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VISUAL ART

THESE UNCANNY TABLEAUX ARE OPERATICALLY EPIC IN SCOPE, TEEMING WITH SCENES OF BLOOD AND GUTS, TERROR AND TRAGEDY.



TELLING TALES: HOWIE TSUI'S STORIED WORLDS

REVIEW BY ZOË CHAN

With a trajectory that reads like a poster boy for today's global citizen, the Ottawa-based artist Howie Tsui was born in Hong Kong, before moving to Nigeria and then Canada. Unsurprisingly, his art practice is as cosmopolitan in its sources of inspiration as his background, resulting in a playful yet critical intermeshing of diverse aesthetics and mediums. His early career started out heavily informed by North American youth scenes and styles—band posters, graffiti, and street art, as well as aspects of

Japanese visual culture—erotica, manga, and anime. More recent work, though still marked by these early pop culture influences, draws heavily from older artistic traditions ranging from the visual iconography of Buddhist hell scrolls to Ming Dynasty figure and landscape painting. Through the lens of his fascination with the supernatural and the surreal, Tsui creates extravagantly strange worlds that seamlessly meld fact and fiction. His artworks are testament not only to his far-reaching imagination and curiosity, but also his personal interest in and engagement with questions surrounding diasporic experience and identity.

Tsui's hybridized approach to art-making is more than manifest in *Horror Fables* which evokes ghost stories, family anecdotes, bestiaries,

and vampire films. This series, previously presented at the Carleton University Art Gallery and the MAI (Montréal, arts interculturels), will head to Vancouver's Centre A this summer. Employing formal techniques borrowed from Ming Dynasty scroll painting, Tsui created drawings rendered in ink, paint, and pigment on rectangles of delicate mulberry paper. While his early works may have had a more cartoon-like sensibility with a kid's rainbow palette, these are delicately drawn with the muted though no less rich colours of century-old works.

Horror Fables is rife with chaotic scenarios situated in a mythical place where mortals and monsters intermingle. A ship afloat on a sea swarming with skeletons and sea creatures. A

figure bent over a stream finding his reflection to be a hideous monster. A gruesome creature stirs a boiling pot writhing with creatures within. A man hangs from a tree by a rope around his neck, tongue lolling, while above him a naked woman clings in desperation to a branch using both her teeth and limbs. These uncanny tableaux are operatically epic in scope, teeming with scenes of blood and guts, terror and tragedy. Tsui ups the ante by providing them with an eerie soundtrack made up of remixed sounds culled from Hong Kong horror movies. Moreover, he presents these works on paper alongside spectral "portraits" rendered directly on to gallery walls using the residue traces of smoke from matches. Ghostly visages—recalling Edvard Munch's iconic *The*



Scream—surface from the darkly lit walls; only the burned-out matches left scattered on the floor remind us of their material source.

While stimulating the viewer's sense of sight and sound within the somewhat sinister atmosphere evoked by *Horror Fables*, Tsui explores horror through its various facets: as recurring nightmares concocted by our subconscious; as prominent themes in film and folktales; as cautionary tales told to instill good behavior; as generation-old stories bonding families; as strategies to demonize the "Other" within conservative rhetoric; as the traumatically violent events that happen to us or are witnessed on the news; as the tragedies that make up our collective histories, be they natural or man-made, past or present. Yet, as dark as this all sounds, Tsui's works feel imbued with the enjoyment he finds in mastering old painting techniques and translating these tangled-up stories onto paper.

Tsui brings narrativity to the fore once again in what promises to be his most am-

bitious work yet, *Celestials of Salt Water City*. Commissioned by Centre A, this evening-long performative event will be presented in Vancouver's recently refurbished Yue Shan courtyard in Chinatown in conjunction with his *Horror Fables* exhibition. It will draw from stories collected by Tsui during interviews conducted with senior citizens from Vancouver's Strathcona Community Centre as well as well-known members of the local Chinese community. Here, Tsui revisits the *utsushi-e*, a once popular Japanese "multi-media" form of entertainment that harks back to an era before the term "multi-media" even existed. Before its demise with the arrival of the moving picture industry, *utsushi-e* transformed the European nineteenth-century phantasmographical tradition of magic lantern projections. Japanese artists refashioned these projectors in wood rather than metal, allowing for heightened mobility as they were no longer too hot to carry. This highly sophisticated theatrical tradition, involving the manipulation and pro-

jection of several of these projectors or *furo* at once, was usually accompanied by live music and narration by actors. When I spoke with Tsui this spring, he had built seven *furo* according to templates found on the Internet, and was in the process of painting dozens of slides. With the aid of a team of *furo* operators, he will recast the real-life stories of Chinese immigrants as tales with a supernatural bent. In spinning true accounts with fantastic details, he hopes to imbue the stories of strife and hardship that often marked early Chinese experience in Canada with a note of levity. In this way, he reclaims the term *celestial*: if it was once used as a derogatory term for Chinese immigrants in North America, Tsui whimsically invokes instead its original meaning which came from the notion of China as Celestial Empire, one whose citizens lived and worked under heavenly rule.

With these multi-layered works, Howie Tsui positions himself as a highly skilled artist and committed storyteller. Although there

is undoubtedly a nostalgic element present in his pastiche of bygone media and folktales, his work affirms and amplifies the power of the narrative—its immediacy and potential to make personal and collective histories come alive. In discussing the age-old tradition of story-telling, Michel Foucault writes that "the motivation, as well as the theme and the pretext of Arabian narratives—such as *The Thousand and One Nights*—was also the eluding of death..."¹ In this light, without the stories we tell ourselves and others, and without the essentially *creative* forces that drive the telling of these stories, life would be akin to death. Tsui brings this sense of urgency, innovation, and inspiration to his artworks—where stories are retold and reimagined within the context of other stories, resulting in an almost overwhelmingly complex polyvocal saga.

¹ Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" (1969) in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), 102.