

EVERY TRICK ONLY NEEDS ONE TRUTH

DAVID CHAN



ART SEASONS
Singapore | Beijing | Jakarta



James Turrell's 20-foot-tall "skyspace" called "Second Meeting, 1989. (1)

By David Chan

"...where are you then looking at? I am hoping that you then have a self reflective act of looking that you are looking, that you are actually seeing yourself see to some degree and it does reveal something about your seeing as opposed to being a journey of mine seeing..."

James Turrell explaining about his work to Robert Hughes in American Visions episode 8 hosted by Robert Hughes, created by BBC

I was first exposed to James Turrell's work many years ago when I chanced upon a documentary narrated by Robert Hughes called "American Visions". In episode 8, James Turrell was introduced as a conceptual artist with grand ideas, many of his creations involved manipulating the viewer's senses through the use of unique spatial environments. James' works were essentially very simple and minimalistic to say the least, however the vision that he was trying to achieve caught my attention in a great way.

James Turrell's hope to evoke a self-reflective state in the viewer is a difficult and at times idealistic response to expect from diverse viewers. In most cases, the general public is usually not used to critical or self-reflective examinations. Thus, most artists are hopeful but usually apprehensive when trying to reach this holy grail of art making. However so, in my view many of my artistic heroes have already hit the grand prize, just to name a few, these include MC Escher, Caravaggio, Lorenzo Bernini, Ron Mueck and James Turrell. All of who have successfully manipulated the viewer through certain metaphysical properties of their artworks. Nonetheless to achieve this effect, the works had to be conceived with hindsight; Escher exploited our visual flaws by designing his prints to confuse our sense of perspective and dimensional

space, Caravaggio played with lights and shadows in his paintings to focus our attention on the heightened drama, Lorenzo Bernini and Ron Mueck both created realistic figures in their respective eras, hoping to make us conscious of the physical flesh, and finally James Turrell took pains to create grand spatial “windows”, that would force viewers to focus only on one area negating the rest of the void.

Well, I am no Caravaggio or MC Escher, but in preparation for my new series, “Every trick only needs one truth”, I became increasingly mindful about the relationship between the delivery of the concept and the outcome of the artwork. Like James Turrell, the *trick* was to engage the viewer on a sublime and almost psychological manner. In effect, the artwork was not the outcome, but the process of engagement was.

It actually doesn’t take much for one to recognize that the method of engagement with an artwork is as important as the physical artwork itself, the challenge is to distillate one’s concept to its most fundamental key-point, and to deliver it in a succinct and interactive way. It took me some time before I could attempt to articulate this relationship in my work.

During the initial conceptualization of “Hybrid Society – Schizophrenia”, I was keen to explore the contextual dilemma of preconceived visuals against the meanings of written text, hence the creation of the paintings “Urban Species”. In effect, the series of paintings were composed to first appeal to the viewer from a distance, and as the viewer moved in to read the metallic title on the frame, he or she is confronted with a conflicting name that doesn’t suit the image. Take for example, the image of the wolf below; it bears a highly questionable tag at the bottom of the frame that reads, “Mr. Honest”.



Urban Species – Mr. Honest

For “Urban Species”, the whole setup was to put across the basic premise “to never judge a book by its cover”, and to suggest that our inner personality is often inherently opposite to that of our outward social persona. As with the painting above, many works were also presented in a similar fashion throughout the series. Like many ideas, it didn’t occur to me until much later that many works, including my own, were technically very narrative in nature, hence making it a means to an end. And what made “Urban Species” so appealing to me was the fact that I had played a little “trick” on viewers to induce them to investigate the work further. On realizing that the title and visual was contradictory, viewers would then grasp the full “truth” behind the painting.

“Turrell’s art doesn’t happen in front of your eyes, it happens behind it...”, Robert Hughes responding to James Turrell’s statement from the very beginning.

