

BORROWING FROM BATMAN¹

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Chen Fei's paintings *look* as if they should be easy to interpret, certainly as if they are easy to read. Bright color, clean lines, and scenes reminiscent of storyboards for a screenplay imply that all it takes is a glance or a skim of the gaze across the surface of these paintings to compute the elements they contain. Perhaps, but there is more, for their visual simplicity belies an unexpected, disconcerting psychological depth.

The analogy to a storyboard is not misplaced; Chen Fei creates paintings to function in the manner of a single frame from a comic strip that is intended to be self-contained and self-explanatory. As the expression of a young artist, these compositions are, in one sense, as straightforward as they seem and therefore it is not necessary for them to be accompanied by excessive textual baggage. With this in mind, I'll keep to the point. Art, after all, was once believed to speak for itself alone, as in the examples of grand history paintings and religious narratives that functioned as pictorial story telling for an age that knew little literacy in a formal, bookish sense. Today, we are thoroughly word-literate and, in terms of pictorial literacy, we read through a far greater volume of visual images each day than our ancestors could comprehend. We also look at a great deal more art. Why is it then that a significant volume of artworks today is unable to stand alone outside of time and place and socio-historical and cultural context without an accompanying author's statement, or the confidence- and credibility-affirming presence of a critical text? One might argue that, having dispensed with Modernist values, contemporary artworks possess a form, content or theoretical dimension that relies on referents other than the obvious ones, but, conversely, that does not make Chen Fei's painting any less contemporary or less complex. Still, at risk of writing myself out of a job, you do not need this text to understand his paintings in all their myriad nuances. With the clarity and precision of the reality-based artistic illusions the paintings contain, they are accessible to anyone who gives a moment's pause beyond that skim of the gaze to discover the delightful humor and equally acerbic attitude the artist brings to these descriptive vignettes from life.

In the context of contemporary art in China, where such pictorial clarity and precision is almost a standard of painting set by the nation's academies, Chen Fei's expressions may still give the impression of being illustrative. They are, however, not illustrations in the sense that the art world demeans illustration as a sub-category of creative expression one degree separate from "art." These paintings illustrate life with deft accuracy. At close quarters, the smooth surface—where all is graphic flatness and neatly outlined form—gives way to a range of unexpected, sardonic, brash, and pathetic even, detail, which is lost to the reductive nature of the print process, exacerbated by the habitually reduced scale of catalogue illustrations. The actual paintings are meticulous objects, executed with great care and attention to detail, and can be several months in the process of completion. This example of what we might term "slow art" is achieved at odds with the enforced pace of output under which many successful contemporary artists find themselves working today. It tempers Chen Fei's output to less than a dozen paintings a year, and while he himself would prefer this pace to be less protracted—ideas come faster than he is able to explore and execute them—thus far, he acquiesces to the dictates of the chosen approach.

Chen Fei's meticulous graphic style is not the anal extreme of a rigorous academy training that bestowed upon its carrier a deft hand and no ambition beyond seeking to prove its meritorious degree of skill over and again. It is an approach developed through practice and preference. Chen Fei painted from a young age, as many artists do, but failed to pass the entrance examination for the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing. As a result, he chose to go to the Beijing Film Academy to study screenwriting—Chen Fei is "a devoted movie buff," especially of cult movies. Yet, at the Film Academy, he still spent all his time painting. And watching movies.

Provided with this background insight, the range of formative experience that informs Chen Fei's

1 An allusion to a description of Chen Fei's methodology for the painting *Xiongxiong's Ambition*, in Sun Dongdong, "Chen Fei: Independent of His Time," published by Distanz, Berlin 2015, p.5.

art today begins to emerge. In 2008, for example, he produced a monumental six-meter-long painting titled *To Remember Our Comrades*. It seats several hundred classic horror film villains in densely packed rows in what looks like a school year photograph.² He can name every one of these characters and the cinematic vehicles that brought them fame. It may also be true that Chen Fei is a natural scenographer; after all, to judge by the narrative coding of the carefully constructed scenes, these flat, spectral paintings can be imagined as film stills, which the imagination extends with ease using all the cues the artist provides. As paintings, they almost have an almost classical sensibility, one that Chen Fei undercuts with a stylistic turn derived from mid-twentieth-century American comic books. The resultant effect is absolutely of this age; paintings that are wholly contemporary in their coat of bright, Pantone color brought a cinematic blue-screen and CGI approach to reality; these impossible, yet highly plausible scenarios are brought to life courtesy of a conscious crafting across the pictorial space, which makes no attempt to conceal the joins where figures, taken from one image or backdrop, are transposed, one onto another, at the whim of the artist. As viewers, we acknowledge this, but it in no way impedes our received impression of the authenticity of the moment that is unfolding. Chen Fei is inventing fantasies, but of a familiarly real form.

