



Creep show at Carleton



BRUNO SCHLUMBERGER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Ottawa artist and rock musician Howie Tsui is definitely moving up in the art world with a major new exhibition at the Carleton University Art Gallery, *Howie Tsui's Horror Fables*.

Artist Howie Tsui 'satirizes' western perspectives on post-9/11 torture

BY PAUL GESSELL

Howie Tsui wants people to be "creeped out," and he will surely succeed.

The latest art exhibition by this rising Ottawa star is called *Howie Tsui's Horror Fables*. It opens today at Carleton University Art Gallery for a two-month run before travelling to Winnipeg and Halifax.

The exhibition is dominated by three large scroll paintings on mulberry paper. Two exceed three metres. Another is about two metres.

Upon each scroll, Tsui has used paint and ink to create scenes of unrelenting horror that roll across the wall like depictions of Dante's *Inferno*, except the characters in these hellish dramas are Asian, many of them inspired by Buddhist paintings, Chinese fables, real-life hauntings experienced by the artist's Hong Kong relatives, a form of Japanese caricature called *manga* and, creepiest of all, familiar looking 20th-century scenes plucked from photographs of the bombing of Hi-

roshima and the Nanking Massacre.

These tormented beings co-exist with some very contemporary figures, including the hooded man who bears more than a coincidental resemblance to an Iraqi prisoner in one of those infamous photographs that leaked out of Abu Ghraib prison a few years ago.

On the scrolls, these characters all interact in a bewildering state of turmoil and mayhem. There is no unifying narrative to all the depicted mini-stories. Everyone viewing the art will create his or her own narrative, based on personal experiences and the resonance of familiar references.

The Carleton exhibition also contains three smaller paintings on mulberry paper of similar creepy carnage. Then, there are the shadowy images of ghostly figures transferred directly onto the wall from wet rice paper paintings. And there is an endlessly looping 10-minute soundscape harvested from the cries and shrieks embedded in old Japanese horror films.

The soundscape will definitely creep out gallery visitors. But what about gallery staff who have to listen to that all day? They shall surely go mad. One can envision headlines this spring about "Carnage at Carleton" from gallery staff babbling incoherently in Japanese and running amok around the campus.

Tsui's vignettes of murder and mayhem are more creepy than frightening. His characters have an unreal cartoon-like quality to them. Some are even cuddly. It's hard to take them seriously, even when you know their murderous or suicidal antics are based on historical facts.

The artist's intent is to "satirize" the way western culture is dealing with fear and torture in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. And so, Tsui's paintings turn horrific events into pop-culture phenomena suitable for cartoon shows or wordless graphic novels. Contemporary society, the artist seems to be saying, can't tell the difference between centuries-old ghost stories, gore-

filled movies from the *Saw* and *Hostel* franchises and real, state-sanctioned torture of prisoners.

This body of work at Carleton is far deeper and more complex than much of Tsui's earlier work, which we have seen in the past few years at Gallery 101, Wurm Gallery and the Ottawa Art Gallery.

Before, we were given portrait-like paintings of humanoid mutants, with limbs and facial features sticking out in all the wrong places from gelatinous blobs. (Tsui calls those earlier works "cutesy.") They were creepy but lovable characters rooted in Japanese *manga*.

Tsui's current work is more disturbing. The creepiness has prompted more than one person to approach Tsui's girlfriend and ask whether the artist is as weird and violent at home as he is in his work.

The word on the street is that Tsui is really a nice guy, who lists his influences as Asian mythology, Canadian hockey, heavy metal and all the other usual things one would expect of a 31-year-old man who was born in Hong Kong but grew up in a place like Thunder Bay.

Along with visual art, music is Tsui's other great passion. He is a guitarist with the rock band The Acorn, a very noticeable

Howie Tsui's Horror Fables

When: Today and continues until June 14

Where: Carleton University Art Gallery

Information: www.carleton.ca/gallery

presence on the Canadian music scene. The band is about to embark on a three-week European tour and is also preparing to record a new album.

In the world of visual art, Tsui has some influential fans. They include Carleton's Sandra Dyck, the curator of *Horror Fables*. There's Emily Falvey, the former curator of contemporary art at the Ottawa Art Gallery, who is preparing a group show next year for her alma mater including Tsui. And there's Victoria Henry, director of the Canada Council Art Bank, which has purchased one of Tsui's early mutant portraits.

Clearly, with fans like that, Tsui is going places. Yes, they may be dark places. But sometimes we need someone to shine some light into those dark places.