

Signs taken for Wonders

By Marilyn Zeitlin for e-magazine, Issue 2, May-June, 2009

...a storm is blowing in from Paradise.... The storm irresistibly propels [The Angel of History] into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

-Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 1939

Gordon Cheung presents a chiliastic view of the future painted to seduce us into the contemplation of a ruined world. That Cheung depicts a post-apocalyptic world is where we'll start. But it is not the whole story. Both in his images and on the surface of his paintings, the presence of decadence, collapse, and the end of "life as we know it" is palpable. In the new series *Wilderness of Mirrors*, Cheung shows us a dystopic universe in which all but the most primordial elements of existence have been - what? bombed? starved? poisoned? all of the above, and more, unto oblivion.

Cheung references the CIA and double agents in explaining the source for the title of the series. "Wilderness of Mirrors" was the phrase used by James Jesus Angleton, chief of the CIA counter-intelligence staff in the 1950s, to describe the convoluted duplicitous layers of appearance and reality, of spy and counter-spy. It is a phrase drawn from T.S. Eliot's *Gerontion* (1920), a poem narrated by a self-described "... old man in a dry month/ being read to by a boy, waiting for rain." It too delineates a spoiled world--- ruined and overindulged, a world that is encapsulated in the efforts of an old man to summon some last virility. "These with a thousand small deliberations/ Protract the profit of their chilled delirium,/ Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled,/ With pungent sauces, multiply variety/ In a wilderness of mirrors." (Ah, for the days of a CIA in which poetry undergirded thinking!) The sense of multiple readings behind what can be seen is more relevant now, it seems, than in what now appears to be a simpler age in which paranoia, red scares, and countercounter intelligence was norm.

In the title painting of the series, Cheung uses the visual vocabulary of religious tradition and science fiction film iconography to place the issues on the table. We see a horizon of water or fissured earth, framing devices of denuded mountains. The water mirrors the peaks and the iridescent, psychedelic neon colors of the fumes of the atmosphere. This compositional arrangement, with its near-symmetry and flanking forms, has reappeared in Cheung's work since 2003, when his work moved to the exploration of the future as void. The composition is hieratic - a formula seen in religious art of both the West and Asia, a shell within which deities are enthroned surrounded by parenthetical anecdotal material including landscape and narrative that expand on the central theme.

The vision of an apocalyptic end is a theme with constant reappearance throughout the history of art, and Cheung clearly knows the work of and respects his art-historical predecessors. Apocalypse was the rage in late medieval times and populates its art. It chronicles a time when millennial fears were paired with the devastation of plague throughout Europe. Martin Schöngauer (15th century) and many others depicted the *Dance of Death*. Albrecht Dürer's *The Apocalypse of St. John* (1496-98) to Peter Breughel's *Tower of Babel* (1563) - an early expression of anxiety about globalization - lay the groundwork for the parables of destruction. Perhaps an unintentional expression of hubris is Erastus Salisbury Field's *Historical Monument of the American Republic* (1876), painted to celebrate the victory of the American Civil War. But now it is impossible to see it without thinking of the World Trade Center. Zooming into the present, there are the paintings of contemporary Brazilian artist Oscar Oiwa. But these, and Cheung's work, are not simply sci-fi horror movie stills. Cheung uses an array of devices to draw us into the paintings and to carry us into a psychological space in which we can go beyond mere the present and contemplate a possible future.

As I write, the radio in the next room drones on, commentators debating reasons for the financial collapse of 2008. None can explain it. But that is because they are looking at the minutiae of market economics. We all know what is happening in the grand scheme of things, in the dues we are paying for excess. Gordon Cheung has been laying it all out for us for quite some time.

The title painting of *Wilderness of Mirrors* offers two new elements, images that carry the painting beyond the vision of a world that has ended. First, in the bottom foreground is a form that at first seems like a pelvis, or a pair of bones made into clubs knit together by twigs. On closer look, it is a pair of battling bucks or elk. The image is against a black background, an apron of a stage; it functions like a cartouche that announces the genealogy of those who brought us here: figures of the same species warring to their own extinction. And secondly, at the top, in the distance, the painting is crowned by a nimbus of light.

