Evoking Past into Present: The Spectral Imagination of Howie Tsui

Interview by Joni Low

Howie Tsui, installation view of Horror Fables at Centre A. Photo: Mathieu Bichard. Courtesy of the artist and Centre A, Vancouver.

Over the past decade, Howie Tsui has produced a fascinating body of work, combining an array of disparate cultural and art-historical references that destabilize the experience of viewing in order to create unexpected connections between signifiers and narratives. His otherworldly compositions often draw eerie parallels with aspects of human nature and contemporary society. Fragments of stories may continually be present—in fantasies, myths, ghost stories, and tales of survival and hardship. Tsui demonstrates that although history may haunt us, it can also sometimes be played with, displaced, and recombined to activate new interpretations and understandings of past and present.

Howie Tsui's work resides in the collections of the Canada Council for the Arts Art Bank, City of Ottawa and Centre d'exposition de Baie-Saint-Paul, and has been shown in North America, Europe, Australia, and Mexico. In 2005 he was awarded the Joseph S. Stauffer Prize from the Canada Council for the Arts for most outstanding young visual artist. In 2012 his work will be featured in Phantoms of Asia, *a group exhibition on Asian cosmology and spirituality at the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco.*

In June 2011, Tsui produced a new installation work and performance titled Celestials of Salt Water City, *as part of his exhibition at Centre A in Vancouver, Canada. Adopting the form of* utshushi-e*—an eighteenth century pre-cinematic storytelling tradition in Japan that combines magic lanterns, slide projections, and music—Tsui presented stories gathered from residents of Vancouver's Chinatown community, transforming familiar narratives of struggle and discrimination into fantastic, otherworldly fables.*

Shortly after his performance, Howie Tsui and I sat down on the rooftop of the artist-run centre Western Front to reflect on recent works, his artistic process, and the stories interspersed throughout his art.

Joni Low: Let's begin by talking a bit about your body of work, *Horror Fables* (2008–10), which was on view at Centre A in 2011. There is an incredible depth and richness within these works, both visual and historical—a summation of a decade or so of your own research that is manifested in these fantastic collisions of ancient and modern Asian ghost stories, with their grotesque, hybrid forms and contemporary cultural references from Japanese manga to Hong Kong pop culture. Could you talk a bit about your methodology and how this research manifests itself?

Howie Tsui: It was through various popular mediums. First, I was reading books, usually compendiums of Japanese and Chinese ghost tales that are translated into English. They are pretty easy to digest because a lot of the tales are quite short. So it's not as involved as plowing through a big novel—each story is around five pages. In addition to these books, I watched movies such as the 1960s Japanese horror films in the Criterion collection. One movie, *Kwaidan* (1964, Dir. Masaki Kobayashi), is adapted from traditional Japanese ghost stories; another movie, called *Jigoku* (1960, Dir. Nubuo Nakagawa), is about Buddhist hell.

I also embedded family ghost stories into some of the pieces that came from questions I asked of my relatives. And then there are more memory-based influences, in which I took images that traumatized me as a child, images from 1980s Hong Kong pop culture, and inserted them into my work. *Yeung Ga Jeung* (Yang's Saga) was a six-episode television show about gods coming down onto earth and then meddling about in the politics of the state. There are some graphic scenes in it; it was pretty shocking to see this as a youngster.

Joni Low: How old were you when you saw this?

Howie Tsui: I was probably around seven. Tony Leung is one of the actors—he played the role of a reincarnated Daoist deity (Duke of Thunder), and near the end of the series, the villians finally catch him. They tied him up to a wooden post on the beach by the sea, with the tide slowly rising. They try to kill him with arrows, but he won't die because he is a reincarnated deity. The only way they are able to kill him is by slitting his forehead open and peeling the skin down over his face. This is on nine o'clock, evening NBC-

Howie Tsui, *Forest Romp* (detail), 2009, Chinese pigments, ink, and acrylic on mulberry paper, 91.4 x 317.5 cm. Photo: Stephen Fenn. Courtesy of the artist.

Howie Tsui, *Forest Romp* (detail), 2009, Chinese pigments, ink, and acrylic on mulberry paper, 91.4 x 317.5 cm. Photo: Stephen Fenn. Courtesy of the artist.

type prime-time TV in Hong Kong! And it's Tony Leung, too. Everyone loves Tony; no one wants to see him die like that.

