Unknown beauty

In June, Chen Man will turn 30. She is already a hugely sought after fashion photographer on the Mainland, and the Beijing-based artist speaks with such a gentle, sheepish voice that, when she finally turns in a succinct remark, it already sounds like an emphatic statement. To be exact, the sentence is: “None whatsoever.”

Speaking over the phone from her Beijing studio ahead of her first solo exhibition in Hong Kong, pertinently titled Unbearable Beauty, Chen has just been asked about the degree to which her art reflects her personality. She continues after a brief pause, “Because I’m a really easygoing person, while my works are sometimes quite extravagant, displaying strong personality. They give a totally opposite impression to my own person.”

And there, in a nutshell, you have Chen Man. Here is an artist who isn’t just consumed by an obsession with depicting feminine beauty; rather, you get the feeling that Chen – a fantastic stylist and a wizard in digital post production – wouldn’t be happy if her images retained their verisimilitude in the final print of her work. The sense of unrealistic perfection permeating her art can be characterized by their vibrancy of colours, as well as the impeccably polished complexions and fantastical make-ups on her photo subjects.

In the artist’s own generalisation, the first phase (out of three) of her career thus far represents the time from 2003 to 2007, when she did a series of covers for Vision, a prominent art and fashion magazine in China. When she started in 2003, Chen was still a student of graphic design and photography at Beijing’s Central Academy of Fine Arts. “I did a lot of retouching at the time,” she recalls, “because I was younger. I shot only one photo a month, so I did a lot of things with it.”

The series gained Chen her first recognition in the field, which eventually translated into the second phase – beauty-oriented fashion shoots. Chen’s visually striking aesthetics have seen her regularly contributing to the Chinese editions of Vogue, Elle and Harper’s Bazaar, among others; advertising campaigns for international brands, such as P&G, Sony Ericsson, Adidas, Nike, and L’Oréal, followed. Her 2006 portrait shoot of David Beckham for Motorola may be her most notable assignment to date.

The third phase, of course, refers to Chen’s subsequent dip into fine art photography. While admitting that she sometimes takes her models’ faces for canvas (she started painting at the age of two), it is probably her creative influences – including artist Matthew Barney, photographer Nick Knight and the late fashion designer Alexander McQueen – that contributed most to her avant-garde approach. Interestingly, the artist is largely oblivious to any connection between her work and the tradition of surrealist art. “Perhaps I am [influenced by it], but I haven’t paid much attention.”

“I usually use very beautiful imageries to represent the dangerous, hidden problems underneath”
Chen says, “What I’m concerned with is the local Chinese elements.”

“Such elements are recurrent feature in our conversation and, indeed, the majority of Chen’s artworks. The experience of growing up in the 1980s and 90s has a great influence on us. First of all, our generation is at least guaranteed the basic standard of living. It’s only after that that people will think about things like art and fashion,” Chen explains.

“We’ve experienced the beginning of the digital era, the blossoming of the internet and the pirated media. They allow us to instantly get in touch with the rest of the world,” she adds.

As it turns out, the artist’s latest works are directly informed by the cultural happenings in the decades she grew up in. In her new 2010 series, Environmental Protection, the artist contemplates the place of electronic waste in China’s increasingly prosperous society – by literally putting abandoned computer wires and mobile phone components onto the heads of her naked models. “This is to bring together the message of environmental protection and the fashionable spirit,” offers Chen. “I want to show people that what they threw away can also be turned into something beautiful.”

In comparison, her Young Pioneer series (2009) is probably closer to the organisation under the Communist Party; when we were children – only that the clothing material is “more transparent and fashionable”. More intriguingly, in each of the pieces, Chen has digitally juxtaposed the girl(s) respectively with images of three Chinese landmarks: the CCTV Tower, Chang’e-1 Lunar Probe, and the Three Gorges Dam.

