

OBSESSION

Cary Kwok

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CURATED BY PRABAL GURUNG

The correct hairstyle, the perfect period shoe, a nod towards popular contemporary culture, touches of a witty, self-referential Orientalism all glazed with a healthy splash of jissom: At first glance the artist Cary Kwok's intricate pen drawings can be read as simply high resolution facsimiles of common tropes of fetishization. It would be all too easy, in fact, to come to this reductive (though not wholly untrue) conception of the focus of Kwok's work. It is not that Kwok is unaware of his reification of specific objects of particularly fetishistic interest—his understanding in this regard is sure—but this is just the starting point for the work the artist does, far in the distance from where his practice eventually takes us. Ultimately, in assembling a heterogeneous index of drawings and other works on paper, most (though not all) sexy, each expertly executed, and all drawn with high fidelity to specific cultural and sexual histories, Kwok is extending and decolonizing the conversation about appropriation which has been in some degree of vogue in the dialogs in and around contemporary art for the past thirty-five years. Kwok brings the sexy back by destabilizing the geochronological and ideological stability of images and histories and re-mediating those images in the most intimate way possible – through drawing.

The best known early work by the London based, Hong Kong born and raised Cary Kwok is something of a dual series of men and ladies, made from 2006 and on. These works, almost always realized in highly controlled blue biro pen ink on A4 sized paper, focus variously on the men or women of specific historical periods. The images of women belong to a period that the studiously non-art historian in me vaguely thinks of “High Rococo” - they are generously dolled up, with aristocratic French noses and perfectly placed moles. But most important, both to the artist and the viewer, are the extravagantly detailed, architectural and seemingly period-correct hairstyles these ladies sport: Kwok has spent countless hours researching just the right style frocks and 'dos to match specific time periods in Western Europe, and channels his research onto paper with draftsman-like skill. While in the years since the beginning of the series, the eras and geographic locations acting as sources for Kwok's drawings of women have changed, these early works, drawn as they were from sources in the 17th and 18th centuries, speak directly to a certain high-water mark in western European geographic expansionism—colonialism, which can be read quite specifically in regard to the artist's growing up on formerly colonized lands. But to Kwok the hair, glamour, and sense of costume depicted in his work is what seems to most appeal and take precedence. Perhaps not surprisingly, Kwok himself is an enthusiastic amateur barber, and it was with him in this guise (placing my head in his sure hands in the booth of London's Herald St gallery at Art Basel Miami, 2007) that I first encountered Kwok's made-up women and men – the men wearing considerably less clothing, and appearing to be experiencing considerably more pleasure.

In these drawings of men, surely the most iconic of Kwok's works to date, various butchy specimens, in profile or three quarter-profile to the viewer, are depicted from the mid-torso up – naked and hunky with streams of liquid gushing up from the bottom edge of the drawing and the subjects' eyes closed; clearly they are cumming. Otherwise, the men are serious - and seriously brawny, a (seeming) mixture of Hollywood second string players from the 1950s and rougher trade from the same era. There is no clothing to direct the reading of these subjects as historical, but Kwok is able to use a modesty of signifiers - their hair and (in the case of the rougher subjects) tattoos - to clearly delineate that they are from a time that is not our own. Like the ladies mentioned above, these men in the moment of their little deaths, obsessed with themselves and shut off from the world, are not drawn from experiences lived by the artist but are rather imagined by Kwok, and mediated by countless books, television, texts, and the cinema. Since these first men in the “Cumming for Barber” series, works depicting the results of men's self-pleasure have continued to appear in Kwok's oeuvre, the cultural source material expanding to include subjects ranging from rabbis to Popeye and Santa Claus.

