



detail from *Forest Romp* (2009), 91.4 x 317.5 cm

all photos: Scott Stephens

HORROR FABLES

HOWIE TSUI

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A RESPONSE BY
Aaron Boissonneault

"I've always been attracted to the grotesque because I associate it with the imagination, creativity, the unknown, and the existence of a parallel other-world. Which is why I became so interested in painting and drawing in the first place as a child."—from an interview with Howie Tsui¹

There's a Cantonese saying that the number of rice grains left in your bowl will be the number of zits on your future wife's face. There's another one that translates roughly to "grow eyes to pierce needle", which refers to the sharp pain you'll feel on your pupil if you watch pornography. These are examples of the "nascent applications of fear" Ottawa based artist, Howie Tsui, would hear from his mother as methods of control when growing up. Fantastical and absurd, Tsui believed in these proverbs all the same and later became interested

in the power they had over him as well as the violent, comic, fantastical, and creative world from which they came.

Horror Fables is an orgy of mayhem and cruelty where a parade of monsters, demons, ghosts, gods, and ambiguous grotesqueries commit wanton acts of torment and torture with unholy zest upon their victims. Combining the fearsome with the ludicrous and ranging from the gruesome to the droll, Tsui offers up a spectacle of such graphically excessive bloody dismemberment it overwhelms the rational self, rendering one unable to respond to this work with the aversion and dread typical of uncanny horror. Instead, one is drawn in by its creative energy and its complex, detailed studies of Asian folklore and nostalgia.

"The places of hell are painted by the brush of the painter's desire, within his mind."—from the Buddhist text *Sutra of the Remembrance of the True Law*²

Tsui crafted together this world by delving into Japanese and Chinese ghost lore, the ambiguous Asian culture of monsters and demons, the horror movies of his youth, and his own family's ghost stories. *Horror Fables* presents itself as an encyclopedia of characters and scenes that populate a hyper-narrative of terror. Painted on large scrolls of mulberry paper using Chinese pigment inks and brushstrokes, *Horror Fables* harbors a rich intertextuality of tradition and a who's who of Asian horror, featuring scenes and characters from Edo-period *manga* block prints, traditional Japanese *shunga* erotic art, *yokai* monsters, Buddhist Hell scrolls, the Nanking Massacre, Hiroshima, and even Tsui's own *kawaii*-esque super-flat mongrel characters of his earlier days, all in a *ukiyo-e* floating world landscape.

The show is anchored by three large thematic scroll paintings, *Dead Sea* 120" x 34" (2009), *Tengu's World* 76" x 25" (2009), and *Forest Romp* 120" x 34" (2009). These works feature the traditional landscapes of Chinese scroll





paintings and the *ukiyo-e* tradition of Japanese block prints and painting, familiar to Westerners as depictions of idyllic landscapes of oriental passivity and elegance as depicted by W. Heath Robinson in Hans Christian Andersen fairytales. By evoking such settings, Tsui is situating the viewer in the realm of fantasy, dream, and hallucination—the realm of unreality—and creates a context akin to an old animistic concept of the universe wherein the external environment is endowed with anthropomorphic consciousness harboring benign or malevolent intentions towards the individual, and with the power to influence the course of events. In this primitive, magical world, Tsui conjures up the uncanny, turning the passive, idyllic, floating world into a Boschian hellscape, where the repressed infantile anxieties

of unconscious childhood nightmares, along with surmounted modes of primitive fears, grotesquely threaten the individual with gruesome and debasing forms of physical subjugation and ultimate annihilation.

Confusion of boundaries and gross violations of the body's physical integrity resurrects primitive fears about human identity and an element of magic at work in the very process of nature. Take the grotesque figure in *Forest Romp* presiding over a burning Buddhist monk while sucking foam from the fingertips and facial orifices of a Ming Dynasty youth. With seemingly human legs and a head with the animalistic overbite of an alligator, its green decaying flesh seems to sprout the limbs of infants, while the pea



Silver Tree (2008), 63.6 x 47.0 cm



soup exhaust emerging from the back of its head has its own set of lips, eyes, and nose. Typical distinctions of properties of animals and humans, birth/death/decay, consumption/excrement, and corporeal/ethereal, are uncomfortably blended together here. The veneer of the diversity of things is melted away, revealing the soft monstrous masses, naked in disorder. In *Cumulous Dark* (2008), similar confusions occur, where even the lines between victim and victimizer disappear.

Mythical figures and deities such as the Buddhist God of Heavenly Punishment and the Tengu yokai, along with the aberrant forms of water and clouds throughout the exhibition, animate the threats of a hostile and domineering external world in the form of grotesque embodiments, radicalizing the rift between self and other. Within this landscape of fear

Cumulous Dark (2008), 46.8 x 63.7 cm



are the complex mini narratives Tsui has threaded together. In *Dead Sea*, Hokusai's Edo period Octopus from *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife* (1820) is being fought off by a Taoist priest with a crossbow. Below deck are slaughtered infants from the Nanking Massacre and Tsui's own grandfather escaping mainland China during the Cultural Revolution. In this one small boat we find the personal, the mythic, the political and historical, the real, the fantastical, the erotic, the absurd, and the horrific, all sailing together among the flotsam of primeval terror, where sea monsters of the unconscious emerge immediate and appalling.

The graphic spectacle of terror, however, reaches such a degree of exaggeration that it becomes absurd and ambiguous. The violence is treated as matter-of-fact; in the presence of so much blood

and gore there is little evidence of pain. For example, a Mongolian character in *Forest Romp*, being dragged by his bound wrists, looks at most a little worried that he's just lost the entire bottom half of his body. All the parading monsters on display are treated simplistically, making them easier to make fun of thus denying their power and permanence. The green turtle-thing in *Forest Romp* drowning some victim, is a water goblin meant to ward children away from unsupervised shorelines. The Kappa yokai, are said to smell like foul excrement and have bowls on their head containing water that if spilled will kill them. It is also said that Kappa can be repelled by farts. Despite its violence, the scene is more characteristic of male adolescent water sport, and the Ninja Turtle shell paired with oversized *anime* head with receding hairline place it in the realm of droll whimsicalities. This absurd monster is treated by Tsui both as menace and neoteny.

Back to our poor fired-up monk mentioned earlier, though eyes and ears are sizzling into foam, he appears to be enjoying a game of Chinese checkers while cradling a purring calico cat. Play subsumes the serious. *Schadenfreude*, the spark of perverse glee that is part of the play element in the grotesque, jars our sensibilities to grasp the terrible and pathetic thereby excluding the commonplace sentiments of revulsion and pity. The spirit of joviality, the play of fancy in combining forms, musical instruments, the energy and unholy zest of bedlam, all present an attractive carnival world of activity and imagination, a progressive exaggeration of fantasy feeding on itself.

Notes

- 1 Tsui, Howie. "interview" 22 Sep. 2009. E-mail to Aaron Boissonneault. 22 September 2009.
- 2 Matsunaga, Daigan, Alicia Matsunaga. *The Buddhist Concept of Hell*. New York: Philosophical Library Inc., 1972



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