

**exhibition review**

**MARK FRANK**

*STAY REAL Forever*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai,  
10th June-12th July, 2010

Remember the scene in *The Graduate* (1967) where Mr. McGuire tells Benjamin that there is a great future in plastic? Tsai Mengda (蔡孟达) found that future. In 2002 he made his artistic debut with a series of plastic figurines at the Taipei National University of the Arts. The blogosphere went wild, and Tsai kept moulding plastic. Eventually he started going by the name KEA, his graffiti tag.

This year KEA's work was on display in Shanghai's Museum of Contemporary Art as part of an exhibit called *Stay Real* which drew record-high attendance at its opening. He shared the exhibit with fellow Taiwanese artist No2Good, but unlike the assortment of Mickey Mouse figurines (literally) on No2Good's end of the gallery, KEA's pieces achieved more than kitsch. His work is a celebration of pop-consumerism that embraces everything the international millennial generation really drools over - sex, pirates, dinosaurs and name brands.

The centerpiece of the exhibit is a plastic zoo of sleek, communist-punkadelic mutants. There are snails with skulls for shells, animals with the wrong heads for their bodies, and a gas mask-come-vacuum cleaner thing. Most are emblazoned with a hammer-and-sickle insignia, except that the hammers are really pirate swords.

KEA bills himself as Taiwan's most famous graffiti artist, but he lacks the street-cred of true masters like Banksy. His modest reknown comes more from hanging his work on walls than defacing them. For *Stay Real*, KEA worked in spray paint and acrylic on canvas, in a manner more dependent on pop-culture than politics. Think Napoleon crossing the Alps draped in Louis Vuitton and Moses descending Mount Sinai with a MacBook. Most viscerally pleasing is an image depicting the artist's tag tattooed



KEA, *Mona Lisa So Hot*  
Photograph ©Mark Frank



KEA, *Punk Penguin*. Photograph ©Mark Frank



KEA, *Obama*, 2009. Photograph © Mark Frank

on Mona Lisa's naked rear end. But one of the most controversial pieces is an acrylic image of Barack Obama as an ape. To the horror of Western observers, this image was imprudently selected as the cover image of the PRC magazine *World Art*. Browse rest of KEA's *Planet of the Apes* series, however and you will realize that he is simply melding history and anthropology with euro-centric pop culture and not spewing hate. After all, he aped Einstein, Dali and Beethoven too.

KEA's work presents a paradox: he deifies brand names, but defies conformity. In his most thematically-charged piece, *The Cross* (2009), he has constructed the world's most recognizable religious symbol out of about two dozen moulded plastic brand logos. If Christ were crucified on KEA's cross, he would have his hands nailed to Coca Cola and Levi's and his feet to Hugo Boss. There is a reality here that bridges the straight between People's Republic and Republic of China. Consumerism may be eclipsing the dominant ideologies and religions of the world, and if consumerism can be called a form of idol worship, then China builds the idols.

While most artists struggle against the leviathan of commercialization, Tsai Mengda is rid-

ing it. The media he employs—moulds and stencils—lend themselves to mass-production and yet his work is unique. If the future is made of plastic and pop culture, can't it still be creative? *That's staying real.*

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KEA, *The Cross*, 2009. Photograph © Mark Frank