



## VINCENT SARDON: THE STAMPOGRAPHER

Gorgeously uncouth, Sardon's work revels in a Dada-like spirit. —Publishers Weekly

Parisian artist Sardon commandeers the rubber stamp with razor-sharp wit, unabashed profanity and sublime beauty.

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FEB/MAR 2013

## Braising Hell

Audacious chef Eddie Huang's memoir recounts how cooking helped him escape a stormy childhood.

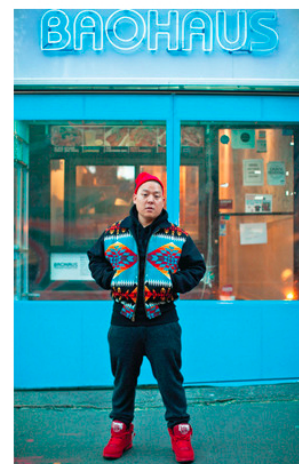
MELANIE REHAK



"I wanted to rent a lion, but they said the insurance was too much," Eddie Huang told me, offhandedly, one chilly afternoon late last year. We were discussing the four-minute TED talk he's preparing to deliver at the organization's annual conference this February, "I Dreamt of White Lions." Its main point, according to Huang, who is a 2013 TED Fellow, is that "lions are the king of the animal kingdom like white people rule the world. But neither of those ideas have any power unless you give it." He was hoping to illustrate his upending of the received wisdom by walking a tame lion onstage, where it would sit next to him like a docile cat while he spoke.

The plan, at once hilarious, provocative, and somewhat improbable, is not unlike Huang himself. It was designed, like everything he does, for maximum impact. Many things have been and no doubt will continue to be said about Huang's food, politics, personal style, and pronouncements about Tiger Moms, the TV show *Girls*, Marcus Samuelsson's restaurant Red Rooster, and other topics, but I'm fairly certain that no one will ever accuse him of subtlety. When he's really on a roll, as in his review of Samuelsson's memoir for the *New York Observer*, he can take perfect aim at multiple targets at once: "The entire book reads like it was ghost-written by Rudyard Kipling with an assist by *Girls* heroine Hannah Horvath, who infamously never encountered a black person in all of season one (except that homeless guy)." The fact that Huang won't ultimately manage to stroll onstage at TED with a lion on a leash somehow doesn't seem to matter at all. He conceived of and communicated the idea, which is more than enough.

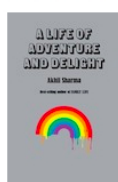
I only came to that realization several days after we chatted, though, because at the moment when the lion scheme came up, I was too busy stuffing myself at the counter of Baohaus, Huang's Asian-street-food place on East Fourteenth Street in Manhattan, to pay close attention to much except what I was putting in my mouth. Huang may be known as much for his personality as for his cooking—and not always to good effect, especially if you ask the Food Network or Sam Sifton of the *New York Times*—but his food is incredibly good. Over the course of our two-hour conversation, I very happily consumed enough to avoid giving even the slightest bit of power to any stereotypes about the eating habits of writers or white people or women that Huang—or anyone else for that matter—might previously have held.



Eddie Huang.

Huang is famous for his *gua bao*, Taiwanese "sandwiches" consisting of various things stuffed into spongy white buns, which he steams on lotus leaves for extra depth of flavor, so I started there. First came the Birdhaus, a piece of marinated boneless, skinless chicken thigh dipped in egg wash and a combination of potato starch and flour, then double-fried and sandwiched with cilantro, crushed peanuts, and Taiwanese red sugar. Next came the Chairman Bao: a luscious hunk of caramelized Berkshire pork belly with all the same add-ons, plus a swipe of "Haus Relish." There was also an order of ethereally light taro fries with

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a side of sweet chili sauce, a cup of house-made ginger soda, and a few squares of Huang's "dessert" *bao*—a deep-fried bun with a sweet sauce made of black sesame and condensed milk drizzled over it. Then I got to the main course.

"Wow. You really made a dent in that," Huang said to me, one eyebrow slightly raised under his pristine leather Georgetown Hoyas baseball cap, as I polished off a pile of traditional Taiwanese minced-pork stew over rice with sides of chili-pickled cucumbers and baby bok choy. Then he turned to a laptop on his right to monitor the hip-hop playlist booming through the tiny restaurant, and from there to a customer standing at another counter a few feet away, eating her lunch. "I like your pants!" he said with unfeigned enthusiasm and a big grin. "They're fresh!"

Huang can often be found at this post at the end of the takeout counter, directly across from a collection of basketball posters torn out of magazines and taped to the wall. He no longer really cooks at Baohaus unless he's testing or tweaking a new recipe, and he wouldn't cook with me, either, even though that was what I'd requested. "I don't want this to be a dog and pony show," he said with extreme tact. "Someone at Subway can make you a sandwich. I can talk to you about my American experience."