If Chen Fei treats each composition as if it were a scene from a film, then deciding what characters to paint is like casting a slew of actors. Just as many directors work well with particular actors or stock types, Chen Fei works with a largely set cast of characters that appear on rotation in the paintings; a young girl (who plays a dual role of pure maiden and defiant individual); a John Doe who is also a stand-in for the artist; a horse and a dog, the latter bearing remarkable resemblance to the artist's now thirteen-year-old pet; and a host of skeletal figures and fizzing, eye-popping landscapes. Regular pictorial motifs also include: sunbursts, rainbows, and starry night skies; a plethora of expansive tattoos, bodily gestures, and attitudes, there to signal an underlying sexual energy and tension. The 2013 painting *Hornet* seems to parallel the aura begun in the composition *Spring in the Factory*, completed the previous year; it pivots on complex drives and desires, and unwanted attention. In *Hornet*, the figure of the girl (here, halfway between the purity of *Spring in the Factory* and the consenting kitten in *Bad Uncle* coming up) is shown making a phone call in a corner store. Here, the artist-as-shopkeeper leans, in pseudo-casual fashion, with a hint of aggression, over the counter. There's nothing immediately untoward in his state of undress within a local context. Storekeepers dress like that in China in the heat of the summer, but the sense of menace in the posture is perfectly judged. The titular hornet is a reference to the trouble brewing, the nest being stirred up; said nest visible in the top of the painting on the ceiling of the shop. The girl's telephone call is surely clandestine. She is outwardly nonchalant in expression, but her posture shows her in thrall to the conversation, the intimacy that only she is receiving; a telltale finger twists the telephone cord. The shopkeeper's tension is palpable; the intensity of his stillness invoked in the forgotten cigarette burned almost entirely to ash. A bucket of pig intestines placed full center at the bottom of the painting, right before the viewer's eyes, speaks of the knotted gut he is experiencing as he watches her so lost to him, so oblivious of the devotion that is offered by his presence, that radiates from it. Or is it merely lust? Directly above the box, on a table is a brilliant sunshine yellow container of sweets, with the legend "Suck..."

An encounter with a Chen Fei painting is likely to evince an instinctive wince, or a smirk depending on the viewer's age, gender, and sexual persuasion. Shame. Hatred. Impotence, ennui, despair. A certain hostility. These emotions suffuse the paintings. More, they radiate from them, vibrating in the air that surrounds them, in that space cultural critic Walter Benjamin famously christened the work's aura. Chen Fei's painting possesses this aura in great magnitude. In this phase of his painting he plays with this force, tripping with some bravura along the uncomfortably fine line between mutual consent and unwanted harassment. *Stepfather*, from 2013, has the artist in the titular role, proffering the supposed stepdaughter a hotdog. The staple food of a teenager maybe, and in China, still considered a special treat rather than a daily purchase. So, this might appear to be a nice, "fatherly" gesture. The undisguised joke is that the "dog" is his penis. In some warped imagination it must seem like a good idea, a cunning seduction, but there is nothing seductive about the proposition. Just the rather amusing notion that people don't usually

2 Star Gallery text introducing Chen Fei.

suck a hotdog—they bite with relish. It seems as if Chen Fei is suggesting that the stepfather actually *wants* to be punished for his misplaced affections. By this subtle means, Chen Fei perfectly captures the aura of seduction, sedition, deceit, and implied incest in the juxtaposition of the stepfather's loosened bathrobe and the twin cherries on the plate placed in front of the stepdaughter who sits uneasy in her school tracksuit.

The theme of sexual dalliance continues in *Lychee*, 2015, a sour humor brought to the illicit encounter between two workers on the production line of a state-of-the-art automated car plant. (There is an echo of J.G. Ballard's *Crash*, in the shape of the 1996 movie made by David Cronenberg; the sexual charge associated with danger versus the clinical ambiance of the machine that conflates intercourse with fetishism.) Where lovers might more usually be depicted snatching an illicit moment in the depths of nature, in this painting, in the depths of the automated assembly line, a couple is seen post-coital. She seems to be sleeping, but something in his posture makes you sense that she just might be pretending; perhaps as the kindest means to gloss over a bout of male impotence. Why say this? After all, the male has the biggest pair of balls imaginable, which are almost invisible, but unmistakable, in a reproduction in the actual painting, the eye guided toward them by a spotlight subtly placed in the lower left-hand corner. As Chen Fei says, just because a guy is well endowed doesn't mean he has it under control all of the time. The "mechanics" of the setting speaks of a "going through the motion" devoid of pleasure or of any emotion at all. The cool tone of the palette used for this painting speaks volumes about the message embedded here.

