

Chasing The Dragon

Christian Develter



Enigmatic Spirits
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Teo+Namfah Gallery

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It has never been easy to make a satisfactory definition between the portrait and a mere likeness. The debate on a clear definition has been around since the earliest figure paintings, and in almost all cultures. Among the finest artists in the West, from a classical master such as Albrecht Dürer (1471 – 1528) to a modern icon such as Lucian Freud (b. 1922) as well as the numerous modernist art movements, agreement on what constitutes a portrait and a mere likeness has rarely found common ground.

Perhaps the medium that has most changed our perceptions of portrait and figurative painting has been photography. Hyperrealist painters and Pop artists, for example, made figures that forced the viewer to look more closely at the qualities of the face and the body and how these reflected our view of ourselves. To some people such art is bland, even meaningless, in the face of photography. Yet, the style and techniques of realism and hyperrealism, for example, provide an uncanny focus on the human figure that is uniquely questioning of individual humanity in a manner in which photography is not. In the age of the Internet and video art such painting may appear old fashioned, even redundant. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth.

The close examination of the face and body in portrait painting that is afforded by hyperrealist art, for example, has seen a gradual resurgence in Asia during the past two decades. Why this should be so may be due to a new generation of artists, initially many of them Chinese, seeking to make iconographic figures that represent something of the powerful and influential as well as making a statement of the changes within their own cultures. This art is immediately accessible to a Western audience since it has been realized through a combination of Western painting techniques, often with a Warholian influence. But Asian hyperrealism is also informed by Asian sensibilities and traditions: for example, classical Chinese *guohua* portraiture or Japanese portraits of famous *kabuki* actors and courtesans reproduced in myriad series of woodblock prints. The proliferation of Mao figures, the smiling, distorted or pained faces of the masses, and the erotic art of such artists as You Yuhan, Wei Dong, Fang Lijun, Zhang Xiaogang, Feng Zhengjie, and Zhang Huan represent just some aspects of the kind of figuration that has swept across China's art world and influenced many other Asian artists since the mid-1990s.

For the Belgian painter Christian Develter (b. 1968), who has been living and working in Bangkok since 1996, the hyperrealist portrait offers excellent opportunities and challenges through which to combine his training as both a painter and a designer and to comment on the cultures in which he now travels. Among the aspects of his art that are immediately intriguing to viewers is the quality of beauty that he achieves within tightly focused compositions. Develter's sense of the beautiful and the individual strength and spirit of his protagonists with his close-up narrative is developed through careful consideration of line, lighting, and geometry as well as his perspicacious awareness of the power of color to reveal that which is behind the surface of each character.

His colors are, at times, neatly contrasting, but, at other times, there are surprising juxtapositions that enliven his individual figures so that the viewer is drawn quickly into his art, his private narrative of time, space, and cultures observed. This is not to say that all of Develter's art is always easily accessible: it is not. This is true in the case of his stern soldier *Defender of China*

(2009) and the brooding child in *Sakya Boy* (2009) as well as the somewhat surreal image of *Olympic, Asian Athlete* (2009). The contrasts and juxtapositions of colors of the sultry *Louise* (2009) and the formal *China Chic* (2009) invite access. Such works, however, while they emphasize Develter's careful attention to color and lighting, are also good examples of how he builds his forms to reveal something of the character and spirit behind his surfaces.

"I have the tendency to say that I work mathematically in the use of color. Mostly I start with the background color and this background defines the atmosphere of my work," says Develter. "When I like the painting to have a Chinese feeling, mostly the background will be red, but not always. The mathematical part is that for the rest of the painting, as much as possible, I put the opposite colors next to each other. Lighting is a bit like handwriting. I have my own way of painting but this is also the result of my personal evolution as a painter."

