

## Tianzhuo Chen

Palais de Tokyo, June 2015

Khairuddin Hori

---

*'I cannot leave poison here and there in the apartment, because when they eat it, they would later crawl away and die. That would be just the same as clobbering and killing whenever I see them. My intention then would be to kill, I cannot kill and I should never have thoughts of killing.'*

This was part of our post exhibition opening party conversation in Shanghai recently. Tianzhuo shared his most recent dilemma with cockroaches that had mysteriously turned up in drones in his apartment. I remember visiting it, just down the road from the French embassy in Beijing. It is an apartment that his parents acquired some years ago and it is where he has been working and living in. From the outside, the apartment block looked worn, a little ghetto-ish and slightly unsettling for a foreigner used to sterile public housing like myself. Its walls have not been painted for years, the elevator felt as if it could breakdown at any time, and bills, possibly 'promotion materials' from illegal money lenders, were posted on its dingy corridors. That day when I visited the artist, I felt as if I was continually walking through alternating realities. I arrived at the airport late at night and had dinner at a rather empty restaurant (most people were out of town to spend Chinese New Year with their families), After midnight, I had a long taxi ride before checking into a boutique hotel at 798 Art Zone. On the next day, I had breakfast and exhibition visit at Central Academy of Fine Arts, followed by a Thai lunch. After that, I went to a Maizidian at the 'hood', which is also the title and subject of Tianzhuo's parodic work on fashion from 2012.

≈

The first precept in Buddhism is an edict that prohibits the killing or injuring of any conscious life that breathes. Although the cockroaches were spared human-induced trauma and possible death, one is terrorized by 'visual aggressions' in Tianzhuo's videos and installations. On one hand, a position of non-violence while the other, a contrasting fondness for confrontation.

At Palais de Tokyo in Paris, a 3-meter tall flag greets the audience and sets the scene as you enter Tianzhuo's constructed sphere. On the flag, you see an eye and the text *Ordo ab Chao*, Latin for 'order out of chaos'. This expression was adopted by the *Thirty-third Degree Freemason*, an honorary sect within the *Freemason* institution that consists of long-time members of the

organization. Since then, various clandestine groups have adopted *Ordo ab Chao* as their operational maxim. The mechanism behind this order is chaos itself, deliberately created as a form of distraction. In its operation, only part of this chaos would be made known, resulting in partial solutions so that its root cause is overlooked. The point of such exercises is sabotage and mainly intended to embed trauma in the minds of its victims, capturing control and creating new order.

True to the multi-disciplinary nature of his practice, the exhibition was activated with what Tianzhuo refers to as 'opera', performed by a cast of eclectically costumed Parisian *vogue* ensemble, masked contortionists, Swedish musician and artist Grebnellaw, DJ Shiqi and *butoh* inspired Chinese dancers. This hour-long opera, titled *ADAHA II*, was performed on three separate raised platforms and activates the otherwise static installations or 'scenographies'. Consisting of a 'holy' water wellspring; raised, neon-flamed steps; and two, 4-meter tall half-man half-skeleton *citipati* sculptures that foregrounds his latest video *19:53* featuring scandalous Chinese pop vocalist *Yico*. This poetic yet evanescent performance-manifestation within the exhibition space left a trail of debris from pieces of various costumes, graffiti and artworks that were partly destroyed in its wake.

23 decorative glass bongos of incremental sizes line-up, framed with running neon coloured LED lights, and with the tallest of them connected to a modified fighter pilot's helmet in a work fittingly titled *Pilot*. An obvious reference to drug culture, more specifically, marijuana smoking culture. Here, Tianzhuo underlines modern day desperation to 'get away', which the artist refers to as 'modern day meditation'. In another part of the world, Indian *SADHUS* are known to smoke a mix of tobacco and hash as part of an effort to achieve 'moksha' or liberation. Allen Ginsberg in *The Great Marijuana Hoax*, recounted his personal experience smoking marijuana with *sadhus* in Calcutta, alongside a burning funeral pyre. This ritual, performed till this day, is undertaken in reference to Hindu god Shiva, referred to as 'the destroyer' as well as 'the rejuvenator'.

