

Annysa Ng: A Matter of Life and Death

Interview by Stephanie Bailey

Renewal is a persistent theme in the work of Hong Kong born artist Annysa Ng. She is known for stylized black-and-white silhouette depictions of faceless women caught between East and West through the astute appropriation of costume and the referencing of art history. Starting as an evening school student at the First Institute of Art and Design in Hong Kong whilst keeping down a day job, Ng later became a student for five years under respected watercolour teacher, Maytin Kan, holding her first solo show as an artist in Hong Kong in 1994. Over the course of Ng's career, the artist has ventured into a terrain of the unconscious teeming with underlying thoughts, dreams, and ideas. In 2002, Ng left Hong Kong, as well as all work she previously had made, arriving at the School of Visual Arts, New York, ready to start anew. Here, she discovered an affinity with the work of German artists, including Anselm Kiefer and Joseph Beuys, which prompted her to leave SVA after two years to finish her studies at Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Stuttgart, Germany. Now based in New York, Ng carries on with her the historical heritage of Hong Kong as a city arguably caught between two influences, the East and the West, as she continues on a journey that explores the role of culture, knowledge, history, and gender in a culturally and socially ambiguous world.

Stephanie Bailey: When did you make your first silhouette painting?

Annysa Ng, *Level*, 2004,
painted wood, perfume vial,
steel nut, 30.5 x 5.5 x 1.8 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.



Annysa Ng: When I went to Stuttgart in 2004. I found the education there quite different because teachers in New York taught me that everything is about surface, how you build up the oil paint, the textures, and so on. In Stuttgart, I was a bit confused at first because my professor, Marianne Eigenheer, who was an important influence on me and taught me how to bring my inner self into my work, asked me why I was painting certain things. I thought the answers would be evident in the work, so I put painting aside and started making objects. The first object I made was a carpenter's level. I used a Chanel perfume tester vial and wood that I spray-

painted; this level is like a man's tool with a feminine edge. In 2004, I made my first silhouette painting using the outline of the Vermeer painting *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*. I titled mine similarly, *A Woman with a Pearl Necklace*. But instead of a pearl necklace, I drew a necklace consisting of dentures. The painting hints that youth is fleeting. I had this idea for a while, and I knew that technically I could paint a beautiful woman really easily, but then the dentures would not show



Annysa Ng, *A Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, 2004, ink on paper, 76.2 x 55.9 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Stadtbücherei, Stuttgart City Library, Germany.

Opposite page: Annysa Ng, *Ritual*, 2010, mixed media, 157.5 x 218.4 x 315 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

up because people would look at the face instead. So I came up with the idea of painting silhouettes of very famous paintings, and although people would not see the face, they would know that this is an image of a beautiful woman, and the dentures would stand out. There was a balance.

Stephanie Bailey: So did the painting develop concurrently with your object making?

Annysa Ng: You know, I think that all the way back to my time in Germany, in 2004, when I started to make these objects, along with the silhouette painting with the dentures, I just worked with whatever media were suitable to execute an idea.

Stephanie Bailey: What ideas are you drawn to in your work?

Annysa Ng: Psychology, the unconscious, fear. When I work I am in such a state of concentration that I kind of feel in between being conscious and unconscious. Over the years I have actually found the unconscious mind thinks better, so I pose questions to that part of my brain. I don't aim for my work to come out under one concept, but, gradually, I see the underlying concept of most of the work to be related to my interest in and



Annysa Ng, *Veil*, 2004, fabric, crystal, bead, coat hanger, 50 x 140 x 15 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

perception of the unconscious. I think a lot about human behaviour and psychology. For example, some psychologists believe that people who are afraid of heights actually have a desire for death because they are afraid that they won't be able to stop themselves from jumping. From there I thought about ideas of love and death, and skeletons and weddings came to mind, so I created a skeleton bridal dress, *Veil* (2004).



Stephanie Bailey: There is a sense of the occult and a link with the spiritual world in your work, something evident in your bed installation, *Ritual* (2010).

Annysa Ng: Yes, the bed is antique and revisits the idea of dreams and how the unconscious shows up in the dream world. When you are sleeping you go back into the unconscious, and you let it take you somewhere. For me it's more like going back to your true self, home. Going home is also like going back to the womb—this timelessness and spacelessness of nine months when a baby develops, with all that is already there in the genes. Over top of the bed is an abstract form of a sleeve, like the mother's arms, and the mirrored orb in the centre converges the visible consciousness into a focal point in the virtual realm behind the reflective, mirrored surface. At the same time, dreams are timeless and spaceless; you don't know where you are, like in Paul Gauguin's paintings, where he often puts sleep and death together.

