A Cute Critique? The Work of Shen Jingdong

Julian Stallabrass

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International Comedy Series 3, 2018

Even by the standards of Chinese political-pop, Shen Jingdong's combination of attitude , style and subject matter lies at an extreme—of neutrality, sheer surface and cute, toy-like form. If the figures are meant to have a fairytale quality—and if, as Shen says, even the baddies in those tales are cute—this handling extends even to genuine monsters, to Stalin or the foot-soldiers of Hitler's *Wehrmacht*. And if even Christ on the Cross can appear cute and, when compared to Shen's usually cheery figures, merely a bit upset, this is to spread a Koons-style shallowness to the most unlikely subjects, with the same effect that all interiority is banished. Koons' toy-figure bronzes (of the Incredible Hulk, for example) bear an affinity with Shen's sculptures, particularly of Saint-Exupéry's *Little Prince*, and as with some of Koons', feature cartoon figures standing at the shoulder of the main character, like Jiminy Cricket whispering into Pinocchio's ear. In Koons, no matter how popular and

even debased the source, aesthetic distinction is maintained by finely graded judgements over material, colour, form and quality of surface. While Shen invents his own forms, that distinction stands on wobblier ground. In their cuteness, they mine the oscillation that Sianne Ngai explores between the urge to cuddle or abuse: oh, you are so cute, I could just eat you all up![1] There is something edible about Shen's figures, particularly the soldiers, lined up smiling, as if about to be dipped in egg. The overall result of this combination is a shallow, kitschy art—popular, and perhaps populist—of a straightforwardness that would have made Warhol blush.[2]

You are malicious, 2020

This populist simplicity is accompanied—as is usual, and is found not only in Koons but in Takashi Murakami, Yoshimoto Nara, Damien Hirst and many others—by a concerted brand-spreading strategy, by an urge to achieve ubiquity which has a parallel in corporate culture and graffiti alike, and also by a rejection of politics. These are all linked: the need to get the brand out as widely as

[1] Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2012, ch. 1
[2] On populist art, see my essay 'Elite Art in an Age of Populism', in Alexander Dumbadze/ Suzanne Hudson, eds., *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*, John Wiley & Sons, Oxford 2013, pp. 39-49.

possible—with products to suit all pockets, including postcards, stickers, tote bags and T-shirts, some of them made in collaboration with magazines and fashion brands. This fits with the graffiti writer's hyperactive distribution of the tag, which Shen invokes in his 'Shen Jingdong Was Here' exhibitions (an echo of the legendary Kilroy), which had his stickers and posters printed with the slogan plastered all over the cities in which it was shown, including Venice. Shen says that he would like his characters to be as popular as Mickey Mouse.[3] As in much street art, an undemanding humanism prevails. Shen says of his figures: 'People are people. Skin colour doesn't matter. Uniforms don't matter.'[4] A utopian equality is prefigured here, in which politics and enmity have been abolished, and people can indulge their tastes with a clear conscience. This attitude stands in marked contrast to the origins of political pop, which was staged in a revulsion against the long tradition of humanism in China, which some prominent artists set out to 'liquidate'.[5]

There is a wilful and carefully cultivated naivety here which is a logical accompaniment to the cute. Shen's 'heroes' lived through dark times, were formed by them, and some had their part in creating them. Mao and Lei Feng were forged by imperialism, Japanese fascism and civil war, Ho Chi Minh by the concerted attempt to suppress anti-colonial revolt by genocidal force. Yet here they all appear as if seen by a child—as friendly toys or cartoons. Even the soldiers, says Shen, are not meant to be seen as 'sarcastic or political', but to be just another, and humorous, side of humanity.[6] The smile in political pop, which is often exaggerated to the point of implied derangement, is here hard to read behind: it is only what it seems to be.

Yet there are some not too subterranean references to critique: is the exhibition title 'The Art Journey of a Good Soldier' a reference to Jaroslav Hasek's famous infantryman, Svejk, who undermines authority through an exaggerated and idiotic conformity?[7] The mention in Shen's New York Gallery of Chinese Art exhibition of 'one-dimensional man' is surely a reference to Marcuse's account of the commercial assault on language, thinking and subjectivity.[8] For those who insist on holding to a Cold War frame of thinking, the work may be read a critique of Communist propaganda—to which Shen, in his long military career, was dedicated to making—and of its strange alliance with an imposed and controlled consumer culture. Then the cute becomes a mask for the uncanny, and the figures' empty black eyes become a register of the suppression of dissent and indeed of all individuality and interior life.

