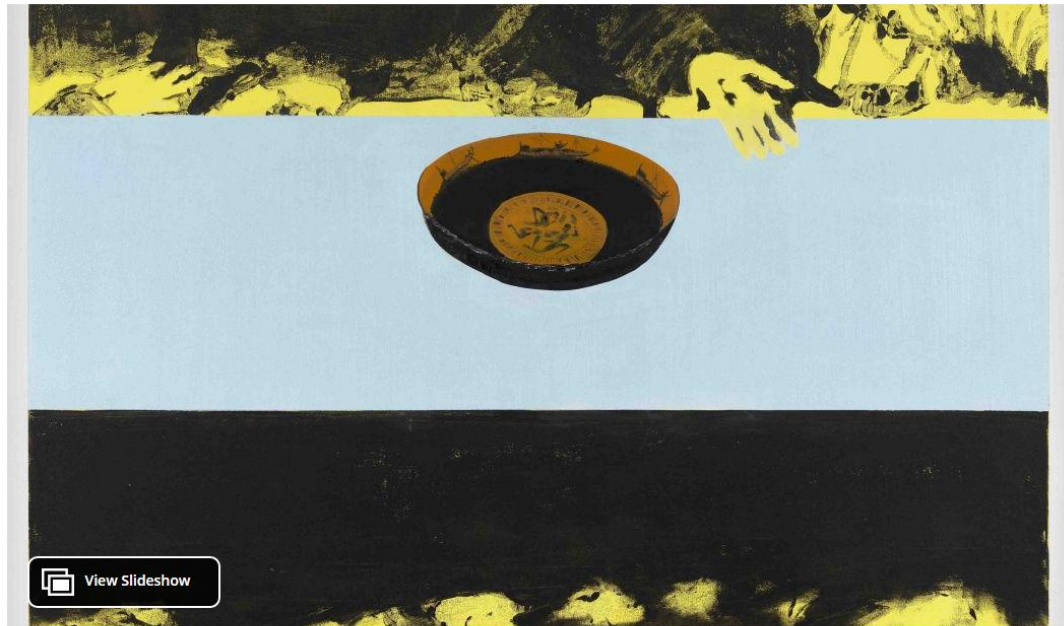


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Dexter Dalwood Brings Propaganda to China

BY SAMUEL SPENCER | MARCH 20, 2016



Dexter Dalwood's "Greek Bailout," 2015.
(Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery)

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In his second collaboration with Simon Lee Gallery, British collagist-painter [Dexter Dalwood](#) brings the exhibition "Propaganda Painting" to Hong Kong. ARTINFO spoke to Dalwood about the upcoming solo show.

In the lead up to the exhibition, Dalwood was interested in what he called "the relevance of preexisting visual images," as well as "the contemporary relevance of painting."

"I chose 'Propaganda Painting' as the title of the show, as I was thinking about the Latin origin of the word propaganda, which is 'congregation for the propagation of the faith,'" said Dalwood. "I think this is particularly pertinent in reference to the painted image today." He gave this title to one of the paintings that he felt "most connected to this idea" — and with that, the show had what Dalwood called its "title track."

Following his "London Paintings" series, shown at Simon Lee's London gallery in 2014, Dalwood set his sights on China. Taking full advantage of his first solo exhibition in Greater China, Dalwood created allusion-rich works that feature many defining moments in 20th-century Chinese history, complemented by references to artists of the era.

What was it specifically about China that so appealed? "The invitation to exhibit in a country I had never visited really appealed to me," Dalwood said. "I have always been interested in the idea of place within artwork and particularly in artists who make work that is not about their own culture or history. While making this series I was thinking about the work being shown in Hong Kong and consequently my own relationship to its recent history. That relationship is as informed by images as much as by what I have read."

These Western images of China are seeded throughout exhibition. In Dalwood's witty and anarchic paintings, specters of Mao (swimming in the Yangtze) and Nixon rub shoulders with Lichtenstein's and Picasso's signature brushstrokes.

"I usually start a new series of paintings ruminating on a theme of some sort," he explained. However, he tried to keep the themes broad. "This is deliberately not particularly pre-planned, as I like to see what the work starts to suggest. But knowing that the work was coming to Hong Kong, although there weren't specific events for every work, I allowed a lot of different associated ideas to connect up."

However, Dalwood does not approach these events with any particular agenda. "The paintings don't have a direct message, per se — I'm not trying to put across a particular political viewpoint," he said. "I want to bring together various references from political and artistic history and propose them in a new context of the painting, to see if they become something beyond the sum of their parts. To that extent I am only really interested in whether they work as a painting, not about conveying a message."

Dalwood's "Greek Bailout," 2015, for example, evokes the Greek financial crisis of 2009 by placing an Ancient Greek bowl at the center of the Last Supper. "The title refers to a very recent event in European economic history," he said, noting, however, that "the imagery comes from a wide range of sources and time periods, from the Ancient Greeks to Warhol, reworking probably the most iconic religious painting ever."

This barrage of references — many easy to miss on a first or even second viewing — is more than a gimmick. By juxtaposing so many time periods, historic events, and pieces of iconography, Dalwood highlights the process by which we consume images and the artificiality of history.

In a sense, when he references Mao, it is a Mao that is himself a collage. He evokes not only the historical person but also how he has been reflected through media. Dalwood's Chairman is the Mao of history but also "Mao," Warhol's 1972 screen print or the character of Mao from John Adams' opera "Nixon in China." In "Propaganda Painting," identity is multiple and filtered heavily through culture and media.

"It fascinated me that the image of Mao is now so neutral in the West that it can become almost meaningless when reproduced on plates or T-shirts," said Dalwood. "I would suggest that this is primarily because of Warhol's choice to use it in the '70s, though his choice had been influenced by the radical chic of Maoism through the post-1968 Paris generation of Jean-Luc Godard, etc. The image of Mao's head then becomes synonymously linked to 20th-century art history — it becomes iconic and recedes historically in time."

On paper, this may sound like dry postmodern academia, but Dalwood has an eye for engaging images that makes these works effective on their own terms. Propaganda, memorabilia, and academia collide headlong, and theory is never presented without wit, which is perhaps why his work has been so in demand.