Stephanie Bailey: Dreams can equally evoke birth and death, the cycle of life itself and the continuation of things . . .



Annysa Ng: Carl Jung said dreams are the window to our unconscious, so when I think of dreams, I think of Zhuang Zi's "Butterfly Dream," because one day he dreamt he was a butterfly, and after he woke up, he asked whether he had been Zhuang Zi dreaming that he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming of being Zhuang Zi; it's a question of reality. *Who is the Dreamer* (2006), a chair with hair woven around its frame and with silk butterflies on the seat and back frame, is about dreams. I took a chair, took away the seat, and rested one of its legs on a crystal ball, which conveys the fragility of reality. The chair represents a world that

Annysa Ng, *Who Is the Dreamer*, 2006, synthetic hair, chair, crystal globe, silk, 150 x 135 x 210 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

appears to be real and exists objectively, but you cannot sit on this reality: You cannot sit on the chair because it is occupied by butterflies and dreams, which represent ideas. In one Zen story, someone asks a monk what the truth of "forever" is, and the monk answers that it is like a spring flower and a running river because nothing lasts forever and everything changes. Only change itself is forever and therefore truth lies in transcendence. I think the butterfly also expresses this.

Stephanie Bailey: When I think of white butterflies, I think of visiting my grandmother and my uncle's grave during the festivals of ancestor worship in Hong Kong.

Annysa Ng: That is a very Chinese thing. People say they always see the white butterflies around cemeteries, and quite often they show up during a

funeral. I think the scientific explanation is they are attracted to the incense or the light, but quite often people believe they are the spirit of the dead. There is also a Chinese opera, *Liang Zhu —The Butterfly Lovers*, which based on the legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai. The legend, set in the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420 AD), also says the butterfly is the spirit of the dead. This legend is about a woman, Zhu Yingtai, who disguises herself as a man in order to attend school. She falls in love with a fellow scholar but he is not smart enough to tell she is a woman. Yet they become good friends, and though not attracted to each other by appearance, they are spiritually connected. Three years later, her family asks her to return home. Too shy to reveal her true identity to Liang Shanbo, Zhu Yingtai comes up with an idea of telling him that she has a sister, and he should go to her home and ask for her hand in marriage. When the scholar goes to her home he's too late because Zhu Yingtai's parents have arranged for her to marry another man. As they were unable to be together for all eternity and had to separate, and then Liang Shanbo died. On the day of Zhu Yingtai's wedding, she goes to the tombstone of her love and all of a sudden the tombstone opens, and in happiness she jumps into the tomb, which closes behind her. In the opera, the lovers become butterflies, so they live on. That's the forever thing—spring butterflies.

Stephanie Bailey: Thinking back to *Ritual*, growing up with ancestor worship in Hong Kong feels like reconnecting to a past that exists in another realm, which is interesting when you consider how much butterflies seem to influence your work.

Annysa Ng: I remember when I was in junior high school, in Hong Kong, there was one poem written by a famous writer, Wen Yiduo. It's about the writer's daughter who died very young. I think in the early twentieth century the political situation in China was very unstable, and this writer wrote: "Lying under the earth could be quieter—the tranquility of hearing the earthworm burrowing; grass roots sipping is more graceful than the secular noise on the earth." Then he said, "I will tell the paper butterflies—the ashes of the burned joss papers flying tenderly—to fly slowly." It is very beautiful. I was brought up in Hong Kong, and I would go to the Chinese opera with my mother, and I would see these stories like *Butterfly Lovers* and the festival of the dead.

Stephanie Bailey: It's interesting, because in many ways Hong Kong retained many of the old cultural traditions of China that disappeared with the Cultural Revolution.

Annysa Ng: I think so. We didn't have to go through the Cultural Revolution so we could keep the Chinese traditions, yet, ironically, because Hong Kong was a Crown Colony governed by the British, it is both negative and positive.

Stephanie Bailey: How do you feel about being a Hong Kong artist?

