

CLIMACTIC!
MU PAN'S
MASSIVE
PAINTED
BATTLE
SCENES
ARE TEEMING
WITH HUMOR
AND AN INTROSPECTIVE
BLEAKNESS





By Andy Smith

The towering behemoths that saunter and wage war through Mu Pan's paintings are rooted in several aspects of the Brooklyn artist's psyche. They occupied his dreams and nightmares as a kid who grew up in the 1980s, as he followed Hong Kong cinema, Japanese *manga*, and *kaiju* movies in his native Taiwan. But in the end, the giant beasts represent something even more personal than his early pop culture interests. "Every monster I draw is actually my self-portrait," Pan says.

As Pan writes and speaks, he moves between a tone that seems both sincere and in-character. He speaks of his own history as an artist as though it's an ongoing war in itself. "I worship the strength of men and animals," Pan continues. "I dream to have the dominating power to rule and to destroy and create fear to my enemies. Of course, it is impossible; no one can have this kind of power in today's world. So I created my own world for myself with my images, in my images. I can be whatever I want to be and eat whoever I hate. ... I am playing those monster roles as an actor."

Pan insists he doesn't really consider himself an artist, though. He doesn't seem to care about being associated with the title of "painter," either. He prefers to think of himself as an "otaku who draws." (For the uninitiated: "Otaku" is a Japanese term for an obsessive individual whose interest overtake their social capabilities. It's usually in reference to fans of pop culture—and in particular, the *manga* and *anime* Pan adores.) The other form of entertainment that's had an immense impact on the work of the painter is the film genre of the war epic. It's why he currently teaches a course on "epic drawing" at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Combat and conflict are ever-present themes in the artist's work, with the largest contenders both obliterating and bested by their human-sized adversaries.

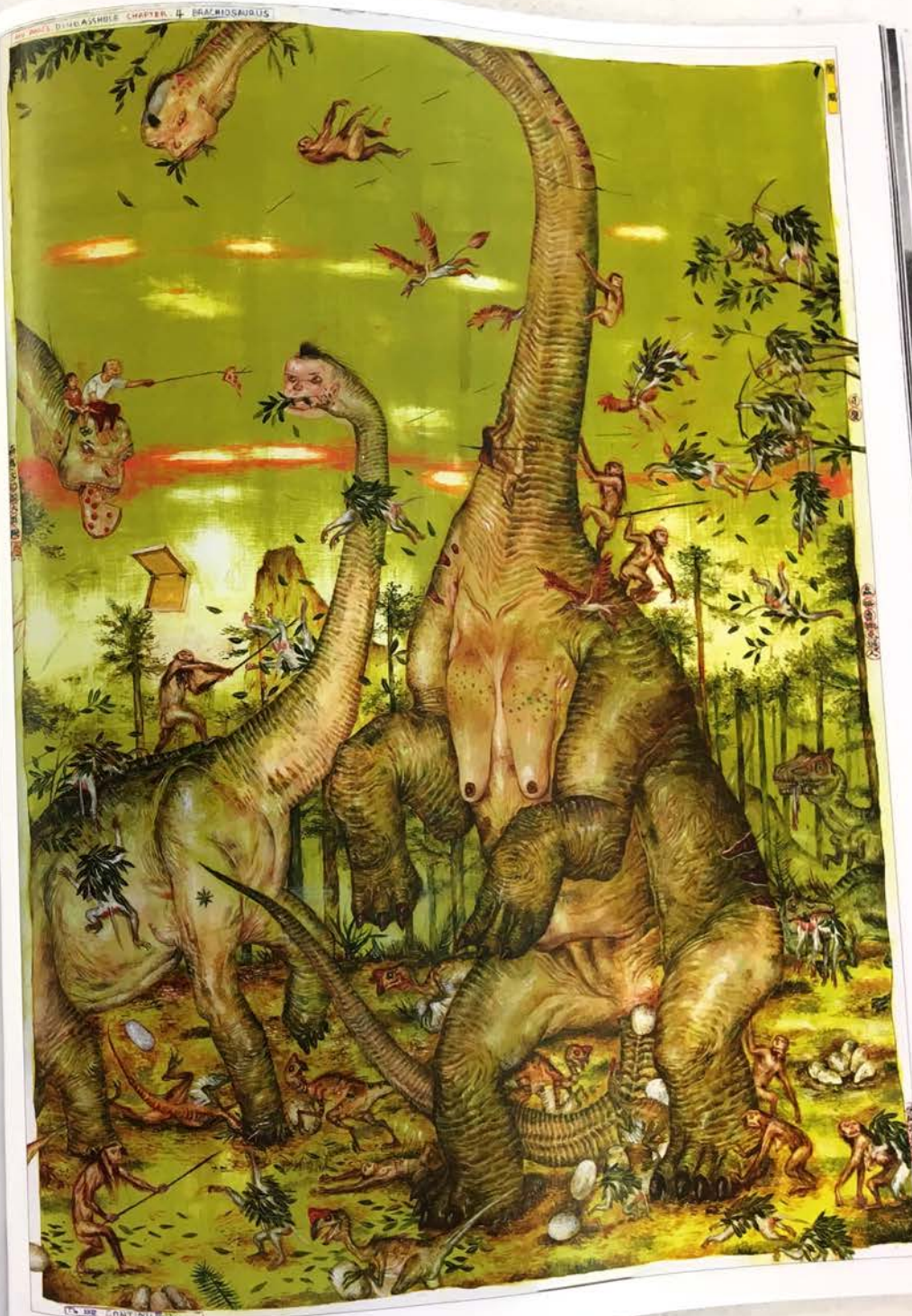
"War is a beautiful thing to me," Pan says. "War creates great characters and it also writes history. You got to be a great artist in order to fight a war as a commander. There are so many [art forms] you have to master in warfare, such as the formation, the economic concern, the time, the strategy, the geographic advantage, the numbers difference between you and your enemy and the