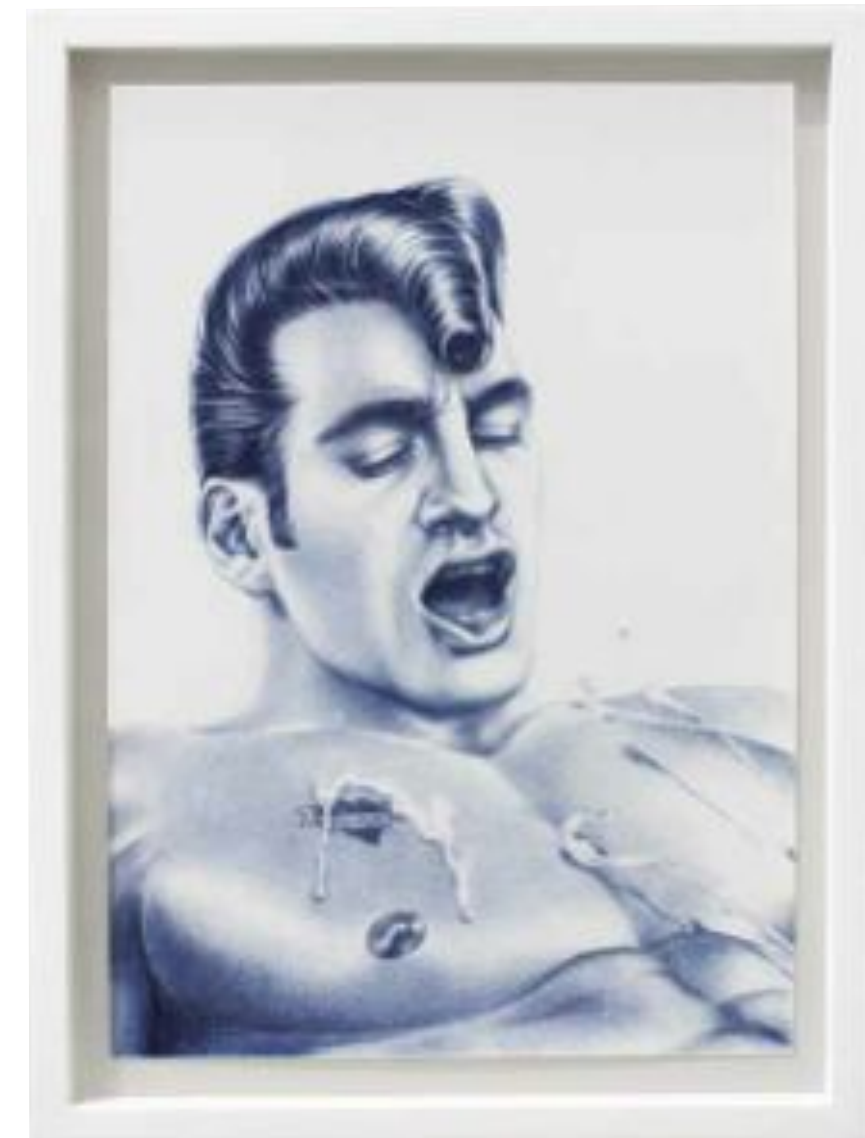
likewise, Kwok's images of glamorous women have moved beyond the earlier drawings of imagined European upper-class mademoiselles of the 1700s. Most recently, they have encompassed Asian as well as Western ladies through the 1960s. Just as aristocratic and powerful as their predecessors, these women are viewed through the lens of various stereotypes - most strikingly, that of Western Orientalism. Be they faux late-Ming Dynasty princesses, riding in an elaborate shoe carried through the air by two white cranes, naked Edo-era Japanese women masturbating while dreaming of the binding shoes that restrict their feet, or Victorian-era Chinese women posing with large-scale versions of westernized shoes, each of these ladies, like their Western counterparts, are not actual representations of actual subjects. Despite the high skill with which they have been drawn, these women, like their male counterparts, are copies of shadows, their relation to history and style breaking down with each filter that is placed over them. But for Kwok, a man born and raised in Asia, redrawing these stereotypes is not a conscious act of reclaiming or anything else quite so simple. Rather, he is exerting his right to get it just as wrong as Westerners. The cultural tropes he abuses (such as his sultry Eastern ladies) are just as stylized and divorced from the real as those European ladies with their Baroque hair, and as much a part of the cultural ether as his hunky, rough trade cumming men and perverted pop-icons.

