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"Wong Ping and the Cartoon Subconscious"
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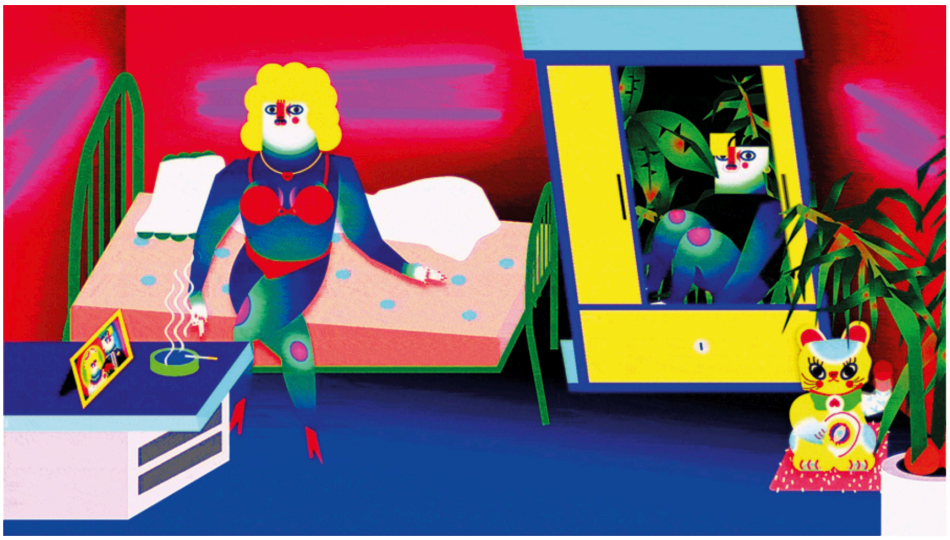
Wong Ping and the Cartoon Subconscious

The Hong Kong-born artist showcases the darkly comic potential of cartoon visuals

Children's entertainment, at its best, speaks in two distinct tongues: the first, primarily visual, is for the kids; the second, heavily laced with innuendo and snark, is for us adults, corrupted by our years. Such double entendre allows for (at most) societal truths and (at least) droll vulgarities to be trafficked to a mature audience through a seemingly harmless aesthetic, thus increasing the likelihood that a particular show, game or film will remain on the screen for an extended period of time. *Fun for the whole family*.

But there is, as always, a line. In 2017, weary parents the world around sat their manic children down in front of YouTube clips of *Peppa Pig* (2004–ongoing), a cartoon that tells innocuous tales of its porcine lead and her merry band of animal friends. They get muddy; they meet a parrot; they fly a kite: if these stories carried a Parental Advisory label, it would be zero, perhaps lower. But, on this occasion, the storylines had a nefarious edge: Peppa drinks bleach; Peppa is tortured by a dentist; Peppa devours her own father.

The unsuspecting viewership had fallen victim to two markedly sinister products of 21st-century online culture. The first: a twisted YouTube subgroup that takes pleasure in forcing beloved children's characters through gory narratives. (Dearest Peppa had ample company in her misery.) The second: an organizational algorithm that deals primarily with keywords and is incapable of differentiating between 'Peppa goes to ballet lesson' and 'Peppa pulls gun on princess'. While warped, these online oddities are not thought of as harmful unto themselves. In this instance, however, they unwittingly conspired to highjack a supposedly wholesome visual language, using it to introduce swathes of otherwise ignorant children to the gruesome cruelties of the real world. As James Bridle wrote, for *Medium*, in response to the ordeal: 'The internet has a way of amplifying and enabling many of our latent desires.' Dressed in a cartoon pig's clothing, these bastardized videos led the innocent into an immoral domain, one that erred too close to our own for comfort.



A similar bilingualism runs through the moving-image work of Wong Ping. A cursory glance reveals the Hong Kong-born artist's animation to be the stuff of early-childhood ecstasy, its sugar-tweaked estimations of bodies, backdrops and frivolous bliss re-animating the halcyon days of 1980s computer games. A witch jitters above a pixelated forest; schoolchildren gossip in a wobbly polka-dot classroom; a plump pair in 'I <3 HK' vests vault a skipping rope. Wistfully clunky in its rendering, Wong's 8-bit utopia sends rose-tinted ripples down the spine of anyone nostalgic for an infantile time in which a witch gleefully grasping a broomstick was just that.

But it's not, is it, because the witch is grasping a dick. And one of the schoolchildren is smearing an exploded cow's eyeball over the cheek of her deskmate. And the folks playing patty-cake? They are, in fact, greying old men, naked from the waist down: the unsettling stars of 'Under the Lion Crotch', a music video that Wong produced for the band No One Remains Virgin in 2011. And herein lies the problem, the perversion, the explanation for the 16+ restriction that has been slapped upon Wong's current exhibition, 'Golden Shower', at Kunsthalle Basel. Wong's work, while masquerading as something sentimental, sweet to the point of being saccharine, is overburdened with messages less subliminal than sickeningly brazen, which together provide a nauseating insight into 21st-century existence: perversion, anxiety, misogyny and avarice, all bound up in a twisted little 2D fantasy.

