

Hacking into the present: The Apocalyptic imaginings of Gordon Cheung

By Paul Hobson for the exhibition catalogue, 'The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse', New Art Gallery Walsall, 2009

"The marriage of reason and nightmare which has dominated the 20th century has given birth to an ever more ambiguous world. Across the communications landscape move the spectres of sinister technologies and the dreams that money can buy."
- J.G. Ballard, *Crash*, 1995 (first published 1973)

Since graduating from the Royal College of Art in 2001, British artist Gordon Cheung has attracted critical acclaim for his epic, nightmarish paintings which prophesise the apocalyptic collapse of our late capitalist, globalised world, creating sensational 'techno-sublime' dystopic vistas. Interested in "the increasingly technologised era that has transfigured our perceptions of time, space and position into a constant state of flux", Cheung describes his mixed-media paintings as "hyper-paint-by-numbers depicting virtual landscapes oscillating between utopia and dystopia". Cheung's paintings make visible, as a type of overt sign or metaphor, the invisible architecture of our existence: the global villages, digital frontiers, information highways and cyberspace of the new "borderless" world of technologically-driven global capitalism, bearing witness to the final, spectacular moments of its physical and ideological implosion.

Cheung's anxious vision of the future has been shaped by the way in which the original, euphoric utopian projections associated with new technologies in the final decade of the twentieth century, were swiftly followed by the collapse of the dot com markets, the Millennium Bug, Enron and Worldcom, reaching its ultimate sign in the images of the World Trade Centre on 9/11, the resultant "war on terror" and current global economic melt-down. The anxiety generated by rapid and unexpected shifts between utopian and dystopian scenarios, amplified by the media and new technologies, and imagined on a global scale – economic, military, biological, environmental – is at the very heart of Cheung's particular brand of postmodern Armageddon.

Rendered in his complex signature style, which involves sourcing specific imagery from the Internet in order to create virtual environments using Photoshop, and then printing them onto a base layer of collaged stock-listings newsprint from the Financial Times, Cheung employs spray paint, oil pastels and ink to make his spectacular paintings. The use of stock-listings newsprint as a ground is intended by Cheung to evoke the invisible yet omnipresent digitised, data-saturated framework – a simulated reality à la *The Matrix* - that constructs, mediates and limits our conditions of possibility at the beginning of the twenty-first century, especially the global financial markets. As Cheung says: "for a long time I have been curious about our 'virtual' existence in a highly technologised era, in which we exist to such an extent that we literally have electronic information flowing through us". Here Cheung is referencing the invisible datascares that saturate our environment; the mobile phone signals, the radio waves, the zeroes and ones that permeate our physical world, forming a landscape of information where streams of data allow us to traverse and access virtual dimensions. "When I started making mixed media paintings using the stock listings I was looking for a material that could symbolise this space".

Cheung's technique and mixed media generates a complex range of textures, rhythms and scales on the surface of his paintings, heightened by compositional strategies which conflate the spatial operations of virtual gaming environments and science fiction, with those of Romantic landscape painting. Working over the minute detail of the newsprint type with broad but highly controlled areas of acrylic paint, Cheung employs a polluted pallet of acrid pinks, violets, yellows and greens over a nostalgic sepia base, over which in turn are suspended pools and traces of soft black ink that puddle and crack as they dry. Cheung's use of discordant psychedelic and phosphorescent colours confuse painting with photographic negatives and thermal imaging, and his sfumato contours suggest burns, bruises, pollution and corrosion. His kaleidoscopic and symmetrical compositions evoke the jagged psychological projections of the Rorschach test, combined with indeterminate, contradictory spaces and perspectives, where pictorial space is dislocated and mapped as a type of notional architecture. Through his handling of media and composition, Cheung creates a disruptive yet seductive surface where detail functions to contest and destabilise the coherence of the larger image of which they form a part.

