

Miffy with a beak, Eric Cartman from South Park in Balenciaga – artists deny plagiarism and say they have appropriated cartoon characters

- Chinese artist and art professor Feng Feng, who put a beak on cartoon rabbit Miffy, says he seeks to present new issues by tapping into viewers' memories
- Ernest Chang put Lucy from Peanuts in Versace and a South Park character in Balenciaga, a comment on how kids are bombarded by both cartoons and luxury logos



Nadia Lam and Mandy Zuo in Shanghai

Published: 7:15am, 26 Jan, 2021

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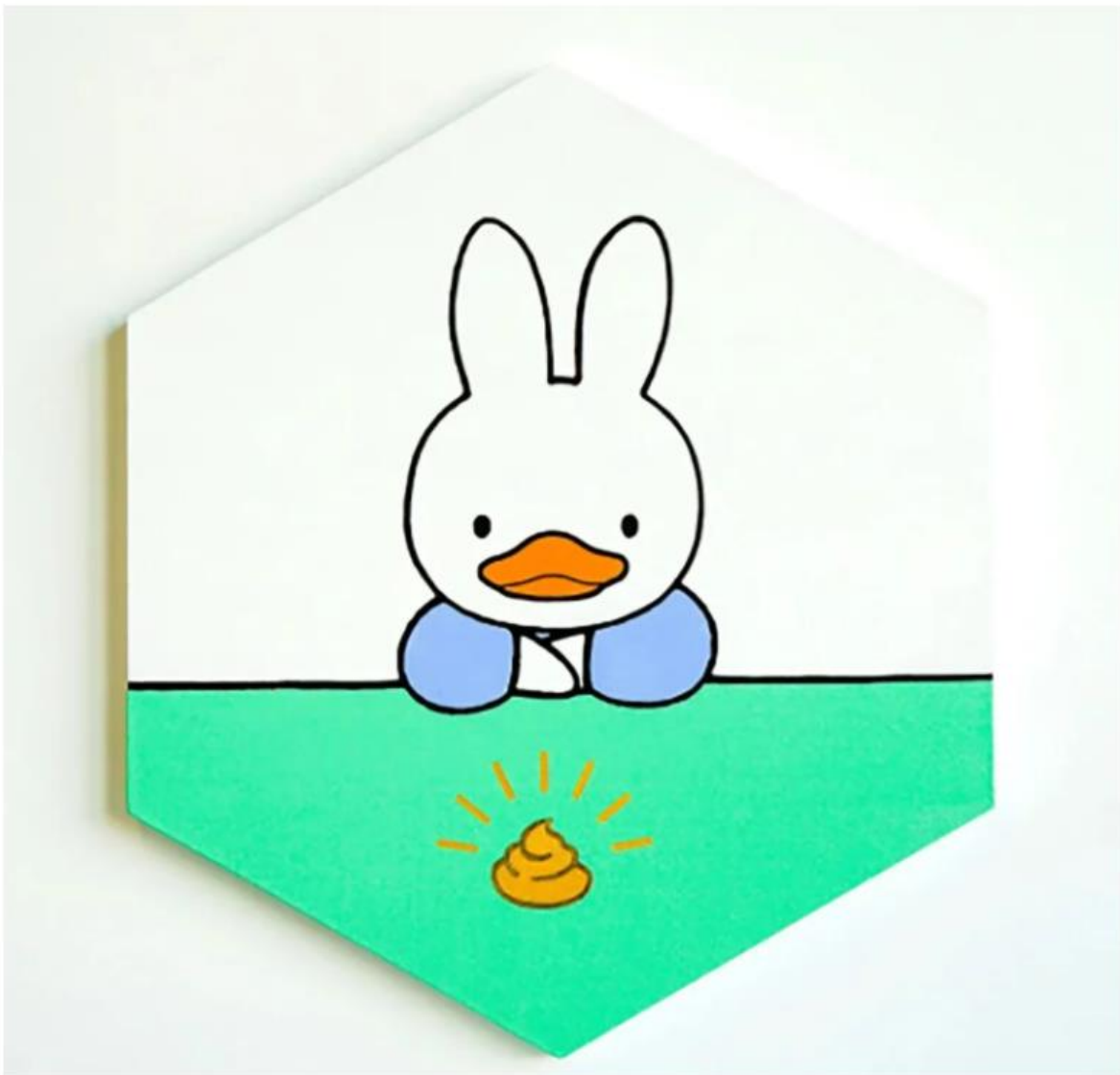
Ernest Chang with some of his works at The Stallery gallery, Hong Kong. He appropriates popular figures for his paintings, and says: "I aim to use the characters as a tool that ultimately adds to the whole piece." Photo: Jonathan Wong

A professor at one of China's top fine-art academies wanted to get people interested in contemporary art with his latest exhibition, and they did.

