

# Yuk King Tan

b.1971

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Yuk King Tan is an artist who works in a variety of media, but she pioneered her creepy plastic masks dripping with silky tassels right at the very beginning of her career – in fact, while she was still at art school. Getting in touch with her Chinese heritage was important for the young artist, and red, as the most revered colour in China, was a trademark of her work. Tan painstakingly wrapped ordinary objects in red tassels, or dipped them in red wax, transforming mundane things like scissors, combs and cuddly toys into strange ritualistic offerings.

Tan then covered a series of masks in red threads which spilled to the floor like rivulets of blood. The red stuff that pumps through our veins and keeps us alive tends to horrify us when we see it outside of our bodies, since it's usually the result of an accident or violence. But blood also signifies our connectedness to things – to our families and to all creatures; Tan's grinning and grimacing masks weren't just ghosts, but ancestor figures, protecting us in their infinite wisdom. Mixing up mythological figures with animal heads, Tan reminded us of the Chinese horoscope, according to which we all possess animal characteristics.

Her latest series of masks emphasise this borderline between human and animal, but the colours have changed: red, white and blue suggest national flags, while black streaks introduce a sombre, serious note. Each mask is the same exaggerated ape face, peeping out from its canopy of fringes as if it was emerging from behind a coloured waterfall.

Why would Tan choose to decorate these apes? The reasons are complex. If her red tasselled masks depicted ancestors, then the apes must be representatives of our primitive ancestors. Obviously, ideas of evolution are in the title of the work. But what about revolution, which speaks of a need for political change? Does Tan's ape represent the face of power, idiocy wrapped in a flag? Indeed, it's almost a cliché these days to see images of George W. Bush as a chimpanzee, or to hear jokes about his IQ, and perhaps this is what Tan, in a more subtle way, is referring to?

She might also be referring to the classic *Planet Of The Apes* movies, in which the roles of apes and humans are reversed. These popular movies brought to the fore a range of issues, from animal welfare to the abuse of power in religion and politics, and Tan's white apes inspire similar reflection. The white ape in China has a different meaning though, and is connected to a venerable Old Master of martial arts who was turned into a white ape when he lost a battle. Perhaps we are supposed to pity this geriatric simian instead of feeling frightened by his furrowed face and cascading fringes? Either way, this mask functions the same way that most masks do – unsettling our view of reality, and leading us to reappraise the roles of those around us, and of ourselves.

## Tessa Laird

### Galleries and museums:

[www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz](http://www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz)  
[www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz](http://www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz)  
[www.govettbrewster.com](http://www.govettbrewster.com)  
[www.suecrockford.com](http://www.suecrockford.com)

### Articles:

Dale, R. 'Going East: Post-Orientalism In Contemporary New Zealand Art'. *Art Asia Pacific*, 23.  
 Leonard, R. (2002). *Yuk King Tan*, Artspace.

### Books:

Farrar, S. (2006). *Overflow: Yuk King Tan*, Wellington, City Gallery Wellington.

