

right down to the creative part of my brain, connecting me with the very essence of my writing. Somehow, the solid and satisfying rhythm steadies me, whilst the repetitive reflex simultaneously regulates me. Inexplicably, the combination of these things tends to produce more meaningful work. Many say that the formulaic type produced from a typewriter brings more authority to the written word, with machines demanding ‘obedience’ from the composer. And the immediate, sensory feedback (and lack of distraction) acts as a further bond between machine and typist.

I remember back to the early days of the tedious modem dial-up: distracting enough, but less disturbing than hopping from one online window to the next, where an hour can pass without any effective writing having been achieved. With my GC, by comparison, things are more simplistic — with just one font between my ideas and the paper on which they are recorded.

Today’s obsession with self-publishing, blogs and magalogues shows the increasing interest in ‘I’, the author. This year, Google will introduce a new content-based algorithm as its’ primary form of search engine, meaning that the written word will become key in terms of reputation and brand recognition. It follows that there will be an increase in the number of people wanting to see their ideas disseminated on the web, as a way of boosting their rankings and popularity. Voice recording and apps that type as you speak will become the norm, making it easier than ever to be published. However, in the race to spill out our ideas and cultural commentary, will we lose any sense of reflection before pressing the publish button?

The paradigm shifts of these modern technological times have also seen the rise of platforms such as Twitter as ways of recording ideas and thoughts. Notwithstanding the immediate publishing element, is the process of recording thoughts in a limited number of characters at all similar to the experience the traditional typist enjoys? The ability to enjoy visual and syntactic ‘arrangements’ is certainly an attribute shared by both mediums, capturing the essence of a mood or sentiment immediately; would Hidalgo Moya have approved of Twitter, one wonders?

One unavoidable side-effect of composing anything on a typewriter is the way it forces the writer to make advanced assessments of what punctuation might be required: going back to re-insert a comma, semicolon or exclamation mark is far from easy! One has to think carefully about how to control the flow and meaning of any typescript.

And the writer is also forced to approach a blank piece of paper much as a graphic designer would. But does the

traditional typist, through the medium of a machine, become an ‘artist’? One person who has is Dorset-born, London-based Keira Rathbone, who uses either a 1960s Silver Reed SR100 or a Czech-built Consul to produce her portraits and images by painstakingly positioning letters, numbers and symbols — and who began by feeling a need to type, but not knowing what to write.

Similarly, the typewriter is the tool of choice for many a poet keen to create ‘poem-pictures’. Much in the same way that a musician has rhyme and rhythm, the typewriter’s rigidity and space precision offer a guide as to where breath, pauses, syllable suspensions and wording juxtapositions should occur for best effect.

So, pace and space... just my type :-)

EAST SIDE STORY



Thanks to Pictures and Light in Stoke Newington and Hoxton Arch Studio

Words_Melissa Digby-Bell



Poker Skull (King of Hearts), 2013
Double-sided, 7 colour screen
print on museum board, die cut
130 x 98 x 7 cm



OPPOSITE
The Sun Rises in the East, 2014
Lacquer carving on wood panel
120 x 120 cm

“I wanted people to see the beauty in decay, and to comment on the proximity of life and death.”

It's hard to keep up with Jacky Tsai. On top of qualifications in illustration, graphic and web design, his busy CV also boasts a successful stint working alongside the late British fashion designer Alexander McQueen — and now, aged just thirty, the self-described collage artist is set to unveil his first solo exhibition at the Scream Gallery on London's Eastcastle Street. Reflecting his eclectic career, Tsai's practice encompasses a broad range of imagery, techniques and media — a diversity that can be traced back to his globetrotting roots. (As he himself acknowledges, “My extremely mixed background definitely helped me to produce art differently.”)

Born in Shanghai, Tsai moved to London in 2006 to study at Central Saint Martins — and has lived and worked in the capital ever since. He admits the distance has allowed him to have a slightly romanticised view of his own culture; “It gives you a different angle to look at where you're originally from. Especially in a Western country; every day you receive a new message, a new culture. I like the contrast. But sometimes I look for the common points, where all the elements are in harmony.”

