

ART & DESIGN



Eastern Promise

JACKY TSAI BRINGS CULTURE CLASH TO THE MASSES

In a world that appears ever-decreasing in size, the distance between China and England seems to be getting smaller and smaller by the year. On the surface the culture, the arts, the very history between the East and the West couldn't be further apart. But it's the spaces deeper down that interest 'collage artist' Jacky Tsai, whose exhibition *Eastern Orbit* is on display at London's Scream Gallery from May 16. He tells AIR: "I'm pretty much looking for the common parts in between the Chinese part and the Western parts. Otherwise you cannot combine them together. What I'm looking for is obviously bright colours, very detailed finishes. All the Western arts and the Chinese arts are very detailed and very delicate, that's what I appreciate most."

'If you want to be a pop artist, you have to be in London'

Tsai is better placed than most to comment. Born and raised in Shanghai, he moved to London in 2006 to study at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, and has been there ever since. "Shanghai is where I come from," says the artist, "Everything – the food, culture – is amazing. It's always a very cosmopolitan city. In terms of London, the way I feel is that the art culture is incredible. If you want to be a pop artist, you have to be in London. But Shanghai, for me, the most amazing part is the way it combines the culture of the west and the east together. It's like my art. Shanghai is a big piece of my art."

The influence is clear to see in the pieces on display in *Eastern Orbit*. The bright colours, intricate detailing and materials (like porcelain and paper) that each piece

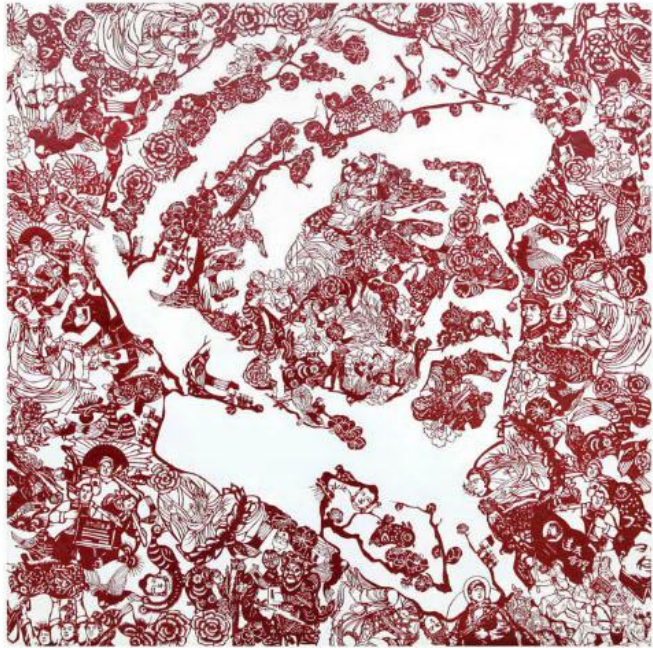
contains is straight out of Shanghai, but often the subject matter, dealing in human existentialism and industrial themes, has a clearly Western pop-art sensibility.

Tsai got his big break in 2008, when the English enfant terrible of fashion, Alexander McQueen, picked up his floral skull motif. Tsai recalls: "I don't think I was really working with him, I was just on placement there. It was an accident. I didn't expect to create such an important piece, and when I finished my three-month placement I didn't realise this floral skull would be a classic piece." Tsai's feelings on the wave of copycats and imitators that came next are dripping with sarcasm. "I think it's an amazing feeling to see all the different brands doing the similar copy-cat pieces. I saw ten or fifteen different floral skulls. It's such a great feeling for me..."

The skull motif so beloved of McQueen is an important symbol for Tsai, and is an emblem he returns to again and again, including in Eastern Orbit. "Chinese people are afraid of skulls, they see skull imagery as pretty scary," Tsai explains, "That's why when the floral skull was so successful, every

time I create my skull, it's a process of overcoming my fears so I want to create different, beautiful skulls, rather than a skull that will scare people. Every time I create something beautiful, to discover the life, that's what I'm looking for. Also, the floral skull motif represents beauty and decay. I realised how to do the beauty and decay motif, in a beautiful way."

Fashion and art are intertwined in Tsai's career. As well as creating works of pop-beauty with lacquer, porcelain and paper, many designs are committed to clothing as well. Jacky says: "All my art can be essentially transformed into the fashion platform. Fashion never influenced my art, but my art influenced my fashion a lot. The way I do my fashion brand is pretty much the same with what I'm doing in art, so I treat



Images courtesy of Scream gallery, London and Jacky Tsai.

my fashion as an extension of my art."

The UK's pop art scene is enjoying a period of success not seen anywhere since Warhol's New York in the 1960s. And in fact, as it would be impossible not to be, Tsai readily admits to being influenced by the archetypal pop-artist of the modern age. "Commercially I really like Andy Warhol or Takashi Murakami, the way they work is amazing," Tsai enthuses, "They are such talented artists in a commercial way. Aesthetically, my hero is Roy Lichtenstein. He is absolutely amazing, he influenced me a lot. I went to the exhibition at the Tate Modern two or three times. He was such a big idol of mine."

There is still much of humanity to explore, from Shanghai to London and everywhere in between. For now, the plan is to entertain. "This exhibition is for everyone," says the artist, "If you love Western pop art and Chinese traditional art, you should come in and say hello to me. I'm open to everyone, this show is very important to me. Just my art being mature enough to show in a very good gallery is important. I'm confident it will be one of the most amazing shows of the year."