Joni Low: That image has appeared in your work.

Howie Tsui: That's in *Forest Romp* (2009). And there's an image near that figure in *Forest Romp*, which is also from that television series with someone being dragged by a horse.

Joni Low: I'm curious about your process as the results of your research often seem to be non-linear, irrational, and create a destabilizing encounter for the viewer. Can you describe your experience of creating the scroll *Dead Sea* (2009), for instance? How did all the different cultural references come together?

Howie Tsui: I take all the notes from my research and then organize them in some way based on, say, setting and location, or how various images could be woven together to create hyper-narratives. For *Dead Sea* and *Forest Romp*, I used the natural environment as a guide, or a way to frame and figure out which content to put in which piece. *Dead Sea* was based on water stories. Usually I have a couple of anchor stories within each of the pieces that are more in-depth/involved, combined with anecdotal tidbits, images, and vignettes that form other components. *Hoichi the Earless* was the anchor story for *Dead Sea*, which is about a blind *biwa* player who was enticed to play music for a group of ghosts. To protect him, a priest painted his body with characters from the *Heart Sutra*, which rendered his body invisible. When the lead samurai ghost summoned Hoichi again, all he could see were Hoichi's ears, which the ghost ripped off in anger. In *Dead Sea*, the images illustrating this story ascend from the foreground of one of the panels.

Alongside these are other images—including these Heike crabs—that relate to a story about two warring Japanese clans. One clan was completely annihilated, and the myth follows that all the souls of the dead clansmen

Howie Tsui, *Dead Sea*, 2009, Chinese pigments, ink, and acrylic on mulberry paper, 91.4 x 317.5 cm. Photo: Stephen Fenn. Courtesy of the artist.

inhabited the crabs; to this day, when you go to this beach in Japan and see the crabs, their shells look like they have faces. I googled Heike crabs to see the photos. So, I usually have these more concrete elements to anchor the piece, and then I leave it open-ended, with areas where I try to merge more intentional components with subconscious responses.

Joni Low: In researching and keeping all these materials, do fragments of stories and images exist in your mind, like a sort of cognitive database, waiting perhaps months or years before finding an appropriate place in your work?

Howie Tsui: Yes, I think so. Even the images in the *Horror Fables* series were gestating for a while before I wrote a project proposal for what it would actually become. But I knew I wanted to make work that incorporated these images, especially the nostalgic childhood ones. In a way, I created a platform that used traditional ghost stories to satirize fear, while also allowing me to "sneak in" family ghost stories and weird, nostalgic 1980s pop culture, so there is a historic thread—of fear and horror—that runs throughout.

Joni Low: You've talked a bit about how your personal experience and upbringing configures themselves in your art. I understand you've moved around quite a bit, and I have noticed that the theme of migration appears in your work.

Howie Tsui: It's interesting because I don't really think much about how my personal experiences seep into the work. It seems that I've been privileged to be able to view the world from various perspectives, having moved around

quite a bit to places that are drastically different from each other—for example, from Africa to Thunder Bay, Ontario, which is a rather isolated blue-collar town, and then to a bureaucratic, political place like Ottawa. I was born in Hong Kong and lived in Nigeria for five years, and I would go back to Hong Kong for the summers, so my family travelled a lot. When we immigrated to Canada we moved to Thunder Bay, where I basically grew up; we lived there for fifteen years. But I don't think I've addressed the theme of migration explicitly or intentionally in my work. Maybe in this new work, I'm addressing it more. I wouldn't say *Horror Fables* is necessarily about migration. But it does reflect this kind of spectral or radiant perspective that I've acquired through my general life experience.

Joni Low: It certainly makes for an interesting world view. How about your personal experiences with ghost stories—and, specifically, ghosts?

Howie Tsui: Well, obviously, as a kid, you think about bogeymen and imagine there's something scary by the furnace in the basement. Then for a certain "enlightened" period, you totally don't believe in ghosts. I find that I've been going through waves of believing, in and out. Now that I'm researching the topic, I'm not even religious, but since I've been researching things like Buddhism, for example, it seems that through this process, I've quietly developed an awareness of the otherwordly.

