

Exploring Identity and Cultural Dichotomies with Brendan Lee Satish Tang at C24 Gallery

Delve into the captivating fusion of Ming Dynasty aesthetics and anime-inspired robotics in Brendan Lee Satish Tang's 'Manga Ormolu' series, currently on view in the duo-exhibition 'Cultured' at C24 Gallery. Unveil Tang's intricate process of melding Asian heritage with Western influences, delving into the complex narratives of identity, cultural assimilation, and societal perceptions.

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On a suspiciously quiet Thursday evening near the Chelsea piers, the streets are bathed in fading sunlight, the day prematurely surrendering to dusk. The crowd of gallery goers looking for visual stimulation, networking prospects, or free drinks has yet to proliferate, and amidst this quietude stands C24 Gallery, a beacon with its luminous lights casting an alluring glow through the window and onto the sidewalk. A veritable unopened treasure chest awaiting discovery.

The gallery is a reliquarium, a sacred box showcasing Ming Dynasty vessels that have been penetrated by and entwined with anime-inspired robots and gilded ormolu.



Adorning the walls and encircling these mutated cyborg vessels, are expansive, bulletproof stretched kevlar sculptural paintings, stained by steel rust and varnished with a luminous patina.

Albeit stylistically distinct—abstract vs. representational and muted color palette vs. an explosion of hues—the contrasting aesthetics of Brendan Lee Satish Tang and Coby Kennedy's works meld beautifully in the space. Non-competing and complimenting, the industrial features and the matte and glossy surfaces of both artists' work harmonize to present *Cultured*, a duo show on view until December 23rd.



C24 Gallery describes *Cultured* as “refined, cultivated, nurtured, artificially grown, or synthesized.” When asked about the exhibition’s title in connection to the works on display, David Terry, the director and curator of the gallery, explains how the artists’ underlying processes align and how the concept and content behind them are parallel:

“The two artists are deep within their analysis of their own culture, personally and within a historical context with Brendan being inspired by the Ming Dynasty and Coby exploring the African-American diaspora.”

With their post-colonial explorations of race, identity, and heritage, *Cultured* showcases the multiplex manifestations and individualistic interpretations of socio-cultural issues experienced collectively.

MANGA ORMOLU



Manga Ormolu 4.0-aa, 2023, Ceramic and mixed media, 22 x 10 x 10.5 in. (55.9 x 25.4 x 26.7 cm) - photo courtesy: C24 Gallery

For over two decades, Brendan Lee Satish Tang (he/they) has been working on their series entitled *Manga Ormolu*—a fusion of distinctly Asian aesthetics accented with European filigree.

A cobalt blue landscape, dragons, fish, florals, and warriors are painted with precision on the 'porcelain' facades—imagery referencing the style of vessels from the 18th-century Ming Dynasty, a prosperous period of economic and cultural expansion in China.

Agglutinated and burgeoning onto the melting Chinese relics are Japanese robotic features that have spored and taken control over the vessels—a sci-fi parasite. The glossy cyborg mutants are inspired by Tang's longstanding love of Mecha: *"a genre of Japanese manga and anime that heavily features or focuses on mechanical innovation. Robots, cyborgs, androids, and space stations, for example, all fall under the wide umbrella of mecha; however, robots are usually the primary focus"* (NYPL).

Tang's infatuation with science fiction and utopia began as a child, which coincides with when mecha grew to peak popularity in the West. They were engrossed in playing video games, reading manga, and watching shows like *Transformers*, *Astro Boy*, and *Star Trek*.



Manga Ormolu 5.0-aa, 2023, Ceramic and mixed media, 23 x 12 x 13 in. (58.4 x 30.5 x 33 cm) - photo courtesy: C24 Gallery

Unsurprisingly, those formal and conceptual themes became parents to their visual language and permeated into their practice—bringing the fictional robots into the physical realm.

Although the Chinese vessels and Japanese cyborgs come from the same continent, that is their only shared variable. The traditional vessels are monochrome, soft, fleshy, and matte, with a crackled glaze, and delicate brushstrokes with value. Meanwhile, the futuristic, graphic robotic parts are hard and manufactured, glossy, and engineered.

The contrasting evocations of the past colliding with the future evoke nostalgia and hope—or detachment and fear—depending on the person and how they view the flourishing omnipresence of technology.

Concerning the geopolitical relationship between Japan and China, Tang explains how this wasn't initially a forefront concern, however, they became aware of the contentious history between the two nations when they had an exhibition in Richmond, Vancouver.

