



TSENG CHIEN-YING, *Mr. OCD*, 2015, acrylic, ink, and pigment on paper, 41×35.5cm. Courtesy the artist.

Tseng Chien-Ying

TAIPEI

In Tseng Chien-Ying's delicately rendered paintings, Buddhas and mortals alike are distorted and caught in absurd scenarios.

Capturing the essential characteristics and charisma of the deities, Tseng is skillful in the traditional techniques used in Chinese ink art, especially *baimiao* (line drawings without shading), but his visual language is rooted in Dunhuang's religious murals. In the caves, Tseng realized the similarities between religious practice and art: worshippers, like audiences at art exhibitions, often locate their own desires and fears in the image before them. This led to *The Thousand Hand Project: The First One Hundred* (2010) paintings, each of which depicts a hand gesture of the Thousand Hand Guanyin, known for her ability to shape-shift based on her worshippers' prayers. In one panel, an eyeball is cradled in the goddess's palm. Elsewhere, she violently grips an infant or elegantly raises a bubble wand. Instead of holding her ritual tools, such as a sword and lotus flower, Guanyin's unusual gestures and contemporary objects allude to our many projections onto celestial figures, driven by our humanly wants.

The bodies of the mortal beings in Tseng's paintings are similarly distorted. *Mr. OCD* (2015), for example, portrays a man anxiously biting his fingers, with his mangled fingertips revealing his veins. Violence is also seen in the suit that evokes burnt skin—referencing those killed or injured in the 2015 Taipei water park explosion—donned by a recurring figure in an unnamed group of paintings (2015-). Their blackened skin is exposed through holes in the suit, in a double play on the figures in the Dunhuang murals who appear to have dark skin due to the oxidization of the leaded white paint. In the series' latest piece, *Strange Fruit* (2022), the figure hangs upside down from a golden branch, with a silver vine twisted around their ankle, like they're waiting to be harvested. The composition evokes the imagery of The Hanged Man in the Rider-Waite Tarot, which can mean sacrifice. Tseng's depiction, however, suggests adopting an alternative perspective on life. After all, we, not deities, are responsible for the meanings of our own joy and suffering.

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