Although one might view Develter's works for his most recent exhibition *Chasing the Dragon* as formal, overly studied, and even too reverential toward his subjects, many earlier works in his oeuvre were not without a singular sense of humor. In his *Ethnic Collection* series (1996 – 2002), for example, which comprised some 30 oil paintings; Develter introduced his audience to figures from a range of cultures. Among these were a Japanese Geisha and a pair of sumo wrestlers, native-Americans, an Eskimo, and a Masai tribesperson. There was something of the caricature in these works, but there was also a sense of humor that enlivened the figures without mocking them. The colors and patterning in these figurative works showed just how well he combined his skills as a fine artist, colorist, and a designer, all of which reveals the depth of his studies at the Institute of Fine Arts, St. Lucas, Ghent, and the fashion department of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Antwerp, in 1990 and 1993 respectively. In these works there is a hint at just how Develter might develop into a figurative artist who gets to the heart of his protagonists by paring away unnecessary details.

Develter's search for beauty in cultures other than his own has taken him throughout Asia and has resulted in various series such as *Daughters of the Dragon* (2005), *Senses of Asia*

(2006), *Japanese Paintings* (2006) *Asian Chic* (2007), *Khmer Femititude* (2007), *Color Notions* (2008), and *The Mikado* (2009). Each series has been built slowly one upon the other to reveal an artist who has an expansive view of Asian beauty. This has been further examined in the works in *Chasing the Dragon*, in which both anonymous and well-known male and female characters are revealed. At the heart of these works is a search not just for physical beauty but also for something of the spirit that embraces and motivates each one in our era of hyper celebrity.

To achieve his results Develter has observed his subjects closely, not only their physical reality but also their environment. In the case of his *Jacky Chan* (2009) and *Bruce Lee* (2009), both of which are set against red backgrounds, Develter shows men of action and their physical prowess and suggests their aggressive personalities, which underpins their psychological need to succeed. The bright colors Develter uses -- orange, blue, black, and red as well as a touch of green for Bruce Lee -- and the characters' postures exemplifies their status as men of action. "I like to paint strong personalities because they are sensual, influential or plain powerful characters," says Develter. In *Jacky Chan*, *Bruce Lee*, and the anonymous soldier of *Defender of China*, Develter has found three iconographic men of action from Chinese culture that fit his ideas precisely. *Sakya Boy* (2009), however, is a more meditative side of Develter, one in which a spiritual stillness is at the heart of the work.

Even though we may recognize such people as Lee and Chan, and other well-known figures, Develter says that he has no real plan when he sets out on a series. "Who I paint is actually a coincidence and the result of an ongoing process. I first started with the more figurative with my *Big Mama* collection. I retained the colors and let the works grow into more realistic and recognizable figures or ones made up only in my mind," he says. "*Chasing the Dragon* refers to Chinese icons but not all are celebrities. These exhibition pieces are not a series but a group of paintings that do fit together. My figures become real to me through the whole process. I start to feel like I know them in person. If I see them in person or on television or in magazines I feel I almost have a familiarity with them although it is only one-sided."

When looking at Christian Develter's women -- *Butterfly Guan* (2008), *Madame Ming*, *Dan Actress*, *Anna May Wong Reclined*, *Louise*, *Anna May Wong Revived*, *Beijing Red Diva*, *Dragon Lady*, *Hui Fei*, and *China Chic* (all 2009) -- one is reminded of two painters whose art encapsulates something of the seductive beauty and the poetry of Develter's art. The first is the Polish Art Deco painter Tamara de Lempicka (1898 – 1980); the second is the French painter and printmaker Paul Jacoulet (1902 – 1960) who grew up in Japan.

De Lempicka's finest Art Deco female portraits are dreamily sensual. Her women project strength and independence, all of which is reinforced by the carefully realized clothes with which she dresses them. The clothes cling to each figure inviting one to imagine the erotic pleasure of touching the warm flesh hidden from the eye. But, perhaps more important, de Lempicka's women seduce the viewer, as do Develter's, through their suggestive gazes. Darkly shaded eyes, wide open or narrowed, beckon the viewer toward the illusion of luxurious sexual union. One is aware of this in a good number of Develter's paintings, among the best being *Madame Ming* and his two *Anna May Wong* works.

The spirit of Gauguin and the natural sensuality of the women he found among the islands of the South Pacific influenced Paul Jacoulet, who moved as child to Tokyo and remained there until his death. While the results of Jacoulet's travels and observations were an intimate, romantic view of an unobtainable eroticism, his art reminds one of Develter's in its subtle emotional visual impact. *Louise*, *China Chic*, *Dan Actress*, and *Beijing Red Diva* resonate more with Jacoulet's women than de Lempicka's.