In the content of these paintings Chen Fei might be suggesting that unnatural desires are fine as long as they are not acted upon. In one work he makes specific reference to the shift in meaning and import that can take place for actions that are, in one situation, cool and in the next, discomfiting. *Bad Uncle—To Michelangelo Antonioni*, 2010, is a pastiche of the famous image of the British photographer David Bailey as a young photographer, then the talk of swinging sixties London town, straddled over a model being photographed. Then, it was all good, innocent fun. The image was transformed in the Antonioni film *Blow Up* (1966), which imbued the role of photographer, and the raw but healthy enthusiasm for beautiful women, with a disturbing layer of voyeurism in a tale that tangled photography with aggressive sexual intent and murder. Here, the nuance of lurking danger is further promulgated in the person of the "bad uncle."

What may mark the last of this sequence of sexually driven narratives is *Un-cooperation* (2015). Here, Chen Fei presents a typical scene in a not-so-typical karaoke club. A boy and a girl, all the attributes of a good night on the table, but they are separated by an ugly mass of meat that divides them and the pictorial space, the composition. It is there to accentuate the distance between them—one that is intellectual, practical—and an imbalance of desire. In such karaoke clubs girls are bought temporarily for the right price, but that doesn't mean they can be owned. Touching the body doesn't mean connecting with the mind—quite the opposite. For this reason, there might as well be a side of pork between them: it's an ugly transaction. The salubrious image of the usual KTV is gently mocked here in the heavy, baroque, flocked wallpaper redolent of the painting style of Kehinde Wiley—a certain contemporary reference. All is surface.

That Chen Fei is a male artist is obvious. He is obsessed with his manhood, and most obviously with his penis. *Everybody Loves Gustav Courbet* (2010), a parody of Courbet's *Origin of the World* using male genitalia—his, to judge by his appearance in other of his paintings, like the *Classical Self-Portrait* (2014), after master painters, and *Big Fine Art* (2014), with an all-American family staring up in wonder at his manhood, as if he were on the side of Mount Rushmore. Chen Fei delights in mocking morality and political correctness with a degree of ambiguity that is never really clarified. He is also happy to mock himself. One work from the *Youth Series* (2010), subtitled *Male*, shows the artist in underpants and tattoos, in slouched, three-quarter profile. A cigarette hangs on his lips, giving him the air of a character from *Trainspotting*. This is the artist wearing his heart on his sleeve, literally at times, as he is: unvarnished; an honest portrait of the psychological landscape of an unapologetically male brain. Chen Fei paints only what he loves, things dominated by references to the times, to *his* times, which include television dramas, song lyrics, influential peers and icons. Inspired by one peer, *Life is Porn* (2015), had the legend "goodbye, adieu," scrawled in white characters across it, echoing the moment of ejaculation that we can all imagine from looking at the painting. Goodbye to what, we can only guess; Chen Fei is not quite so obvious in

his delivery. The farewell is maybe a lament to seed spilt on infertile ground, but equally is the perfect, punkish parody of “The End,” both as phrase and the final scene of countless movies, which rest on a utopian optimism for the future, even following devastating adventures that amount to an apocalypse. That glorious sunset sky, with its “happily ever after” message, works so well against the aura of desolation or alienation that is embodied in this figure of the solitary male on a rooftop looking out to a non-entity landscape. The oncoming night speaks not of pleasures, but of further isolation. There is only sadness in those shadows.

These are, perhaps, not paintings for grown-ups . . . but they do adapt in uncanny ways to the age and experience of the viewing eye. Therein lies their echo of classicism, which is why Chen Fei can equally be read as being rather mature for his age. In present-day parlance, he is also quite the metrosexual guy. He lives in an intelligently decorated house, its design scheme a conscious blend of cool and comfort. He loves his dogs, and is comfortable speaking of this home as a prepared nest for married life and children. The first dream failed him. But there will be others. Grasping that illustrates how the subjects he brings to his paintings are old, as in age-old, human. This makes the emotional timbre with which they are imbued convincingly real, which is curious, for the works are so obviously constructed. Again, Chen Fei makes no pretense of assembling elements from different sources on a single picture plane. The canvas is a cleanly managed facade for some unsavory truths about the human countenance: ambition, desire, frustration, self-interest. To date, as of 2015, his work has been fairly autobiographical; the girl was *the* girl in his life for a while. In *The Romance of the Mute* (2013) the girl holds his penis, a gesture that is intimate, but that is here devoid of eroticism; she is being kind, comforting. He senses the romance is over; then one day, she is gone. *There Will Be a Day to See You Again* (2013) expresses a genuine state of sadness at the inevitable parting. His ambitions were perhaps too great for this romance, a failing envisioned in *Scale the Heights of Art* (2015), which shows a (the?) young couple looking at the epitome of romance, Hollywood. Not the sign on the hills, but the Paramount Film Company logo, a band of shining stars arcing over the mountain range. It is as if he is saying both “wow!” to the aura of the stars (literally and metaphorically), as well as suggesting the extraordinary life that awaits the couple on their journey together. From their clothing, they like young urban warriors trying to find their way in the world. Travelers in the cold, but, yet, look at the pure, brilliant, white, mountain pea . . . This is the romance of dreams held by two people together, like two hearts beating as one. There is, too, an underlying lament in the circle of stars, like the diamonds which are the girl’s proverbial best friend, just there, just within and without of reach, waiting for her to step up to the plate. The tragedy here is like a Greek tragedy; she is not going to step up. The Fates have decreed. She might be blinded by the light, but in search of her own star that will lead them to separate paths.