The real power of Kwok's work is its ability to destabilize our notions of how subjectivities are formed. Kwok is part of a new generation raised around the world that shares

many of the same cultural reference points, for good or ill, concurrent with the expansion of a global market. He, and here I really mean we, can appropriate 1950s Hollywood glamour and cheesecake porn as readily as we can fliitch 1920s-era notions of the forbidden East. No matter our cultural or geographic position, whether our homeland was that of the colonizer or the colonized, our conceptions of the world are formed under the same influences, and we observe it through the same filters. In this new epoch, when Kwok acts to appropriate images, modes, characters, and even sexualities, he remakes the world in a wholly different way, one that is substantially smaller and more interconnected than ever before. Whether he knows it or not, Kwok is destabilizing the all-too-often unquestioned and pervasive filters by highlighting how the local specific formations of subjectivity have been supplanted by those that are global, rhizomatic, and perhaps more productive. Even if not, they sure are hot.

– Benjamin Godsill

Benjamin Godsill is a curator based at the New Museum (New York, NY) where recent endeavors include organizing the exhibitions "The Last Newspaper" and "Urban China: Informal Cities". In addition to his work at the museum Mr. Godsill has orchestrated projects around the world in places as obscure and beautiful as Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia and Trevi, Italy; in addition he has lectured and published widely. He holds a B.A. in Political Science from Pitzer College (Claremont, CA) and an M.A. in Media Studies from the New School (New York, NY).





"You will love Cary Kwok!" is the first time I had ever heard Cary's name mentioned. Why, I asked? "Because he is an incredible artist that lives in London and he has an incredible look." Skeptically, I thought, note to self: look out for Cary Kwok. It was a typical Sunday night at Smith's night in New York that three perfectly coiffed women appeared and behind them emerged a gentleman straight out of Wong Kar Wai's, *In the Mood for Love*. It was Cary Kwok.

Cary's art is as intriguing as he is. He is able to capture a moment, an emotion, a feeling, a mood, a person, an eruption, a glamour—all with exact precision. He is able to engage and create fantasy with his staggeringly meticulous penmanship. He is always impeccably dressed. Yes, Cary is just as precise and obsessive whether he is cutting your hair or dressing himself as he is with his drawings. I became an immediate fan of his and have been following him since.

Cary and I were both born in 1975, the year of the Rabbit. Rabbit people are articulate, talented, and ambitious. They are virtuous, reserved, and have excellent taste. They are also admired, trusted, and are often financially lucky. Admittedly, they are fond of gossip, but are tacitful and generally kind. Rabbit people seldom lose their temper. They would make good gamblers for they have the uncanny gift of choosing the right thing. However, they seldom gamble, as they are too conservative and wise. If you were born in 1975, you would have had a teenager's life where daydreaming took over your mind and doodling shrouded your notebook. There was no Google, Facebook, or Internet, as we know it today, where information is available at the click of a button. Being from this unique generation allows Cary's work to draw from a broad scope of references and subcultures. Looking at his work makes you want to investigate further; the same way you would have investigated a band and who that band liked and who they were influenced by. And this is what looking at Cary's work stirs up: this feeling of wanting to understand who the subject is, where they are from, and what they do. It is truly remarkable to think that Cary can capture this range of emotions with a ballpoint pen. And if you're lucky, with a pair of scissors and a comb.

I think it is simplistic to sum up Cary's work as having a homoerotic iconography, or to describe Cary's work as being hyper-stylized and editorial. The subtle or not so subtle context is what leaves you wanting more. There is an ambiguity to what has happened before and what is going to happen after that these painstakingly detailed drawings tell.

I have to admit the first person that mentioned Cary Kwok to me was entirely correct in their assumption...I do love Cary Kwok.