Howie Tsui, *Forest Romp* (detail), 2009, Chinese pigments, ink, and acrylic on mulberry paper, 91.4 x 317.5 cm. Photo: Stephen Fenn. Courtesy of the artist.

One time, a couple years ago, while touring in the band *The Acorn*, in the UK, on our way to France, we stayed in this really old hotel. I was lying down and my band mate was sleeping on the other bed. As I was trying to sleep, a light illuminated my eyelids, and I opened my eyes to see this little diamond-shaped light hovering above me. Suddenly, it expanded and created this huge flash of light in the room, then everything went dark, and I just started laughing. My band mate turned around and asked, "Did you just take a photo of me?" And I was like, "No dude, that just *happened*." It was weird because we were on the fourth floor and it could not have been headlights—the only other logical explanation I could muster.

Another time on tour, we were staying at the Senator Hotel in Saskatoon. I woke up naked, and I've never undressed while asleep before. My band mate woke up, and one side of his torso was wet—not with sweat, but as if someone had spilled something on him. But the bed was entirely dry. Someone from another band got locked in the bathroom, even though it

locks from the inside. She thought her sister was on the other side playing a prank, holding the door shut, but there was no one there.

Joni Low: Very strange. In terms of enacting influences, perhaps we can focus on the more performative elements of your practice. I find your solo exhibitions are like immersive installations with performance—your live frescoes, for instance, as well as your project *Celestials of Salt Water City*, which was commissioned for your exhibition at Centre A. Perhaps we can start by talking about the *Spectral Residue* frescoes. What is the relationship between these and, say, effigies, or other spiritual rituals and cultural traditions? What is the significance of burning images onto the gallery walls?

Howie Tsui: Did I ever tell you how these came about? Well, in 2008 I was doing an artist residency in Baie-Saint-Paul, Quebec. It is a one-month residency where artists work in a hockey arena—they divided up the arena, and consigned artists to their own "compartments." Artists had to be there for set times, from noon to five each day, with two days off. The public comes in and sees you at work—so there is this awkward, zoo-like, artist-as-animal kind of feeling of being on display. Many of my colleagues had filled up their spaces in impressive ways, shipping their large-scale paintings from Montreal. I just had a table, and was working on the four small, intricate pieces from the *Horror Fables* scrolls. I started feeling a bit inadequate about not having any physical presence in my space. So I thought, well, I better put something that will appear more substantive. So I hung this large roll of rice paper on the wall with the intention of just playing around with it, making gestural and expressionistic strokes to counter the tight, hyper-detailed work that was going on with the smaller pieces. It became a way for me to stay loose and limber.

On the last weekend of the residency, because curators were coming to visit, my plan was to remove the rice paper and put up the four finished smaller pieces in an effort to make my space look "presentable." I was there late the night before, removing it, and then I realized, oh shit, this is stuck to the wall. I hadn't placed any absorptive material behind the work and over the past two weeks, I had applied layers and layers of different inks onto the paper, so it stuck to the wall, and I was now peeling it off, and it started ripping, and I thought, this drawing is totally destroyed. The paper was shriveled up on the ground, all ripped and crumpled, and then I looked at the wall, which appeared to have all these eerie, faint marks and impressions. It could have just been a result of late night hallucinations but I started seeing what looked like faces, so I began trying to render these faces out of the markings. I found using a brush was too intentional—there was too much presence of the hand, whereas the marks and what I was seeing sort of came out of nowhere, it just kind of emerged. I had matches with me, so I held them close to the wall and started rendering the images using smoke stains, which I had never done before. I just tried it, and the matches produced this rich, saturated ochre colour from the combusted sulfur along with wisps of black smoke stains traveling upwards. It was a happy accident. When something like that happens, it's a kind of golden moment in art-making.

Residency space at Le Symposium international d'art contemporain de Baie Saint-Paul, 2008
Courtesy of the artist and Le Symposium international d'art contemporain de Baie Saint-Paul, Quebec.

My views of this work have broadened quite a bit from my initial reading. It began as a pretty simple process-based interpretation of the supernatural, where the paper resembles a corpse or body, and the transferred imprint becomes the drawing spirit. I normally use just one match at a time when rendering, but during the opening at Centre A, due to the large space, I had multiple matches all going at once, and people were telling me it reminded them of joss sticks, or incense. I had never thought of it that way, but these interpretations added another dimension to the work that I'm still digesting.