Strongly influenced by the writings of the late British novelist J.G. Ballard (1930 – 2009), Cheung's work reflects on dystopian modernity and the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments. His worlds are specifically "Ballardian" in the sense that some use the term to identify a particular phase in late capitalism yet to play itself out, which is articulated in Ballard's writings and related polemics, but which are also overtly post-modern in their recognition of the highly constructed and spectacular fiction of the late capitalist, post-political condition.

Cheung gives panoramic expression to the ideas proposed by Guy Debord (1931 – 1994) in his influential book, *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), that in advanced capitalism, life is reduced to an immense accumulation of spectacles, a triumph of mere appearance where all that once was directly lived has become mere representation. Elaborating on Karl Marx's argument that under capitalism our lives and our environment are continually depleted, Debord claimed that "the Spectacle" is the system by which capitalism hides such depletion. Cheung's prophetic worlds implicate the spectacular society of late capitalism, where consumption is primary, with the ultimate degradation of humanity and its intellectual capacity: knowledge is no longer used to question, analyse or resolve contradictions, but to assuage reality with devastating consequences.

In his related concept of "simulacra" and his writings throughout the 1980s and 1990s that we had reached "the end of history", Jean Baudrillard (1929 – 2007) iterated Debord's assertion that we are adrift in a simulated version of reality or, to use one of his neologisms, a state of globalised "hyper-reality". This is not to say that the world becomes unreal, but rather that the faster and more comprehensively global capitalism and technology bring realities together into one supposedly coherent global picture, the more insecure and fragmented it looks, and the more fearful and unstable societies become. Actual reality dies out and as a consequence, history itself ends or vanishes with the spread of globalisation. In his apocalyptic paintings, Cheung presents us with the "end of history", not as the culmination of history's progress, i.e. Modernism, but as the collapse of the very idea of historical progress lost beneath the simulated, spectacular surface of global capitalism. What gives these post-modern ideas and images their particular potency in part is the way in which they are combined – again disruptively - with the formal, compositional tropes of Romantic landscape painting with its associated heroic, sublime and utopian projections. The empathetic device of the Rückenfigur may be conspicuously absent, but the Romantic idea of the landscape as a self-contained emotive and psychological subject, of allegory and symbolism, are strong characteristics of Cheung's imagined territories. This is a deliberate strategy on his behalf, using Romanticism to evoke religious or spiritual impulses in relation to the post-modern "techno-sublime": "If a Romantic

landscape painting typically takes you on a transcendental experience which brings you closer to God than what would “the techno-sublime” bring you closer to? If it is a God, then what shape would that take?’

The same device is in operation when Cheung references modernist corporate architecture in his paintings – usually abandoned and evacuated, in a state of collapse or dereliction, or warped in a post-nuclear instant - with their problematic utopian aspirations, as a way of signifying the social and political implications of architecture and its inevitable failure. During the past five years, Cheung has created his worlds from a diverse range of sources referencing digital technology, global capitalism, tourism, consumerism and the financial markets. His iconography includes hackers, billionaires, megacompanies, bulls and bears - as a way of signifying market conditions - related images from hunting, cowboys and the rodeo, along with modernist architecture, corporate and urban environments, tropical gardens, and imagery directly lifted from art history, the news and cartoons. The different representational systems at work in the painting – news media, photographic images, surveillance technology, video games, graffiti, landscape traditions and history painting - make for a complex, fractured artwork where associated ideologies collide. Cheung employs all of them in his creation of collapsing cityscapes and corroding landscapes, oppressed by turbulent, polluted skies with their prophetic sunsets, evacuated by war, disease, drought and economic collapse.

This new body of work develops many of these thematic concerns and iconography. For this exhibition, Cheung has created four interrelated strands of work, extending his practice in terms of media in the form of sculpture, laser-etchings and animation. Whereas his previous work has been broadly apocalyptic in vision, this new body of work engages more literally with the symbolism of the biblical Apocalypse in relation to economic structures and the financial markets, drawing on current events and related imagery sourced from art history.