“Urban Species” among others, was a minor attempt at engaging the viewer in a direct and humorous way. However, after “Hybrid Society - Schizophrenia” - my last series that spanned 4 years, I was left with a splatter of disparate ideas that couldn’t seem to fit into a nice and neat package.

While floundering around to identify what was the common thread that linked all the new ideas together, I came across an online article from the journal: Nature Reviews Neuroscience called "Attention and Awareness in Stage Magic". It was a science research paper conducted by researchers at the Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix, Arizona, to look at the neuroscience of magic.

Teller, one half of the magician duo of Penn and Teller, was one of the coauthors, and its publication was a signal event in a field some researchers are calling “Magicology: the mining of stage illusions for insights into brain function.” On one hand, the researchers were totally baffled by the cognitive workings of the brain when it responded to the deceptive illusions. But on the other hand, the participating illusionists were having a field trip, contributing to most of the study by providing valuable insights into the age-old craft of fooling the viewer. To say the least, their insights were a joyous read.

“The magician must sell people a lie even as they know they’re being lied to. Unless the illusion feels more real than the truth, there is no magic.” - Teller

Amongst the many tricks that were deciphered, three fundamental facts became apparent; the first, the illusionist assumes that the viewer knows that the trick is a lie, a trick is always designed with this basic condition in mind, by exploiting the heightened sense of the viewer, it is actually easier for the illusionist to turn the tables on the viewer. The second, the illusion is only considered successful when both the mind and the heart of the viewer are befuddled. Finally, and most ironically, the viewer is always a willing participant to the lie; he or she actually wants to be convinced and fooled, failing to do so makes it more disappointing than pleasurable.

“Every time you perform a magic trick, you’re engaging in experimental psychology,” - Teller

“Tricks and truths”, have always been partners in crime; to “trick” is to outwit, to deceive with cunning and sinister means if necessary. The outcome of this trickery is a “victim” with an illusion and a piece of arbitrary info that has been internalized as “truth”. However so, according to the article by Barrow Neurological Institute, the victim is often a willing participant and the trickster a possible victim to yet another’s trick. It appears that we are constantly in a cycle of trickster and victim role-play when it comes to handling issues of “truth”.

It is noteworthy to realize that this “trick and truth” hypothesis is also prevalent in the real world context as well. Why are we so attracted to beauty and perfection when we know that they are merely visual pleasures? Why trust words when there is a multitude of contradictory meanings? If religion is infallible, can belief turn lies into truth and vice versa? What about the comparison of value, say, symbolic versus physical, life versus death? The list goes on, and the fact of the matter is, in the end, we are all victims and tricksters,⁴

willing and contributing participants to our own dilemmas and contradictions.

After having this epiphany, I began to link the dots to my concepts, “Every trick only needs one truth” begun to take shape. I was keen to explore the fundamental shortcomings of human perception and our ever-evolving judging criteria. I am also curious about the ironies of humankind as gullible victims to questionable and arbitrary “truths”, and yet guilty of being in cahoots with the sinister trickster at the same time. Granted that contemporary life is marked by many contradictions, it is perhaps only fair to recognize that none of us are that innocent anymore. The most fundamental “trick” that we play is to lie. Be it an inevitable pervasion from our DNA or an erroneous upbringing, each generation struggles to achieve that fine balance of “truths, tricks and lies”. Therefore amidst this balance of self-preservation and that sneaky sleight of hand, I attempt to play the trickster, hopefully to stir up one’s curiosity and reflective understanding of the works presented. While every lie can be made real as long as there is a hint of truth in it, the trick to success depends greatly on the method of delivery. I suppose in the end, every truth needs a trick and *every trick only needs one truth*.