Joni Low: For your project, *Celestials of Saltwater City*, a performance combining live narration, music, illustrated transparencies and projections, you bring that same spontaneity and process of discovery to the work. I understand it was based on six stories that you collected from conversations with elders in Vancouver's Chinatown-Strathcona community. Could you talk a bit about your process and about the stories themselves?

Left: Howie Tsui, *Spectral Residue* (detail), 2008, rice paper, acrylic, ink, matches. Courtesy of the artist .

Right: Howie Tsui, *Spectral Residue* (detail), 2008, rice paper, acrylic, ink, matches. Courtesy of the artist.

Howie Tsui: I had gathered a lot of research material and tried to illustrate it on as many slides as I could in the time frame, but I really had to stop at a certain point because I needed to begin assembling and sequencing the slides and rehearsing for the performance.

I started off the performance with slide projections depicting a ladies' mahjong game, which is actually inspired by Wayson Choy's 1995 novel *Jade Peony*. There are always these scenes where his mom goes out and plays mahjong really late at night and hangs out with the ladies. When we first

Howie Tsui, *Spectral Residue* performance at Centre A, 2011, rice paper, acrylic, ink, matches. Photo: Mathieu Bichard. Courtesy of the artist and Centre A, Vancouver.

Howie Tsui, *Celestials of Saltwater City* rehearsals, 2011. Photo: Debra Zhou. Courtesy of the artist and Centre A, Vancouver.

moved to Thunder Bay, all the Chinese restaurateurs would gather together on the weekends and play. Our parents would play mahjong and we'd be wired on sugar, running around at three or four in the morning. *Deen sai ma! Wan do deen ma!* (You're crazy! You're playing crazy!). That's what they would say.

I wanted to begin with this because I have these warm memories about those times. I thought ladies gossiping and telling stories would be a good narrative entry point. And also in reference to terms like *tai hung yun* or "astronaut," the idea of how one's husband comes to Canada and the wives stay in Hong Kong.

Joni Low: And also the inverse, today, when husbands work in China and their families live here.

Howie Tsui: Right. I was also interested in the idea of having first wives, second wives, concubines, and so forth, together. I kind of see this first scene incorporating this idea as well—an unspoken hierarchy amongst the

Howie Tsui, *Celestials of Saltwater City*, Mah Jong scene (digital composite), 2011, *furos* (wooden projectors), Chinese pigments, and ink on transparencies. Courtesy of the artist.

mahjong players, where they might be from the same family. But those ideas are not implied, by any means, in the performance.

The performance is fresh right now, so there will be many more interpretations of these images as they unfold in time. I wanted the story in the performance to follow a sort of timeline, so the next scene kicks off in Hong Kong around the late nineteenth century, during the great migration of workers leaving China for North America in search of gold and to build the railroad. It's a story that a friend told me, handed down from his partner's great-grandfather, about workers boarding a ship off the Hong Kong harbour; they tried to pack as many people on the steamship as they could and it capsized. He could swim so he made it to shore. But he recounted the desperation of the incident. Once the boat sank and everyone was in the water, there were people who couldn't swim who desperately grappled onto those that could. And the swimmers reacted by either rescuing folks or by kicking them away to drown. In this series of projections, you see red silhouttes of people boarding the boat, and then the boat capsizes. The next scene begins with a water horizon line with flickering figures slowly sinking, a swimmer dives down and rescues one person, while above, there are two characters, one kicking the other. I'm interested in the moral dichotomy of that situation.

Howie Tsui, *Celestials of Saltwater City*, capsize scene (digital composite), 2011, *furos* (wooden projectors), Chinese pigments, and ink on transparencies. Courtesy of the artist.

That was followed by a set of eyes, which relates to a saying I recall from some history books, which goes something like this: "They call Vancouver Saltwater City because the water is salty from all the tears of the people that suffered." It's a very Chinese-type of saying, very pathos-laden. The same emotional appeal is used in the story of laundry workers who had a really rough life—they washed people's clothes with their tears. I read a history book about laundry workers in the late 1800s, and it is always described as a very lonely time—their wives are back in China, so they are just doing laundry and working long days, and before the advent of other technologies, such as running water. So they would go down to the creek with a barrel and fill it up with water, wheel it back to the workplace and then boil it.

