

Glamcult  
Independent Style Paper

G

“Burn that mother down.”

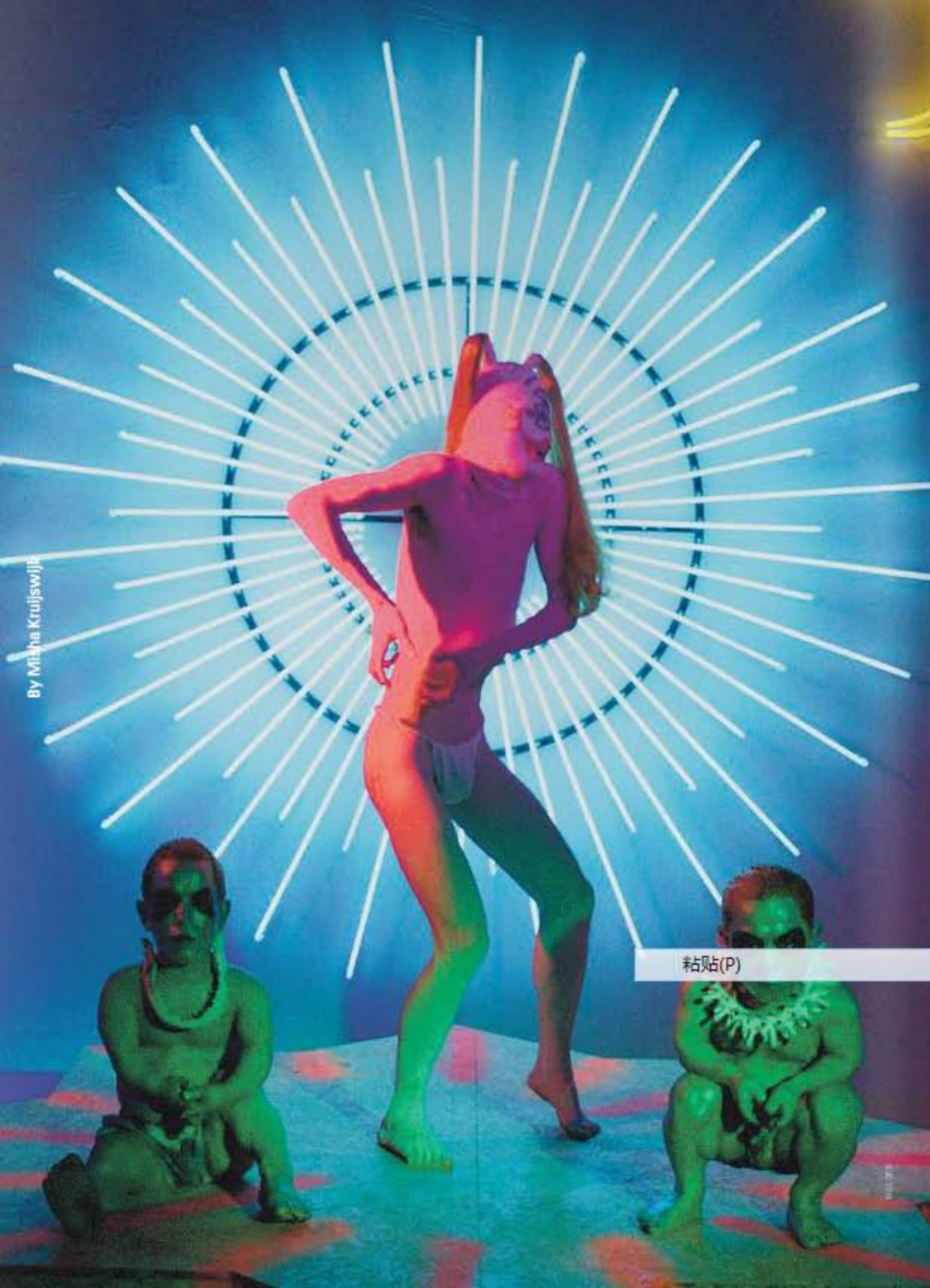
粘貼(P)

C

FREE  
2015—Issue 6 #114

# Tianzhuo Chen

Rapping twin dwarfs, lizard-licking clowns and the slow removal of a ponytailed butt plug, all set against a '90s plastic fantastic backdrop: watching Tianzhuo Chen's videos is like taking an outrageous trip. Combining elements of the rave scene, contemporary pop culture, fetishism, hip hop and manga with religious iconography, Chen blends it into a single hysterical hallucination. In the process, he expresses the brokenness of modern existence within a contemporary spiritual experience. Trippy...





