




New British Painting





THE VEXED relationship between art and nature has in recent years been thrown into confusion by the arrival of a virtual reality that has come to us through the creation of cyberspace. It is easy to imagine that this new reality was the result of the invention of computers and electronic communications, but it is worth considering whether virtual reality may have actually preceded the digital age. Paul Virilio has argued that throughout history, advances in technology create greater speed – both in travel and communications – in which our perception of space is collapsed (and, incidentally, undermined). Technology enables greater speed, which reduces our sensual perception of real space, and increasingly replaces it with an imagined space. Computers and electronic communications are simply a recent development of this phenomenon.

Such a process is a strange corollary to the effect of schemata and particularly, graphic schemata. Drawing itself offers a virtual world which our imaginations can inhabit, but the more simplified the schema becomes, the more symbolic its representation. Animation and cartoon characters use the most schematically abstracted graphics which communicate complex ideas (emotions, for example) through the most economical of means. This anomaly between simplicity of means and complexity of result is what we find amusing about animations from Mickey Mouse to Wallace's friend Grommit.

Interestingly, these two realities collide in the world of computer graphics, which is increasingly developing a language of its own in which the most ruthlessly reduced schematic vocabulary is devised to create as close to a universal language as possible. It is a language whose speed must keep up with instantaneous electronic communications. Ironically, this stripped down visual shorthand (think of the first computer ping-pong games) now uses the tricks of its own technology to embellish its imagery. Thus a self-generated actual space grows from a virtual reality. It is not surprising that this uncanny world fascinates an increasing number of artists, who use paint to imitate such graphic representations. Art imitating life imitating art imitating life.

Pearl Hsiung is the ideal explorer of such a world. Born in Taiwan, she was brought up and educated in Los Angeles. Both cultures rely on the power of the cartoon character (police uniforms in Tokyo sport a logo of a cartoon bear) and both are at the

electronic cutting edge. Hsiung has immersed herself in the visual saturation of the Los Angeles streets, with its advertising overload of electric neon and the acidic chemical palette of plastic paint. This is a city where the cartoon graphic and one-off logo dominate, and push even the calling cards of global conglomerates into the background.

Hollywood was once upon a time the place where animated film was made by large teams of artists who spent months and years painstakingly drawing and painting by hand to create the world of Disney and Looney Tunes. Not surprisingly, Hollywood is now at the forefront of a computer technology that can achieve similar results in a fraction of the time. It is an irony that such technology is used to mimic the graphic simplicity created manually by earlier generations.

In Hsiung's painting *Power Chode Homina* imagined figures appear against a nondescript space which is a darkened and gradated nothingness akin to the background of more recent, more sophisticated space-invader games. In such games, graphic tonality is achieved through the use of a gradient tool which, at the touch of a button, can create nuance of shading across a whole background, mimicking a light source across an apparently eternal void. Hsiung has worked to achieve the look of the graphic effect, which in turn attempts to achieve a look in nature. In the forefront of such a stage, figures resembling alien beings in synthetic candy colours float across the foreground and appear to advance and recede, or explode upon impact, or sidestep the evils of an oncoming enemy. A third element in the visual language is a patterned ribbon, like a digital tape-worm, growing across the screen whilst plotting an invisible vertical and horizontal path. The visual language of the whole is akin to a synthesis between New-Age visual muzak and psychedelia.

When hand painted commercial graphic art finally gave way to computer generated techniques, there was a great drive to imitate the original. Again, the gradient tool and other paint tools could create effects at the touch of a button. The formulaic result was simply too perfect to accurately reflect the exact look of its handmade forebear, but it is the calculated simulation that Hsiung has tried to capture in her own hand-made images. Paintings such as the *Overfiend* series clearly refer to a digital imitation of painting techniques rather than the techniques themselves. They

also reflect the artificial painting techniques of graffiti and mural painting on the liquor store wall or freeway underpass of Los Angeles. The perfect tonally gradated chiaroscuro refers to the smooth modulation of a digital version of spraypaint, or airbrush technique or watercolour wash. The imagery itself refers to the overt sentimentalism of synthetic graphic imagery. Whilst the most economical of graphic means is capable of portraying great complexity, the commercial art to which Hsiung refers intentionally dabbles in the mawkishness of the computer age.

Stephen Foster





Pearl Hsiung

Educated at the University of California, Los Angeles, and Goldsmiths College, London. Recent solo exhibitions include: *Pearl Hsiung*, Upriver Loft Gallery, Kunming, China, 2003. Recent group exhibitions include: *Short Ends* Film Festival, ICA, London, 2003; *Lexmark European Art Prize*, Eyestorm Gallery, London, 2003; *Royal Academy Summer Exhibition*, London, 2003; *Chockerfuckingblocked*, Jeffrey Charles Gallery, London, 2002; *Ars Moralis*: Bea Schlingelhoff, Barbara Classen-Schmal, Berlin, 2001.

Overfiend (twins) 2003
enamel on linen
courtesy Wigram Collection, London

overleaf:
Power Chode Homina 2002
enamel on linen
courtesy the artist