Joni Low: A lot of hard physical labour.

Howie Tsui: Yes, back breaking and psyche-busting lifestyles. When I interviewed Ken Lum, he was saying that he suspects that the toxic chemicals used for machines and fabrics at a garment factory where his mother worked led to the premature death of several women she worked with; they died of leukemia and were all about the same age. So there's a weird connection to that story.

Joni Low: I seem to remember a scene with a face, with a grinning red mouth, with these floating images of chicken feet, *dan tart* (egg tart)—what's that about?

Howie Tsui: That's probably one of the most difficult stories to translate into *utshushi-e* form. It was a story told to me by Master Toa Wong, a ninety-year old opera singer, when I was here last summer doing early research. He shared a few really colourful ghost stories, mostly about spirit possession that he had personally encountered. That story starts off with an image of a teary-eyed mother forced to strangle her own baby due to poverty. She then stashes it under the bed and a baby ghost emerges, but it is trapped on earth and wanders aimlessly, not at peace—a hungry ghost that eventually possesses the body of a prostitute. Transcribing this story in a visual format was quite challenging because it was littered with colloqial Cantonese terms. That's why I gave the prostitute the facial markings of a red-eared turtle, which references the Cantonese slang term for a madam, *Gwai Po* (which translates literally to turtle lady).

So the baby possesses this "turtle lady" while Master Toa Wong and his opera friends are having dim sum with her. He then recalls, "I knew she was possessed because these ominous clouds suddenly appeared in her eyes," which refers to another Cantonese term to describe the symptoms of bodily possession by spirits. I tried to illustrate this sequence with a series of projections focusing on the eyes. First the eye sockets contained beady eyeballs; these were replaced by flashing lightning bolts, and finally storm clouds. It was a way for me to illustrate how her consciousness was taken over by the spirit. It was difficult to convey that.

The story finishes with the starving spirit-possessed prostitute eating dim sum ravenously and becoming super happy. There's this Cantonese term, *hoi sum doa da guan dau*—so happy that you're doing cartwheels, which is illustrated in the scene following the food scene. That one was really tough to do.

Joni Low: Did you get the sense that the audience was able to pick up on these sort of colloquial references? I'm sure that for those who are less familiar with these stories, it would certainly pique their curiosity, or perhaps encourage them to learn more, as it has for me.

Howie Tsui: It was difficult to know, as I was behind the projection screen conducting the performance and was unable to see the audience. Also, I did not get into too many detailed discussions about the piece afterwards. In retrospect, I wish I had included a little program pamphlet with the scene titles and a short description to offer a basic guide for the audience. I would be quite impressed if anyone was able to pick up on the colloquial references. But I think by incorporating colloquial interpretations in these stories, it reveals that I am a Cantonese speaker who is gathering stories in a slang-laden language.

Joni Low: So in illustrating these stories—these oral histories you've collected—do you feel an obligation, or an allegiance to preserve their original form?

Howie Tsui: I think it depends; it's on a story-to-story basis. I have been trying to, but based on the laboriousness of drawing all of the frames for the performance of *Celestials*, I have to edit—there are details in some stories that I can't include because it would be just too confusing. I've been editing and simplifying some stories; it depends on how dense a story is. So I am taking liberties with them.

Joni Low: How might your approach differ between the stories you collect and inherit from a personal connection and interaction, and stories that you have more of a distance from—those read in books, for example?

Howie Tsui: That's interesting. I probably take more liberties with stories told directly to me. It's so formal when it comes in a book format—it's like it arrives as fact, you know? So in a way the medium in which I receive these stories dictates my flexibility in playing with the ideas.

With the stories found in books, my whole idea surrounding *Celestials* was to undermine historical portrayals of early Chinese immigrants as a nondescript and hapless labour force. Many older texts produced images of these nameless figures suffering generalized hardships in the few available areas of work. I think it is so difficult to feel something for these early immigrants when they have been, historically, so de-humanized, yanked of any sense of individuality or character. That is why my intention with the project is to transform these undistinguishable people into physically distinct creatures based on a Chinese book, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*. It's an ancient classic that includes snippets of information on Chinese cosmology, strange lands, animals, people, and things. It's very otherworldly, with mention of "people with very long earlobes" and "people with backwards tongues" or "backwards feet"—it's absurd. A treasure trove of the fantastic.