It is this central image of light that is important in the new work. Like the foreground image, this one can be seen in two opposing ways. First, it suggests a post-nuclear glow, which goes the distance to explain the desolate outcome. But that alone would be far too facile a reading, it seems to me. At the opposite extreme, it resonates as a suggestion of a future, something that is not visible from where we stand but offers a harsh, even blinding, future.

The composition, with its evocation of enormous scale in nature and the diminution of man plays on the tradition of the painters of the nineteenth century who sought to convey the enormity of nature. The sublime. In the case of Frederic Church, his subject was the American West, still exotic at the time that he attempted to portray it, and the Andes. All were manifestations of a presence of divinity to be discovered in the natural world. The classic example of this relationship of man to nature is Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818).

In Cheung's painting *Death By a Thousand Cuts*, he places takes the two elements of landscape and figure and tilts the picture plane and radicalizes the proportions. In the earlier painting, it is as if we are standing just behind the wanderer and see his vision of the landscape. Friedrich's figure is dark, silhouetted against the whitish fog, and the figure is more prominent. But Cheung places us, the viewers, above as well as behind the figure, removing us emotionally, making us omniscient rather than immediate observers. Cheung's figure is minute in the face of the landscape laid out before him. Friedrich's figure stands above the fog, dominating what is below him; Cheung's is simply a witness.

The drama of Cheung's paintings is conveyed in part by a compositional device which often suggests a stage. That stage is frequently empty, waiting for the characters to animate the space. In *Death By a Thousand Cuts* the central nimbus is now revealed as the backdrop of a tower of knives

capped by a nuclear warhead rising from the waters. At the right is the dead tree trunk - like the last remnant of Eden. A colossal floral branch grows at the far right.

The title refers to ling chi, a form of torture used in ancient China - but employed recently enough to be captured on film. The victim is cut repeatedly to die a slow but inevitable death, often one that is a protracted spectacle. Cheung offers not only visual multiple readings but a verbal double entendre: the word cuts also resonates with economics, with budget cuts and rationing and diminishing resources. In a broader sense, it suggests intolerable changes made so gradually that we do not notice or are, as the process goes forward, too exhausted to object.

At the left side of the painting, a figure descends the mountains. He carries what looks like Chinese ceramic ginger jars, one in each hand and one balanced on his head. They are decorated with floral patterns. The scene, witnessed by a tiny figure standing on an outcropping in the foreground, is the reduced version of Friedrich's wanderer. I am reminded of Yung Chang's film *Up the Yangtze* (2007), in which the creation of the Three Gorges dam devastates the lives of people living in the path of the rising water and the cultural past of a region of China is being drowned and erased with the displacement. The film is an inexorable indictment of the contemporary Chinese economic boom and of carelessness - in the literal sense of not caring what happens in the long run. The film and Cheung's painting tell us to regard the implications of the changes we are exerting on what is left of the natural world, to check our hubris in dominating nature.

"Unnatural vices are fathered by our heroism" says Eliot. At least one of the contributing forces that has brought down the world must be war. But with the exception of the nuclear warhead in *Death By a Thousand Cuts*, Cheung never shows us war explicitly. In fact, his strategy is in avoiding the explicit. What is beyond the horizon in these two paintings? It is undefined, perhaps a void. I am reminded of the temple of Borobudur in Java. Borobudur is a maquette of the universe, a three-dimensional cosmogram. The central conceit is of the universe as a mystical mountain, a form that bridges between heaven and earth. It is also a device for gradually achieving enlightenment. As the devotee ascends from level to level, he or she can see further out along the Java plain and, figuratively, can comprehend more of the surrounding and ever-expanding world. The lower levels are squared off to reflect the four cardinal directions. The upper levels are circular, making the pace faster and suppressing the differentiation that the lower levels reinforce. Friezes of sculptural murals girdle each level. At the lowest levels, the imagery represents the most savage aspect of human behavior: murder and its mass version, war, are most prominent. Higher up, the imagery depicts higher aspects of human behavior as human approaches divine. And the concept is mirrored in form: the depth of the relief becomes lower as the figures become more ethereal and the ideas more abstract.