One such point in Tsai's own career came when he was offered the opportunity to work on pattern design at Alexander McQueen's Clerkenwell studio. It was whilst there, in 2007, that he created the now-iconic floral skull — a motif which has since become synonymous with the McQueen brand, and which cemented the young designer's reputation as a producer of excitingly innovative work. As well as articulating McQueen's obsession with the intersection between beauty and death, the image perfectly captures the core of Tsai's aesthetic: the fusion of East and West. The skull has a long tradition of use in Western culture, from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to Dutch still-life paintings to modern-day Hell's Angel iconography, whilst the intricate rendering style Tsai employed — flooding the skull shape with blossoming flowers, branches and birds — references the traditional Chinese painting style known as *guóhuà*. Since then, the motif has dominated Tsai's work. As he explains, “Many Chinese people are afraid of skulls — and, to a certain extent, so am I — but the skull image has become trendy in

the Western world, especially in fashion, and I was interested in this difference in perception in the East and the West. I wanted to see if I could change the attitude in the East towards the skull, so I tried to represent it in a beautiful way by using images of nature such as flowers, butterflies and birds to transform this previously 'scary' symbol. I wanted people to see the beauty in decay, and to comment on the proximity of life and death.” His thoughts echo those of Damien Hirst, who garnered widespread publicity in 2007 with *For The Love Of God*, a platinum skull adorned with Bentley & Skinner diamonds — one of his most recognised and powerful works. At the time, Hirst's rationale for the piece's startling, opulent beauty was simple; “I just thought, ‘What can you pit against death?’”

When I meet with Tsai, he is wearing a T-shirt with one of his skull designs emblazoned across the front — part of a limited-edition mens' T-shirt collection he produced exclusively for Harvey Nichols last year. It is this shift between fashion and art that really sets Tsai apart from his contemporaries. And yet, to him, it's a straightforward move; “My art can be naturally transformed onto the fashion platform, so why not make fashion as an extended field of my art?”

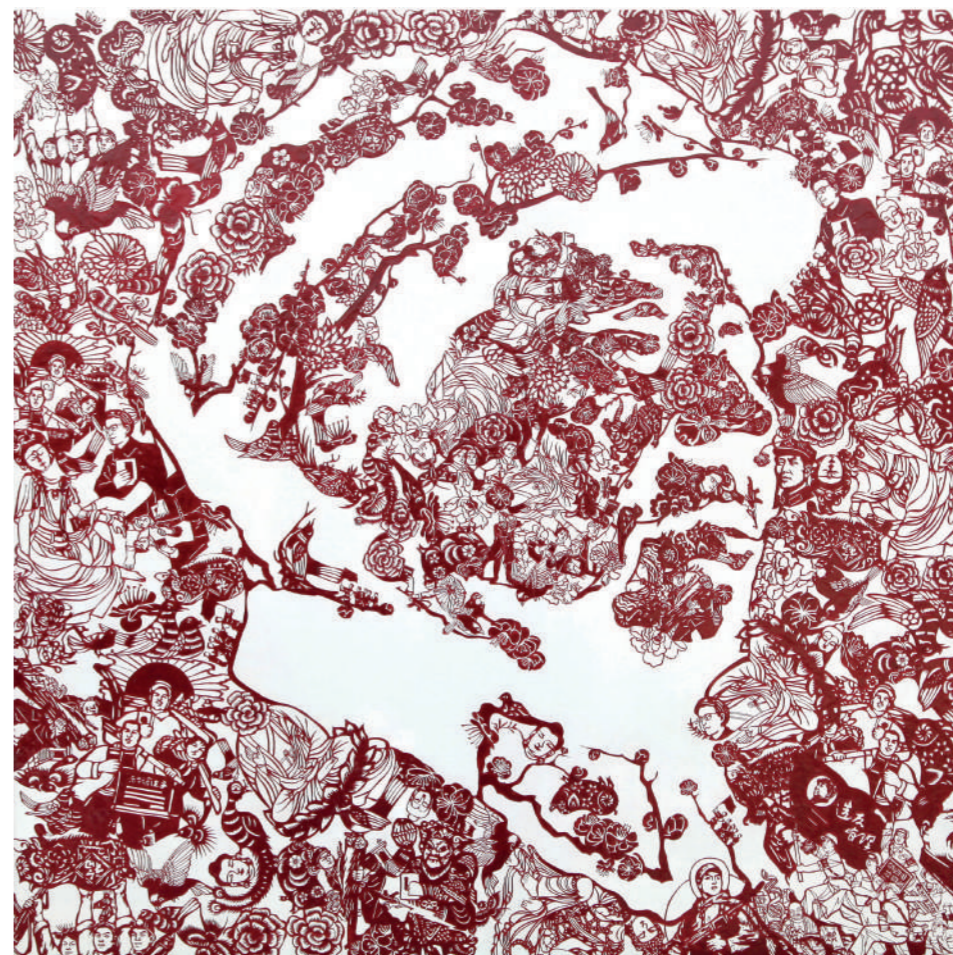
But for now, it's the upcoming Scream show that's getting Tsai excited — and it's shaping up to be another defining moment in his career. As he flicks through work-in-progress images on his iPhone, the intricacy and craftsmanship of the processes involved becomes clear — amongst them traditional Chinese techniques like lacquer carving, silk embroidery and hand-painted porcelain. “I want to create an engaging dialogue between traditional Eastern craft and a Western Pop aesthetic. Each piece takes a few months to make, so the show will be a long time coming,” he explains, “I'm combining several different techniques to create my 'fusion' art.”