— Humberto Leon, *Humberto Leon is co-owner of Opening Ceremony with Carol Lim.*



Nabokov has famously said, "Detail is divine," and artist Cary Kwok perfectly embodies that ethic. I first encountered Cary's masterful work at my inaugural presentation at The FLAG Art Foundation. I was immediately drawn to his art because of its enrapturing intricacy. From afar, Kwok's work has a simplicity to it but as one gets closer his brilliant technique unravels and the details become powerfully apparent. His attention to detail is something I truly admire and personally embrace as a designer. In this age of modern technology and fast fashion, I value a well thought out and hand-made process. In order to fully appreciate the quality of fabric or hand-stitched detailing in design, one needs to experience it up close. The difference in the quality of work is as evident as Kwok's highly rendered ballpoint pen illustrations.

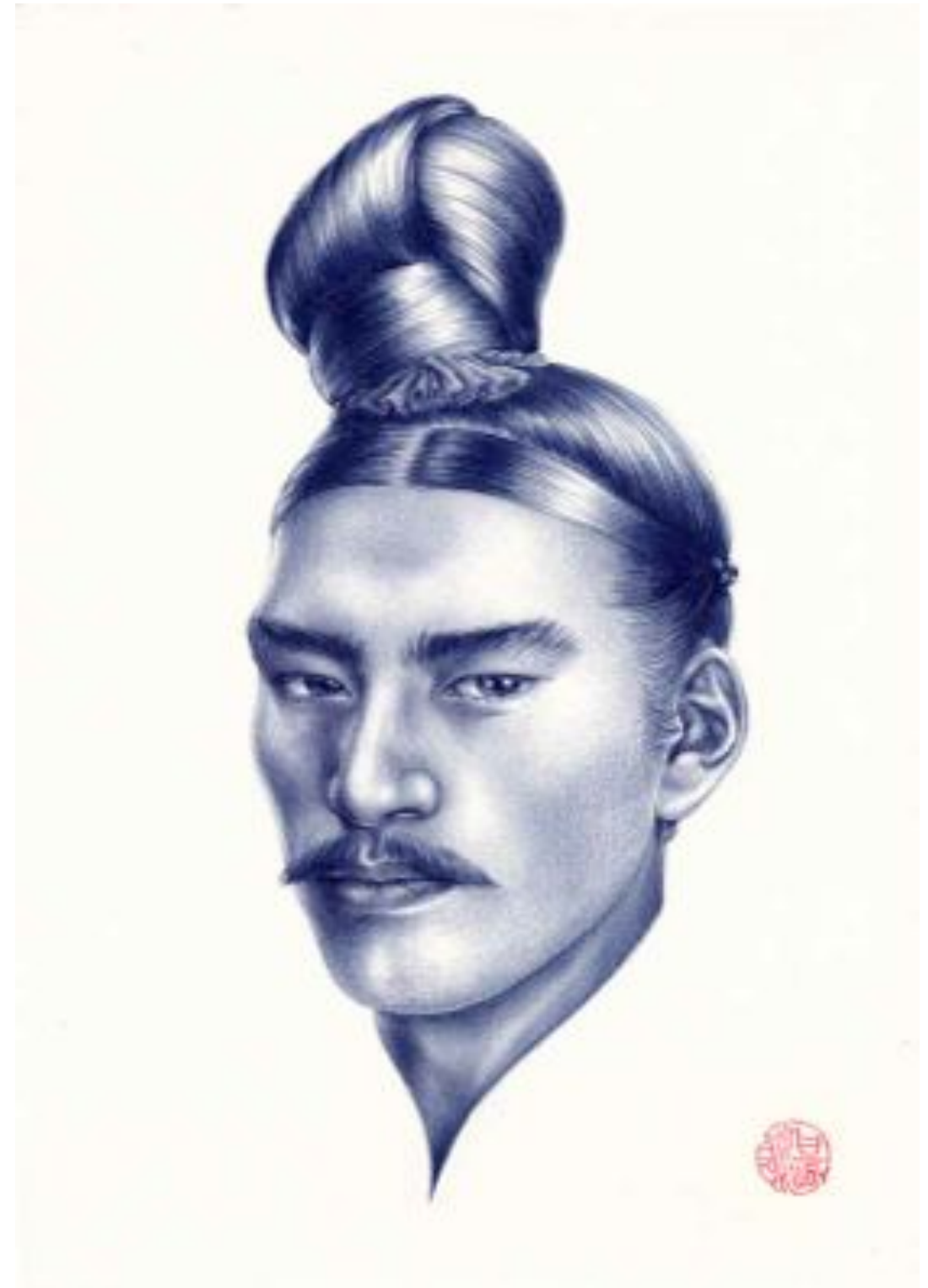
Today, we live in a world where information travels in a viral instant and everything has become smaller and smaller, limiting social norms, and creating similar obsessions across cultures. In fact, the word obsession is particularly thought provoking due to social media but also relevant when discussing Cary's work. Cary's tongue-in-cheek sartorial collection of celebrity portraits, women's shoes, male homo erotica and period glamour all resemble a different story relating to today's overwhelming desire for information and intruding thoughts of the mind, which lead to obsession. I was intrigued by the raw nature of this honest concept and was honored to create a deeper story depicting Cary's meticulous images.