Though Develter's portraits and likenesses are not all recognizable celebrities, the manner in which he paints may be seen as the projection of the notion of celebrity. Here are social icons, some of which are wrapped in the aura of contemporary celebrity, while others are painted with a nod to history. His female Chinese figures are also informed by the standards of beauty found, for example, in Chinese advertising posters and among cinema divas of the 1930s. However one views them they are all role models for a new generation whose knowledge of the past is limited. Each figure possesses its own singular dynamic and sense of intimacy and mystery. While the viewer may see only a

simple and colorful face, and not each face's inherent complexity, obtaining this is the result of not only close observation of his subjects and their worlds, but also an astute understanding of the psychology of celebrity. In their presence we are ourselves celebrities by association. This heightens the emotional response to such work, whether it be a known person or not, and it also helps the viewer to understand the inherent difference between portrait painting and photographic portraits.

Develter says that he doesn't feel that his work is formal overall, rather that he likes to capture details, "a certain expression from the eyes and that might strike you as distinctive or even formal," for example. To achieve some of the details and the moods to which he refers he needs to use "different media... [from] models to photographs or it can also be stills I retrieve from old movies or just simply sketches I make myself," but he also notes "photographs can be misleading and not all images translate themselves successfully into meaningful or successful paintings."

To make each painting count, to see beyond the surface emotionally, psychologically, and visually Develter likes "to catch that something extra, the impact of a person looking right into your eyes. Like Magritte would say 'this is not a pipe.' I often say to myself this is not a person, it is just painting that looks like a person. These days it is so easy to reproduce what you see. Everybody takes pictures whenever they want and they can have a digital print in seconds. Painting, on the other hand, is a process of making mistakes and correcting these until one is satisfied. Sometimes I feel that I am looking into the character. A good example of this is the Maria Callas painting I once made. She was a very strong character, a proud and even vain woman. That painting captures that part of her look and feel in a strong way."

But Develter has no preference for painting either men or women and neither is he consciously attempting to reveal anything through his intricate geometry. The viewer's imagination is a catalyst in revealing the hidden 'character' of his protagonists. "In general gender doesn't matter but I have the feeling of having more 'play space' painting women. When painting women I have more tools in the sense of ornaments and make-up but also the expression, being more seductive or posed," he says. "I don't

think there is a big difference in geometry of male and female. When I see a human skull, I can't tell if it is male or female. The interesting part is that humans are conditioned to recognize and distinguish instantly male from female. Androgynous people are interesting, being in the gray zone and confusing our perception of what we automatically and naturally divide into male or female. I can paint personalities of a bygone era but only insofar that they have a specific appeal to me as an artist. Translating them onto canvas has a lot to do with seduction."

It is clear that Develter's training as a designer is central to the success of his artistic vision for, as he says, "you need to have a keen eye and absorb a lot, but the most important for a designer is to look at what the vibes are in society and remodel these to your own taste and give it back to society. Of course the study makes you more trained in the use of colors and shapes but the most important for me is that you actually learn to look." Behind his fashion design skills he has an astute sense of cultural mores and he says that while absorbing Asian cultures, his influences tend to be more from Western artists. "I'm an absolute fan of Matisse for his color use and composition and Hockney for landscape and luminance in his work but also old masters and ethnic art," says Develter. "I can't say that all this had a real influence on me. The biggest influences are those that I get from traveling and seeing and being part of different cultures," and "after living in Asia for more than 10 years I have changed a bit."

Christian Develter is not an artist giving to looking back. He is a painter of his time. He rarely reminisces. His future is undiscovered territory waiting to be explored, a place where people will be imagined and painted. The future is a world in which new adventures and excitements will inspire. But when he does take a glance backward he takes pride in his beginnings while looking to change. "I'm proud of the first painting that I made; just for the simple fact that at that point I started painting. There are other pieces that are dear to me, being a turning point or a milestone in my work," he says. "Painting for me is constant evolution, sometimes with big steps, sometimes with small ones. In general [paintings are] a bit like kids: you love them all although they all have their own characters."



