

Gordon Cheung: The Sleeper Awakes

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How could one be in this world without feeling dismayed by it? Even if one paints flowers and gingerbread

—Gerhard Richter

One of the most overlooked literary works in science fiction is H.G. Wells' *The Sleeper Awakes* (1910). A reason for this oversight may have to do with it being written in the wake of Wells' most famous piece of prose, *War of the Worlds* (1897). The latter concerns an attack on Earth by invading Martians and is considered part of a genre called Invasion Literature. Much has been written about this story in how it metaphorically mirrors the historical and political context of its time, including Britain's imperial rule over India, present day Pakistan, Bangladesh, parts of Burma, as well as parts of Western Africa. In *The Sleeper Awakes*, Martians invade the coast of England, and to some scholars, the extraterrestrial onslaught is symbolic of the non-White, colonized subject returning to the land of the Empire. This would not be an altogether implausible reading of the story, for Wells was a socialist and had disdain for the Throne and was highly critical of Britain's imperial expansion into non-European lands.

Most science fiction, then, is not only about storytelling and imagining the impossible possible: travelling to other planets, discovering and communicating with other life forms whether they are hostile or benign or inferior or superior to human intelligence, as well as the possibility of multi-dimensional existence, for example. Memorable works of science fiction, whether they are in literature or cinema, address political questions concurrent with their milieu or often grapple with lofty ideas including philosophical problems such as the nature of mind, the body, free will and so forth. *The Sleeper Awakes* also seems to convey elements of the West's tumultuous economic and political history during the early twentieth-century, and was strangely written with an ostensible oracular purview of what our collective future would hold for humanity. Topical phenomena that this visionary tale alludes to include the rise of financial cartels and the exportation of the banking industry to international markets, rapid technological advancement especially in the development of modern weaponry, Freud's discovery of the unconscious, and other aspects within the social, political and cultural arena of an ascendant European modernity. The downside, in

regards to the West's economic, Nietzsche-like "will to power," would soon manifest some years later in the U.S. with "The Great Depression" and the U.K.'s "Great Slump."

The plot of *The Sleeper Awakes* revolves around a man named Graham who falls into a catatonic sleep in London in 1897 and awakes 203 years later. While he is sleeping he becomes wealthy through compound interest in his bank account that has accrued for over two centuries. Yet those who had managed his money are more than just surprised by Graham waking up. In fact, these so-called financial guardians or trustees have used his wealth to finance a governmental world order. Upon hearing news that "the sleeper awoke," a general unease and paranoia haunts the body politic; for Graham's two centuries old slumber created mystique and aura around his phantasmagoric existence, a condition so otherworldly that there was a kind of specter of mystery as to the man who had fallen into such a deep, abyss of sleep

In the exhibition *The Sleeper Awakes*, Gordon Cheung uses Wells' tale as narrative touchstone to address conditions of contemporary globalization but in a multilayered fashion. Cheung's artistic interpretation is not the equivalent to a graphic novel that visually parallels plot, character, etc as found in Wells' story. Nor are the works in the exhibition inspired by the famed, albeit under appreciated science fiction masterpiece. A few of the works in the exhibition have been presented in other contexts, but within this exhibition thematic they are absorbent of Wells' story all the while updating it by situating it within a contemporary backdrop of global disasters: financial fiascos including multinational corporate collapse, political hijacking of democracy by special interest groups, an exponentially accelerating technology and so forth. But what may even be more captivating that reveals much about Cheung's artistic intelligence, is that it is not only the content of the artworks that are engaging Wells' myriad narrative strands, but the formal strategies that constitute the works as well. It is very difficult for a painter to treat technique and materiality as signified rather than only signifier. In other words, the meaning of a painting or its signified is created through color, composition etc and these artistic elements are aggregates of the signifier; that is, these things congeal in the work to convey meaning

and are not the meaning itself. It is very much a challenge and rare for an artist, and even more so for a painter, to conflate these two together. A few examples may suffice here in order to understand the formal and conceptual complexities of Cheung's work.