Chinese internet users were filled with outrage, accusing Feng Feng of plagiarising Miffy, the world-famous cartoon rabbit created by a Dutch artist. But the Chinese artist refuses to apologise for his "Rabbitduck" series – pictures of Miffy with a duck's beak.

“Plagiarism and appropriation represent two different attitudes. Those who plagiarise often try to hide the original by making changes to it, and they target works that are not so famous because they are afraid to be discovered,” the professor at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts tells the *Post*. His Rabbitducks are not plagiarism, but appropriations, he says.

Coincidentally, a Hong Kong-based artist is also about to show works that incorporate familiar characters from popular culture. Ernest Chang’s “Bling Dynasty” puts characters from *Peanuts*, *South Park* and other cartoons into paintings, embroideries and sculptures that use traditional Chinese art techniques.



My Golden Dog S**t by Feng Feng, featuring his Rabbitduck character — cartoon rabbit Miffy with a duck's beak, on show at XY Gallery in Guangzhou until March 1. Photo: courtesy of the artist

The US-born artist takes Feng's side. Use these cultural icons well and they can make people think about important issues, he says. It is a far better option than making art that the audience does not connect with.

Feng's exhibition hit a nerve in China because people increasingly see the country's notorious disregard for intellectual property as a matter of national shame. The artist, who is well known on the international contemporary art circuit and has exhibited widely, says all he is trying to do is to present new issues by tapping into his audiences' collective memory.

"Those who appropriate tend to use the best known images for fear that people cannot recognise the references. The art is a failure if people cannot recognise the original," he says.

Miffy was created by Dick Bruna in 1955, and the children's book character has remained popular across the world, partly because the image has been sold for use in many commercial products. Global Brands Group Asia, which represents the interests of Bruna and his work in China, has posted on Weibo, China's Twitter, that it is aware of the amount of interest in Feng's works but has not expressed any concern over them.

In a post on Weibo, Feng said he was thankful for the widespread discussion his works have prompted. "I'm very grateful that so many people have shown interest in art, which means art is playing an increasingly important role in our life," he wrote.



Ernest Chang at The Stallery gallery in Hong Kong. Photo: Jonathan Wong

Chang also has a serious point to make with his “Bling Dynasty”, which will be on show at The Stallery gallery in Wan Chai from February 20.

The exhibition room will be made to look like the interior of a typical home in China, he says, in a comment on how consumerism has been exported from the West to the East, with luxury brands seeing China as their most important market.

Visitors will spot a lot of familiar faces and luxury brand logos. For example, Lucy from *Peanuts* is seen wearing a Chinese silk dress with the name Versace on it, and holding an Off White paper fan, while standing in a Chinese rock garden.



Wake Me Up When It's Over (2020), by Ernest Chang, for which he cast images of Kriby from Pokemon in bronze and resin. Photo: courtesy of The Stallery

He picks characters that people have grown up with because these days, children in China are bombarded with luxury icons as much as cartoon characters.

“I think that it is a paradox. You’re telling children to stay young and pure, but at the same time, you’re mixing them up with consumerist values,” he says.

He hasn’t reached out to brands for permission but he doesn’t believe his art constitutes trademark infringement, he says. “These artworks draw from popular logos and symbols from pop culture but are recontextualised to generate my own original meaning that is very different from their original application.”



The Only Way Is Up (2020), by Ernest Chang. Photo: courtesy of the artist

“I am trying to use the characters as a tool that ultimately adds to the whole piece. The piece itself does not necessarily just mean Eric Cartman (from South Park) or just mean Balenciaga ... When it’s all together, add it up,” he says.

“They are two entry points, I feel like there is an added meaning to it, and therefore, it is art in my way,” he adds.