Louise
Oil on canvas
170 cm x 150 cm



China Chic ▶
Acrylic on canvas
120 cm x 150 cm



◀ **Defender of China**
Acrylic on canvas
120 cm x 150 cm



Madame Ming
Oil on canvas
150 cm x 170 cm



Images not valid. Real Size Hi-Resolution: 80x100mm

Cigar Zhou
Acrylic on canvas
100 cm x 120 cm



Images not valid. Real Size Hi-Resolution: 37x45mm

Asia Red
Acrylic on canvas
80 cm x 100 cm



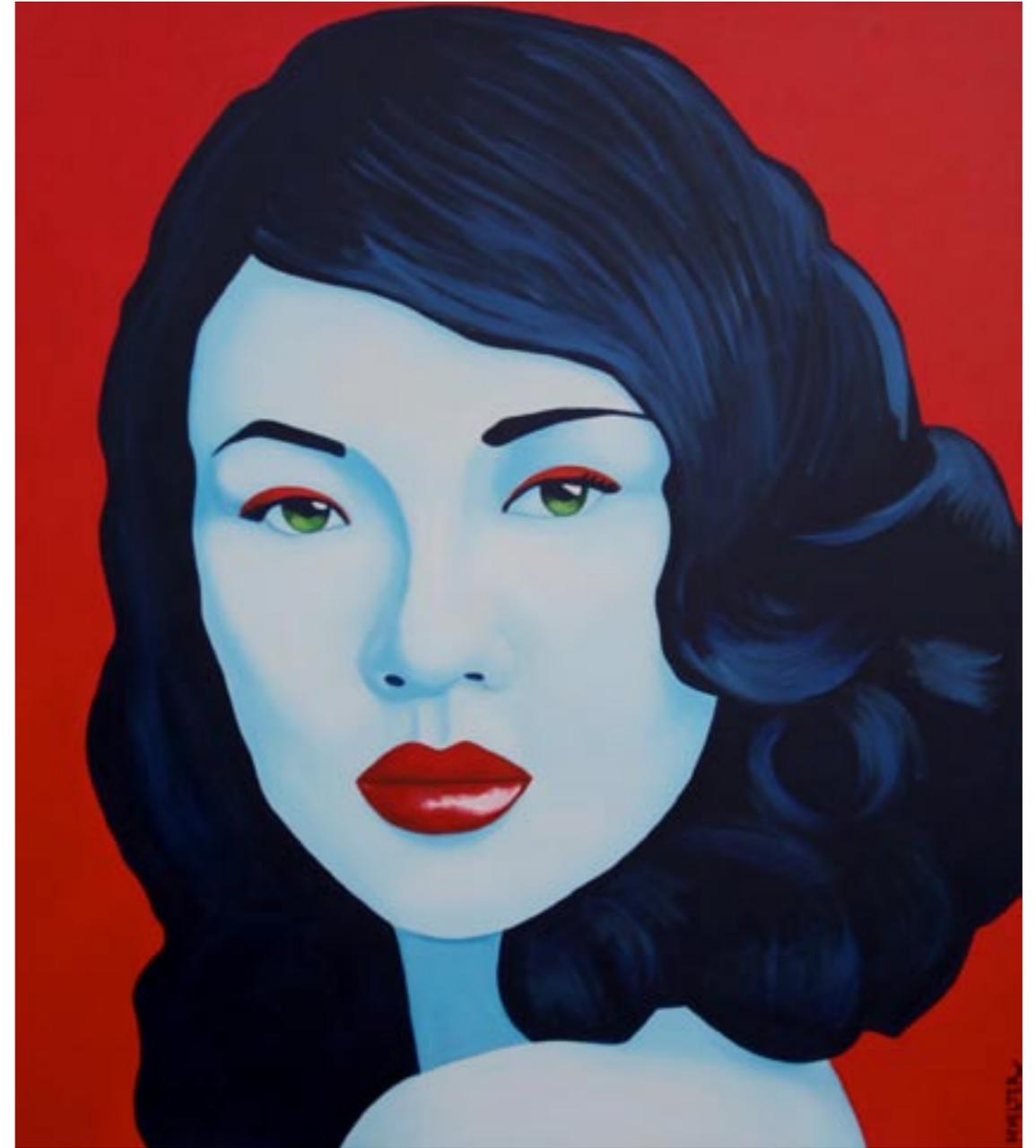
◀ **Hui Fei**
Mixed medium on canvas
150 x 170 cm



