

Gordon Cheung

Peaceful Retreat

Sep 6 — Oct 12, 2024 | Shanghai

Almine Rech Shanghai is honored to present a solo exhibition of the British-Chinese artist Gordon Cheung in China, *Peaceful Retreat*, from September 6 to October 12, 2024. The exhibition will feature a series of recent mixed-media paintings and installations inspired by Chinese gardens, as well as ceramic sculptures specially made for this exhibition.

The artist starts with the idea of gardens to express as a microcosm, how mountains, water and plants have always been an escape for the burdens of the heart and how garden history reflects when a foreign government takes control. Gordon Cheung has long focused on the relationship between transnational political economics and landscape painting. By combining disruptive innovative technologies—such as AI generation and 3D printing—he explores new ways to express contemporary still life and landscape painting.

Gordon Cheung often collages fragments of the Financial Times onto canvases and window frame works. The Financial Times, which emerged at the start of the first wave of globalization, is reputed for its “Newspaper of Record”. Cheung’s final pieces reveal passages hidden beneath thick paint, expressing the undercurrents of civilizational rise and fall beyond the serene imagery. Cheung extracts symbols of abundance woven by global trade from a detached perspective, reassembling them into psychological landscapes reflecting current affairs.

The paintings displayed in the exhibition feature distant views generated from the 1744 Qianlong Emperor’s imperial album “Forty Scenes of the Yuanmingyuan”. The main images of vases and flowers reference Dutch Golden Age still life painting, while the foreground cityscapes are derived from Google’s 3D mapping data of China’s 40 largest provinces in terms of GDP, rendered into desolate lunar landscapes with spray painted sand. Combining elements from different times and regions, the realistic yet unfamiliar images create a sense of surrealism, seemingly paying homage to the “Jinhuidui” art style that collages imagery of calligraphy and feasting in paintings. Art historian Nancy Berliner describes this as China’s trompe-l’oeil painting style, where the artist’s meticulous depiction of erosion, decay, and fragmented shapes seeks to achieve a convincingly truth and deception collage effect. Cheung’s mountain contours and horizons in his paintings appear to be overexposed by photo-editing software, creating chiaroscuro, a stark contrast to the ground-level views of the city, emphasizing that, paradoxically, the images are joined and disjointed. This aligns with the “Jinghuidui” spirit: dramatically expressing cultural shifts through obliteration and fragmentation. Cheung juxtaposes the seasonal flower features of Dutch Golden Age paintings with AI-generated antiquated images, further detaching the works from the real-time axis to blur with the transcendent historical essence of “majestic grandeur in timelessness” pursued in Chinese literati painting.

The window frame sculpture series, “Szechwan Shop 1750” and “Szechwan 1850” feature patterns similar to those found in “cardboard stones” (mosaic tiles, known as tessera in English) of Hong Kong’s post-war “Tong-Lau” buildings. Originally imported goods, these tiles have recently been embraced by popular culture as nostalgic symbols of Hong Kong. Similarly, Sichuan cuisine, with its intense spiciness and sensory impact uncommon in Western dishes, is seen by Americans as quintessentially Orientalist and exotic. The English title “Szechwan” uses the postal-style romanization common in early 20th-century American Chinatown restaurants, highlighting the disparity in the pace of cultural transmission between the East and the West.

Debuted specifically for this solo exhibition, the work "Eternal Flux" features 3D-printed scholar's rocks, fired in the ceramics capital of Jingdezhen. As Su Shi once said, "the ugly stone unfurls hidden beauty". The disorderly nature of bizarre rock formations is the wellspring that allows literati's boundless creativities to meander through. Since the harnessing of 3D printing technology, rapid prototyping with consumer-grade 3D printers has liberated creativity from cost and technical constraints, allowing previously unimagined forms to materialize rapidly like bamboo shoots after a spring downpour. "Eternal Flux" leverages the technical characteristics of 3D printing to interpret the meditative nature of literati rocks.

Cheung deftly employs the metaphor of landscape garden as a battleground for power struggles: for one, it can be the projection of a frustrated official's longing for a tranquil life in seclusion; for another, it can also be akin to the Old Summer Palace, a lavish expenditure of state resources to showcase the zenith of Qing gardening prowess and the dynasty's imperial vision of prosperity. Furthermore, it can be the garden cities established by colonial sovereigns in the Far East, where, under the pretext of sanitation, they forcefully introduce exotic flora and fauna, thereby crafting an image of the colonial rule as the God-ordained ruler. This fabricated Eden in the East is presented as the manifestation of divine will, with the "benevolent gardener" becoming the ultimate justification for colonial conquest.

The works in *Peaceful Retreat* convey the philosophical tenet of "not seeking perfection, content with the partial" — the paintings hover between the plane and the three-dimensional, akin to Ming-Qing wall vases; the sculptural forms reminiscent of latticed windows, where the intention is by no means "borrowing the scenery", but rather the framing of the blank wall space. The solitary scholar's rock is like a lonely peak, seemingly making room for solitary contemplation. Taking viewers on a contemplative journey, Gordon Cheung never ceases to unsettle and question the inevitability of historical narratives written by the victors. *Peaceful Retreat* invites us to meditate on a garden where the profound fullness of emptiness evokes tranquility with both unfinished sorrow and unbridled anticipation for the future.

— Zoie Yung