– Prabal Gurung

Prabal Gurung is a New York based designer, born in Singapore and raised in Nepal. Gurung launched his first eponymous collection during New York Fashion Week in February 2009 with a presentation at FLAG. For Fall 2010, he staged his first runway show in the Tents at Bryant Park. Gurung incorporates intricacy and flair to achieve a feminine and classic aesthetic. He has received numerous prestigious awards including this year's CFDA/Vogue Fashion Fund runner up award and has dressed leading ladies including Michelle Obama.



Plumage - Chinese (Tang Dynasty唐朝), 2007
Ink and colored pencil and gold leaf on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches



Plumage - Chinese (Qin Dynasty秦朝), 2007
Ink on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches



Plumage - Greek (7th Century B.C.), 2007
Ink on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches,



Plumage - French (1780s), 2007
Ink on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches



Plumage - Japanese (Heisei平成), 2007
Ink and colored pencil on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches



Plumage - Indian (Early British Raj), 2008
Ink and gold leaf on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches



Plumage - American (2000s), 2007
Ink on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches



Plumage - English (1960s), 2008
Ink on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches



Plumage - American (1990s), 2007
Ink and colored pencil on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches



Plumage - French (1770s), 2007
Ink and colored pencil on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches



Plumage - American (1970s), 2008
Ink on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches



Plumage - Japanese (Heian平安), 2008
Ink and gold leaf on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches



Desire - British (1940s), 2009
Acrylic, ink and gold leaf on paper
16 1/2 x 11 7/10 inches



Desire - American (1930s), 2009
Acrylic, ink, gold leaf and silver leaf on paper
16 1/2 x 11 7/10 inches







Sperman, 2006
Ink on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches



Here Cums the Spider, 2007
Ink on paper

11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches



Here He Pops, 2007
Ink on paper
11 3/5 x 8 1/5 inches



Birth, 2005
Ink on paper
16 1/2 x 11 7/10 inches

Desire, 2009
Ink on handmade leather shoe
6 3/10 x 8 7/10 inches

Cum To Cobbler, 2006
Ink on paper
11 7/10 x 16 1/2 inches





The Bob (1920s), 2010
Acrylic and ink on paper (verso - acrylic)
16 1/2 x 11 3/5 inches



The Bob (1930s), 2010
Acrylic, ink, paper, silver leaf, gold leaf, glue
(verso - copper leaf and acrylic)
16 1/2 x 11 3/5 inches



The Bob (1950s), 2010
Acrylic, ink, glue on paper
(verso - acrylic)
16 1/2 x 11 3/5 inches



