

M2 by Sean Lean

"I've barely scratched the surface before, and the images are too much fun to play with."

When considering the vast variety of influences that can affect our relationship with our cultural identity, none more succinctly encapsulates the struggle and tension of such conflicting experiences as artist Sean Lean. As a continuation of *Motherland*, 'M2' sees Lean dive deeper into the crux of his obsession with his own contradictory cultural past, which draws from the vast toy box of Chinese bedtime stories and Sunday morning comic books to present us with this exploration into his cultural self.

"The treasure trove of imagery is still the same," says Lean, but how he plays with them are now very different. While 'M2' explores many similar concepts and ideas as *Motherland*, Lean treats his subject matter with an undeniable sense of play and light heartedness this time, refusing to be bogged down by seriousness and guilt when discussing his cultural past. Coming from a "traditionally" Chinese upbringing, he recounts his childhood in terms of stories, and a lifetime spent on consuming a variety of disparate media, ranging from *Romance of the three Kingdoms* to *Lord of the Rings*, TVB dramas to American sitcoms.

However, it isn't just the clash of cultural content that Lean finds most fascinating, but rather, it is the fissures encountered when trying to reconcile the specific customs and norms of his family's Chinese upbringing and his own comfort in Western culture. In an earlier interview for *'Motherland'*, Lean speaks specifically about a painting titled *'Dear God, keep my son away from harm, may he does well in school, protect him from...'*, a telling piece which was named after a prayer his mother would make for him. The painting, depicting a Chinese shrine on a background of Marvel superheroes articulates this idea most eloquently, perfectly illustrating the distance between the gods that his mother worships, and the gods that he does. Following this thread, 'M2' sees him explore these same ideas with arguably a much subtler approach, with Lean choosing to emphasize these connections instead through playing with colour, technique and materiality.

A striking example of this, is his piece *Tiffany Blue Door (Heroine of the Yangs, Mu Guiying)* (2019). Here, Lean expertly combines aspects from his various cultural touchstones, interpreting the image

of a Chinese deity in bright colours on a found door. The mythology surrounding the figure of Mu Guiying is an apt one, as a warrior and heroine, she is one of the guardians who would typically be placed on doors for protection. That is where the expected ends however, as Lean then utterly subverts our preconceived notions and associations.

Upon viewing the piece, it is immediately obvious that there is a metaphor to be drawn here between the nature of the door-turned-non-canvas and the deity turned image. For one, Lean has chosen to paint an interpretation of the guardian by depicting them as an opera singer. This blurs the line between the historical person and the mythical figure, a very familiar occurrence in many pieces of Chinese historical-fiction. This is further paralleled in the way in which he treats the door. In his transformation of it, Lean never allows it to become a surface simply for the appearance of the deity's image. Rather, he accentuates its identity repeatedly by presenting it with tiffany-blue trimmings. Even the presence of a handle here further emphasizes its identity, bringing to the forefront the conflict of its now transient nature, a half-fictional character on a half-fictional door.

It is through this juxtaposition that we identify the core of Lean's exploration into his relationship with culture, symbolizing the contradictions of his references in the liminal space where the door and deity reside. In the same way, much of the other works in 'M2' explores these same contradictions through a rigorous process of experimentation with colour and materials.

In the trio titled *Cranes Sunrise (Traditional)* (2019), *Crane Sunrise (Samples)* (2019), and *Crane Sunrise (Distressed Pastel)* (2019), we see Lean take the typically East Asian iconography of a pair of cranes and repeat it three times on steel, each with a distinct change in colour palettes. The first iteration sees the cranes dressed in red, blue and white, a traditional colour scheme for the subject matter. The third however, sees it stenciled in bright pastel pink; but most fascinating is the center piece, which depicts the cranes in a combination of the two palettes, forming a third blend of colours. The symbolism is easy to follow here, and is a repeating theme in the other trios, drawing a clear line between that which is traditional and expected, to that which is deliberately other and different. The point where they meet in the center is where Lean seems to sit. Not in the old or in the other, but somewhere in the middle where the new resides.

When asked about the formal progress of his practice, Lean reveals that, unlike the enamel and canvas pieces in Motherland, his new fascination lies instead with hard steel, stencils, and automotive car paint, relishing in removing the human touch from the very human subject matter. As Lean so eloquently describes it, the tension between the cold, industrial and forceful nature of steel actively undermines his ideas of culture, and the culturally ingrained images in his work. "Culture is transient, and in a flux," he muses "whereas metal is a mineral, an anchor".

'M2' brings with it an undeniable sense of urgency, interrogating our understanding and expectation of culture, only to turn and undermine them at every turn. It is an introspective, rigorous look into Lean's own differing identities, and the many ways one can find reconciliation between these tensions. At the core of it, the work teases at our personal stances, and cultural positions towards his interpretation of Chinese cultural icons and relationship to western media. This ultimately affects how we view Lean's work: is it a playful experiment, a sacrilegious act or perhaps a body of work consisting simply of lines, shapes and colours?

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