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# GORDON CHEUNG

## USING TECHNOLOGY TO EXPLORE HUMANITY

*VAULT* spoke to British-born Chinese artist Gordon Cheung about digital technologies, the sublime in art and the materiality of technology.

WRITTEN by ALISON KUBLER

Artist Gordon Cheung's working process is complex even as the resultant aesthetic is refined and deceptively simple. Cheung graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Painting) in 1998 from Central Saint Martins in London and earned a Master of Fine Arts in 2001 from the Royal College of Art in London. He works with a diverse range of materials including acrylic paint, ink, collage, digital printing and sculptural elements, chosen for their purpose and the project. Cheung often integrates computers, algorithms, 3D printing and modelling programmes into his practice, fusing traditional painting methods with digital printing or manipulation, lending the work a physical and conceptual depth as he traverses a fascinating line between past and present. As Cheung explains, "I aim to explore the ever-evolving relationship between humanity and technology, capturing the essence of our contemporary existence."

**Your work involves an exploration of traditional Chinese subject matter and themes, landscapes for example. How do you approach this looking back to go forward, as it were?**

Looking back is crucial for understanding the roots of your present and, subsequently, for reflecting on how you envision the future. Chinese landscape painting holds significant importance in shaping my identity and understanding who I am. I was born in London, which means I grew up with a hybrid Chinese-Western perspective. For a long time, my primary exposure to landscape painting was within the tradition of the Western sublime.

I recall a visit to Tate Britain in 2002, where I saw the epic and beautiful *American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States, 1820–1880* exhibition.

During that visit, I was struck by a realisation that this genre, or at least one aspect of it, was a form of propaganda. Sublime painting, in its romantic portrayal, conveys an overwhelming sense of nature as an expression of God. These paintings often featured a small figure within the landscape, typically a gentleman or explorer, implying that the land was bestowed upon this discoverer, with little regard for the Indigenous people who inhabited it – who were rarely depicted in the paintings themselves.

These two reference points, Chinese landscape painting and the Western tradition of the sublime, inform the landscape paintings that I create. This is one of the core foundations from which I explore the theme of the rise and fall of civilisations, using technology like computers, algorithms, 3D printing and modelling programmes to layer into the art what I think of as symbols of the modern digital era.

**Your work explores personal and shared histories, and specifically your Chinese-British histories. You have said your that work asks what it means to be human in a world in which history is written by the victors. Can you expand on this?**

When I reflect on the 1997 handover of Hong Kong back to China, I realise that at that time I didn't truly understand what it meant, and I wasn't even familiar with the concept of a colony. Yet, that's precisely what Hong Kong was. My parents are native to Hong Kong, having immigrated in 1968 and 1972, while I was born in London. As a result, my identity has always existed in a state of flux. Unfortunately, my education didn't provide much insight into colonisation, especially Britain's role in taking over and

impacting Hong Kong. The narrative I encountered was mostly negative, with limited exposure to any positive aspects.

Over the years since 1997, I've embarked on a journey to explore the roots of my identity. This exploration has led me to a deeper understanding of how China has evolved and the complex relationship between the West and the East, with colonisation playing a significant role in this history.

In this pursuit, I've aimed to move beyond oversimplified and propagandised narratives, such as the dichotomy of good versus evil or democracy versus communism. Instead, I strive to uncover a more nuanced perception of the reality of these situations, one that looks beyond history written by the victors or a one-sided transmission of historical information, which inevitably reflects the viewpoint of the dominant power over the conquered.

