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Jacky Tsai. Eastern Orbit

16 May–20 Jun 2014 at Scream, London



Jacky Tsai, Blam!

Scream are proud to present the first solo exhibition of unique works by Chinese artist Jacky Tsai. Constantly evolving and re-inventing his creative output Tsai is something of a hybrid whose practice encompasses a broad range of imagery, techniques and media. The fact that Jacky alludes to himself as 'a collage artist' is revealing in his approach to creating artwork and he comments, "my extremely mixed background definitely helped me to produce art differently". Originally born in Shanghai, China, Jacky moved to London in 2006 to study at Central St Martins College of Art and Design and has lived and worked in the capital ever since. Titled Eastern Orbit Tsai's solo exhibition addresses the cultural exchange between Asia and the West and the artist aspires to revolutionise contemporary Chinese art and combine Chinese craft and skill with Western Pop imagery.

Having worked with British fashion designer Alexander McQueen it was here that Tsai designed the now iconic floral skull motif and this catapulted the McQueen brand into public consciousness and cemented Tsai's reputation as an exciting and innovative designer. This design perfectly captures the core concept of Tsai's artwork – the fusion of East and West. Tsai's intricate rendering of a human skull using flowers, branches and birds references the traditional Chinese painting style known as 'guóhuà' meaning 'national' or 'native painting'. Tsai's commitment to revitalising his country's artistic traditions is seen in the works produced for this exhibition – where he utilises the traditional techniques of lacquer carving, silk embroidery, hand-painted porcelain and cloisonné. The skull was the key symbol for Tsai to develop his artistic oeuvre and he explains, "Many Chinese people are



afraid of skulls, and to a certain extent so am I, but the skull image has become trendy in the Western world, especially in fashion, and I was interested in this difference in perception in the East and the West. I wanted to see if I could change the attitude in the East towards the skull, so I tried to represent it in a beautiful way by using images of nature such as flowers, butterflies and birds to transform this previously 'scary' image. I wanted people to see the beauty in decay while commenting on the proximity of life and death."

The solo exhibition at *Scream* is another defining moment in Tsai's career. The works exhibited have a high level of production and the process appears to be intricate and labour-intensive. "Each piece takes a few months to make", he explains, "I'm combining several different techniques to create my 'fusion' art". All the pieces in this exhibition are unique works and Tsai's signature floral skull has been exquisitely lacquer-carved, referencing Asia's rich cultural heritage in the arts. Carved Lacquer ware, also known as 'TiHong' which literally translates as "Carving the Red", is one of China's traditional crafts. The process was first invented during the Tang Dynasty, more than 1600 years ago, and then later blossomed during the Ming and Qing Dynasty. The technique involves applying a natural lacquer on a wooden surface, then the delicate designs are carefully engraved. The panel is coated with several dozen layers of lacquer. Each layer of lacquer has to dry naturally before applying the next layer, to minimize cracks appearing in the future. The artist comments, "The complicated manufacturing process and the high production costs resulted in very high prices. Traditionally only the royal family or wealthy businessmen could afford them. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the vast working class people had little demand for such luxuries. Young people now are reluctant to learn the skills of lacquer-carving, and many elders in the business have passed away. Nowadays, there are only about twenty trained craftsmen left in China who have this skill. This ancient craft is on the brink of extinction." Tsai is on a mission to preserve, reinvigorate and promote these unique traditions. The exhibition also includes Su Xiu embroidery on silk (originally from the city Suzhou near Shanghai) and Cloisonné, an ancient decorative technique using vitreous enamel and metal, adopted in China since the fourteenth century. It is in Tsai's appropriation of the rich craftsmanship of China combined with Western imagery that the artist's concept of East and West really collides.

A profile image of Chairman Mao is intricately rendered with lacquer-carved Peony flowers (native to Asia) and figures of Chinese socialists are juxtaposed with images of the Buddha. Scenes of wildlife against a backdrop of industrial ships and machinery give a hint of the impending consequences of industrialisation and reveals the artist's sense of foreboding about the rapid advancements that have occurred in Asia in recent years. What appears to be a traditional Chinese landscape scene is littered with images of superheroes and comic book soundbites – the artist cites American pop artist Roy Lichtenstein as a major influence. Tsai depicts the Mandala frequently in his work. Sanskrit for 'circle', this ancient symbol of concentric diagrams was traditionally used as a visual tool for spiritual teaching, a focus for meditation and devotion. Rendered in vivid 'pop' colours, Tsai juxtaposes images of gambling slot machines from Las Vegas with Chinese workers composed within the circular Mandala motif. Here Tsai provokes a debate on the cost of spirituality and cultural traditions against the intensifying progression of capitalism, globalisation and consumerism in Asia, but also its potentially damaging legacy in the West.

Having exhibited internationally, in Asia and Europe, and experiencing both Eastern and Western cultures first-hand, Jacky Tsai has positioned himself with a unique vantage point to explore the connections and disparity between the two regions. He states, "I want to create an engaging dialogue between traditional Eastern craft and a Western pop aesthetic".

Scream

27 - 28 Eastcastle Street
London W1W 8DH United Kingdom
Ph. +44 (0)20 72689857
info@screamlondon.com
www.screamlondon.com

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