Enter *Fresh off the Boat* (Spiegel & Grau, \$26), Huang's new memoir. Let it be said right now that although writing a memoir is an audacious act for a thirty-year-old, it is not nearly as audacious as some of the things Huang did and survived even earlier. He spent his first years in the DC area, where his enormous, unilaterally unhinged Taiwanese immigrant family—as he writes, "if you met my family, you'd prescribe Xanax for all of them"—ran a chain of mini-mall furniture stores. From there, his immediate family moved to Orlando, where his father, a former Taiwanese gangster who sometimes amused himself by holding an unloaded gun to his sons' heads while they watched cartoons, became a prosperous steak-house owner, and Huang and his brothers were thrust into the crucible of racism. When he was nine years old, the one black kid in his class screeched, "Chinks get to the back!" at him, and Huang was transformed. "From that day forward, I promised that I would be the trouble in my life," he recalls in his memoir. "I wouldn't wait for people to pick on me or back me into a corner. Whether it was race, height, weight, or my personality that people didn't like, it was now their fucking problem."

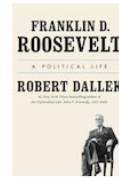
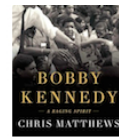
He made good on that promise for the next fifteen years or so, getting into every form of trouble available while tuning out the fighting at home (even if no one else could—as he writes with characteristic mordant humor: "People throwing woks at each other is some pretty loud shit. And if you missed that, you definitely didn't miss my mom driving our van through your bushes"). He found refuge in sports—particularly the career of much-maligned NBA star Charles Barkley, in whom he saw a kindred soul—and in the only kind of music he could relate to: "I was a Chinese-American kid raised by hip-hop and basketball with screaming, yelling, abusive parents in the background."

Also always in the background was food. Huang demonstrated a precocious appreciation and understanding of cooking, not just as a skill but as a way of making a place in the world. What he ate and wanted to eat was different from what most of his peers did, but he saw that as a strength. "As a kid trying to maintain my identity in America, my Chinese was passable, my history was shaky, but I could taste something one time and make it myself at home. When everything else fell apart and I didn't know who I was, food brought me back and here I was again."

Eventually, Huang went off to college, first at the University of Pittsburgh and then to Rollins College back in Orlando, where he was surrounded by people he'd never seen the likes of in his life. They owned yachts, and they were trained in the fine art of never committing to anything, including an opinion, in public. "You could ask them a straight question like 'Don't you think we should have welfare?' And they could go on for five minutes, waxing poetic, and say absolutely nothing." To Huang, who has probably never elided a single thought in his life, it was profoundly disturbing (however, the students provided a great client list for his ongoing drug business). Unsurprisingly, he ended up in jail for getting into a nasty fight with some fraternity brothers who thought he was packing heat (he wasn't). His parents' answer was to send him off to Taiwan for a summer, a fate he accepted without pleasure. "I'd fallen completely off the tracks," he recalls, "and the only trick they had left in their kung-fu manuals was to send the kid home to marinate on things."

The trip turned out to be revelatory for Huang. "That summer in Taipei, I looked around and saw myself everywhere I went. Pieces of me scattered all over the country like I had lived, died, burned, and been spread throughout the country in a past life." He arrived home with a new sense of self and plunged into his studies (as he notes, he was "probably the only student on felony probation that won college awards"), finding his new resolve echoed in writers he could relate to directly, like W. E. B. Du Bois, Audre Lorde, and Toni Morrison, as well as many he never imagined would speak to him. Or as he put it to me while I was busy cramming in the taro fries: "I wouldn't be who I am if these people—Emerson, Swift, Twain—weren't like 'Yo, this is who I am. I did this.'"

Yes, they did. And now Huang, who also started a street-wear business and picked up a law degree at Yeshiva University on his way to opening Baohaus in 2009, is doing what he's doing, too. He's not even totally sure what it is—at one point while we were talking, he floated the idea that he might be a high school teacher in ten years' time—but he's down for however things play out. After all, it's always come out OK for him in the past.



Whatever he ends up doing, you can be sure it won't look or sound like anything that's come before. A single, kinetic passage from *Fresh off the Boat* on the age-old subject of reading Jonathan Swift is all you need to get that straight:

Reading "A Modest Proposal" was the moment I realized, "Dogs, you can win this game. You got these motherfuckers, b!" You look up at the clock with six minutes left and you're only down two. Never did you think you'd be in that spot, but you look around and everyone else is complacent . . . but while they're shook, you come with the full-court press and see a way out. Everything comes clear and you see exactly how you're gonna win the game: by doing you.

I'm pretty sure Shakespeare had the same idea, and Aristotle, too, and a lot of other people between them and Eddie Huang. But none of them set it on a basketball court, and that conceit, just as much as lions or *bao* or anything else, is his particular genius.

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