But what is the effect, as in this exhibition, when Shen applies his métier to various icons of British culture—to Alfred the Great, Henry VIII, Charles Darwin or John Lennon? They are quite variable: no one knows what Alfred looked like, and the depictions that we have emphasise regalia over character. Here Shen's cartoon rendering seems a mild transformation, akin to an illustration of the

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[3] Meimei Song, 'Shen Jing-dong Colours the SAR', *Tatler Hong Kong*, 17 September 2010.
[4] Mark Bloch, 'Shen Jingdong: "Shen Jingdong is here"', *Whitehot Magazine*, July 2019.
[5] Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2011, p. 256.
[6] Fionnuala McHugh, 'My Life: Shen Jingdong', *Post Magazine*, 1 November 2014.
[7] Jaroslav Hasek, *The Good Soldier Svejk and his Fortunes in War*, trans. Cecil Parrott, William Heinemann, London 1973.
[8] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Beacon Press, Boston 1964.

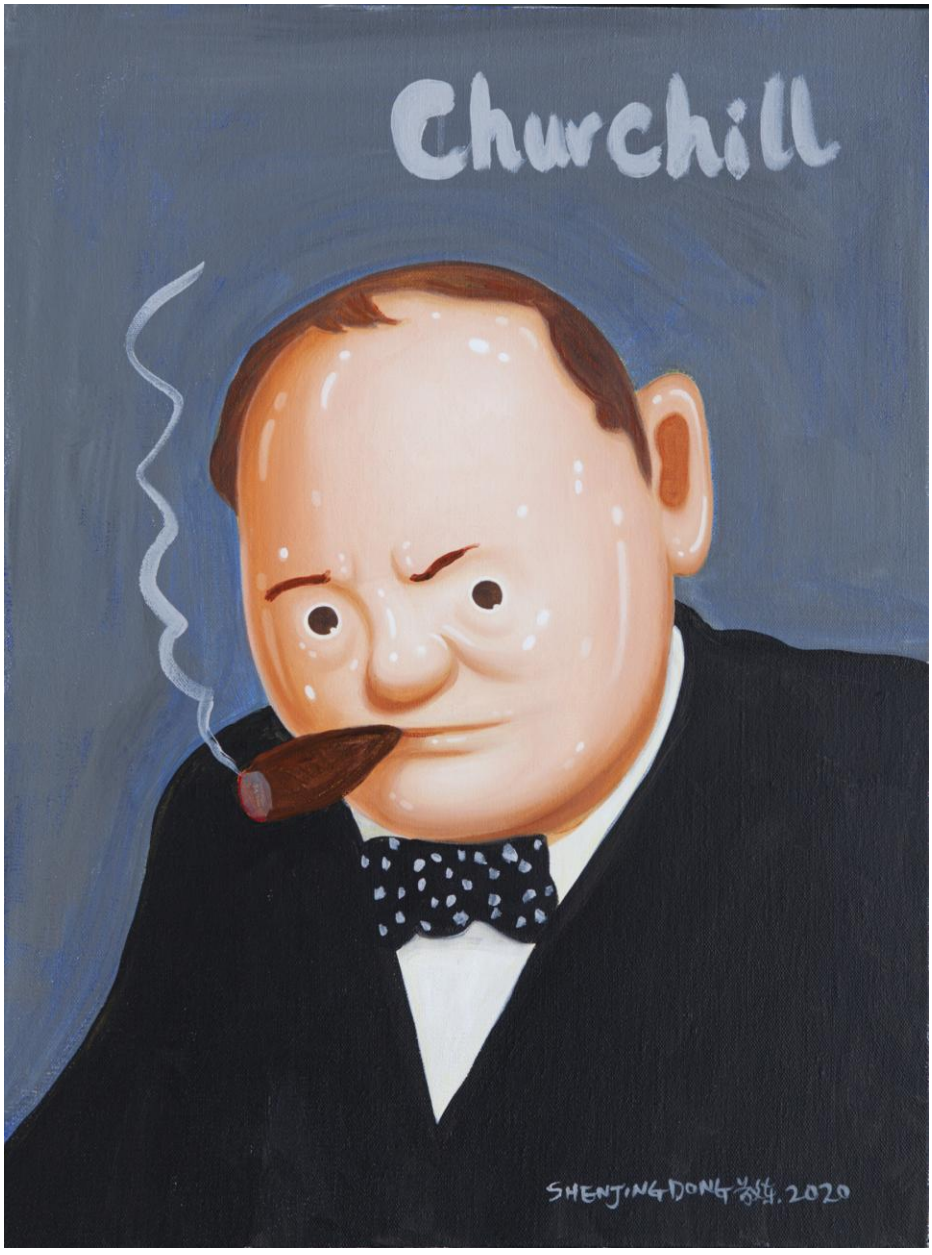
cake-burning story in a Ladybird book. And with celebrity subjects, identified by minimal visual cues, already branded and hollowed out, the effect is also inoffensive, and sometimes slyly humorous. The Queen appears as a beaming, stooped trollish figure, who wears the crown along with a cardigan and what looks like a plastic necklace. This plays on the supposed status of the royals as both ordinary and exceptional, as like and unlike their subjects. As Tom Nairn put it, in his classic study of British royalty, they are 'ordinary in appearance but quite super-ordinary in significance', binding up the mundane with 'some vaster national-spiritual sphere associated with mass adulation, the past, the state and familial morality […]'[9] The Queen may actually complement the crown with furs and a substantial burden of bling, and often looks surly, but Chen gets here at the magical effect that still enthrals many.