Annysa Ng: There are questions. I remember some Western people telling me that the mentality of Hong Kong people and mainland Chinese people is very different. But I know some mainland Chinese artists, and I don't feel very different from them. I don't think I intend to, but I always find myself comparing various cultures. I find in general, Western and Eastern cultures think in similar ways, but they think they are the opposite of each other.

Stephanie Bailey: So opposite that they are almost the same?

Annysa Ng: It's like *yin* and *yang*, black and white. It's really hard to separate.

Stephanie Bailey: Is that one of the reasons you use black and white in your work?

Annysa Ng: Personally, I really like black and white. Since I was young I always used to wear black and white. Many people talk about that now—the use of black and white. But it's not something I intended. As I mentioned at the beginning of this interview, my unconscious is the main creator of my artworks. However, my unconscious just tells me the idea. My conscious mind then needs to analyze it. When I need to write an artist's statement, this becomes one of my problems.

Stephanie Bailey: But what draws you to these colours? Is it that black is the colour of death in the West, and in Chinese culture white is associated with death?

Annysa Ng: I always liked white very much. It is very pure. For example, a colour like red is red, and green is green; they are both just one colour. But to me, white is everything. All the colours combined together in light become white. When white light enters a prism, it becomes a rainbow. White and black are all colours to me. To me they embrace everything.

Stephanie Bailey: Like light and dark. Going back to the silhouette paintings, how have you developed them since the denture painting, in 2004?

Annysa Ng: Actually, in 2007 my then gallery in New York asked me to paint a wall mural after seeing my denture painting. Usually I don't like making work at the request of people, but at one point I said, okay, I'm going to do it, but I'm not going to do it the old way. Then the idea of combining the Qing dynasty-style costume with the Elizabethan collar just came to mind. In general, I took inspiration from the Qing court Jesuit painters. There were foreign court painters who came to China at the end of the nineteenth century as missionaries but ended up working in the Qing court. They introduced one-point perspective and Western styles to Chinese painters, but they also picked up Chinese subjects. The emperor, Quanglong, liked the Jesuit painters' art so much that he got them to paint more like Chinese, so in turn some changed their style to suit his tastes. I take that aesthetic into my own work. To me it's like Western people coming to China and

Annysa Ng, *Tea Silk and Porcelain* (detail), 2007, ink on paper mounted on PVC, 228 x 228 x 2.5 cm (mural). Courtesy of the artist.



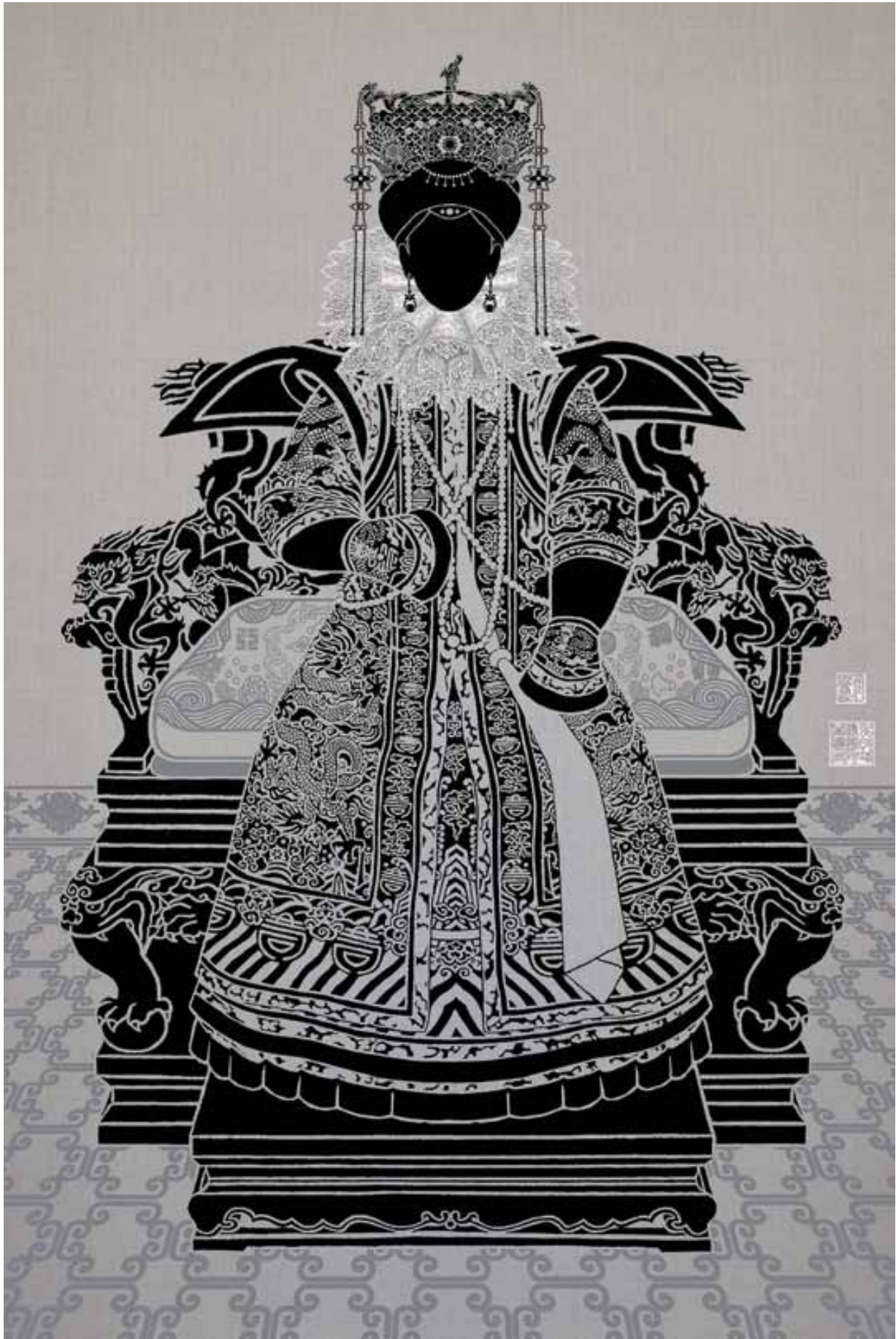
changing their style to suit Eastern taste, and I depart from that idea of an Easternized West to a Westernized East to further transgress borders.