Nearby, a 2-channel video titled *PARADIŞE BITCH* features a pair of fully tattooed midget twins, rapping in Cantonese. The camera zooms in and out, revealing their crass, mono-coloured, line drawn tattoos illustrating cryptic symbols. At certain points, we see saliva oozing out of their gold-plated 'grillz', a typical accessory in gangster rap. And just as we are about to be irrevocably repulsed, we realize a familiarity in the image. They are not much different from what we commonly see in today's pop music videos from the occidental world. The distinction here lies in language and skin colour. One could regard it as yet another 'copycat' product out of China. This regurgitation of the familiar, globalised, everyday normalcy is central to Tianzhuo's approach.

In another piece, Eric Cartman, an iconic character from the animated television series South Park, is reincarnated as a luxurious 7 x 5 meter long carpet made with New Zealand wool. Titled *#Air#Swag*, Eric Cartman lays splayed on the floor, not unlike a skinned bear; a thick gold chain on his neck, rib bones exposed, blood red veins showing through a bulging-popping eye; with Michael Jordan's 'jumpman' logo, mimicking the 'grand jeté' in ballet inconveniently placed just above his privates. Visitors are allowed to sit and lounge on this lush carpet to view *PICNIC*, a 3-channel video placed in front and high above them.

*PICNIC* begins with the entry of a bleached haired and robed Asian man, resting on a *brinjal*-inspired armchair, smoking marijuana through a pilot's helmet. On the left and right channels, an androgynous, fictional man-god figure appointed as ADAHA slithers in a slow, *butoh* inspired gestures, glowing in the light of a neon sun and moon. This image alternates between that of the 'all seeing eye'. ADAHA is the god, idol, superstar and center of a newfound belief system by the same name founded by the artist. In Arabic, ADAHA is sacrifice; in Sanskrit, a meditative chant or a sentence connector such as the words 'therefore' and 'moreover'; and in Hindi it could refer to fullness, but also to mean 'underlying currents' or a foundational substratum.

On the surface, Tianzhuo's imageries and oeuvres appear to contain contraventions after contraventions, as if they were fundamental flaws. Any form of logic and realities, if it exists at all, are blurred. There is no telling of actual emblems and characters from those created by the artist. In Abrahamic religions, there exist an episode that features a bull sculpture, an animal that symbolizes both power and sacrifice. Cobbled together from gold adornments of Israelites fleeing Egypt, the sculpture was initially intended to quell their worries as Moses, their prophet, was thought to have vanished in his quest to receive God's laws. Almost immediately, pagan rituals, sacrifices, dances and orgies were performed in honour of this newfound signifying totem of god amongst gods. Tianzhuo's manifestations draw us to second-guess, assume, and eventually embrace or be repulsed by the idiosyncratic aesthetics and obscure philosophizing. We sense missing links or chapters, but then, to belief is not necessarily a matter for logic.

Tianzhuo offers allegories of the breakdown in society where blind devotion to mortal desires and a habit of faith and worship-when-convenient are commonplace. His mental projections are constructed in the galleries, or should I say *arena* as theatres, filled with a menagerie of acrobats, androgynous demi-gods, five-eyed blondes, gangster rappers and other outlandish characters on caramel and neon-coloured backgrounds. They are of something uncannily familiar and paradoxically, are as attractive as they are revolting. Driven by his recently found faith in Tibetan

Buddhism, these confrontations and visual overdrive are impressions not dissimilar to traditional Tibetan *thangka* or devotional images. While the *thangkas* are mostly manifestations of 'wrathful deities' in Tibetan Buddhism such as Nagpo Chenpo (Great Black One) or Vajrabhairava (Conqueror of Death), Tianzhuo's are essentially expanded mirrors of today's many realities that albeit all its pomp, is of the *maya*, illusory and gratifyingly self-destructive. These are reflections and magnification of our everyday ridicule, of our contemporary celebrities and heroes, fashion and affectations, all animated as if they are celestial gods and goddesses worthy of praise in a world where we depend on various drugs to remedy and introspect while at other times, unconsciously pandering to violence and wealth.

For Palais de Tokyo catalog, by Khairuddin Hori, published by K11