Tsai is on a mission to preserve, reinvigorate and promote his country's unique craft traditions. The exhibition will also include Su Xiu embroidery on silk (a technique which originated some 2,000 years ago in the city of Suzhou, near Shanghai), and *cloisonné* — an ancient decorative process using

vitreous enamel and metal, which first emerged in Western Asia before being adopted by China in the fourteenth century. *Tihong*, or carved lacquer, forms another of the exhibition's central techniques. The process was first invented more than 1600 years ago, and then blossomed during the Ming and Qing Dynasties; it involves applying dozens of layers of lacquer over delicate engravings, with each layer having to dry naturally before applying the next to minimise cracking. “It is an extremely costly and time-consuming

technique,” Tsai concedes, “and the complicated manufacturing process and high production costs result in very high prices. Traditionally, only the royal family or wealthy businessmen could afford them — but after the establishment of the People's Republic, the vast working class had little demand for such luxuries. Young people now are reluctant to learn the skills of lacquer-carving, and many elders in the business have passed away. Nowadays, there are only about twenty trained craftsmen left in China who have this skill. This ancient craft is on the brink of extinction.”

It is in Tsai's combination of his country's rich legacy of craftsmanship with iconic Western imagery, though, that the artist's collision of East and West really comes to life: in one piece, what appears to be a traditional Chinese landscape comes littered with images of superheroes and comic book soundbites. (It's no surprise that Tsai cites American pop artist Roy Lichtenstein as one of his major influences.)



Destroy the Four Olds, 2014
Lacquer carving on wood panel
120 × 120 cm

A profile of Chairman Mao is intricately rendered with lacquer-carved peony blossoms, and figures of Chinese socialists are juxtaposed with images of the Buddha. Wildlife scenes are presented against a backdrop of ships and machinery — hinting at the consequences of industrialisation, and revealing the artist's foreboding about the rapid advances that have occurred in Asia in recent years. Alongside the skull, the mandala

is another frequent motif in Tsai's work: deriving from the Sanskrit for 'circle', this ancient symbol was traditionally used as a tool for spiritual teaching, and a focus for meditation. Rendered in vivid Pop colours, Tsai uses the icon to juxtapose images of Las Vegas slot machines with Chinese workers. Here, his focus is on provoking a debate on the seesaw between traditional culture and spirituality on the one hand, and the intensifying progression of capitalism,

globalisation and consumerism on the other: a crisis looming in Asia, but one which may also bequeath a damaging legacy to the West.

