

[Transoceanic Interview] From the Tulip Mania to Jiqingwei Artist Zhang Yibin: An International Perspective from the In-Between | 2026

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The Bodybuilder

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"I felt a pressure, as if being a minority student meant you 'had to' create work on themes like diasporism, immigration, loss of homeland, exile, or return. White students weren't asked to explore these issues, so I always resisted incorporating them into my work." — Gordon Cheung

Some resigned from their official posts and returned to their hometowns, while others rushed to take the imperial examinations late into the night. Just as tens of thousands of Hong Kong people were emigrating to the UK to start new lives, contemporary artist Gordon Cheung chose to move from England to Hong Kong. In addition to relocating locally, he collaborated with the local gallery gdm, setting up a studio in Wong Chuk Hang. His works were recently exhibited in a group exhibition at Tai Kwun Museum of Contemporary Art, and his early large-scale works have been added to the M+ collection, giving a strong boost to his art career in Hong Kong.

"It's heartwarming to receive such hospitality when I first arrive in Hong Kong," Gordon said.

I first met Gordon more than a decade ago. Art Basel had just launched in Hong Kong, and the British gallery representing Gordon's work was exhibiting there; he came along too. I was working for an English-language newspaper in Hong Kong at the time, and we happened to meet. We even took a taxi together to the Universal Building in Central. Back then, he was a passionate young artist, full of curiosity about Hong Kong. This is understandable; although he was born and raised in England and had never lived in Hong Kong, and we had only spoken in English for many years, he always considered Hong Kong his home and roots. His parents were Hong Kong immigrants of the previous generation, so he had a biological connection to Hong Kong.



Move to Hong Kong early and set your sights on the international stage

Many years later, Gordon moved to Hong Kong. The initial reason was family. His parents, who used to run a Chinese restaurant, retired and moved to Hong Kong about 20 years ago. He originally planned to settle in Hong Kong with his parents in two or three years, but his mother recently underwent knee surgery, which brought forward his relocation plan.

Gordon officially moved to Hong Kong earlier this year, and then returned to the UK in the middle of the year to prepare for his retrospective exhibition, "Many Worlds, One Mind." The exhibition, held at the Close Gallery in Somerset, southwest England, showcased approximately 28 works created over the past two decades, including paintings, sculptures, prints, and etchings. I made a special trip from London, a two-hour train ride, to visit this charming suburban gallery and reconnect with the artist.

As an artist, Gordon not only has high standards for himself, but also has high expectations for his audience. If you're just looking for a pretty but ultimately unattractive prop for your selfie, I advise you to move on; you're not this artist's target audience.

His works are complex and diverse, with meticulous attention to detail and depth in terms of materials, forms, and themes. Through his works, he continuously explores the profound impact of important issues such as geopolitics, financial systems, technology, and globalization on human civilization and nature. Whether it is a painting using the Financial Times stock quotes as its base, or the "Scholar Rock" series of sculptures based on the newspaper, or sculptural paintings crafted using 3D printing technology, all are the artist's reflections on global capitalism and the social, economic, and political myths it has spawned within the context of current international conflicts.

His works are full of critique of contemporary social civilization. For example, his 2011 work "Trembling Sunrise," which was recently added to the collection of M+, belongs to this category. When viewers are present with his works, they are inevitably and involuntarily questioned and made to think about the current crisis.



Gordon grew up and was educated in the UK, graduating from Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design. His transmedia experimental works blend Eastern and Western visual aesthetics. This hybridity is closely related to his diaspora background and his experience growing up in the UK as a minority.

"I didn't really think about these issues in my early years, and for a long time, I lacked the ability to clearly express my thoughts on 'divergence,'" the artist said. It wasn't until he entered art school that he had to confront and confront identity issues. "I felt a pressure, as if, as a minority student, you 'had to' create works on themes like diaspora, immigration, loss of homeland, exile, or return. White students weren't required to explore these issues, so I always resisted incorporating them into my work."