Cheung’s work has frequently included references to biblical scenes and ideas, including the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, the Tower of Babel, as well as Heaven and The Underworld. Religious symbolism takes centre-stage in his new work through the metaphorical image of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse as described in the Bible in Revelations Chapter 6, verses 1-8. A recurring image in Christian art for several centuries, the Horsemen represent the symbolic descriptions of different events that will take place at the end of the world.

In his painting *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, Cheung directly lifts Viktor Vasnetsov’s portrayal of the subject from his painting of the same title of 1887, depicting the arrival of the end of the world in the turbulent skies above the nine Wall Street mega-companies that represent the epicentre of the global financial world, which collapsed in 2008 plunging the world into the worst economic recession since the Great Depression. Cheung’s pilfering of art history continues in a body of laser etchings – again on a veneer of compressed stock listings newsprint - of Albrecht Dürer’s famous woodcut series of the same subject, *The Apocalypse* of 1498, as well as Francisco Goya’s visual indictment of war, *Los Desastres de la Guerra* (1810 – 1820).

In what amounts to a significant shift in his practice, Cheung has also created four sculptural forms which draw on the language of Minimalism – *Le Witt and Flavin* in particular – that supremely corporate art form, presented in the form of a museological display. Each structure refers to one of the four horses of the Apocalypse in colour, supporting a long horn bull’s skull cast from Cheung’s signature material - shredded stock listings paper - combined with a range of binding materials: terracotta, graphite, concrete, marble, plaster and copper. These works are legible as archaeological relics of our civilisation in the form of a totem that compresses the iconography of *The Apocalypse* with corporatisation and its cultural formats.

Alongside these works, Cheung presents the updated version of his *Top Ten Billionaires*, *Top Ten Dead Celebrities Still Earning*, and *Top Ten Hackers* series of recent years with the luminaries of 2008. He also continues to make specific reference to the current economic situation through the symbols of bears and bulls, as well as the idea of the rodeo - a recurrent theme in his work since his Rodeo paintings of 2006 - through paintings and for the first time, a sequence of animations.

Cheung explains the symbolism of these recurring images: “The stock market in good times is called ‘the bull market’ as the bull strikes with upward thrusts, whereas ‘a bear market’ is for the downturn and recession, as it strikes in a downward motion”. Cheung sees the compression of man and bull in the mythological creature of the Minotaur, as “a contemporary symbol of the extreme corporate human”. That this imagery also evokes the cultural iconography of Americana – the vast open plains and Marlboro men, symbols of man’s pioneering spirit and his will to overcome nature - is also a device through which Cheung can reference the history of violence, bloodshed and cruelty behind American’s vision of itself.

His painting *Endgame 4* explicitly references the so-called “bull” and “bear” markets and what Cheung refers to as “the hunt for prestige, power and status”, which has been a recurring idea in his work in recent years. These paintings are composed from images that Cheung has downloaded from tourist hunting websites as part of an ongoing body of work, of which he says “for the ultimate consumer who pays to be taken to a prey for the easy thrill to the kill, devoid of the tradition of survival and for a status symbol”. Again, Cheung finds a way to create an overt sign for a number of ideological positions and values, which he associates with morally bankrupt, socially ambitious consumerism and tourism.

Gordon Cheung is an artist whose work captures the mood and values of our specific historical moment. He continues a long-standing artistic tradition of imagining the end of civilisation, a form of emotional and spiritual escape valve operated since man found a means to express himself. His searing visions of a civilisation veering disastrously off course, into the abyss of spectacle and consumption, moral and intellectual bankruptcy, has never felt more relevant than at the present time, when global ideologies are shifting at a rapid rate, fanned by economic and environmental crises. Perhaps more alarming is the “post-political” resignation which accompanies these wider developments, and the general consensus of the contemporary mass media that the return of religion has emerged as the most important factor in global politics and culture today. In his prophetic visions, underpinned by spiritual and utopian yearning, Cheung finds a compressed sign for these economic, political and spiritual crises. He is a William Blake for our times.