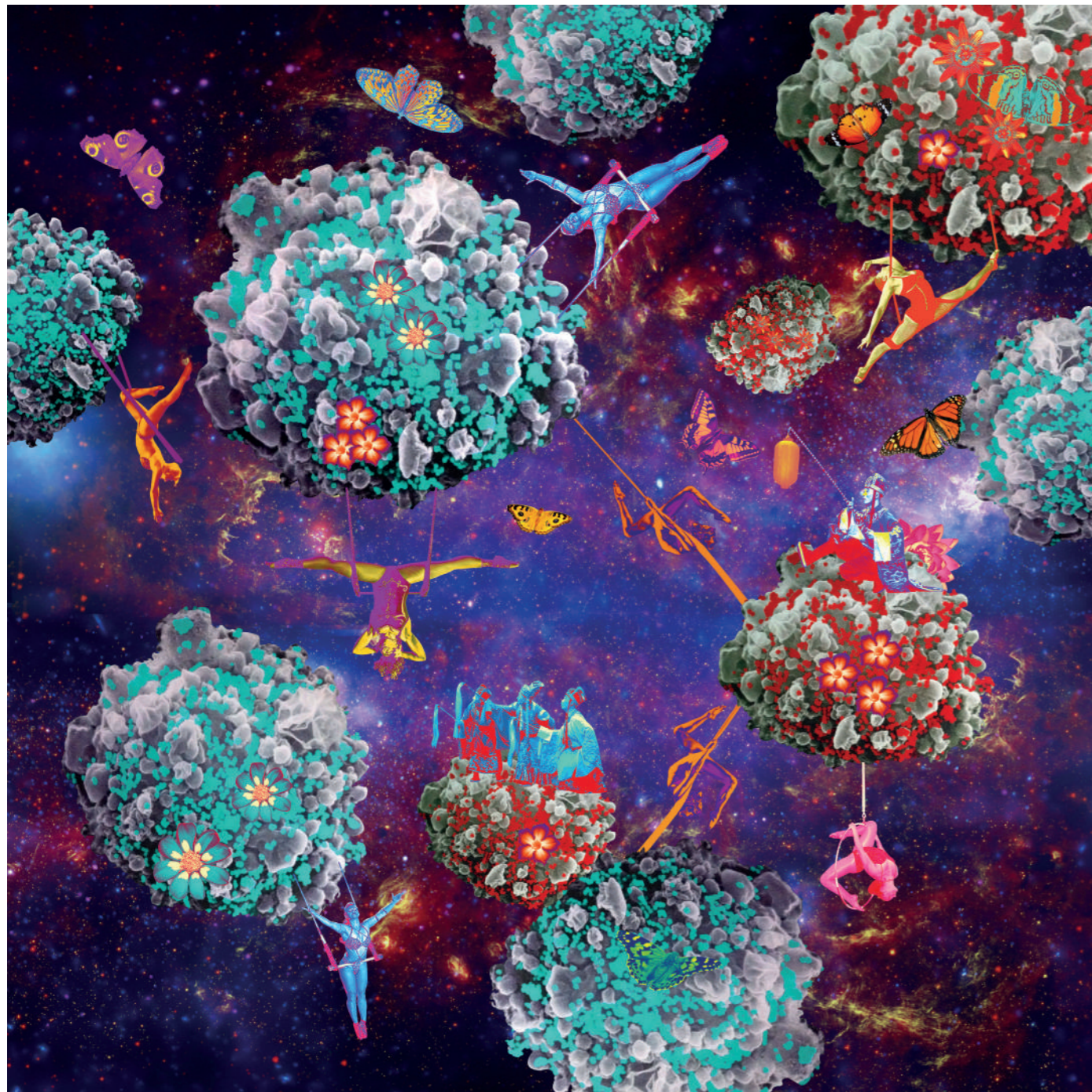
For Tsai himself, though, the future's looking bright. Having exhibited in Asia and Europe, and experienced both Eastern and Western cultures first-hand, he has a unique vantage point to explore the rich labyrinth of connections and disparities between the two worlds. He's moving fast, though: catch him if you can.



Long Live Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, 2014
Lacquer carving on wood panel
120 x 120 cm

OPPOSITE
Pow! Pow! Pow!, 2014
Lacquer carving on wood panel





Human Interactive, 2014
Su Xiu embroidery on silk
110 × 110 cm

TITLE PAGE
Petrol Rainbow, 2014
Su Xiu embroidery on silk
100 × 100 cm