The Day is Yet Long (2015) is the denouement of the recent year’s work and of the series of vignettes and scenarios that focused on this period of Chen Fei’s life. Being informed of this working through of personal experiences is not, of itself, enlightening for viewers, but the private landscape of his life experiences certainly fueled the emotional timbre of these paintings. *The Day is Yet Long* presents the artist in the nominal guise of a police officer nonchalantly resting a leg on the barrier to the lake. This stance is itself redolent of the ambiguity of intent: adjudication, prevention, control, or just hanging with the locals. The “officer” gazes out across the water with nothing apparently on his mind – where “the day is long”, the implication is that he has all the time in the world to wait on her acquiescence. But this only heightens the hint of a non-neutral relationship with the girl. With his back to us, she faces forward, but steadily refuses to look at us, or to engage with anything outside of herself. The entire emotion of the painting finds its peak in the brilliant detail of her right big toe, raised upward, as if flipping a bird to the police, but also in pure irritation at his presence and her predicament. It manages to convey defiance, not resignation. Chen Fei gives a hint of the action by describing her as a petty panhandler caught by the police. She is poised to have her wares confiscated, unless . . . Every little detail brings the focus back to the tension between the two, to that big toe . . .

Here is the undertone of morality similar to that which underscores the comic enterprise and Chen Fei’s narratives. Batman’s Gotham is a place of crime and justice, good and bad, a place where hero and heroine cannot be together, forever held apart by forces of the age, the place, or simply forces of right and wrong that are not always on opposite sides of the fence. This is the realm of Romeo and Juliet, of love

gone wrong, of impossible love, of unrequited love. Because it is “comic,” life goes on. There is always a next installment, a new game on, and so the hero might carry a scar, but he’s man enough to get over it and not look back. Another story clocked up to experience, rolling off the surface of a man made of Teflon. This is pretty much the message embedded in the ultra-smooth surface of the paintings.

For Chen Fei, the bad taste that we might at times sense in the visual elements of the works is intentional. It is also an element of a great deal of contemporary painting, produced by a generation that has emerged in the early part of the twenty-first century. It is not exclusive to Chinese painters. To judge by the two compendiums Phaidon published on painting, between *Vitamin P* in 2002 and *Vitamin P2* in 2012 a shift took place in the activity, goal, and understanding of painting from modern to contemporary, as mapped in the examples each volume contains. The sense that Chen Fei is fully aware of the shifting ground beneath art is evidenced in the volume of art by other artists with which he surrounds himself. He is something of a collector; at least, he has a rather impressive collection of works by artists of this period, ones of similar age but of a wide variety of approaches. He also has a great eye. The works are each fine examples of the respective artists’ practice, often from the early years, when they were starting out, but when the work was pure, direct, and felt. This process of being engaged with the art being made around him, of artists experimenting and working in various media is indicative of his own enquiring mind. The studio home full of anime, of limited edition toys and models. So, he is a bit of a Peter Pan, tied to the fantastic imaginings of youth, yet he is mature. His home, like his paintings, is not without style, and the emotion brought to both is genuine.

Chen Fei’s paintings are executed with a precision and technical skill that feels effortless and resists becoming mechanical. In this era of contemporary painting discussions of skill are almost anomalies; it is the story to which one must look. If it is life that is sought, then these paintings certainly deliver a dose of reality. Do I like them? One might ask if any painting today is created to be liked. Chen Fei’s paintings are no more or less likable than any other overt image of truth that an artist deems worthy of expressing. Again, they do their job extraordinarily well. As a criterion, “like” is both overrated and a rather worthless value judgment, too subjective to be relevant. More important is how Chen Fei’s compositions raise all manner of questions that brook no easy answer and, thus, how long and irritatingly they remain in the mind, like a skittishly punchy lyric from a favorite indie ballad.