The Queen, 2014

It is in the portraits of nineteenth-century bourgeois greats that the effect is most stringent, especially as set against the severe, prosaic but powerful figure of the exceptional individual, rendered in prose in vast detail in novels and biographies, and in paint in a play of telling

[9] Tom Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and its Monarchy*, Vintage, London 1994, p. 27.

contingency, expressive deportment and visualised character (see, for instance, John Collier's 1883 portrait of Darwin). As Franco Moretti argues in his analysis of the class' culture, the piling up of mundane facts is meant to produce an objective seriousness makes it hard to imagine alternatives.[10] The lifestyle and mores of the old bourgeoisie have melted into air, of course, unlike the system that produced them: nevertheless, there is a charge to seeing the stern charisma of figures such as Darwin and James Watt transformed into Shen's insistently shallow playthings, especially for those deluded enough to look back on the Victorian and imperial age with proud nostalgia.



Winston Churchill, 2020

[10] Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois Between History and Literature*, Verso, London 2013, p. 96.

Churchill is a particular case, since his image combines elements of national legend, aristocracy, celebrity and politics. He was an accomplished self-promoter and cultivator of his own 'brand', and Shen fixes on two of its best-known components: the famous cigar and spotted bow tie. The photographer Karsh, frustrated by the old trouper's posing in a portrait session, claims to have snatched the cigar out of Churchill's hand in his effort to pry off the mask. The reputation of the Tory maverick, at least in the UK long pickled in myth, has been subjected to challenge lately, particularly in light of the Black Lives Matter movement: how do we read the fixed stare of Shen's toy figure, with knowledge of Churchill's strident racism and defence of empire, his armed suppression of strikers, and manufacturer of famine in Bengal? Churchill so much objected to Graham Sutherland's portrait in which he appeared as an aged and haunting figure fading into wood panelling, the proud raise of his head juxtaposed with a frail interiority, that he had it burnt. It seems unlikely that an excess of exteriority would have been any more congenial to the exceptionalism that he cultivated, and was cultivated around him, personally and politically.

Graham Sutherland, *Portrait of Winston Churchill*, 1954

For Ngai, the appeal of the cute is based on an unequal power relation between the viewer and the object. It reverses the formula of the sublime, in which the viewer is awed and overwhelmed, and is instead the domain of ownership and consumption. While artists who trade in the cute usually attempt to hold themselves above the effect, as the heroes of exceptional individuality, and by implication do the same for the viewer, the cute can rebound on them. As Marx wrote of art's dialectic, an object is created for a subject and simultaneously a subject for an object.[11] So the subversive charge of Shen's shallow, shiny toy world is to undercut distinction and to suggest (as a child might put it): that's you, that is.

[11] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1973, p. 92.