In cases where the stories are seemingly very solid, or very historical, I'm taking more liberties by going to the *Classic* and substituting these figures to kind of dilute it, to make it seem less like an archival history. That also plays with the whole term "celestials"—these otherworldly beings, these exotic creatures, which was used towards Chinese immigrants back in the day.

Joni Low: Which also took on a derogatory meaning.

Howie Tsui: Yes, and then it became derogatory. And I turn them into creatures, so there's the whole concept of the "other," the grotesque. In a way I'm kind of feeding that fire—exaggerating the exoticism and alienness.

Joni Low: This leads to questions I have about your relationship to other artistic traditions. I'm intrigued by the presence of the grotesque in your

Top: Howie Tsui, *Celestials of Saltwater City*, Queue Gang scene (digital composite), 2011, *furos* (wooden projectors), Chinese pigments, and ink on transparencies. Courtesy of the artist.

Bottom: Howie Tsui, *Camaraderie*, 2005, acrylic and ink on canvas, 30.5 x 30.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

work, particularly in relationship to this sort of Rabelaisian, carnivalesque energy. How did you become interested in this?

Howie Tsui: This was before I began consciously thinking about making work within a larger conceptual framework. I was just doing sort of crafty, unintentional art making. I went through this phase where I was making really saccharine *kawaii* work—like the *Kawaii Noir* series (2002–05). The grotesque came out of a rejection of that.

When I was doing *Kawaii Noir*, it was all about creating these scenes about the baser aspects of human nature, but I just candy-coated it with these super cute characters. There are these scientific studies about why cute is appealing—the shape of a baby's head, for instance. If you consider this in relationship to the evolution of Mickey Mouse over the years, you can see that he grew younger. I was interested in the phenomenon of neoteny.

Joni Low: This sort of prolonged adolescence, or infantilization of adults?

Howie Tsui: Yeah. And I was also attaching these nostalgic memories, simple things that as boys we used to do that were really cruel. Growing up in Thunder Bay, we used to have army worms. It's this infestation of worms during certain seasons, and they were all over the trees—they were everywhere. In our neighbourhood, there would be clumps of writhing worms hanging from the trees, alive and undulating. And we were just like [shiver]: "Let's get rid of them!" So we took a half-bottle of rubbing alcohol, knocked them all off the trees and put them into the bottle, dumped them onto the cement and lit them on fire.

I was interested in why we, as boys, thought of that. It reflects the imagination and wonder of children. It's another one of those memories that was traumatic. I wanted to make connections between the basic reflex that some kids have—like burning insects with a magnifying glass and sunlight—with what happens when boys become men, and also come into positions of power. And how these experiences mirror one another. Is there something innate in us?

Joni Low: That sort of destructive impulse that lives within us.

Howie Tsui: Yes, like the dark part of our brain that conjures up torture methods. So in terms of the grotesque, I was interested in these baser aspects, and having children enacting these impulses. It seems like one can candy-coat it, have some neotenous figure doing it, which renders it digestible. People totally buy these sorts of things.

And then I had a complete rejection of *kawaii*, because I was seeing a glut of it everywhere, mostly in the kind of pop-surrealist low-brow art scene. So I rejected it completely and went in the opposite direction, to the grotesque. I was always drawn to the horrific, but was masking it, and then I just flipped it, straight on. It started with the *Of Manga and Mongrels* series (2006–08).

Howie Tsui, *Mindbuggery*, 2006, ink, acrylic, and collage on mylar, 152.4 x 106.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Of Manga and Mongrels was a kind of unconscious character-generating exercise where I was letting go of control by playing off of Hokusai's manga images, which in collage form served as a sort of "graphic trampoline." I inked atop of his collages, and by looking for visual cues and building upon his line, I was able to create these layered and amorphous double images. This method helped me get over my rut of creating the predictably cute figures that I was so sick of.

Joni Low: What do you believe is the function of the grotesque, or horror, in society?