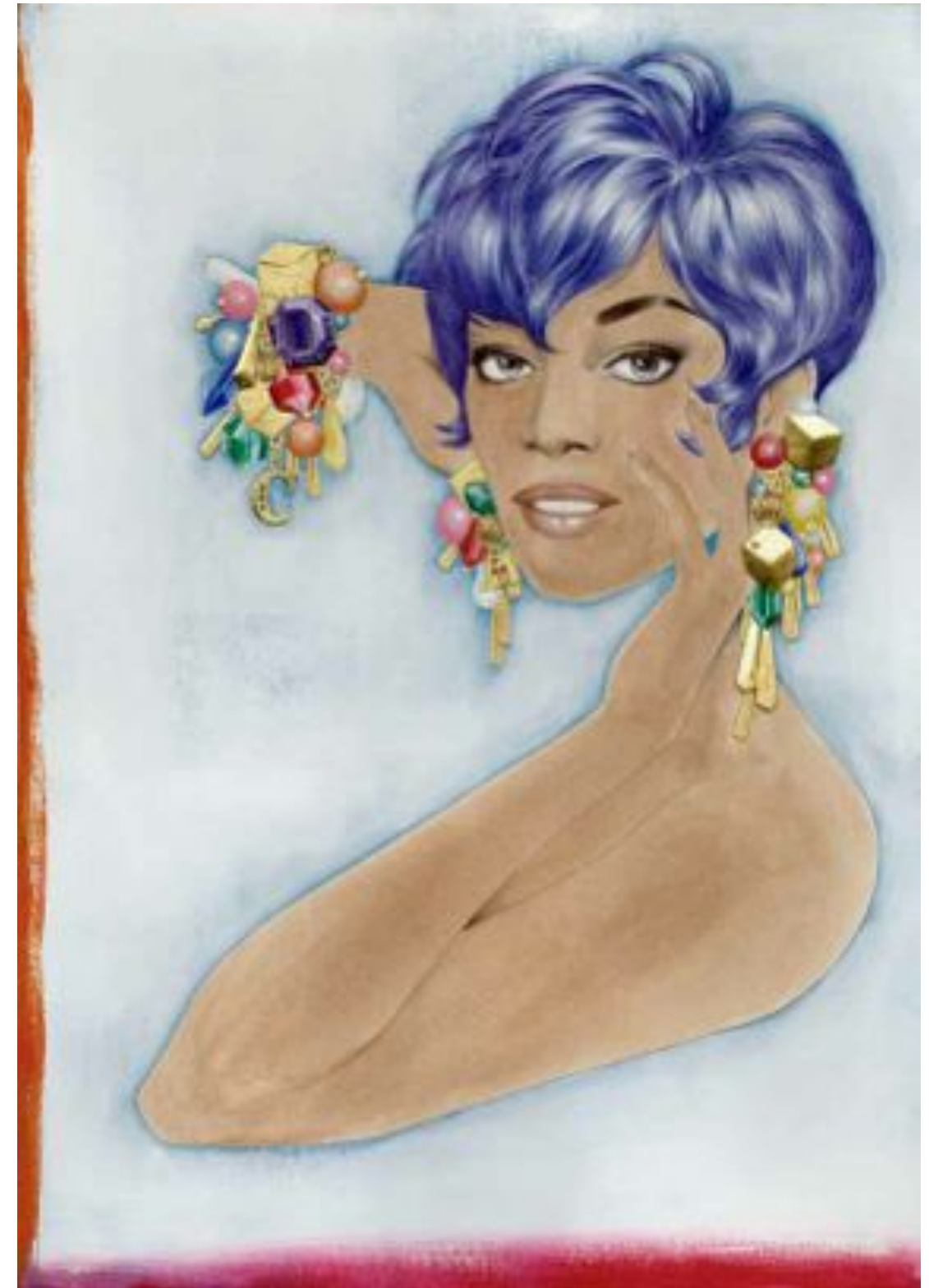
The Bob (1960s), 2010
Acrylic, ink, glue and gold leaf on paper
(verso - acrylic)
16 1/2 x 11 3/5 inches



The Bob (1970s), 2010
Acrylic, ink, paper, silver leaf, gold leaf, copper leaf,
and nail varnish on paper (verso - acrylic)
16 1/2 x 11 3/5 inches



The Bob (1980s), 2010
Acrylic, ink, paper, gold leaf, glue
(verso - acrylic)
16 1/2 x 11 3/5 inches



