

The Mongrel's Progress



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The word “mongrel” is generally considered pejorative in Western culture, but Ottawa-based painter **Howie Tsui** wants to reclaim the term as a symbol of dynamic cultural hybridity. “For me, it’s progressive. I was born in Hong Kong and grew up in Thunder Bay, with Africa in between. I think of that experience as cultural mongrelization.” Tsui admits that in art school he found himself dealing with two very different conceptions of art. “I was really interested in street art, graffiti and anime, and I was looking at low-brow magazines like *Juxtapoz*. In the meantime, I was learning all this Western high-brow academic painting theory. I was always trying to place my work between these two worlds and that was an element of the mongrel.”

His interest in hybridity even had a political dimension. “There were some things I had to come to terms with,” Tsui admits, “because I was a Chinese artist using lots of Japanese imagery. My Dad grew up in Shanghai during the Japanese occupation in World War II, and there was all this tension inside me. But I found out that Hong Kong

was one of the first countries to allow in Japanese products after the war, so there is a symbiotic relationship.”

His ambitious and captivating paintings borrow unabashedly from various sources: Asian ghost fables, family stories, Japanese television cartoons and cultural folklore. “A lot of what I’m doing with this project is examining the creativity in darkness.” In *Dead Sea*, the black hands on the breasts of a young woman were cut from a jealous first wife; the tale has it that at night, between the hours of two to five, the hands lift off the young woman’s breasts like spiders. In *Silver Tree* a hanged man is Tsui’s remembrance of a family member who committed suicide; in *Tengu’s World* he uses “poltergeisty stories” about an apartment complex that his grandfather said was built over a mass grave.

The paintings are filled with figures who do to others, and have done to themselves, acts of horrible violence. But Tsui admits that even though he presents horrible images, there is invariably a comic element in his work. “It has to do with a sense of underground culture, with graphic novels and anime.” *Gangshi Creek* contains blood-sucking monsters, but they are lifted from the figure of the Chinese vampire, who moves with a comical hop and who can be frightened off when pelted with a certain kind of rice.

Tsui likes the mobility of the stories. The folkloric characters have morphed through time, so he feels justified in developing his own narrative variations. He wants viewers to do the same. “I was hoping that people would take these elements and weave their own story.” As for Tsui, he will continue to be a dream weaver. His enthusiasm for the narrative and aesthetic possibilities inside this fabled world remains undiminished. “There’s also the whole hybrid animal/human/monster thing. I feel like I’m just beginning.” His work was exhibited this past fall at aceartinc.com in Winnipeg. ■

1. Howie Tsui, *Dead Sea*, 2009, ink, acrylic and Chinese paint pigment on mulberry paper, 125 x 36". Photographs: Stephen Fenn. Courtesy the artist.

2. Howie Tsui, *Silver Tree*, 2008, ink, acrylic and Chinese paint pigment on mulberry paper, 19 x 25".