Howie Tsui: I think it is a reminder of our mortality.

Joni Low: Interesting. Could you elaborate on your relationship to other artistic traditions, such as Surrealism? You mentioned the whole idea of letting go of control, and I very much see the unveiling of the subconscious in this process.

Howie Tsui, *Scout Nublet*, 2008, ink, acrylic, and collage on mylar, 22.8 x 22.7 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Howie Tsui: I think at heart I'm a surrealist. Even from my various early exposures to European art, Surrealism was the only thing I was interested in. It was almost the art movement that made the most sense to me, because it didn't make sense, you know? I don't actually keep a dream diary anymore, but I think about my dreams a lot when I wake up, and then let them fade away into some sort of ethereal holding tank. But yes, Surrealism . . . I'm a huge Jan Svankmajer fan. He was very into Giuseppe Arcimboldo, and in *Of Manga and Mongrels* I utilize this approach of assembling smaller figures to create a larger portrait. Out of all Western art traditions, the Surrealist art movement is the one I identify with the most.

Joni Low: You mention Arcimboldo—I'm curious about the connections you make between Japanese erotic art and Renaissance art in your series *Shunga and Monsters* (2007–present). How did this come about?

Howie Tsui: Well, I finished the *Of Manga and Mongrels* series, and I liked that exercise. I suppose I was ready for more of a mental workout. The *shunga* erotic imagery is busier, more intense. I wanted to up the grotesque-ante even more. *Of Manga and Mongrels* was actually about portraits, about

the shifting nature of identity inherent in the immigrant's experience. In a way, it wasn't really about the grotesque as much as it was about identity and its different layers—the historical side and the contemporary side. *Of Shunga and Monsters* came about randomly, in a way, when I was invited to participate in a project called Love and Death for a publication called *Faesthetic*—more of a hipster thing.

I was working on *Manga and Mongrels* at that point, and in thinking about love and death I decided to use erotic prints to represent the love, and monster creatures for death. I just did one collage for the publication, and really liked it, so I made a bunch more after that. They're more successful, I think, than the *Manga and Mongrels*. They're more complex; I think they just became a real workout. I have to look at the collage, flip it and combine it with others until I see a secondary image. The actual inking, or line work, is easy compared to the looking part.

So in terms of how these traditions were combined, it was very random. I didn't have any strong intentions with it. It was just like: hipster magazine called love and death, working on collages, porn and monster! But afterwards you can read much more into the work. Formally, I see this series recalling my childhood infatuation with transformer die-cast robots from the 80s—the way they are so compact and morph into other things.

Joni Low: Yes, definitely. I find your work has this way of triggering and sparking different associations, and in many ways, I see your practice of cultural appropriation and intermixing as expressive of our contemporary circumstances. We have an array of cultural and visual materials virtually at our fingertips via the Internet, and Google searches can be a way of following a stream of consciousness, to pick and choose and draw from. It's interesting, though, because Google is indexing the world, yet, at the same time, these are man-made categories that life seems to continually evade, escape, and destabilize. I think your work expresses that in a very visceral way.

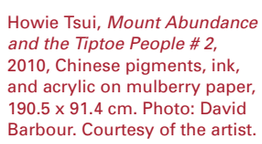
That being said, do you use Google a lot? Do you find you have a Google mentality? How does the Internet influence your work?

Howie Tsui: I use Google only when I'm making an image and require something historical—usually it's for an object, not for figures—for things like a boat, or a carriage. It's usually for architectural or structural components of projects.

Joni Low: In terms of references to other artistic traditions in your work, you mentioned that in *Horror Fables* you are riffing on the traditional Chinese landscape painting, without the training involved in composing a landscape that follows a certain order and understanding of the world, such as "heaven–society–man." Can you talk a bit about your "creative bastardization" of the form?

Howie Tsui: Well, it's just like if I were to write my name in Chinese, it would look bastardized in itself. As for the landscape, it was weird because

Horror Fables was the first time I've ever included a landscape component into my work. I had very strong feelings against landscape for all the usual reasons, especially the legacy of Canada's Group of Seven. But for this series, I thought, well, I'm going to have to place these figures into some sort of space. For me, landscape isn't fun; doing the figures and the action is the fun part. I had to force myself to do the landscape, so I just bought some cheesy instructional books. Actually, instead of Google, I probably watch more YouTube to learn how to do things—especially making the projector boxes for *Celestials*.