The Bob (1990s), 2010
Acrylic, ink, gold leaf, glue and paper on paper
(verso - acrylic)
16 1/2 x 11 3/5 inches



The Bob (2000s), 2010
Acrylic, ink, paper
(verso - acrylic)
16 1/2 x 11 3/5 inches



Desire - Chang'an 長安 (Tang Dynasty 唐朝), 2010
Acrylic, ink, gold leaf on paper
14 1/2 x 11 1/5 inches



Desire - Paris (1910s), 2010
Acrylic, ink, gold leaf on paper
14 1/2 x 11 1/5 inches



Desire - Paris (1900s), 2010
Acrylic, ink, gold leaf on paper
14 1/2 x 11 1/5 inches



Desire - Shanghai 上海 (1930s), 2010
Acrylic, ink, gold leaf on paper

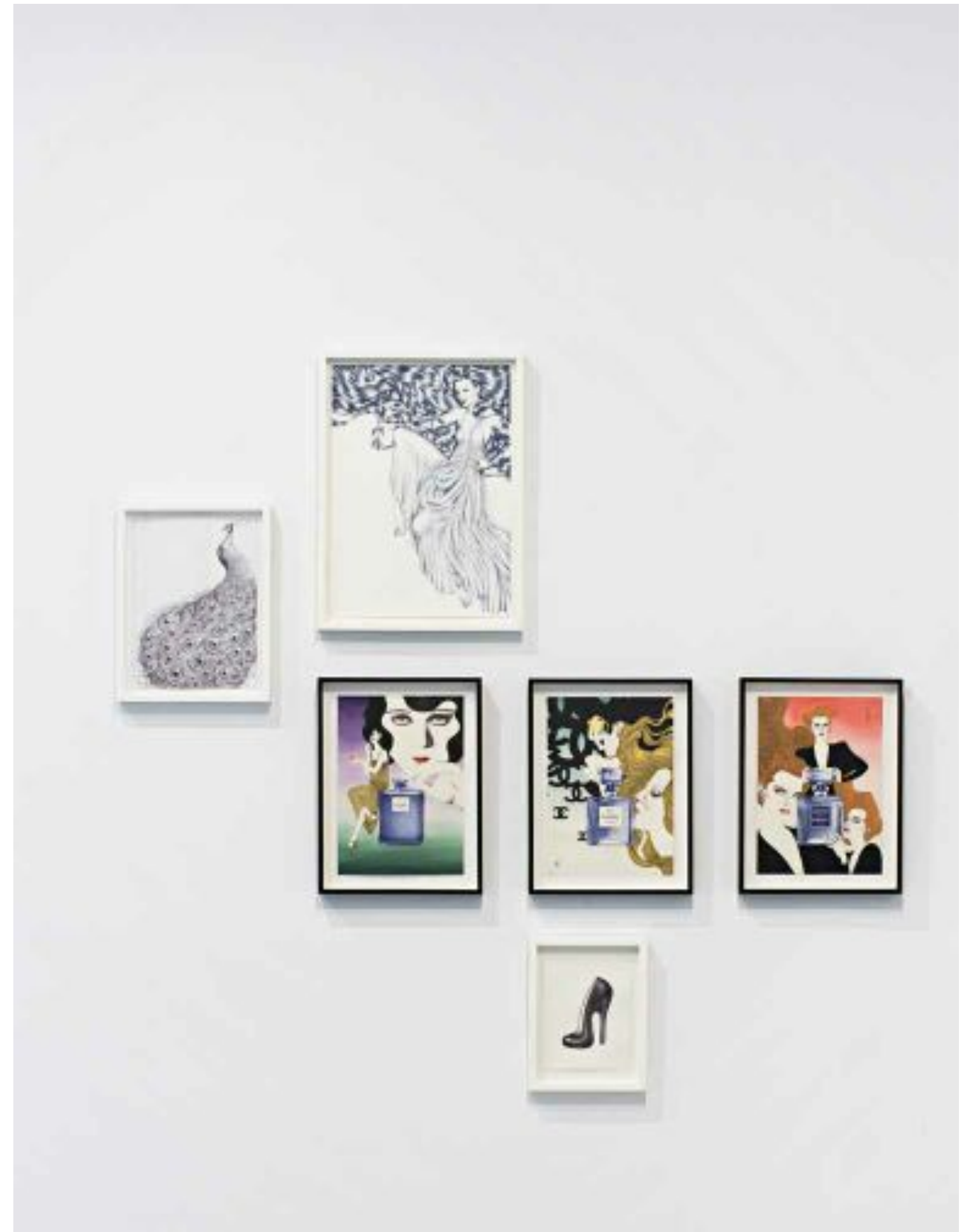
14 1/2 x 11 1/5 inches

Peacock, 2004
Ink on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches

Georgina, 2005
Ink on paper
16 1/2 x 11 7/10 inches

Desire - Chanel, 2009
Acrylic, ink, permanent marker, gold & copper on paper
3 parts: 11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches each

Tattoo, 2007
Ink on paper, 8 3/10 x 5 9/10 inches





Reunion (Niu Lang and Zhi Nu 牛郎與織女), 2008
Ink on paper
30 1/10 x 22 1/10 inches



Cum to Barber (1950s), 2006
Ink on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches



Desire - French (The Revolution), 2009
Acrylic and ink on paper
16 1/2 x 11 7/10 inches



Audrey Hepburn, 2009
Ink, acrylic and gold leaf on paper
7 2/5 x 10 9/10 inches



Armed Chair, 2007
Ink on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches



Cum To Cobbler, 2006
Ink on paper
11 7/10 x 16 1/2 inches



1. *Sperman, 2006*
Ink on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches

2. *Birth, 2005*
Ink on paper
16 1/2 x 11 7/10 inches

3. *Cum to Barber (2000s), 2006*
Ink on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches

4. *Cum to Barber (1950s), 2006*
Ink on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches

5. *Cum to Barber (Roman), 2006*
Ink on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches

6. *Here Cums the Spider, 2007*
Ink on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches

7. *Cum to Barber (1950s - Miami), 2008*
Ink on paper
5 9/10 x 4 3/10 inches