Dragon lady
Mixed medium
100 cm x 120 cm



Dan Actress
Mixed medium on canvas
120 cm x 150 cm



Beijing Red Diva
Mixed medium on canvas
150 cm x 170 cm



Anna May Wong Revived
Oil on canvas
200 cm x160 cm



Olympic Asian Athlete
Acrylic on canvas
150 cm x170 cm



Anna May Wong Reclined
Mixed medium
160 cm x 100 cm



Image not valid. Real Size Hi-Resolution: 70x70mm

Butterfly Guan
Acrylic on canvas
100 cm x 100 cm



◀ **Jacky Chan**
Mixed medium on canvas
170 x 200 cm



Bruce Lee
Mixed medium
170 cm x 200 cm



◀ **Sakya Boy**
Oil on canvas
160 cm x 217 cm



King Sihamoi
Mixed medium on canvas
120 cm x 150 cm

Biography Christian Develter

- August 1968 Born in Blankenberge, Belgium
1990 Institute of Fine Arts, St Lucas, Gent, Belgium
1993 Fashion Department, Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp, Belgium
Since 1996 Independent Artist, Living in Bangkok
2005 Finalist Sovereign Art Foundation, Hong Kong, China

Solo Exhibitions

- 2009 " Chasing the Dragon " Chinese House, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
2009 " Printemps " D'Sens, Dusit Thani, Bangkok, Thailand
2009 " The Mikado (Unleashed) " British Club, Bangkok, Thailand
2008 " Color Notions, paintings and lithographs by Christian Develter " V9, Sofitel, Bangkok, Thailand
2007 " Asian Chic , 10 Year Anniversary Pacific Cigar ", China House, Oriental Hotel, Bangkok, Thailand
2007 " Club Divas and Femme Fatales " V9 , Sofitel, Bangkok, Thailand
2007 " Khmer Femititude, Paintings by Christian Develter " Hotel De La Paix, Siem Reap, Cambodia
2006 " Senses of Asia " Chiva Som Resort, Hua Hin, Thailand
2006 " Japanese Paintings by Christian Develter at Tsu ", JW Marriott, Bangkok, Thailand
2005 " Daughters of the Dragon " La Luna Gallery, Chiang Mai, Thailand
2005 " Christian Develter Revealed " Chiva Som Resort, Hua Hin, Thailand
2005 " Christian Develter meets the Met " Metropolitan Hotel, Bangkok, Thailand
2003 " The Colors of Life by Christian Develter " Schoeni / Lotus Arts de Vivre, Bangkok, Thailand

- 2003 " Shan by Christian Develter " The Peak Look Out , Hong Kong, China
2002 " Permanent Exposure Christian Develter " Q Bar, Bangkok, Thailand
2002 " Impressies uit het Verre Oosten " Porters House, Antwerp, Belgium
2001 " Introducing Christian Develter " Wilkhahn, Antwerp, Belgium
1999 " Christian Develter " + Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium
1998 " Indian Summer " The Hutheesing Haveli, Ahmedabad, India
1996 " Visit to China by Christian Develter " Oriental House, Antwerp, Belgium
1994 " Christian Develter in Flinckenheuvell ", Antwerp, Belgium

Group Exhibitions

- 2007 " Dialogue, Celebrating 120 Years of Diplomatic Relations Thailand and Japan " La Luna, Chiang Mai, Thailand
2007 " Girls! " Grusenmeyer Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand
2005 " Bulgari 2005 Hong Kong " Auction by Christie's , Sovereign Art Foundation, China
2005 " Hans Christian Andersen ", La Luna, Chiang Mai, Thailand
2004 " Art , Celebrating 100 years Diplomatic Relations, Belgian Embassy, Siam Society, Bangkok, Thailand
2002 " Carnival of Art " The Sukhothai Hotel / Café Deco Hong Kong, Bangkok, Thailand
2000 " Linart 2000 " + Gallery, Ghent, Belgium
1995 " Tollart 1995 " Tollhuis, Antwerp, Belgium

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