

Black Magic

Howie Tsui's latest artistic foray takes him on a surreal journey into a sometimes menacing underworld populated by ghosts and demons

BY CINDY DEACHMAN

There's an old Japanese story about a widowed and decrepit samurai whose name was Ogiwara. One evening there came a rap upon his door. In truth, Ogiwara wasn't certain he had heard right — it had been a long while since he had received any visitors. Then came the firm jangle of the bell. Wrenching himself from the sofa and reluctantly switching off Ainori, Ogiwara shuffled to unbolt the front door. Who should be there but a beautiful and, he imagined, charming young woman! Dressed in a flaming red kimono of crepe silk decorated with 25 turtles couched in silver and gold, she introduced herself as Otsuyu. Ogiwara invited her inside. A few cups of sake and soon in fine fettle, the two made mad love on the tatami in the living room. By morning, Otsuyu had vanished, but every evening thereafter, she returned for more sweet satisfaction.

Next door, meanwhile, the nosy neighbour got to wondering why Ogiwara was up till all hours, then sleeping away the livelong day.

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The Next Garde



Fear factor: Recent paintings, such as *Storm God Orchestra* (left) and *Judgment at River Sanzu* (right), are a far cry from the cutesy-pop, manga-inspired paintings Tsui was known for just two years ago

As soon as night fell, through a small hole in the wall of the old man's house, he set to spying. In frightful shock, he watched Ogiwara's frenzy of passion — with a skeleton! A skeleton with ragged strips of hanging flesh, her jet-black hair all matted with cobwebs. Terrified, Ogiwara's neighbour bolted, shrieking.

IN JAPAN, THIS TYPE of ghostly narrative is the stuff of many stories, all rife with odd characters. Macabre? Disgusting? Oftentimes titillating? Yes, yes, and yes. For this is the world of the unearthly, of preternatural beings, of barely recognizable creatures. Here, everything is off-kilter. A shiver of dread passes strangely through your bones. Another world.

That world is just a sideways step from the world of Howie Tsui. Tsui is a painter. Though his is not exactly a household name, for several years now, the arts crowd in Ottawa has been keenly following Tsui's rising star. Incredibly, after a mere seven years of exhibiting — not only in his hometown at Gallery 101 and Wurm Gallery but also at galleries in Toronto, Vancouver, San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, Mexico City, and Sydney — Tsui's career has catapulted. Little wonder, then, that when Sandra Dyck, curator at Carleton University Art Gallery, was combing Ottawa's streets in search of local art to exhibit, she received an earful of "Howie, Howie, Howie!" (Tsui's *Horror Fables* will be showing at Carleton University Art Gallery from April 28 to June 15.)

IT'S DIFFICULT TO IMAGINE that just two years ago, Tsui was painting in a flat, illustrative style. Emily Falvey, a former curator at the Ottawa Art Gallery, describes his work at the time as "colouring book meets street art." Tsui's dreamy paintings, influenced by manga, the Japanese cartoons now so popular with cartoon kids doing cartoon-kid things such as riding tricycles or carrying home pet goldfish in bags of water. "My cutesy-pop era," Tsui now calls the work, as if he's already some avuncular sage. (He's 31.)

His figures floated in a never-never land, teasing viewers with memories from his childhood. (Born in Hong Kong, Tsui moved with his family to Thunder Bay at a young age.) Always, from one painting to the next, his trademark humour was easy to read — in one, for instance, a group of characters sport faces made up like the rock band Kiss.

Now that he has finished with that style, Tsui can afford to see it distantly, critically. He sees the trendiness of manga painting. "All the younger kids are doing it. And I got kinda bored," he admits. Yet that style remains in demand. According to Dyck, "Howie could have had a successful career doing the old work." And even late last year, some of his regular clients were still asking Tsui to produce commissions in his older, more accessible style.

But despite commercial demands and the pull of easy fame, Tsui says he craved new motivation. He was "sick of the sac-

charine." And so he set out for unknown territory. Oddly, for an artist steeped in the modern age, Tsui began rummaging around in history, studying some of the long-held traditions of Asian art. He bought himself some large thick sheets of mulberry paper and long-handled Chinese ink brushes. He found a box of Chinese pigments, the colours deep and saturated. Now Tsui is discovering new ways to paint, ways to draw lines, ways to render shading, even new brush strokes. He's using earthy washes whose colours are muted but still rich. And now he's creating backgrounds for his figures — hills, birches, and apartment buildings. "I had to force myself to do landscapes," Tsui says of the process. He's creating a context in which his characters can live. (If, indeed, you can call this living.)

Looking at Tsui's new paintings, you feel as if you're in a dream. But the characters are rarely children anymore. Instead, the canvas is populated with ghosts and kings, vampires and mutants. In one painting, dead souls are being washed down the river toward hell — Japanese Buddhist hell. The judge, the scowling Lord Enma, sits at his desk hunched over the register of all the wrongs each person has done in his life. (After reading it to you, he'll tear out your tongue so that there's no whisper of complaint.) There's also the green-faced, bug-eyed wraith returned to haunt her shogun husband — the one who had killed her and then nailed her to a door. In another painting stands the apartment building where Tsui's grandfather lived, built over a mass grave from the Second World War.

Even through this aura of surreal menace, you recognize Tsui's wonderful comic relief. Here a horned demon maniacally beats his drums, there a frog races down a hill, bearing high his kidnapped princess. (Or is she a courtesan? You're free to make up your own stories.) All figures are caricatures, drawn with a light hand like those archetypes of the 1800s you see in paintings by Hokusai, Japan's most famous artist. Tsui also pays homage to the 200-year-old *shunga*, Japanese erotic art. Once you get past the sex, you see that these characters are quite hilarious. (Does the drooling tongue of a monster count?)

This is Tsui improvising on past stories — his own family histories are woven through those 19th-century ones from China and Japan. Great primeval legends come shimmering through. The ghosts — familial, cultural, mythical — live on, as do our fears. This other world is ours too. **END**