Howie Tsui, *Mount Abundance and the Tiptoe People # 2*, 2010, Chinese pigments, ink, and acrylic on mulberry paper, 190.5 x 91.4 cm. Photo: David Barbour. Courtesy of the artist.

My main technique is to use a Chinese brush, and to make a mountain, I just roll or slide the brush. With the mulberry paper, it's really great because it creates a texture. So I'm bastardizing it, kind of like when I make noodles, because I'm going to be running them through my pasta machine, and I'm going to use my food processor with a dough blade, as opposed to all the other traditional ways. It's using a shortcut. There's no rule against it; I just know that there are people that train for twenty years doing landscape paintings and it's super Zen. It's just like calligraphy, those marks—the perfect bamboo, the perfect mountain, the perfect mist.

Joni Low: What sort of responses have you had, if any, from Chinese viewers who have that kind of experience or training?

Howie Tsui: Actually I haven't had this sort of feedback about the traditional landscape aspects of the work. I'd be curious. I think that people usually are more captivated by what is going on in the foreground of these paintings, and less so with the landscape.

Joni Low: I'm interested, as well, in your work and its relationship to written language. Your art seems to elude a verbal language—the variety of imagery and its strangeness is something that words can't quite pin down; it's a chase of sorts that I find particularly compelling. Can you talk a bit about the relationship between words and your work? Titling, titillation, etc. . . . Perhaps I can throw in a couple—Elephantitis of the Face, Mermongrel, Bi-polar?

Howie Tsui: Those come right out when I need to name. For both the *Manga* and the *Shunga* series, it was more like, oh, I need names for all of these, and I just bang it out. Sure, I said previously that I didn't have landscape in my work, and now I do; I'm definitely strongly against text in art. I dislike text in art because I don't want words to interfere with people's visual processing of the image. I know a lot of artists like that double play, but . . .

Joni Low: Is that why, for the installation at Centre A, there was an absence of text?

Howie Tsui: Not deliberately. For the exhibition at Carleton University Art Gallery, there were didactic snippets beside each piece, so the viewer

had entry points. But with the Vancouver audience, people are more knowledgeable about this material and it's much easier for them to engage with it than any other audience I've had across the country.

Joni Low: I do find that your practice is very critically engaged, yet the messages in your work are non-specific. What is important to you that people experience through your work?

Howie Tsui: Wonder.

Joni Low: As a way of closing, I want to ask about your experience as an artist in relationship to the world/art world/otherworld. Having observed you peripherally during your residency in Vancouver, I see that the social is very much a part of your overall artistic and life practice—be it your involvement with music or your interaction with the arts communities you become acquainted with through residencies and travel. Your Web site is also an interesting way of connecting with the world and the public. It's very much a visual spillover of ideas, an open book of sorts, where one can become completely immersed in the work. It's a very personal approach. In one of the pages on your Web site you mention where one can read about your work, and I believe you say "embarrassing interviews." It's this sort of directness and immediacy that I find refreshing in an art context where there are often various barriers and controls constructed throughout an artist's career that seem to block access to them as people. I'm wondering how you think things might change, or might not change, as you progress in your practice? What do you hope will remain the same?

Howie Tsui: Actually, I'm naive, because I don't spend much time in art world contexts. A lot of this work was made in Ottawa, and there I'm sort of sheltered from any metropolitan art scene. It's sort of like being in a bubble. It is an isolated but focused way of working. When I started out I was very open about everything, which is a reflection of my personality. I'm really straightforward, and I just say what I think.

The funny thing is, I was talking to a friend who revealed to me some social strategies employed in a larger art scene, and how some folks conjure up an air of mystery around themselves. They would go to openings but avoid committing to any one clique or scene—just go for ten to fifteen minutes, make an appearance and then get out. I was really amazed by the theatricality of it all. I'm only recently beginning to understand that perhaps you can't just be yourself. This is all new to me, this idea of having to conduct oneself a certain way in the milieu in order to be successful. I'm hoping that I don't completely kill my career by being myself, but I think I'm just going to continue doing that. We'll see what happens.