**Your still life works explore the tradition of *memento mori* (I am thinking here of the *New Order* works and their reference to Dutch still life painting) but in relation to contemporary conundrums such as the stock market, for example, a system based on fluctuating algorithms and abstract concepts. Can you talk a little about these works, and how you arrive at the final 'dissolving' images?**

I employ algorithms because, to me, they reflect the modern tools available and symbolise the digital age's increasing reliance on technology. The specific algorithm I use is called pixel sorting. What it does is rearrange pixels according to gradients of light or dark values without overwriting, copying or erasing them. In theory, after reorganising the pixels you could return them to their original image – implying that history



GORDON CHEUNG  
New Order Vase of Flowers  
(after Jan Davidsz de Heem,  
c. 1660), 2022  
giclée on canvas  
120 x 97 cm

Courtesy the artist

“Looking to the future, I believe AI holds great promise for what can be created. Is AI a by-product of global capitalism? In a sense, yes, as many things are intertwined with capitalism, but I don’t view it solely as a pinnacle of capitalism. Instead, I see it as a remarkable human achievement.”



Top to bottom  
GORDON CHEUNG  
*Fragrant Harbour*, 2023  
*Financial Times* newspaper, archival inkjet, acrylic and sand on linen  
135 x 100 x 5 cm  
Courtesy the artist  
GORDON CHEUNG  
*Fragrant Harbour (detail)*, 2023  
*Financial Times* newspaper, archival inkjet, acrylic and sand on linen  
135 x 100 x 5 cm  
Courtesy the artist

Opposite  
GORDON CHEUNG  
*Engraved Moon and Unfolding Clouds (Chongqing)*, 2023  
*Financial Times* newspaper, archival inkjet, acrylic and sand on linen  
150 x 200 x 5 cm  
Courtesy the artist



doesn't repeat but does rhyme. The final 'dissolving' images are arrived at through carefully selecting one of the thousands of altered states the algorithm can create that I choose via one aspect, which is what looks like dragged paint. It is partially in response to Gerhard Richter's blurred paintings, which question fixed points of histories.

The original images used in this particular series, titled *New Order*, are paintings from the Dutch Golden Age, a period roughly 370 years ago, in the collection of the Rijksmuseum. The Dutch Golden Age marked the birth of modern capitalism and witnessed the first recorded economic bubble with 'Tulip-mania', during which tulip bulbs at the peak of the market were selling for the price of a house.

For me, this technique is a way to create a timeline from the birth of capitalism to modernity. Visually represented by the effects of the algorithms on the open-source high resolution photos of Dutch Golden Age paintings, it offers a digital sense of time, evoking a reflection on the fragility of mortality, which resonates with the original genre of still life paintings. These paintings convey the futility of materialism, and were also an expression of the trading power of the Dutch Empire at the time.

Interestingly, though the Dutch Protestant society of that era refrained from openly flaunting the wealth accumulated via their trading prowess, it found its way into the symbolism of these paintings. Additionally, the rise of the East India Company is somewhat mirrored within this genre, reflecting the trade routes they were carving out worldwide. However, it's crucial to acknowledge that these trade routes involved militarisation, colonisation and slavery – which the arts rarely addressed. I aim to shed light on these significant historical aspects by creating meditative spaces through algorithms – a means of questioning histories written by the victors.

**These works also mimic the hand of the artist, the painterly gesture, even as they render it redundant. It strikes me that your work is a sort of push and pull between the hand of the artist and the act of the machine.**

I use an algorithm to reorganise the pixels, aiming for an overall effect that simulates the natural degradation of an image, as I mentioned earlier. It's as if I'm capturing the digital echoes of time. Here's how the algorithm operates: it reorganises pixels based on their light and dark values. In the past, I used to input numerical values

to achieve the desired effect. However, it could take thousands of iterations before reaching a visual state suitable for printing.

Over time, I began to compile all these iterations and combine them into a kind of time-lapse sequence to create video works. This approach allowed viewers to witness the gradual degradation of the image, shifting from light to dark values and then back to normal. In essence, this technique serves as a way to discuss the idea of history repeating or rhyming.

The idea of resembling a painterly gesture is very much on my mind when we create these images. The original images in the *New Order* series are oil paintings, but they also exist as high-resolution photographs of these paintings. I then employ an algorithm to reorganise the pixels in the photograph of an oil painting, resulting in an effect that simulates the smearing of wet oil paint. However, when you examine the surface of the images closely, you'll notice distinct, crisp lines that can only be generated by a computer algorithm, a form of visual art created by technology.

