ALMINE RECH

Gordon Cheung
Arrow to Heaven

Jun 28 — Jul 30, 2022 | Paris, Matignon

Cheung's first solo at Almine Rech takes as its historical marker, the Second Opium War, which lasted from 1856-1860. It consists of a number of new paintings and sculptures which further explores his interest in understanding the development of Modern China and continues his interests in revealing these lesser known histories of China and its invasion by the West. The heaven in the title refers to the city of Tianjian, which is translated as Heaven's boundary or Ford and was the location where the Treaty of Tianjian was signed signalling the end of the Second Opium War.

The show is a study of confluences, a look at an intertwined history between two largely contrasting cultures, religions and philosophies at a historical juncture of huge acceleration on one side, charging headlong into Modernism. Cheung's paintings are a multi-layered account of human activity and history and his interest stems from his upbringing as a British born Chinese and his desire to understand his own roots. His work speaks to a wide range of influences, from romanticists such as Caspar David Friedrich to sculptures influenced by Chinese Window designs. However, Cheung's paintings are anything but polite, the acidic colour palettes (somewhat reminiscent of the swirling pyrotechnical allegories of the Victorian painter John Martin) suggest chemical interactions of a world ravaged by human industry, perhaps even on the brink of anthropogenic chaos or the aftermath of a nuclear war.

The artist creates his signature aesthetic using tools and techniques thoroughly informed by the modern world. He sources photos from image databases and Google Earth which he then prints onto the pink hued listings of the *Financial Times* newspaper. This uncommon technique creates a bedrock where the records of daily economic activity are impregnated, but at the same time interweaving further readings. Layer by layer he builds upon these endless data streams that originate from tales of corporate effectiveness and maps these patterns to tell more complicated histories.

In Cheung's *Augury* series, sand is used in paintings of flowers sculpted from impasto acrylic. Cheung's inclusion of sand as a material is to him "a metaphor of existentialism… all crumbles to sand, from mortals to the grandeur of humanity". Sand as we all know has a long and creative history, as an ingredient in the bricks that created the architecture of vast empires, the forged glass that provided the optics necessary for scientific endeavour, to the production of silicon wafers that are used in today's computer farms. Today sand is the ingredient for a renewed source of conflict and tension as competing superpowers race to secure their share in the global shortage in silicon chips. The flowers that Cheung creates are a hybrid that is reminiscent of Dutch Golden age style still life paintings such as by Rachel Ruysch or Jan van Huysum as opposed to the more typical abstractions of Chinese ink traditions. Like in Ruysch's paintings they can be understood as part of the *vanitas* tradition in which viewers are reminded that all living things, perhaps even empires in this case, will eventually wither and die.

Arrow to Heaven and *Gardens of Perfect Brightness* bookend two key moments of the Second Opium War. A war which by all accounts was a continuation of the imperialist temperament of the British, now joined with Western allies such as France, and to some extent Russia and the US. The Anglo-Franco contingent sought to reconsolidate their positions of power in relation to the opium and silver trade. This was, in short, a complex interaction that initially began with China's necessity to trade with the outside world due to its need to procure increasing amounts of silver (for currency production) and lack of need for British products. Eventually, the British, as silver resources declined, saw an opportunity instead in smuggling Indian opium into China, and demanding silver as payment. As the illegal trade continued, millions of addicts were created in China and eventual hostilities ensued. The name *Arrow* referred to in the title of the painting (and the title of Cheung's show) was a suspected opium smuggling boat flying under a British flag. It was seized by Chinese government soldiers, who according to the ship's captain Thomas Kennedy had pulled down its British flag. This supposed slur to the Crown caused events to spiral for a second time and became the trigger the British needed to start a second war with China.

The painting *Gardens of Perfect Brightness* refers to the Old Summer Palace, located in Beijing which was an elaborate network of bridges, gardens and palaces which was looted and burned down by the Anglo-Franco retaliation to the killings of 19 of its delegation members. Its unusual hybrid Chinese and European architecture now exists only as a ruin, serving as a symbol for the destruction in the cultural relationships forged between differing nations. It was a senseless act and the ruins remain to this day. The looted treasures now belong to many museums worldwide. They are like thousands of shards, symbolising the fragments of a Qing empire shattered by war.

Shards are suggestive of violent traumas. The subject of an empire splintered by rebellions is explored in the work *Two Heaven's Collide,* which depicts the roots of the downfall of the Qing Empire sown during the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864). This was a civil war between the Manchu led Qing dynasty and the rebellious Hakka led Taiping Heavenly Kingdom which claimed the lives of between 20 and 30 million people. Cheung's painting shows the Qing empire dissolving into a series of fractured maps which represent the rebellions that led to its downfall. Its leader Hong Xiuquan through a delirious vision, believed that he was the brother of Jesus Christ and that the Christian god had told him to purge the world of demons (in this case the ruling Manchus.) In this event, one can view the parallels of the desire to completely purge a political and social system as a struggle resonant with proto-communist values.

In Cheung's work, we can visualise overlapping fragments of history and collective identities incised with the aesthetics of lines – trade routes, the fuzzy delineated shapes on a map, the clauses signed on a treaty or even perhaps the lines from the bible. As physical ports now morph into "nodes", and corporates make as much money as a poorer nations annual GDP, these borders and circumscriptions become increasingly porous. It is in this dematerialising space, Cheung asks "If there is a God in the techno-sublime, where the information landscape overwhelms then what shape might God take form?"

— Sunny Cheung, Curator of M+, Museum of visual culture in Hong Kong