Looking back, he realized that these elements had already permeated his work. "Because I am indeed a member of the diaspora, and the psychological state of being in an 'intermediate state' has unconsciously manifested itself in my work. I have also learned to understand this state as a special power—the ability to build bridges between different cultures, to be a member of a global community, and to observe my world through this perspective."

Gordon's perspective, to some extent, is a special sensitivity nurtured by those born into adversity, making it easy for him to see hidden or inconspicuous things and patterns. For

example, his painting series New Order, on the surface, uses algorithms to reconstruct still life paintings of bouquets from the Dutch Golden Age of the 17th century, but in fact, it is the artist's multi-layered critique of contemporary society and colonial history.

A new order of power and corruption leaps off the canvas

The artist explained that "New Order," besides encompassing the new order resulting from pixel reconfiguration, also alludes to power, corruption, and lies—Power, Corruption & Lies is the title of the British band New Order's 1983 album. The album title was actually inspired by a graffiti created by German artist Gerhard Richter in 1981 on the exterior wall of an exhibition space in Cologne. The album cover for New Order used Henri Fantin-Latour's 19th-century still life of a bouquet of roses, but Gordon's version was adapted from a Dutch Golden Age still life of a bouquet.

Gordon explained that he was inspired by the 2008 financial crisis to use paintings from the Dutch Golden Age as his creative blueprint. He studied historical financial crises, the earliest of which occurred in the Dutch Golden Age, which was the first recorded bubble economy and financial crisis in human history in the 17th century.

"That era is widely considered the beginning of capitalism; at the same time, Britain formally established the East India Company, which later became the most valuable company of its time." He believes that art often doesn't tell you how such companies amassed wealth. "That was through colonialism, the slave trade, and other methods, so these works are actually questioning issues that haven't been included in the discussion."



As a descendant of Hong Kong immigrants and an artist born in Hong Kong's former colonial power, geopolitics is a topic of great interest to Gordon, especially the forgotten memories of Hong Kong's colonial past. In recent years, he has frequently traveled to Hong Kong for ancestral roots research and to study his family history. He recently discovered that he is the 29th generation descendant of the Zhang family in the New Territories, with his mother's family lineage tracing back to the Song Dynasty, nearly 800

years ago. These studies and reflections have inspired his work. For example, in his solo exhibition "Zhang Yibin: New Territories" at the Hong Kong gallery gdm last autumn, he used a stock quote from the Financial Times to create a replica of a village gate from a century ago, titled "The Gatekeeper." During the Six-Day War in 1899, British troops attempted to enter a New Territories indigenous village but failed to capture it, ultimately dismantling the gate at Ji Hing Wai, the walled village of his mother's ancestors.

"Britain finally returned that gate (in 1925), but I want to explore whether the people who came through the gate were friends or invaders. How do we understand Hong Kong as a former British colony but not part of the British mainland? What does it mean when different countries come to attack and take what does not belong to them?" The artist's question coincides with the current decolonization discussion in the West.

Gordon is based in Hong Kong, but he still holds exhibitions around the world from time to time. In addition to the exhibition currently running at Close Gallery until August 15, he has an exhibition at Kavi Gupta Gallery in Chicago, USA in September. During Frieze London in October, he also has another exhibition at Close Gallery's London space. He will be very busy in the coming months.



Before leaving, I said with a smile, "Gordon, we've always only spoken in English, but I've never asked you how your Cantonese is?"

He laughed and said, "Very bad."

I know he was just embarrassed, and I believe that when we meet again next time, we will be able to talk in Cantonese.

Written by: Vivienne Chow

Vivienne Chow is a London-based art and culture journalist and critic. She previously worked as a senior reporter for the South China Morning Post (Hong Kong) and as a London correspondent for the international art media outlet Artnet News. Her articles have appeared in numerous international media outlets, including *BBC Culture* , the *Financial Times* , *The Art Newspaper* , and *Variety* .

Image: Hannah Goldsmith @goldsmith_studio