art of brainwashing for loyalty and the sense of mission. It costs great amount of patience and it also requires high level of charisma and intelligence. Whether it is for invading or defending, to me it is just beautiful to see how a person can unite all the individual strength to become one great power to fight against the opponent."

The expressions carried by the warriors in Pan's work—both big and small—vary in how they feel about their environments. Some creatures react in anger or anguish: Others appear to feel blasé or even bored by these battles. The strategies and narratives of his massive works vary between something complex to be deciphered and pure chaos. Camouflage—with animals masked in flora—force the viewer into long studies with the painted conflicts. The effect can be thrilling and disconcerting. The faces of the *Dinoassholes* series, in particular, are disturbingly human-like in both their rendering and their complicated understanding of their surroundings. But Pan is not an artist who worries whether or not the viewer is uncomfortable. When asked how he wants his audience to feel, he offers this: "For people who like me, I wish they can feel my energy and the vitality. For people I hate, I want them to get disturbed and mad or even better to feel depressed."

When pressed about whether viewers tend to have misconceptions about the political nature or general point of his works, he's equally divorced from the process: "I don't mind it, my works are personal, and the only person needs to understand them is myself. For those who have misconceptions about my work are not important to me. They are not buying anyway."

Pan was born in Taiwan in 1976. Learning the war-torn histories of the U.S., China, and Japan had a profound impact



PREVIOUS: "Flying Bats", 48" x 36", oil on wood
ABOVE: "1994 & 1943", watercolor on paper, 50" x 100"

OPPOSITE: "Dinoasshole Chapter 4", acrylic on wood, 48" x 36", 2016
FOLLOWING (L-R): "My Name is Charlie: Red", "My Name is Charlie: Yellow"





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on the young Pan, and he maintains that many of his works are retellings of those stories in his own voice. After moving to the U.S., he acquired both his BFA (Illustration, 2001) and MFA (Illustration as Visual Essay, 2007) at New York City's SVA. But it was after his academic years that he faced an existential crisis. Looking back, Pan says he found himself "trying so hard to be a painter." After attempting a foray into abstract work for two years, which he now calls considers a disaster. "I was frustrated and I realized I really did not like painting at all," he momentarily abandoned art.

It was then that Pan slowly edged back to the reason he gravitate toward making art as an '80s youth. "I started to pick up the pen and draw the things that like my sketchbook drawings again," he says. "I found myself totally indulgent in it. I got the feeling of wanting to work. I finally felt completely happy in creating something non-stop again, just like how I used to draw when I was a kid with ballpoint pen. From that moment, I got rid of all my oil painting supplies. I was never a painter to begin with. I love drawing *manga*, I love telling stories, and I love looking at *ukiyo-e* and other Asian traditional narrative images. I should just do the things where my passion really is."

