



elevén elevén | issue no. 15

CCA  
COLLEGE OF THE ARTS

elevén elevén

\$10





**HOWIE TSUI**  
*Storm God*

CHINESE PAINT PIGMENTS AND ACRYLIC ON MULBERRY PAPER, 25" X 18.5", 2008  
*Courtesy of Le Gallery*



**HOWIE TSUI**  
*Silver Tree*

CHINESE PAINT PIGMENTS AND ACRYLIC ON MULBERRY PAPER, 25" X 18.5", 2008  
*Courtesy of Le Gallery*

## ON THE COVER: AN INTERVIEW WITH HOWIE TSUI

Erica Gomez and Vanessa Kauffman

**W**hen did you begin your career as an artist? Can you tell us about your education, both in and outside of the classroom?

I guess my career officially started after art school in 2003. During that early period, I was working part-time as a gallery attendant and was learning about institutionally geared art practices, while producing many small paintings, mainly for commercial purposes.

I have always been interested in drawing and communicating with images ever since I could remember, and knew pretty early on that it was my life's calling. I did have to pull a bait-and-switch with my folks with regards to my undergraduate intentions – using architecture as the bait.

I graduated with a BFA degree from the University of Waterloo, Ontario, which I would say, is known mostly for its painting program. My favorite professor there, Art Green, was a member of the *Hairy Who*, a Chicago Imagist collective known for grotesquerie, surrealism and a complete disassociation with the NYC scene in the 60s. I'd like to believe I've carried this ethos of irreverently working outside of the dominant 'sexy' aesthetic. In terms of outside the classroom, aside from individually directed learning, I've recently completed a scroll mounting apprenticeship with a master Chinese framer here in Vancouver's vanishing Chinatown. I've been making an effort to learn traditional techniques that are quickly falling out of favour in our hi-tech age.

*It looks like you have lived in many countries and exhibit work in both Canada and the US. How has your international upbringing influenced your artistic practice? Do you notice much of a difference in how your work is received?*

I think my divergent life experiences provide me

with a more radiant perspective of the world and our place in it. Given that much of these re-locations happened during my formative years, I think the imprint of these contrasting experiences is actually embedded deeper within my psyche than something that is consciously and painstakingly incorporated into my practice. Having been an interloper in so many varied contexts has probably spurred my interest in marginalized viewpoints/narratives/histories, and the desire to make formally accessible works that do not carry with it barriers dictated by class and education. The most meaningful responses to my work tend to come from the viewers' hearts and not their brains.

*The series Horror Fables is rich in visual imagery, pulling inspiration from a variety of sources. Can you tell us how the series first began?*

I was just transitioning out of a series called *Of Manga & Mongrels*, which was concerned with unconsciously teasing out grotesque portraits overtop collages from Hokusai and shunga prints. Those for me were "looking" exercises and forced me to use existing elements from historical works as a graphic trampoline for more unpredictable figures. As this body of work came to a close, I wanted to work in a larger scale that was visually chaotic and utilized the hypernarrative form. Still interested in examining traditional East Asian forms and imagery, I developed an interest in the scroll format, and wanted to push the imagery deeper into the realms of horror. Conceptually, I was thinking a lot about the prevalence of fear in popular culture, how it's manifested, and its close relationship with creativity/the imagination. As a result, I decided to construct these

dense narrative worlds inhabited by some of the most visually arresting imagery from ancient Asian ghost tales, Buddhist hell scrolls, bestiaries, and Hong Kong vampire films to satirize the disturbing climate of fear in our social landscape. I included supernatural anecdotes from my family as well as a way to incorporate an element of the 'real' into this surreal milieu.

*Memory plays an interesting role when legends and fables are passed down from one generation to the next. Despite any changes that may occur with each retelling, there remain specific details that continue to captivate each new generation. Can you tell us what role memory plays in Horror Fables?*

The initial idea for the project was inspired by nostalgic memories of fearful fabrications my mother would conjure up to keep me in line. Re-visiting them now, they were absurd and fantastical, but during those impressionable years, fearful images and fantastic entities would haunt my psyche and heighten my sensitivity to possible threat and danger. I inhabited a landscape of imagined paranoia. Looking back now, I am curious about these nascent applications of fear by my mother as a method of control, its role in developing my imagination, and its relationship to contemporary applications of fear. With *Horror Fables*, I wanted to emphasize the disjunction between how fear is administered in folklore to encourage morality versus its deployment in modern society, where a pervasive climate of terror is used to further partisan political and economic interests.

*Many of your works invite images of ghosts or other supernatural beings into your narratives. Do you interpret these spectral creatures as guardians or protectors, or are they meant to be cautionary tales for those still walking on earth?*

They serve myriad roles, from representing the most sinister to the most vulnerable aspects of human nature. More importantly, applying characteristics of the abject, grotesque or the 'other' is a way of exaggerating/critiquing the constructed perception of marginalized

groups in mainstream culture.

*The long, paneled format of your work is so easily read as a scrolling story or a text. At any point in your making do your series or individual compositions manifest themselves into actual textual experiments similar to prose or poetry?*

Although I've long avoided using text in my work, many of the components in the works were derived from either text, oral history, or moving imagery based on screenplays. My sketchbook is littered with compressed research notes. If one could see the text behind the images, the works would very much look like a form of collaborative prose/poetry in scroll form.

*Can you give us an inventory of your top-five favorite items in your studio?*

*Musketball!* – my re-themed pinball machine from a recent project that illustrates the uniquely destructive path that musket balls would take upon entering the human torso.

*Hugo* – studio cat. Super chill, low-maintenance, purry lap warmer who likes it rough.

*Kalimba w/pickups* run through effects pedals – experimental sound jams clear the head and refresh the eyes.

*Laptop* – This Life, Radiolab, Splendid Table, and streaming NBA games!

*Bonsai plants* – my recent infatuation, high-detailed, durational, and attentive art form also helps with re-booting eyes and mind.

*Erica Gomez and Vanessa Kauffman are graduate students in the Visual and Critical Studies program at CCA.*