Take *Wong Ping's Fables 1* (2018), a pseudo-parabolic trilogy of shorts that sees an elephant fall pregnant, a telekinetic tree trunk agonize over whether or not to inform the abovementioned proboscidean of the presence of a cockroach, and a chicken, who is also a fame-hungry police officer with Tourette syndrome, trigger a massacre. Then there is *An Emo Nose* (2015), in which a narrator details his descent into loneliness following the severing of his elasticated snout, and *Jungle of Desire* (2016), a tale of male impotence, sexual extortion and an all-too-familiar longing to disappear.

Edge past *Wong Ping's Fables 2* (2019), an allegory of the vanities of capitalism ventriloquized by an entrepreneurial cow and the three warring heads of a Cerberus-like bunny, and we reach Dear, can I give you a hand? (2018), which was conceived when Wong observed an elderly man disposing of a bin-bag of pornographic VHS tapes. The resulting short sees a decrepit senior wrestle with his own slow drift into obsolescence, all the while reckoning with the death of his wife, a newfound desire for his daughter-in-law and an ant colony's newfound desire for his penis. At the Guggenheim Museum in New York, where it was presented as part of 'One Hand Clapping' in 2018, the animation was buttressed by a pile of gold-plated 'Chattery Teeth' – toys that, following heir release in 1949, were omnipresent, but now gather dust in the side-streets of memory. At Kunsthalle Basel, they are risen again, snarling from the vaulting walls of an arrival hall. *Abandon all hope, ye who enter here*.

Invariably, Wong's targets are male. Or, rather: Wong's targets are those most vapid and violent of characteristics that have come to define 'the contemporary masculine'. *Who's the Daddy* (2017) opens on a muscle-bound bro in a gym: one hand on his weights, one hand on his phone, one exposed penis reduced to a measly red dot. As he reps, intent on wrestling that BMI ever-lower, he browses Yahoo! Answers for more information as to his petite member, bemoaning a boorish culture that cannot appreciate his length (or lack thereof). 'The society I'm in is truly uncivilized,' he says, before attempting to justify his dimensions. 'The average of 4.4-inches almost puts Chinese men last in the rank of penis length. But if you consider the country's population, by tying all of them together, it can go around the world six times!'

Flick forward a few scenes and our gym-jockey meets a woman on a dating app, a crossing of paths that risks validating this most fragile of egos. Thankfully, she dominates him sexually, labels him a 'phallocentric exclusivist', penetrates his eyeball with the heel of her shoe and abandons him to care for her new-born child. Such bathetic, psychosexual narratives ricochet through Wong's animations like defective fireworks, their kaleidoscopic tails illuminating the false prophet of 'the invincible male' that ambles below, his clenched fists wildly beating off at all who trespass on the sacred fiefdom of masculinity. (In 'Golden Shower', this deity is invoked via a four-and-a-half-metre rotating sculpture of a penis, titled *BONER*, 2019.) Roving beneath Wong's heavy pixels, absurdist narratives and disarmingly jocular characters, we repeatedly glimpse this brute: a conception of maleness that is as dazzlingly outdated as the very aesthetic through which it is summoned. When Pankaj Mishra wrote that masculine power is 'an unfulfillable ideal, a hallucination',[1] I doubt he had this intensity of delirium in mind. In *Doggy Love* (2015), a repressed male teenager becomes infatuated with a girl who has breasts on her back.

On 1 January this year, thousands took to the streets of Hong Kong as part of a pro-democracy rally. Amongst the injustices being protested was Beijing's increasing encroachment upon the right to freedom of expression, as enshrined (until 2047) in the territory's mini-constitution, the Basic Law. While Wong distances himself from the fraught politics of his homeland, reluctant to assume the role of 'representative of Hong Kong youth',[2] his animations channel a feverish anxiety as to the dangers (both psychological and physical) of acts of censorship and suppression. Urges, desires and cultural anxieties are repeatedly internalized by his characters – forced underground, until, like the waters that froth in unseen geysers, they erupt. As we bob and weave our way around the spouts, it becomes clear that Wong's surreal is more real than you think, his humour more mournful than it might at first seem. An endnote to episode two of *Wong Ping's Fables 1* reads: 'Keep laughing even when you are surrounded by corpses.'

The first of Mark O'Donnell's 'Laws of Cartoon Motion' (1980) states: 'Any body suspended in space will remain suspended in space until made aware of its situation.' Wile E. Coyote, in hot pursuit of Road Runner, sprints off a cliff. Then, with a glance and a gulp, he plummets. An abstraction of this logic of gravitational cognizance applies to Wong's work. We hover, for a second, suspended in time and absurdist ecstasy, until the reality of our situation dawns on us. And then, with a glance and a gulp, we plummet.

1 Pankaj Mishra, 'The Crisis in Modern Modernity', Guardian, 2018, accessed 24.01.19 < https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/mar/17/the-crisis-in-modern-masculinity>

2 Barbara Pollack, 'Hong Kong's Youth Culture, Captured in Disturbing Animations', New York Times, 2018, accessed 30.01.19 < https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/18/arts/design/wong-ping-guggenheim-one-hand-clapping.html>

Wong Ping is an artist based in Hong Kong. In 2018, his work was exhibited at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA, and the New Museum, New York, and he was the recipient of the inaugural Camden Arts Center Emerging Artist Prize at Frieze. In 2019, he had a solo exhibition at CAPRI, Düsseldorf, Germany, and was one of the winners of the Ammodo Tiger Short Competition at the 48th International Film Festival, Rotterdam, the Netherlands. His solo show at Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland, is on view until 5 May and a forthcoming exhibition at Camden Arts Centre, London, UK, opens 5 July.