“It was really interesting to have that experience because there were a lot of people from mainland China that live in Richmond and when they came to the show, they saw [the *Manga Ormolu* pieces] as an affront and it was like almost an insult onto the historical vessels and that sort of thing. As, you know, we always think of a colonial agenda within a Western context, but it was a colonial agenda within a Japanese context as well. And so there was a weird form of telephone game where it's like I'm unpacking my 'Asianess' through the West unpacking 'Asianess'.”

As a Chinese, South Asian Canadian who was born in Dublin, Ireland, Brendan has always lived within a Western landscape and felt disconnected from their heritage as they assimilated, negotiated, and suppressed their “Asianess” to steer Western spaces. When they discovered the ormulu—the 18th-century French and German aristocratic practice of embellishing pre-existing, often foreign or “exotic” objects—they saw themselves reflected in the gilded Chinese porcelain.



Manga Ormolu 4.0-bb, 2023, Ceramic and mixed media, 23 x 10 x 11 in. (58.4 x 25.4 x 27.9 cm) - photo courtesy: C24 Gallery



Manga Ormolu 2.0-t, 2023, Ceramic and mixed media, 20 x 14 x 13 in. (50.8 x 35.6 x 33 cm) - photo courtesy: C24 Gallery

"I was excited by what I was seeing kind of in a way of seeing myself in the work where I am very much an Asian identity but I have all this Western filigree all over me. I am the Ming Vessel with the gold filigree and the strange architecture and stuff like that. But then I started seeing things where they started making these elaborate pieces with Buddha and put all these things that have no business being together. I felt a bit revolted, but also equally fascinated."

Unearthing these appropriated, fetishized, and Westernized Asian relics became the genesis of their *Manga Ormolu* series and an outlet to explore their identity. Akin to Asian fusion restaurants, where spices and ingredients are modified to become more accessible and digestible, the cyborg vessels appear Asian whilst garnished with European flavors to suit the Western taste.

These sculptures are a self-portrait of Brendan, they humorously scrutinize and satirize the Western lens and cultural appropriation, whilst simultaneously confronting their self-inflicted discrimination. No longer, are they molding and denigrating themselves to accommodate and please others, however, their people-pleasing tendencies have sublimated and materialized in their craftsmanship.



Work in progress of Manga Ormolu 4.0-bb, 2023 – photo courtesy: Brendan Lee Satish Tang

“I am a chronic pleaser,” they state whilst chuckling, “I go to ridiculous lengths to make [my work] seem so seamless.”

Tang is unquestionably skilled and perfectionistic, with a meticulously torturous yet satisfying process. It begins with sketching, measuring, and drafting the sculpture’s foundation. Subsequently, they throw a vase, base, and ‘shot glasses’ (trimmed and attached to the sides of the form) on the wheel, then proceed to build the composition by extruding, slab building, hand-building, manipulating, pinching, and sanding. Tang then fastidiously hand-paints traditional Chinese imagery and dresses the piece by airbrushing, glazing, and applying gold luster treatments.

The laboriously constructed sculptures and impeccably glazed surfaces imitate porcelain and metal, despite being made from low-fire earthenware. As an exercise in trompe-l’œil, Tang teases the viewer into thinking the piece is constructed from separate parts using varying materials. They further confuse the viewer by grounding the form on a wooden plinth and adding rubber gaskets, screws, and bolts—some of which are real and others ceramic.



Manga Ormolu 2.0-s, work in progress – photo courtesy: Brendan Lee Satish Tang



Manga Ormolu 2.0-s, 2022, Ceramic and mixed media, 40 x 19 x 15 in. (101.6 x 48.3 x 38.1 cm) – photo courtesy: Brendan Lee Satish Tang

The result is an intriguing, animated mutation that illustrates Tang's expert understanding and decades-long experience in playing with trompe-l'œil and the interrelationship between reality and fantasy.

Traditional and futuristic, Western and Asian, industrial and fine art, and imperial elitism and commercialism—Tang gifts us with sculptures filled with juxtapositions, complexities, and perplexities. The cyborg vessels invite you to question your heritage (within your ethnic and cultural tribes), your identity (within society), and your existence (in the Digital Age).



Study 8, 2018, Ceramic and mixed media, 6 x 11 x 5.5 in. (15.2 x 27.9 x 14cm cm) – photo courtesy: C24 Gallery

<https://explore.moca-ny.org/2023/12/14/exploring-identity-and-cultural-dichotomies-in-the-cyborg-vessels-of-brendan-lee-satish-tang-at-c24-gallery/>