8. *Here He Pops, 2007*
Ink on paper
11 3/5 x 8 1/5 inches

9. *Well Hard, 2007*
Ink on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches

10. *Cum to Barber (1990s), 2006*
Ink on paper
11 7/10 x 8 3/10 inches

11. *Man Power, 2006*
Ink on paper
16 1/2 x 11 7/10 inches



Cary Kwok 郭紹恆 is a London based artist, born in Hong Kong. He moved to London to study fashion at Central Saint Martins College. He is represented by Herald St gallery in London and has exhibited internationally at Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Miami, Taro Nasu, Tokyo, Hauser & Wirth, Zurich, Hard Hat, Geneva and in *Attention to Detail* curated by Chuck Close at The FLAG Art Foundation, New York. Most recently his work was included in *Rude Britannia* at Tate Britain, London.

The artist wishes to thank: Glenn and Amanda and everyone at FLAG, Javier Suarez Sabarros my partner for his support, My Mother, Peter Close a good friend who's helped and supported me throughout the years in London, and Jimmy Choo for making the leather shoe.

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All interior images courtesy of Genevieve Hanson.

Design by DTE Studio

The FLAG Art Foundation is an exhibition space for contemporary art. The program includes three to five professionally curated shows each year. Each consists of works by established and emerging international artists. FLAG is on the 9th and 10th floors of the Chelsea Arts Tower located in the heart of New York's art district on 25th Street between 10th and 11th Avenues.

Our objective is to encourage the appreciation of contemporary art among a diverse audience. FLAG provides a unique educational environment in which visitors can view, contemplate, and engage in active dialogue with the artworks. Curators select and borrow from a variety of sources to include a wide range of work in each exhibition. FLAG is also a resource that facilitates loans of contemporary artworks to museums around the world.

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