



The Quotidian as Muse: In the Studio with Chris Huen



Hong Kong artist Chris Huen has garnered global attention in recent years, with solo exhibitions dotted all over the map and making appearances at major auction houses. At his studio in Hong Kong's northwest, he tells CoBo Social Managing Editor Denise Tsui how the mundane everyday experiences make their way into his life-sized paintings, and compares his practice to building with Lego blocks.

TEXT: Denise Tsui

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist

Bicycles lined the concrete streets; the air imbued with a peaceful quiet—a relief from the incessant humdrum of Hong Kong traffic. It was a gloriously sunny September day and Yuen Long, in the western New Territories, felt like a world away from the Hong Kong I encountered on a daily basis. Inside an industrial building, with the smell of pet food wafting strongly through the passageway, I stood in front of an inconspicuous steel gate and wooden door just like any other, with nothing more than a number on the door indicating I had found my destination. With a warm and affable smile, Chris Huen welcomed me to his studio.



Portrait of Chris Huen in his studio. Image courtesy of the artist.

Large paintings in the making line the walls, a portable paint station standing in between, and a table at the back spilling with all manner of paraphernalia—screwdrivers, staple guns, electric drill, a measuring tape, tubes of paint, jars of medium and even a digital SLR camera. Curious hand-carved wooden pipes scattered to one side caught my eyes. It's his side pastime, Huen tells me; sculpting provides an antidote to painting, an escape into another form of creativity. Looking at the pipes, Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* instantly surfaced in the mind. It's a personal favourite of mine, and as it turns out, the enigmatic 1929 surrealist painting is also an important philosophical influence to Huen's approach to painting.

"It's a really important idea that the painting isn't the real thing. If I paint my dog, this dog in the painting isn't the real dog in real life," says Huen. Referencing Magritte, whose painting, viewed as meta-communication, sought to contest the construct of visual and linguistic conventions, Huen explains, "Basically, it's like I'm not really painting the image itself, but I am painting the experience of seeing the things. The subject is real, but when I'm painting it, it is not. So I'm always wondering at which point in the portrayal do people start to realise that it is something we can relate to?"

In his painting practice, the minute and quotidian experiences of his day-to-day life serve as Huen's muse. Although he set out in pursuit of a conceptual art practice during his years studying for his BFA at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, inspired by artists he met in his formative years, Huen quickly discovered he couldn't connect with this genre of art making. "I realised painting is what really inspired me," he explains. "So that's why I chose to paint for my graduation year project, and continue to do so today."



Doodood, 2020, oil on canvas, 200 x 240 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



MuiMui, *Tess and Joel*, 2020, oil on canvas, 220 x 260 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Born in 1991 in Hong Kong, Huen's career has quickly blossomed in recent years. Already acquired in private collections around the world, the young artist has held solo exhibitions in Hong Kong, Taipei, Tokyo, London, Los Angeles and more. Catching the attention of the art market, his paintings have appeared on the block at major auction houses Christie's, Sotheby's and Phillips. But this current success hasn't dimmed the sincerity of Huen's paintings. The art market, a grandiose construct of the industry, doesn't interest him, the artist tells me. Instead, he pours his energy into furthering the development of his painting practice. "I always compare my practice to building with Lego blocks," says Huen. Seeking to continuously learn, modify, and test, the young artist explains that although his paintings change and grow over time, the same foundation always remains, just like the Lego block which will always be a Lego block.

Since moving into his Yuen Long studio almost four years ago, Huen's paintings have grown dramatically in size. The higher ceilings, and most importantly, the accessibility of an industrial lift have allowed him to paint large-scale, much to his delight. Working on large canvases allows him to be absorbed by the painting. "When you're working on a smaller work, it just keeps me thinking I'm actually working on an object. But when it's like this in size, I am actually working on the picture," he explains. "It's like I can paint something close to real life, so it is closer to my experience of seeing things."



Haze and MuiMui, 2020, oil on canvas, 220 x 260 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Balltsz, MuiMui and Doodood, 2020, oil on canvas, 200 x 320 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



MuiMui and Haze, 2020, oil on canvas, 200 x 320 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

"And then when the whole picture comes out, and when I'm painting it, I feel like it is the present. It's not something from the past, it's actually happening in the painting," says Huen. "I also want the audience to have the same feeling when they are seeing my paintings or seeing my work; that they are actually seeing something happening in the picture. It's not something like a photo that shows something that happened in the past."

Among his favourite painters, aside from Magritte, are Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon. While studies in calligraphy and Chinese painting also find its way in his work, evident more so is the intuitive approach Huen adopts. Utilising no underpainting or pre-drafting, his paintings are an organic reflection and response to the world around him. His wife Haze, their children, and their dogs Dood Dood and Mui Mui are recurring subjects in Huen's paintings. "What I want to depict isn't a specific moment of life, but a combination of different moments in time, maybe in the same place but with a different perspective," says the artist. The moment of completion for a painting, the artist explains, is determined by how close he gets in accurately depicting his experience. "I'm not trying to push those things into people's faces, but showing people that when I keep engaging with these ordinary things, it is actually the action of engaging that comes to mean something."

Gesturing at the three paintings lining the walls, he explains the process of working on multiple paintings concurrently as a way to allow fresh perspective and not feel trapped in any single work. "Actually when I'm not working on it, I am just looking at it. Then after, at some point, I return to it. Sometimes I spend more time looking at the painting than painting it," says Huen. "And this randomness is actually corresponding to my idea of when you walk down the street, you never know what will happen."

With our conversation still fresh in my mind, I walk to my commute home, basking in the afternoon warmth. The sound of insects and birds, the chatter of people gathering, and the hum of the water seem louder; the sight of an ordinary and genuine Hong Kong, all feel different and heightened in my senses. At once, I feel a surge of joy for Huen's muse—that is, the quotidian beauty of Hong Kong.