So, in essence, these images exist in an in-between state, appearing both natural and artificial. This ambiguity aligns with one of the overarching themes of my work, which is to contemplate the



human condition within the spaces we have constructed, where the natural and artificial coexist. This, in turn, is rooted within my own identity of being in-between British and Chinese.

**What prompted your incorporation of technology? And how do you use technology to look at materiality? Does technology have its own materiality?**

Returning to my time at Central Saint Martins, when I enrolled in the fine art course for painting I wanted to set myself a philosophical challenge – one that involved painting without using paint. This idea stemmed from the realisation that significant history was unfolding in the moment, particularly with the rise of the internet and the accessibility of mobile phone technology.

I was eager to encapsulate this historical moment, to bear witness to a technological revolution. To achieve this, I adapted my creative approach, seeking instruments, techniques, and processes that could symbolise the new digital era we were entering. This transition was happening just before the turn of the millennium, symbolising progress into the future through this new technology.

Instead of traditional paint, I substituted information, specifically the stock listings from the *Financial Times*. To me, these listings symbolised the global space where the light speed transmission of capital accumulation was shaping utopias and dystopias. I employed various technologies in my work, including computers, photocopying machines and, most recently, algorithms and 3D printing.

Bringing together these processes and techniques was a crucial aspect of conceptual layering in my work. It helped convey that the narratives and subjects I dealt with were inherently linked to the processes, techniques and technology I employed.

Indeed, technology has its own materiality, yielding by-products such as printouts and influencing the visual forms. This is particularly evident in my more recent work with 3D printed objects.

**And within that, what role do you see for AI in art making into the future? Is the triumph of AI a by-product of global capitalism, and how can art find a place for itself within this?**

I believe that, for now, the role of AI in art making is primarily the acceleration of brainstorming. There has been much concern and fear about AI taking over creativity and even humanity, but I don't think we're there yet, or if that will ever be the case. AI is, in essence, an aggregation of human creativity. It's premature to claim that it will replace artists and I think it will be more likely that we end up adapting to the expanded possibilities that AI will open up.

Currently, we are in an intriguing phase in which AI aesthetics are emerging – and how artists and creatives are utilising this tool is extremely exciting. AI expands the boundaries of imagination, and it's remarkably inspiring to witness the forms it can generate, which might not have been conceived otherwise.

Looking to the future, I believe AI holds great promise for what can be created. Is AI a by-product of global capitalism? In a sense, yes, as many

things are intertwined with capitalism, but I don't view it solely as a pinnacle of capitalism. Instead, I see it as a remarkable human achievement. We are stepping further into the threshold of realising true sentient AI, which many have sought, but at this point it remains a valuable tool for exploring creative ideas – just as many disruptive technologies have done before. The computer and the internet, just to name a couple, have revolutionised humanity let alone just creativity. It's essential to recognise that humans, including artists and designers, remain the editors, improvers and adapters of AI's output, with the power to align it with human purpose and thought. **V**

Gordon Cheung will show at ART021 Shanghai Contemporary Art Fair, from November 9 to 12 with Almine Rech, Shanghai, China.

Gordon Cheung shows with Cristea Roberts Gallery, London, Almine Rech, Paris and New York, Edel Assanti, London, Richard Koh Gallery, Singapore, and Galerie Du Monde, Hong Kong.

cristearoberts.com  
alminerech.com  
edelassanti.com  
rkfineart.com  
galeriedumonde.com  
gordoncheung.com

Above  
GORDON CHEUNG  
*Home*, Installation view,  
Edel Assanti, London, UK, 2020  
Courtesy the artist

Opposite  
GORDON CHEUNG  
*Sleeping Dragon*, 2023  
*Financial Times* newspaper,  
wood glue, and polystyrene on  
thermoplastic polymer  
265 x 95 x 70 cm  
Courtesy the artist