Andy Warhol's silkscreen style was more than brilliant aesthetic choice and critical displacement of Jackson Pollock's drip technique, since Warhol placed his canvases horizontally to the floor in order to make them. Warhol's quotidian iconography including Campbell's soup cans and celebrities were conceptually charged via the flatness of his silk screen technique. This *modus operandi* underscores the painting's surface, which is a formally ingenious way to highlight the artifice of his subject matter. Or, take for instance the painter Jorge Tacla, who mixes marble powder into his pigments not only for aesthetic reasons that gives his paint more density, but when he uses this viscous color to depict a church that is also constituted from marble, there is a semiotic connection between the mark's meaning and what makes the mark. There is also Cildo Meireles, a conceptual artist whose sculpture titled *Money Tree* (1969) consists of rubber bands wrapped around money. The rubber bands are a formal, sculptural device, but they also act as part of the meaning of the work in addressing rubber as commodity which is made more complicated via the actual currency that it wraps; for the value of money, like rubber commodities, is contingent on the rise and ebb of international markets. In other words, these artists use matter linguistically rather than as elements of what they are narrating visually. In regard to Cheung's deft formalism and his artistic articulation of *The Sleeper Awakes*, the trustees of Graham's income have, through lobbying and other modes of political manipulation, set up a government in which their interests and those of the selected few eclipse the needs of the general population.

Mega-wealth and its corrupting influence on the machinations of the political are alluded to in Cheung's riveting 10 portrait piece titled *Top Ten Billionaires, 2008* (2009). The portraits include, respectively, the richest men on the planet during the year stated in the works title: Bill Gates, William Buffet, Carlos Slim Helu, Lawrence Ellison, Ingvar Kamrad, Karl Albrecht, Mukesh Ambani, Lakshmi Mittal, Theo Albrecht,

and Amancio Ortega. Not only is the combined wealth by these 10 men staggering, but the network of multinational corporations across the globe makes the financial power vested in these individuals, and the merciless effort to sustain them, borderline conspiratorial. Cheung's artistic brilliance manifests in playing off *The Sleeper Awakes* and *Top Ten Billionaires, 2008* via his use of stock listings as foundation for his portraits. The stock listings are an index of contemporary global economic trading. But the poetics of this seemingly simple formal trope is that though the stock listings may be a register of a particular commodity's worth in a specific moment in time, because it is now an element of an artwork that fluctuates within an art market, it becomes conceptually active. In a kind of inverse of the Duchampian readymade, Cheung's readymade stock listings refer back somewhat to their original function. This Duchampian inversion is also a move made by the above mentioned Meireles in his *Coca-Cola Project: Insertions into Ideological Circuits (1970)*. This work consists of empty Coca-Cola bottles that are returned back for recycling to be refilled with Coca Cola and then sent back out to commercial circulation. And to a lesser or greater degree, is what Cheung succeeds with his stock listings in being part of artworks that circulate within the art market and larger systems of finance. The latter scenario becomes even more apparent if a collector was to buy *Top Ten Billionaires, 2008*, solely as an investment.

Gordon Cheung's candid portraits, in which some are in profile while others are frontal, are also derived from imagery that is not officially released to the media by the billionaires' public relations machinery. What they reveal are imagery of powerful individuals who have been demystified; they are a kind of anti-icon in the way that Cheung has rendered them in an unguarded, ostensible offhandedness. But yet at the same time, there is still a sense of reification imbued in them. All the works are of the same size and share a similar palette, though Cheung's highly recognizable trademark of dazzling explosive color achieved through his masterful use of gels and mixed media create a kaleidoscope of bleeding and coagulating polychromatic surfaces. There is, however, plentiful nuance in these works amidst their explosive spectra: for example, a blinding white light that emanates from on top of the heads of the portraits appear as if its source is from above, if not outside, of the picture plane. The effect is not unlike an aura or even a halo. While both of these words are somewhat synonymous, the aura, according to the Frankfurt School critic Walter Benjamin, is what imbues an artwork with the patina of

history that differentiates it from any another mundane object. The halo, of course, is the antithesis to the secularity of the capitalist ethos and the business empires created in the fields of computers, property and causality insurance, telecommunications, steel production, investment banking and so forth. In alignment with the global nature of the *Top Ten Billionaires, 2008* and the shadow government funded by Graham's wealth, then, are two works whose animal iconography historically and culturally rubs up against each other in an archetypal duel: the Minotaur and the dragon

