in hopes and fears...These charlatans, as I subsequently realized, between us and the entrance to the cave, had a large hanging lamp behind them and in front of whose light they placed their little figures such that their shadows were projected over our heads, and came to rest on the canvas on the back of the cave, composing scenes so natural, so true, that we took them to be real, now splitting our sides from laughing at them, now crying over them with ardent tears...Despite the illusion created by this arrangement, there were a few in the crowd who were suspicious, who rattled their chains from time to time and who had an intense desire to rid themselves of their restraints and turn their heads; but at that very instant first one then another of the charlatans at our backs would begin screaming in a terrifying voice: Beware of turning your head! Calamity will befall anyone rattling his chains! Show respect for the restraints...On another occasion I'll tell you what happened to anyone disregarding the voice's advice, the danger he ran, the persecution that was his lot; I'll save that for when we talk philosophy. Today, since we're dealing with pictures, I'd prefer to describe to you some of the ones I saw on the large canvas..." - Denis Diderot, *The Salon of 1765*

Who, or what, governs our lives today? In our post-Enlightenment, post-secular – which is to say assertively religious – 'global' age, what is the form of divinity that would regulate human venality and total destruction? Gordon Cheung's art struggles with what has become a crucial problem for Western 'civilization', the problem of freedom and self-deliberation, and, ultimately, the presence of an unruly and devastating new God in our time. His is an art of revelation that at once stages a secret and exposes a rabid contradiction: landscapes richly illuminated by intimations of a 'hidden God' – of a world dangerously left to its own devices – expose the dead end of a missionary civilization from which there is no discernible or foreseeable way out.

Let us begin with the ground of his ambitious tableaux. Since the mid-1990s Cheung employs a medium that materializes a contradiction between the transparent demotic and opacity: the printed financial index of shifting market values in its most distinctive and internationally recognized paper form, as it daily appears in the British finance-oriented newspaper *Financial Times*. The process of transmuting this stuff into his pictures' ground is intricate and time-consuming, as Cheung extracts clean blocks of figures – the index – carefully omitting the bold capitalized names of individual companies, and pastes the flat blocks of digits onto the canvas, to form a pervasive ground. These stock listings constitute the new divinity of Cheung's contemporary history painting – it is this artist's primary and presumptive material - and out of it emerges a highly charged mythic pictorial universe.

This is our divinity, yet with only a tenuous relation to the believable and without reassurance. The faceless global economic markets, contrary to the grid-like orderliness and placating salmon-pink of the FT's printed financial index, have gone wild; and become both sovereign (with in its train a sovereign debt crisis) and unnervingly volatile. The glued application of coloured newspaper – 'collage' - has its origins in another critically fraught moment of Western culture, with the early twentieth century modernism, in the years preceding the first global war, of for example Georges Braque. But rather than introducing messages of imminent war or of popular culture superficially onto the plane of the picture, 'torn' and incorporated in an incidental and contingent manner, as if to radically and riotously interrupt the realm of art, as Braque and then Picasso did, Cheung's coloured newsprint has become the picture's dominating presumptive ground. Economy is where we start from; and it is one that has engendered its own antithetical global riots.

Yet, rather than dwelling on the riot, Cheung is intent on unravelling the immanent logic of a life lived by the economy, its images and affects: his images speak a state of unfreedom. The inexpressiveness of the background wall of numbers (like the captivating canvas stretched out in Plato's cave) that is distinctive of Cheung's work masks powerful, even archaic human feelings that every speculator and spectator will know: anxiety, risk, fear of catastrophe, atopia. The jargon of the world of finance reveals this: the memory of the 'Great Depression', 'Market Sentiment'. Against the menace of depression, of 'zero growth' and 'stagnation', our culture has put into play an old animal symbolism. The reign of the bull – the 'bull market' – is asserted apotropaically to check the fear of its ever-present spectre, the bear. This irrupts fabulously into Cheung's pictorial reflections on the signs of our times.

His new body of work builds resonances to other bull paintings, some in the very distant past indeed. Revealed by flickering light in a secret place in the bowels of the earth, the prehistoric Palaeolithic cave paintings at Lascaux - discovered in 1940 during the onset of a second global war – represented, for Georges Bataille (from whose writings the name of this exhibition is taken), not the climatic hardships and material poverty of archaic humanity, but its sovereign and unspoiled magnificence, that culture's wealth. The noble killing of the animal – which developed into the barely civilized nobility's pastime of hunting – is not motivated by hatred for the animal, nor solely by human hunger, but, Bataille insisted, by a respect for the beast; it illuminated a now lost identification between the fragile human and the sovereign beast.

But if Cheung's work can be likened to cave painting - in its intensity of colour, return to the man-animal hybrid (here bull and cowboy), and 'archaic' search for symbolization - the stories it tells us are not about a nascent culture, about the cradle of humanity, but a decadent one.

Mapped onto Cheung's essentially realist gesture - the substratum in his canvases that is the financial index is his chosen signifier of the 'real world' - is a hallucinatory symbolism that exposes the market figures as not only determining and real, but also fully illusory and fictive in their bullish presumptions; and in which can be read intimations of a catastrophic fall. What is the exit strategy of a culture - a Western 'civilization', that believes it stands for freedom - that is embroiled in the entrapping structure of a numerical grid? How do we liberate ourselves from the escalating grip of fears and dashed hopes that the numbers blithely represent?