(1) <http://www.english.imjnet.org.il/Media/Uploads/Turrell-Space-That-Sees.jpg>





David Chan
The Price of the Goal
2013
Oil x 24k gold leaf on linen
200 x 200cm



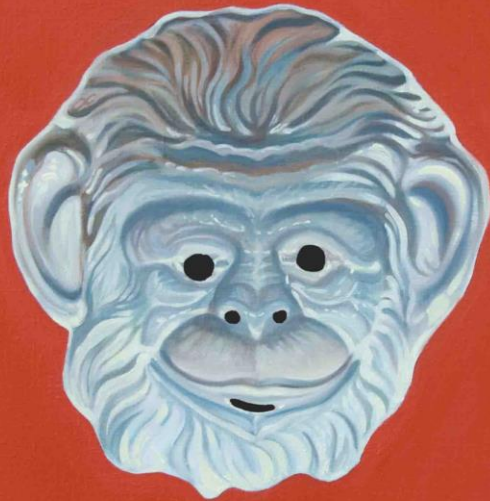
David Chan, Suspension of Disbelief, 2012, Oil on linen, 150 x 180cm



David Chan
Foreplay Perhaps
2012
Oil on linen
200 x 200cm



David Chan, Misdirection, 2012, Oil on linen, 110 x 90cm (Each)



David Chan, Being Red, 2013, Oil on linen, 60 x 50cm



David Chan, Being Cerulean, 2013, Oil on linen, 60 x 50cm



David Chan, Being Yellow, 2013, Oil on linen, 60 x 50cm



David Chan, Being Green, 2013, Oil on linen, 60 x 50cm



David Chan, Being Blue, 2013, Oil on linen, 60 x 50cm



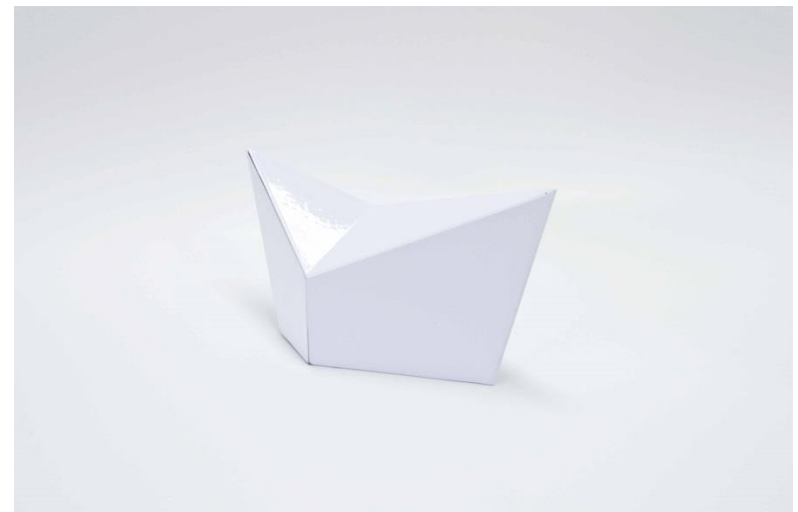
David Chan, Being White, 2013, Oil on linen, 60 x 50cm



David Chan
Anamorphosis-Molly
2012
Fiber glass, assorted rubber animals, powder
coated cast iron
36(H) x 29(W) x 39(L)



David Chan
Anamorphosis-Bert
2013
Fiber glass, assorted rubber animals, powder
coated cast iron
15(H) x 9(W) x 23(L)





David Chan
Alphakind 1
2012
Assorted rubber animals, acrylic box, wood case
73 x 73cm



David Chan
Alphakind 2
2012
Assorted rubber animals, acrylic box, wood case
73 x 73cm



David Chan
Centauree
2009
Aluminium and fibreglass
179 x 190 x 76cm
Edition of 3

DAVID CHAN

1979 Born in Singapore
2004 Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
Fine Art - Bachelor of Arts (1st Class Honours)