Stephanie Bailey: When you finished the mural, in 2007, what did it reveal to you?

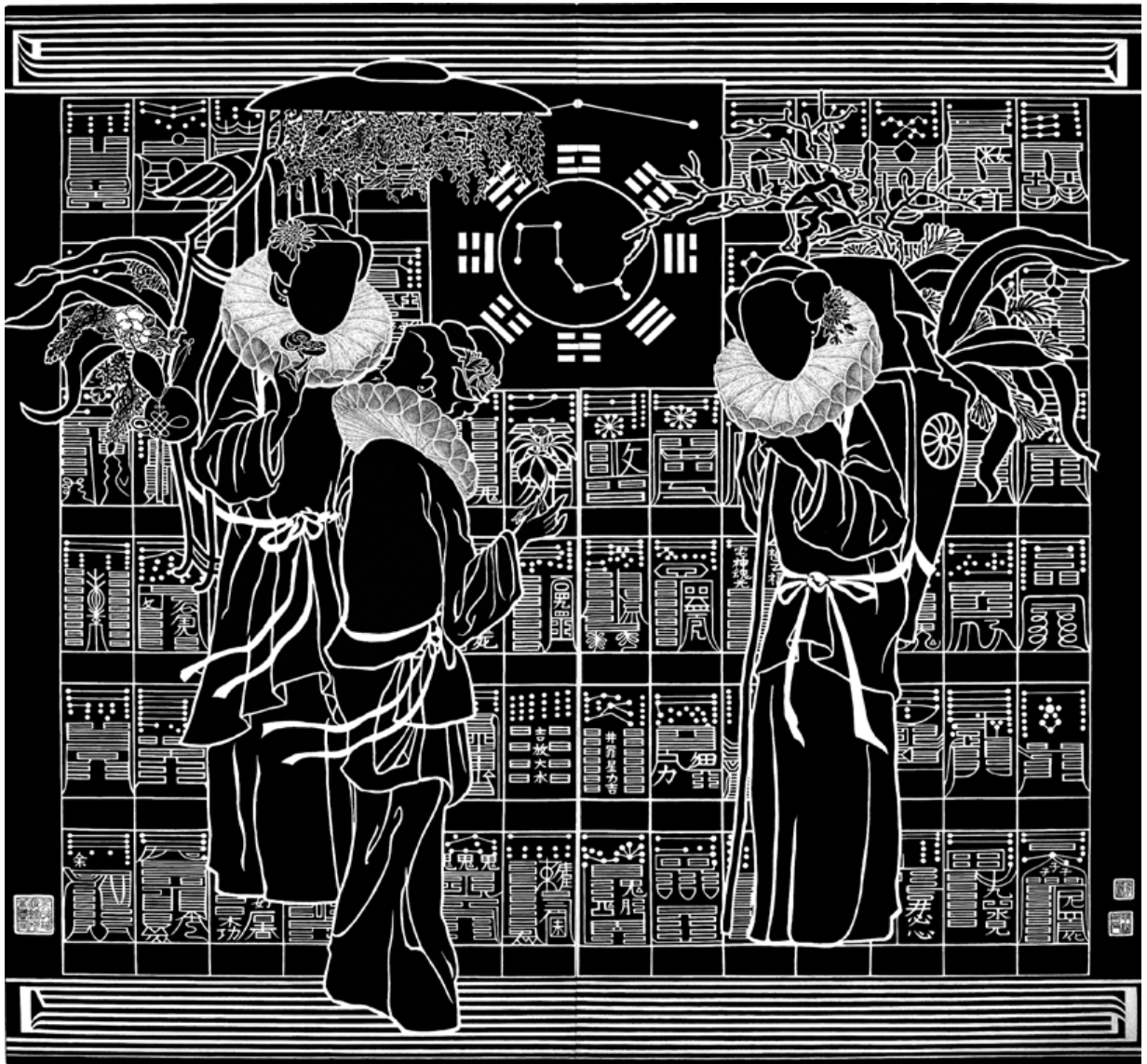
Annysa Ng: Actually, when I finished it, all of sudden I thought the paintings merged in one respect: the identity of Hong Kong. The featureless, blacked-out faces of the silhouette figures in Chinese robes and Elizabethan collars reveal not only the combinations of East and West that can be seen in Hong Kong, but also the specificities of the paradox that lead to the construction of a hollow identity. In Hong Kong, no one asks you where you come from, but overseas very often people do ask. It is politically correct to say I am Chinese from Hong Kong because Hong Kong is not a country. So I would say, “I am Chinese,” and they would say, “Which part of China?” And I would say, “Hong Kong.” Many times people would reply, “Oh, you’re not very Chinese, then.” I thought, “Oh, really? Then who or what am I?”

Stephanie Bailey: Are these questions expressed in your paintings?

Annysa Ng: I think they must be, because of my identity. That identity must have come out at some point, maybe when I did that mural, in 2007. People look at Hong Kong and ask what it is, and if you look at it as just another city of China it somehow gets lost. My quest in exploring what Hong Kong is, and what my identity is, are the inspiration for the paintings. The ruff on the collar of the oriental costume symbolizes the colonial culture of Hong Kong. It is what makes us (still) different among the cities of China. I am not embracing this colonial history, but it is Hong Kong’s history and



Annysa Ng, *Empress V*, 2011, pen on paper, acrylic on linen, 152 x 102 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.



