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Artasiapacific
"Wong Ping Heart Digger"



Camden Arts Centre

Wong Ping *Heart Digger*

The legitimizing potential of art spaces should never cease to amaze us. A urinal in a restroom or an unmade bed in a bedroom is just that, but put them in a gallery or museum at the right point in time while alerting sufficiently influential people to their presence and you can change the course of history.

With these two examples there is a transposition from one category to another. In a restroom or bedroom these items are primarily utilitarian objects. In a gallery or museum they are signifiers for more abstract concepts, intended for deeper consideration. With regard to the animations of Wong Ping, which he originally posted for consumption on the internet, the transposition from the online realm to the hallowed spaces of major arts institutions engenders no change in status. What, then, makes the pieces in "Heart Digger," Wong's solo exhibition at London's Camden Arts Centre—part of his reward for winning the Centre's 2018 Emerging Artist Prize—any different from videos on the internet?

The show included four animations: *Wong Ping's Fables 1 and 2* (both 2018), which comprise short animal fables with vague, if any, morals; *Who's the Daddy* (2017), the tale of a sexually submissive man who eventually becomes a single parent; and *Dear, Can I Give*

You a Hand (2018), in which an elderly man fantasizes about his daughter-in-law while being pushed out of his home by her and his son. The videos are all rendered in Wong's colorful and slightly abstracted style, which doesn't seem to be drawn from anything specific. Allusions to the visuals of 1980s video games aren't quite accurate—the four videos are too finely graded and concerned with perspective to be compared with 8-Bit—but the works aren't futuristic either. References to the sculptures and paintings of Pop artist Allen Jones are misguided. Wong's visuals aren't owed to any stylistic lineage, but, rather, are constructed in an idiosyncratic fashion because they can be.

This is significant, because it ties Wong's oeuvre to its closest antecedent outside the art world: creepy animations such as *Salad Fingers* and *Happy Tree Friends* by the likes of David Firth and Kenn Navarro, respectively, that were widely circulated on the internet in the mid-2000s. These videos often followed a stream-of-consciousness logic that invariably led to grotesque revelations. They were also called clever and defended as art by people on the internet, in spite of—or, more discouragingly, because of—their offensive content.

It is not always easy to see where Wong's works diverge

from this genre of video, besides the legitimacy they enjoy from being screened in galleries rather than on laptops and phones. What, for instance, can be taken from a cockroach touching a pregnant, anthropomorphized elephant, causing her to miscarry? This bloody scene, accompanied by "fart" sounds, is from *Wong Ping's Fables 1*. There are plenty of other grotesque moments: graphic and uncritical references to paedophilia in *Who's the Daddy*, and an old man habitually stealing and sniffing his daughter-in-law's underwear in *Dear, Can I Give You a Hand*.

None of this is to say that grotesqueness is in itself illegitimate, or incapable of saying important things. Sometimes grotesqueness is important simply because it challenges societal norms. There is something compelling about the raw exposure Wong gives to perversion, and admirable about the freedom with which he does so. He also, at times, approaches genuine issues, such as with the comment on the exploitative thinking prevalent in capitalist societies, arising from the son in *Dear, Can I Give You a Hand*, who realizes that accommodating old people other than his father can be profitable.

The trouble is, while it is true to say that Wong "touches on" psycho-sexual taboos, cultural anxieties and, at a stretch, politics, whether or not he substantively engages with or critiques them—rather than simply exploit them—is another matter. It is worth being aware of the ability of post-post modernity and a generation of humanities graduates to argue convincingly that anything has meaning and political validity, not to mention the inarguable defense of irony.

NED CARTER MILES



Installation view of WONG PING's *The Ha Ha Ha Online Cemetery Limited* (foreground), 2019, toy dentures, dimensions variable, and *Dear, Can I Give You a Hand?* (background), 2018, animated video installation with sound: 12 min, at "Heart Digger," Camden Arts Centre, London, 2019. Photo by Luke Walker. Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist and Camden Arts Centre.