Despite their undeniable visual attractiveness, Chen reveals that there is a darker edge to her artworks lurking behind their shiny appearances. “We’re the generation after the Chinese economic reform; the [societal] development is smooth, but it also brings about many problems that are not very obvious on the outside,” she says. “I usually use very beautiful images to represent the dangerous, hidden problems beneath.”

**The Collectionist with Jehan Chu**

When I work with art collectors on collection-building, in addition to education one aspect I constantly emphasise is focus. Stop buying art reactively, and start buying proactively; be a hunter not a gatherer. Through this broken-record approach, what eventually dawns on developing collectors is that once you’ve overcome the initial unfamiliarity with buying art and learned how to say “yes”, you must immediately need to learn to say “no”.

Like any new experience, enthusiasm and excitement can be overwhelming, and I end up playing defence 90 per cent of the time. Once you realise you can buy art, every piece of art becomes a potential purchase and what used to be a window of opportunity becomes a frowning now. I feel frown. “Well if I like it, that’s the only thing that matters!” you protest. “Not exactly,” I reply. Liking your art is a prerequisite, but shouldn’t be the sole reason for collecting art. Factors like the artist’s career, exposure, significance and place in the collection as well as many other aspects should also be considered. Of course, those who are really only looking to fill their walls with pretty things should feel free to turn the page now.

To put it another way for those numerically inclined, ever since the Big Bang, many, many millions of artists have churned out many more millions of artworks. Out of all of these artworks still in circulation, only 0.00001 per cent have stood the test of time through museum or private collections. The rest are compost. With those odds, the probability of randomly walking into a gallery and picking up a good artwork without knowing anything about the artist is somewhere between improbable and impossible.

Therefore, as a new collector, your default answer to casually buying pieces should be a sonorous and grandiloquent “NAY”. Nay, that is, until you’ve done your homework and figured out whether the artist is creating work truly worth your dukats. Treat unknown art like tap water in the third world; assume it’ll make you sick until you know otherwise.

I know, I know, first Uncle tells you to “Be bold and buy!” and now I’m saying, “Slow down there, sort!” What can I say; it’s a mixed-up world. The bottom line is that collecting art is a great thing and once you have more experience and knowledge, it becomes even greater. So once you’ve got the bug, slow it down – you’ve got plenty of time until the next Big Bang. Travelling? Staying in town? Check out The Collectionist’s ‘Art Guide’ iPhone app, now available on iTunes.

**Reviews**

**Stretched Connotations**

*White Tube Until March 31*

Calling the narrow stretch of corridor on the 10th floor of the Hong Kong Arts Centre the White Tube gallery doesn’t change the fact that the space is in fact an entrance hallway to the Hong Kong Art School. Two officious looking receptionists perched behind banker teller style windows point to the dimly lit alleyway punctuated by doors and light switches and confirm that this is in fact the whole display space being utilised for Stretched Connotations, a group exhibition examining the use of canvas in painting.

But modest surroundings aside, it is commendable that the people at HKAS are determined to use every available space to nurture and display current works by developing local artists. In this case the curation of Helen Ng and Evangela Costadimas have carefully utilised the space to create an interesting narrative discussing an endless debate in art. The first use of canvas in painting is thought to span back to the 16th century, during the Italian renaissance; five centuries later and a group of Hong Kong artists are still inspired to examine its enduring use as a medium.

Stephanie Sin’s large white diptych Habitat Inhibition opens the show, a mixture of oil, acrylic, sand and dry pasted into the swirling iron works of a hidden gate. Her restraint in palette is in harsh contrast to the blistering greens and pinks of Carol Ho’s Swing for Love, the final canvas tucked around the corner of the cramped corridor. In addition to their painted pieces the artists have each compiled a study of their works in sketches and notes that have then been pinned to the reverse frame of an empty canvas and placed in close proximity to the finished works. As a lesson in artistic practices the studies are interesting, kitsch glimpses into the creative mind, but as a grand addition to the canvases controversy they are perhaps rightly left out in the hallway. Mary Agnew

*Say ‘Yes’ to Motohiko Odani’s Hollow, at Maison Hermes*

*Habitat Inhibition*