Annysa Ng, *Searching*, 2011, pen on paper, acrylic on canvas, 152 x 162 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.



has made Hong Kong what it is. You cannot ignore it even though many Chinese people are not really happy to acknowledge this inglorious past. I have all these confused feelings and emotions about that part of history. So confused that I chose to detach myself from it and hence the black faces in my paintings.

Annysa Ng, installation view of exhibition at Blindspot Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.

Stephanie Bailey: You recently had a show in Hong Kong of your silhouette paintings. Were you nervous about the reception of the works?

Annysa Ng: I usually do not feel nervous about how people look at my work. I am just curious about the responses. In fact, when I showed my paintings to this store in Chinatown that sells Chinese art supplies, the storekeeper asked me, “You paint so detailed, why don’t you paint the faces?” I didn’t answer, but I liked the question because that is actually the essence of those paintings. I think about these Hong Kong influences as if from a third person perspective, to tell the history without comment. Through the costume, the dragon robes, the images themselves, I wanted to keep my paintings detached and emotionally uninvolved. Hong Kong’s history is so complex. When you read about the Opium War, you feel it should not have happened and that it was a bad thing. You wonder, how did we become a colony? It feels almost unfair. Somehow, I always feel like Hong Kong is an orphan, and now China thinks we are different. But maybe the question is why we are different.