Both of these mythological creatures reflect polarities in respectively representing the West and the East. They are two cosmic creatures that are symbolically engaged in the contemporary geopolitical rivalry between Europe, the U.S., and Asia. The Minotaur is a particular animal that is a combination of the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic.

Its origins are in Greek mythology and it is a creature with the head of a bull on the body of a man or, as described by Ovid, "part man and part bull." He inhabited the center of a labyrinth that was designed as a maze, and this creature appears in other contexts not only in Greece, but is even referred to in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. It was also appropriated by Sigmund Freud as a metaphor of the unconscious were it symbolized the labyrinth, while the Minotaur became the buried personification of repressed fear, desire, and unresolved conflict. The Asian dragon has many connotations as well, unlike the European dragon. It is the most auspicious sign in Chinese astrology, but has been characterized in the West as a symbolizing China. Cheung's use of animals in *The Sleeper Awakes* is not limited to the Minotaur or the dragon, however, but there also other creatures that constitute what can be called his Trophy series.

The works that make up this series include images of bears, rams, and deer. In the West, it is not uncommon to go hunting for such animals and then have them mounted on walls as display. Yet this bestiary to masculinity can also highlight within the exhibition as commodities, the exploitation of natural resources, and even the possibility that these animals may die out. Extinction is one subtext of Wells' *The Sleeper Awakes*, for one of the odd realities that Graham has awoken to is a London that is completely altered from 203 years earlier. This wasteland of a new, futuristic London is, if you will, also aptly alluded to in the exhibition in a series of sculptural works titled *Conquerors (2009)*.

Conquerors are made from mirrors, florescent

lights and cast animal skulls and human spines that bespeak of environmental cataclysm from rampant technology left unchecked. Cheung's title, moreover, like other works that are left in a state of poetic ambiguity, can be reflexive in that they may refer both to the zoomorphic skulls as conquerors themselves, or are they the evidence of a wrath inflicted on them by humans? H.G. Wells' story is ultimately dystopian, and these works cathartically convey this through their memento mori quality as well as alluding to an urn or some other kind of futuristic mortuary repository. Or, are these the extraterrestrial equivalents to the pictures of animals as trophies? The apocalyptic dimension of these works, which is a Wells' trope par excellence in both *War of the Worlds* and *The Sleeper Awakes*, is very much embodied in four video animations titled *The Four Riders (2009)*.

The *Four Riders* are analogues to the apocalyptic Four Horsemen envisioned by the Apostle John in the Book of Revelation. Like the Biblical horsemen who are divine harbingers of pestilence, death and destruction on earth's final days, The *Four Riders* hint to this as well: each animation consists of a bull-riding cowboy endlessly riding in a circle. The beauty of this work resides in Gordon Cheung's vision of a kind of cosmic phantom endlessly looping like the dance of Shiva the Destroyer, who concomitantly creates and destroys, and is the source of both life and death. Three of the animations have a mountain range distant in the background. It's difficult to ascertain whether the mountain ranges are the Himalayas, The Rockies or even the Andes. What the animations do formally share is a kind of smoky haze that permeates the middle ground in which the bull-riding cowboy circumambulates for all eternity. Is this fog-like, apparition akin to psychic ether or cosmic ectoplasm, or simply modern pestilence in the form of chemical warfare?

As one is mesmerized by the haunting allure of these animations, what is faintly heard in their audio track is *The End by the Doors*; an iconic song that also appears in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. Like "For whom the bells toll," which is the philosopher John Donne's metaphor for the Grim Reaper, Gordon Cheung's use of *The End* and his exhibition is his trumpet call to us; but he does not signal us for the hour of our death, but rather to awake up from our sleep and greet the new dawn.