At the topmost terrace, several dome structures are carved with lattice patterns. You can look through the lattice to see seated Buddhas. But most amazing, when you finally reach the topmost level, there is a single dome. When you peer through the lattice, the space is empty. No Buddha. The most highly evolved form is beyond representation.

My first thought in seeing *Wilderness of Mirrors* is that the halo at the center, which does not encircle the head of any figure, is the analogue of that absent figure. Nor is the religious association farfetched in Cheung's case since he has long used metaphors of temples and the fallen angels of John Milton as the armature upon which he hangs his chiliastic vision of the present. But perhaps Cheung is offering a last reconciliation, a final option for hope, a promise that cannot be delineated.

So how did we reach this point? Since 1995 Cheung has used the stock quotations from the Financial Times, plastering the sheets seamlessly over the painting support. The columns of words and numbers, flush left, organizing the entirety into a grid. They also never allow us to forget that what underlies history in the age of global capitalism is the fluctuations of these numbers. It is a collective unconscious of the moment, inescapable, one we share even if we pay no attention to it. The printed pages form an all-over texture that unify what are often very large paintings. The stock listings appear in some places and are covered in others, but implicit is that they underlie EVERYTHING.

To regard the unseen as the moving force in our lives is paranoia, religion, and/or science fiction. Paranoia is differentiated from fear only when the reason for fear has no basis. These paintings are not fantasy, they record the fluidity among elements that have become combustible in the present. It seems that the narrowing ecological path we are on and economic boom-or-bust tsunamis are very real bases for fear, but they can be exploited to become paranoiac, to the end that national security eclipses all else and "defense spending" becomes a euphemism for a national security state and the militarizing of the economy. Outsourcing the Iraq war has moved wealth from the public coffers to private pockets. No one spells this out as carefully and convincingly as does Naomi Klein in *The Shock Doctrine*, which traces the impact of free-market economics from the 1970s, from Augusto Pinochet's coup in Chile, up until the Iraq war. It is a book about economics that tells a parallel history of the latter half of the twentieth century and goes far to explain the depletion - financial, moral - of the present. Over the ground of stock quotations, Cheung builds up layers of paint, creating textures from the thin mist of spray paint to the thick impasto of a loaded brush. He can control crackle to represent a decaying world. The surfaces of his paintings are rich and complex and completely relevant to his content.

The iridescent color that Cheung uses in these paintings links them with pachinko or pinball machines in which science fiction battles take place. They are the colors of hallucinogenic visions in which an aura scintillates around forms, beautiful but on the edge of painful.

In *Deluge* Cheung references another icon of Romanticism, Théodore Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1819). He frames the action within a more roughly symmetrical stage: to the right are the stubs of ruined buildings and on the left a barren tree limb with the shipwreck scene below. The sea looks like molten earth about to inundate the fragile raft. The back story of the raft is based on an historical event. The few that survived the shipwreck resorted to cannibalism in order to survive. Cheung does not tell us this, but it is behind the image, like a dirty secret. Cheung, perhaps aware of the ghoulishness of the story, has countered this horror with a goofy image of a cartoon-like ghost in the opposing corner. The light that is central in *Wilderness of Mirrors* and *Death by a Thousand Cuts* here is diffused into multiple bursts, like fireworks over a river. Beyond the edge of a V of mountains, the light appears to be setting. Like the wrong-headedness that is so vividly portrayed in *Up the Yangtze*, Cheung shows us in *Masterplan* the results of technology gone awry. Light in the distance still glows above the edge of mountains. Human presence takes the form of figures amassed on the right. Cheung takes them from documentary footage of *Futurama*, a utopian vision of transportation efficiency presented by General Motors as part of the 1939 World's Fair in Flushing Meadows, New York. The figures are onlookers, not agents, an audience for the human enterprise that takes center stage. Two figures appear to be attempting to start some sort mechanism, like two guys trying to start a lawnmower. A crank or electrical cord lies useless. The machine is topped by a globe. Perhaps they are attempting to reincarnate the Creation? They've simply got to get this thing spinning again. Things are not looking up.