Right after graduating high school, Tianzhuo Chen (1985) left his hometown of Beijing to study graphic design at London's hallowed Central Saint Martins, following it up with a master's in fine art at the Chelsea College of Art and Design. After seven years of living, studying (and raving) in London, he decided to return home—in spite of his controversial subject matter and the cultural tyranny of his native China. Now, Chen's biggest solo show so far is on view at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris—and it's quite the eye-fu!

For the opening, Chen collaborated with dancer Beio and House of Drama, a Parisian artists' collective, to create a frenzied and highly stylized spectacle. The performance, titled *ADAMA II*, combined a light show, dancers and seemingly endless props, all blended together into one crazy carnival. In spite of the heady, anything-goes aesthetic, Chen stages events like this carefully, consciously playing on the responses it may evoke within the public: "My performance is kinda like a musical or an opera: it contains a narrative, so I need to think of how it will catch the audience's emotions and attention. In certain parts, I might want the audience to feel touched or provoked," he explains. "I'm playing a director's role."

Typical first responses to Chen's work generally run the gamut from mild distaste to overt disgust. Unfolding as loud and colourful parades of shameless exhibitionism,

his performances are in fact staged to perfection to prevent us from looking away—from their styling to their direction. Combining music-video choreography with the ecstatic aesthetics of the '90s Ibiza rave scene, Chen confronts us with the empty hedonism that seems so characteristic of contemporary culture. But it is his incorporation of religious symbols that distinguishes Chen's work from postmodern pop artist such as Jeff Koons and Micha Klein. In fact, his entire oeuvre revolves around religion and the ritual practices that accompany it.

Chen's installations and performances abound with ambiguous references to different forms of religion: here a statue from a Buddhist temple, there a nod to Christian iconography and over there a South American totem. Blending in different forms of culture, high and low, different art forms and dances, Chen's work starts to signify something new.

*PICNIC*, one of Chen's latest works, opens with an androgynous figure ceremoniously lighting up an enormous bong. Dressed in a fluorescent, hemp leaf-printed suit, the figure sits between two colourful flags declaring *Jerk Off in Peace* and *Ordo Ab Chao* [order from chaos] respectively. In the hallucinatory vision that follows, we see a skinny guy wearing nothing but a mask, two ponytails and a white cord between his buttocks. Standing before a bright sun of neon lights and flanked by two bodily painted midgets, he performs a dance that resembles Butoh,

an experimental avant-garde form developed in Japan in the '60s and which forms a recurrent motif in Chen's work. Dance as a means of expressing feeling and soul through movement is an obvious preoccupation in this, as in all, Chen's work.

To the well-travelled, the sun structure in *PICNIC*'s background may remind of the halos in neon and flickering LED lights that adorn many Buddhist temples in modern-day Asia. And although European and Asian approaches to aesthetics and religious decoration are very different, it calls to mind the age-old—and non-denominational—alliance between religion and spectacle. This blurring between temple and theme park is even more apparent in Chen's reversal of the usual tropes: club culture becomes a form of religious cult.

Which is no coincidence: with every event or exhibition, Chen creates a contemporary place of worship, a temporary temple. For the exhibition *Tianzhuo's Acid Club* in Beijing's Star Gallery, Chen turned the space into a rave club. "That was one of my best experiences," he recalls. "About 500 people came to the party, smoking weed, taking mushrooms or LSD. That night was so dope!" But his intentions were somewhat more profound than a drug-fuelled orgy: Chen was attempting to create a religious experience through building a church- or temple-like space.

A Buddhist himself, much of Chen's work is preoccupied with individual belief and the distinction

between the real and unreal. His performances all combine a candy-shop aesthetic with a dark and gloomy undertone because, he says, "happiness and darkness are basically one and the same, containing each other and both being part of the void." He continues: "This is a very Buddhist idea, and I think it's so true. My work is kinda grotesque and I think the grotesque is beautiful. Many figures and gods that look very grotesque and dark but they actually represent goodness. The good can appear angry and grotesque, in order to scare the demons out of our minds."

Meditating on Chen's performances, one starts to see parallels between rave culture and the materialization of religious cult. Ecstasy as a state of consciousness has been described in many religious traditions—most notably the Christian one, but also in Hinduism and Sufism. In contemporary club culture, the DJ becomes the high priest, standing behind his altar of mixing desks, the audience worshipping via dance. Chen's work addresses our human yearning towards some transcendental experience, touching on the universal or even the divine. Amen to that...

Tianzhuo Chen will be on view at the Palais de Tokyo (Paris) until 13 September.

[www.tianzhuochen.com](http://www.tianzhuochen.com)



Seitens view of Tianzhuo Chen, Palais de Tokyo, courtesy of Bank Gallery (Singapore), photo: André Mouri