Photo by Will Grundy

STUDIO VISIT

Artist Ding Shilun Makes His Own Mythology

His paintings allude to Japanese manga, Western pop culture, and Chinese traditions—with a dollop of fashion and camp.

by **Alex Needham**
Photographs by **Will Grundy**
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Visiting Ding Shilun's studio, in an industrial area of west London, is like stepping into a dream—or, possibly, a fantastical nightmare. In one huge canvas, a naked man leans back on a chair waving something that the artist identifies as "Voldemort's wand," from *Harry Potter*, and spitting a fountain of water that is meant to represent human souls. Four other figures grimace and shriek, and if you look closely, fairies are pulling some of them by the hair—a reference to the film *Ratatouille*, Shilun explains. Next to the canvas, a Victorian side table is upended, and a fancy paper hat—the physical model for the one on the sculpture's head—rests on a bookcase, along with some manga comics, books on Alexander McQueen and John Galliano, and a fearsome shadow puppet that seems to depict a malevolent tree spirit.

The artist responsible for this cross-cultural, decadent mash-up is a soft-spoken, 25-year-old wearing a fluffy paisley sweater. His paintings aren't straightforwardly allegorical or biographical; they represent scenes from Shilun's own personal mythology, which alludes to Japanese manga, Western pop culture, and Chinese religious and cultural traditions. There is also a generous dollop of fashion and camp. "I consider camp as the perfect combination of spirit, body, and materials," Shilun says. Some of the paintings, which will be shown at Bernheim Gallery in London (opening February 7), are inspired by his relationship with the "so-called fortune tellers" who are, by Shilun's account, ubiquitous in China and dictate much about home life under the aegis of feng shui. It's a subject personal to Shilun, who was born and brought up in the Cantonese town of Guangzhou. "For a long time in my childhood we weren't allow to display toy action figures because a grandmaster of feng shui told my mum not to," he says. "Even Batman had to be put into the closet. You look back and think, 'That didn't make any sense at all.'"

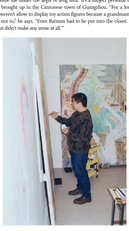

Photo by Will Grundy

The paintings also suggest that Shilun's subconscious is working overtime. He shows me one called *Hunter's Whistle*, which he had intended to be a "simple portrait." It depicts a figure of indeterminate gender in a corset and headdress decked with flowers and tomatoes, playing the flute. The character has a crossbow at the waist, and on the floor is a human skull in a basket. "It's peaceful but quite scary—almost like a horror movie," Shilun says. "I'd describe my practice as a sugar-coated bullet. It looks sweet and delicate but when you come closer, you're like, what happened here?"

Ding Shilun *Hunter's Whistle*, 2024
Courtesy of Bernheim Gallery

Shilun says that he has vivid dreams, though he never refers to them literally. He has no idea what a work will be until he starts it, often by painting an eye. "It's like a puzzle game, it comes piece by piece," he says. "Sometimes I finish a painting and I don't even know where I started from." He points out that the drive to create narrative is as old as art, mythology, or religion. "Our ancestors told stories to turn something they didn't know about into an explainable phenomenon, so I consider myself to be doing the same thing. I can transform indescribable emotions into figures and put them onto canvas."

Ding Shilun, *Falling Gold*, 2024
Courtesy of Bernheim Gallery

Shilun grew up around art. His father is a traditional landscape painter, and his mother ran the local art school, but they never taught him how to paint. He doesn't discuss his work much with them now. "Every time I ask my dad for his opinion, he says stuff like 'It's very beautiful, but the leg is too long.'" Shilun is more interested in drawing tapes, they supposed, and he taught himself. Although Chinese traditions are ingrained on rice paper so that you can really see through layers, so I'm trying to do the same thing with oil paintings," he explains. "I use solvent, which can make the pigment really watery. It requires hyper-focus. You can't wash it off, so it's quite stressful." His large canvases take a month or two to finish.

Photo by Will Grundy

He studied at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, and moved to London three years ago for his BA at the Royal College of Art. It was hard to find a studio space post-pandemic, so he decided to do small watercolors on paper, part of what he called the "Daily Observation" series. Despite the unassuming title, these contained much of the strangeness of his more recent work. (Frans Jozsef large, because Shilun was alarmed to see a group—or as he puts it, "a gang"—of them when he was walking home one night.) The Bernheim Gallery was the first to approach him, even before he had graduated, and since then he has had several shows, with two more to come in 2024. He works in his studio from 11 AM to 11 PM, seven days a week. "I don't know if it's healthy or not, but it's become part of my daily life. I can't tell where work ends and life begins. I don't care!"

Ding Shilun, *Annunciation*, 2024
Courtesy of Bernheim Gallery

Shilun says that his artistic hero is Goya, someone who, he points out, reflected the reality of his era. Shilun is as attentive to the stylistic quirks of the 21st century as he is to the history of art—for instance, many of his characters have spiky, twisted coiffures. "If I had the hair for it, I would definitely do something like that," he says. The creatures that inhabit Shilun's imagination are anything but otherworldly to him—whether they are monsters, gods, or outrageous habitants of some wild nightclub. "I consider all the figures in the paintings as the embodiment of myself," he says. "They're all telling a story about me."

Photo by Will Grundy