The constant in these paintings is the stock listings visible and overlaid but ubiquitous. The machinations of the market, even if we have no investments per se, impacts and unifies us all. Cheung uses another device to underscore that we are all in this - whatever it may be - together with a net-like scoring of the ground. We see it in *Death by a Thousand Cuts* and in *Masterplan*. It creeps up the facades of buildings. It is the modernist grid, which organizes space. But in Cheung's hands, it becomes animate and often sinister.

Cheung's complex paintings--- complex in the multiple layers and variety of technical means to create complex surfaces--- embody the complex and often internally contradictory view of the world and especially of history not unlike that of cultural critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin who lived 1892 to 1940. Benjamin approached his work as an analysis not only of aesthetics but of the political and social as he witnessed the collapse of Europe, starting, from his perspective, with the failure of Weimar Germany and the rise of National Socialism or Nazism. Benjamin was an agnostic longing for God. He formulated a Messianic vision in which his familiarity with the cabala was countered by his interest in Marxism. His vision of history is apocalyptic, a seriality toward oblivion that is also transcendent. Benjamin decoded the everyday - children's books, arcades, his library, works of popular culture - as the source for understanding deep human and social issues. He saw "the unapparent in the everyday." He relied, in the end, on the flow of sensory experience as much as on theory. In this regard, he is the appropriate prophet of our own time, and of the industry of producing and understanding the role of media---that term that references an ever-expanding field of new technologies delivering images in an undifferentiated torrent.

We understand abstractions in narrative or image. The actual event is ephemeral, and what is important about it or will have staying power is not clear as it happens before our eyes. It is in the reportage, the theorist's writing, the novelist's plot and characters, the painter's image, that the event becomes comprehensible. At worst, we get the repetition of the sound byte ad nauseum. At best, we get works of art that embrace complexity, that present options for understanding that allow us to keep many balls in the air. The temple at Borobudur organizes a tremendous amount of information and presents it as a cogent image for the world of sensory experience and, at the apogee, of a void that we each must accept as the unknowable, something finally beyond representation. An example of how an image becomes a synecdoche for a larger event and finally of a large idea is incorporated in *Death by a Thousand Cuts*. Cheung tells me that with the man on the outcropping in the bottom foreground he is referencing the student who stood before the oncoming tank during the 1989 protests and massacre at Tien-an Men Square. In 26 seconds of video on YouTube, you can watch him facing off, forcing the tank to feint right, then left, trying to go around the student who repeatedly places himself in the path of the tank. This man, his bravery and defiance, is the distillate, our mental image, of the Tien-an Men events. In the larger sense, Cheung sees him as, "the enduring symbol of heroic hope in the face of a power system that will not accept his voice and ultimately silenced it."

Benjamin wrote in an unpublished fragment from 1931, "All Mickey Mouse films are founded on the motif of leaving home in order to learn what fear is." Cheung takes the large issues of our time and of every time, including the issue of our choosing between annihilation and survival, and presents them in a way that shares the longing for transcendence that is embedded in the work of Benjamin. Cheung works like an archaeologist to find images that convey his vision. He culls, cuts and pastes from history, art, film, literature; he uses humor in the midst of visions of the terrible. Cheung has always paralleled his operatic large-scale works with portraits. Recently, the portraits have been of animals. They are trophy heads, dead animals. He uses the stock listings to create the grid as he does in the more complex works, and mixed media including acrylic gel and spray paint. In *Trophy 2*, the head of what must be a very old buck, with a complex rack of antlers, is shown turning his head into profile. From his open mouth a sound is frozen. Drips of paint simultaneously suggest blood and gore and remind us that this is just a painting. The shadows - of the neck and of the lattice of the horns--- press the form into our own space. It is the most poignant of the *Trophy* series. The iridescent, psychedelic palette suggests the hyperhybridization of advanced science that transforms animals into commodities. The technologies of biology are creating monsters.

After such knowledge, what forgiveness?