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2013 Every Trick Only Needs One Truth, Art Seasons, Singapore
2011 Ego States, Richard Koh Fine Arts, Kuala Lumpur
2009 Hybrid Society - Schizophrenia, ART SEASONS, Singapore
2008 Hybrid Society - Chapter 1: The Infant Cycle, ART SEASONS, Beijing
2005 A Divine Comedy, ART SEASONS, Singapore
2004 Genetic Wonderland, ART SEASONS, Singapore

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2012 Detour , National Institute of Education, Singapore
The Collector's Show – Contemporary art from Asia
Art Seasons Gallery, Singapore
ART STAGE Singapore, Marina Bay Sands, Singapore
2011 Art Seasons 10th Anniversary, ART SEASONS, Singapore
New Pop New World, Element Art Space, Singapore
La Biennale di Venezia—Future Pass, Fondazione Claudio Buziol,
Venice
ART STAGE, Singapore
Art Taipei, Taipei
2010 Idiolect: Contemporary art from Asia, ART SEASONS, Singapore
2009 Animamix Biennial – Visuals Attract and Attack
Taipei MOCA, Taiwan
Animamix Biennial - Metaphors of Unreal
Shanghai MOCA, China
Young And Emerging Asian Talents, ART SEASONS, Jakarta
ARTSingapore
ASYAAF, Seoul
ARTHK, Hong Kong
The Naked Truth, ART SEASONS, Singapore
2008 BMW Young Asian Artists Series II, STPI, Singapore
ARTSingapore, Singapore
ACAF, New York
KIAF, Seoul
CIGE, Beijing

2007 Soka Fresh Perspectives, Soka Art Centre, Taipei; Beijing
2006 National Museum of Singapore Opening Festival, Singapore
Made in Singapore, ART SEASONS, Singapore
Art Taipei 2006, Hua Shan Cultural Park, Taipei
2005 ARTSingapore, Singapore
Sinfully Lomo, Objectifs, Singapore
A Day in Genetic Wonderland, Studio Miu, Singapore
Celebrity Portraits the Exhibition, Wisma Atria, Singapore
M9 - Singapore Artists in Style, ART SEASONS, Singapore
2004 Blink! Exhibition, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
New Finds, ARtrium MICA Building, Singapore
The 23rd UOB Painting of the Year Exhibition, Esplanade,
Singapore
Multifarious - RMIT Graduation Exhibition, LASALLE - SIA College of
the Arts, Singapore
Asian Pop, ART SEASONS, Singapore
ARTSingapore, Singapore
The LASALLE School Exhibition, LASALLE - SIA College of the Arts,
Singapore
Made in Singapore Exhibition, ART SEASONS, Singapore
Work in Progress Exhibition, LASALLE - SIA College of the Arts,
Singapore
Fresh!, ART SEASONS, Singapore
2003 The Big Small Works Exhibition, ART SEASONS, Singapore
Honey Mercury Diploma Graduation Exhibition, LASALLE - SIA
College of the Arts, Singapore
Singapore Food Festival Art Exhibition, Raffles Place Shopping
Centre, Singapore
Limelight Exhibition, LASALLE - SIA College of the Arts, Singapore
Winston Oh Travelogue Exhibition, LASALLE - SIA College of the Arts,
Singapore
2002 Tourist Souvenir Exhibition, LASALLE - SIA College of the Arts,
Singapore
2001 Groundwork Foundation Exhibition, LASALLE - SIA College of the
Arts, Singapore
1994 Xi Shan Art Exhibition, Bukit Timah Community Centre, Singapore

DAVID CHAN

AWARDS

- 2004 The 23rd UOB Painting of the Year Exhibition - Representational
Medium Category Winner
- 2003 Della Butcher Merit Award
- 2002 Winston Oh Travel Award
LASALLE - SIA College of the Arts Diploma Scholarship
- 2001 3rd in 3I Central Corporate Identity Design Competition
Winner for Home United Mascot Design Competition 2001
LASALLE - SIA College of the Arts Diploma Scholarship
- 2000 Top Student in LASALLE - SIA College of the Arts Foundation Year