Now, Pan exhibits across the world. He's had recent shows in Denmark, Paris, New England, and Los Angeles. Reactions vary, he says, depending on the country and the audience, and whether or not they come with humor, political, or a general thirst for battle. He says most of his collectors are in Europe. ("I started in Paris with *HEY*

magazine show, then people started paying attention to me," he says.) And that aside from participating in some art fairs with Gallery Poulsen in Miami and New York City each year and a few solo shows in Los Angeles and Brooklyn, his U.S. audiences are "just a few who are really into monsters and *ukiyo-e* kind of work."

But it becomes most complicated when Pan divulges his relationship with his home country. The artist says that despite being born in Taiwan, his family history gives him a "thirst for being accepted by Chinese people and being recognized as one of them." He seeks the mainland of China as a place to call home for his work. However, he hasn't been embraced as he desires by China, likening the feeling to being a "bastard child are longing for his real mother. It is really ironic that the place I have encountered with the culture conflict is actually from my original culture."

And in Taiwan, his works are just unwelcome, he says. "Many of the subjects of my images are attacking the pro-independence party and group, and they are very personal. Plus, I always praise the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese nationalism in my work. I do that on my social media platform with a very high tone too. Therefore, most people in Taiwan, especially younger audiences, really do not wish to see my work, and I have almost zero fans there. This fact did not stop me from making those images. In fact, I will make it even more offensive to them with more intensity."

FOLLOWING (top-bottom): "Little Big Horn," 28.5" x 101", "The Loyal 47 Ronin," diptych, watercolor on paper, 25" x 38" each, 2011

ABOVE: "Dinoasshole Chapter 5," acrylic on wood, 24" x 36", 2016
OPPOSITE: "Birds Are Laughing on Top of the Tree," 48" x 36"



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However, one of the biggest surprises for the artist arises out of Japanese sentiments toward his work, as Shinzō Abe, prime minister of Japan, has been a target of the artist's work in the past. While his work is part-love letter to Japanese pop culture and he himself is married to a Japanese woman, the right-wing politicians and policies of the country often catch Pan's monstrous, acrylic wrath. Yet, one show has shown an unexpected gravitation toward his work. "However, out of my expectation, when I was showing my pieces in Hong Kong Art Central earlier this year, many Japanese actually enjoined looking at them, and many were even laughing at my cynical jokes, which was very negative about Japan," Pan remembers. "Maybe because of all the reference from pop culture?"

But Pan, ever the student of history, acknowledges a resentment from a wars of centuries and past, and particularly, with what Japan "did to China during their invasion, and as a descendent of the soldiers who fought in the war, I can never let that go." Even with his acceptance in Japan, he adds this: "I really wish I [could] have a show in Japan. Then I will create the most offensive images ever and see how they will react."

Pan's process begins with inspiration from those past conflicts and today's headlines. He then picks the monster

he wants to represent a specific subject, and he pits it against the appropriate adversaries. He never plans his layouts. He doesn't even do sketches. ("I strongly believe that no one image should be done twice," he says.) His frantic and ever-changing style is a battle all its own. Any changes are made with the coarse surface of sandpaper, not brushes, signifying an aggression that ignites life in his characters.

In the end, there was no evolution between the excitement he rekindled from opening up his sketchbook once again and his current artistic existence. "I do not see the difference between my sketchbook drawings and paintings," Pan says. "The way I work is the same, and the look of them are the same as well, even though they are done in different materials and size. Or I should say my 'paintings' are just my sketchbook pages on a big piece of wood."

Even the content of the work itself is less of an ever-changing endeavor than another series of battles between Pan and paper. "I don't know [that] my work has evolved in any way," he says. "It just comes natural to me, and I don't know what they will become later either."+

ABOVE: "Sharkuza", 2015, 30" x 44", acrylic on paper

OPPOSITE (top-bottom): "Me Like Sushi", acrylic on paper, 147 x 135cm, 2015, "Dinoasshole Chapter 3", acrylic on wood, 36" x 48", 2011