Cheung's is a sort of romantic crisis; his visual language of the 'romantic sublime', reinvented as a 'techno sublime', recognizably draws its roots from the sublime romantic landscapes of the early nineteenth century, such as those of Caspar David Friedrich. And it was Friedrich who painted both a longing for subjective interfusion with nature and an experience of utter alienation and loss of connection with a homely world. Our artist, for his apocalyptic tone and prophetic gifts - Cheung visualized the chronic fragility of a world driven by the logic of volatile economic markets before the actual 'crash' came in 2008 - has been called a 'William Blake for our time'. All the multifarious references to nineteenth-century Romanticism in his art ultimately constitute his urgent re-engagement with Romanticism's critical and deep rebellion against the crazy encroachments on life of industrial capitalism.

The real value of Cheung's work may not ultimately lie in its own tracking and indexing of the contemporary loss of control, its powerful visual image of the nightmare of determinism; nor in its unflinching and fearless calculation of the catastrophic effects of the world 'economy'. It raises a deeper problem, and this is what the writer and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva has referred to as humankind's 'incredible need to believe'. In these post-political times the question of belief has become the pressing and urgent one. Through his art, Cheung raids the most archaic and recent belief systems, and he spectacularly crushes them together; Palaeolithic belief in the power of the image rubs against American credibility in its slogan 'freedom' and its civilizing mission, all this against the backdrop of the global financial world's belief in the redemptive power of the bull. In this montage of fragments of belief systems - he is a dexterous shuffler and shifter of mythemes - Cheung not only unmask and destabilizes belief itself, shows us its cultural variability and post-iconic fragility; but piling on visual indices of belief upon belief, creating a veritable archive of what humans have found credible, exposes our actual inability to live in the world without them. The 'message' here is not that one belief system is redemptive and hopeful while another is false and harmful; but rather that the neo-romantic question of what we can believe in today is an open one. In the very same gesture that Cheung advances his visual critique of capitalist risk - the bull and cowboy here are on a mission to nowhere - a certain preternatural light glows through and about the canvas as an irradiating substance - let us say it represents abstractly the need to believe - which has no definitive form, and is in a process of becoming (what will it become?).

At the same time as Cheung throws down upon his canvases the epiphenomena of archaic and fast redundant (though residually powerful) belief systems, he transmutes them. In his 1957 essay 'Myth Today', Roland Barthes noted the numbing effect on the viewer (or reader) of myths, their rigid and 'frozen' quality. In this way myths present themselves as free from historical situated-ness (since history means movement). Cheung submits such frozen mythic signifiers - the heroic American cowboy, the bull, the American 'sublime' landscape - to a kind of heating up, which eventually sees them about to melt before our eyes. If there is a mythologizing action in Cheung's painted and sculptural practice - rather than merely a passive montage of the culture's received mythemes - it is this characteristic fluidity and flow, the waxy softening of our culture's mythic signifiers. Rush of Blood, Fade to Black: the titles hint at emotional, physiognomic and visceral mutation rather than immutability or fixation; one which finds its rhyme in 'financial meltdown'. Cheung's ideal landscapes appear as subject to disturbing seething conflagrations (Gottterdammerung), the ground beneath the bull coagulates into a reddened slime rich in implications of unspeakable violence, the nature symbol of the tree becomes scarred and striated and dead and heavy; and it is no accident that at the centre of Solar Cry and Rush of Blood rivers are flowing, acid-like, cutting into and melting the once-heroic mythic landscape. Cheung changes myths through plasticizing their forms, keeps them moving, in the direction of the anti-heroic violated and violent. Meltdown.

In the most recent canvases even Cheung's ur-matter of the Financial Times printed index has undergone a striking and significant deformation. In the studio, he literally incinerates the salmon-pink newspaper into blackened ash, and then binds it with a viscous medium and applies this to the canvas. In Rush of Blood the central dual figure of the cowboy and bull is flanked at the edges of the canvas by soaring vertical shafts of this weird rubbery substance. Cheung, in this way, transforms the civilization's highest value (not gold, but the numerical salmon-pink index of financial values) into the dark matter associated with the primeval dark bowels of the earth: he is a perverse alchemist.

There are intimations of a redemptive process in such material transmutations. In this exhibition 'Solar Cry' the contingent, disposable and flimsy Financial Times newspaper is, in a reverse process, turned back into a woody log-like substance: the piled up branches at its centre are a composite of newspaper worked papier-maché-like now resembling 'driftwood', the natural deposit of perhaps a cultural wreckage. The throwaway paper financial index is now converted into an enduring sculptural thing with a positively generative place in the world, this log fire around which stories might begin to be exchanged and narrated, new myths might appear. What was ephemeral and elusive has become graspable and community forming.

This graspability is crucial to Cheung's work; although, it should be said, his work always begins as an engagement with, and as a mode of rapacious plunder of, virtual imagery (he is an avid collector of the images that flow through our virtual world). How do we grasp a myth? How might we get a handle on it and its overweening power? How could we manipulate it? At the centre of the exhibition 'Solar Cry' Cheung has placed a constructed bomb suit made of felt that in its 'hands' holds archaic symbols, perhaps of misfortune and fortune, of disaster and futurity. Within this shell there are intimations of human presence - the resonance with Joseph Beuys, with his 1961 performance clad in felt, I Love America, is unavoidable - and it dominates 'Solar Cry', gives it an explosive edge.

Who – or what – is this revenant homo erectus that grasps archaic symbols in both hands, fragilely protected by the warmth of the felt from the contemporary wreckages and catastrophes projected in the history paintings and shards around him? Are we to comprehend this elemental figure as a sole survivor of the apocalypse that fearsomely charges through all of Cheung's work, or as an augur of it? For sure, he is not the messianic Light of the World, come to save us, but perhaps its very opposite. What is needed is a protection from the catastrophe in a time when, as Cheung sees it, there is ultimately no way out of Plato's cave, and its indelible images.