

PRESS CLIPPINGS

Close-up: Contemporary Art from Taiwan

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Yao Jui-Chung: Recover Mainland China, Action at Tienanmen, Beijing (1997), photograph. Photo courtesy of The Taipei Fine Arts Museum

CLOSE UP: Contemporary Art from Taiwan

***Close Up: Contemporary Art from Taiwan* was The Taipei Fine Arts Museum's first art exhibition to be shown in Canada. Curated by Ying-ying Lai, it featured eight artists representing 'the scope and energy of contemporary Taiwanese art'.**

PHOTOGRAPHY AND NEW MEDIA predominated the exhibition and included Chien Fu-Yu's documentary photographs of Taiwanese women (poet Chen Hsui-Hsi, Taiya activist Chan Hsui-Mei, newspaper reporter Yao Min-Hsuen) and Chen Shun-Chu's red-, blue-, and green-tinted prints of a family grouping layered over a fairground scene. Hou Shur-Tzy's identity-questioning *Guess Who You Are?* installation consisted of a series of five colourfully tinted photographic portraits inscribed with calligraphy. Below each of the photographs, wax moulds of feet — a single foot in some instances, and in others, a pair or a threesome — were nominally linked by lengths of surgical rubber hose.

Yao Jui-Chung's seven large-scale sepia-toned photographs featured the artist levitating perhaps a foot or higher above the pavement in front of important sites in China such as the Museum of History in Beijing, at the Great Wall, in Tienanmen Square, and along the Bund in Shanghai. According to Ying-ying Lai, *Recover Mainland China: Action Series*, 'both satirises and undermines Taiwan's long-held military strategy and political dream'. A similar ironic quality was apparent in Wu Tien-Chang's elaborately-framed narratives portraying defaced figures against surrealistic landscapes. For example, the male/female couple in *Farewell Quemoy*, 1998, are foregrounded against a fictionalised landscape referencing both Taiwanese political history and the history of painting.

Two of the remaining installations in *Close Up* featured drawing. Yu Peng's hastily-sketched *Landscapes of Desire* covered the surfaces of sturdily-constructed plain wood furniture. Liu Shih-Fen's *Book of Cryptic Comments*, 1996, installation consisted of 119 sketchily-annotated pages from a medical textbook on heart murmurs arranged in a grid 17 lines across, seven tiers high. While all of the works in *Close Up* were engaging, Yuan Goang-Ming's video projection *Fish on Dish*, 1992, encouraged viewers to approach 'close up' to watch Yuan's illusory goldfish swimming endlessly in an intangible bowl. Serene, poetic, and high-tech, *Fish on a Dish* exemplified curator Ying-ying Lai's assertion that 'contemporary Taiwanese artists live in an ever-changing, information-age society where chaos and harmony coexist'.

Paula Gustafson

**Close Up:
Contemporary Art
From Taiwan at
Charles H. Scott
Gallery (Vancouver)
and the Art Gallery of
Greater Victoria
(Victoria)**

Some types of visual art slide seamlessly across cultural borders, translating easily for the eyes and minds of new viewers by offering images or objects that are universal to contemporary society. Works by five of the eight Taiwanese artists in *Close Up: Contemporary Art From Taiwan* (Taipei Fine Arts Museum's first contemporary art exhibition in Canada) would seem to fit this assimilative process: images of individuals or small groups of people which, despite being canonized by an art gallery curator, are variations on the ubiquitous snapshots of friends or family.

The most specific examples are Chien Fu-Yu's documentary photographs of Taiwanese women (poet Chen Hsui-Hsi, Taiya activist Chan Hsui-Mei, newspaper reporter Yao Min-Hsuen) and Chen Shun-Chu's red-, blue-, and green-tinted prints of a family group layered over a fairground scene. Both series are firmly rooted in the use of the camera lens as an arbiter of memory. In an interview with the exhibition's curator, Lai Ying-Ying, Chen said that her multiple-print *Family Scene* (1996) investigates "the relationship between what one sees in a photograph and what one remembers and doesn't remember."

Hou Shur-Tzy's *Guess Who You Are?* installation was slightly more complex and less decipherable to Western viewers. It consisted of a series of five life-size photographic portraits inscribed with brushwork calligraphy. (My viewing of this section of the exhibition was in the company of three young Japanese-speaking women. Their struggle to read the text dissolved into shrugs and laugh-

ter, paralleling my own perplexity. I learned later that the text was excerpted from discussions between the artist and the sitters). Placed below each of the photographs were wax molds of feet: a single foot in some instances, and in others, a pair or a threesome, inexplicably connected via a surgical rubber hose. While turquoise, rose, and ochre shadings lent an aura of luxury to Hou's portraiture—emphasizing her stated purpose of exploring individual notions of identity and desire—the overall intention of this installation remained unclear.

Yao Jui-Chung's miraculous levitations at famous sites in China were equally incomprehensible but much more fun to look at, if only to try to discover how the photographs were concocted. Seven sepia-toned enlargements (approximately three by five feet) feature the artist elevated perhaps a foot or more above the pavement in front of the Museum of History in Beijing, at the Great Wall of China, in Tiananmen Square, and along the Bund in Shanghai. According to the exhibition notes the idea for the series was developed during the summer of 1994 when Yao was starting his compulsory two-year national military training. At that time, he ironically placed an advertisement in Taiwan's *Lion Art Monthly* stating that he was going to become a soldier "and learn how [to] recover mainland China."

The sense of destabilization or displacement which many Taiwanese experience—which Yao wanted to convey in his *Recover Mainland China: Action Series*—is also a factor in Wu Tien-Chang's fictionalized narratives portraying defaced figures against surrealistic landscapes. Wu's imagery, however, is edgier, more politically brazen. His painting *Farewell Quemoy* (1998), for example, presents a couple (she is seated, he is perched on the arm of the chair) against a back-

ground that contains a broken tree, a beach eroding from wave action, and steps that lead upward to nowhere. One eye of each of the figures is occluded by the insertion of a fabric flower. Elaborately framed by glittery-green fabric and rococoish gold-centered, white-plastic flowers, Wu's cryptic scenario presents a darkly satirical view of both history and the history of painting.

Two of the other artists in the exhibition used drawing as a major component in their installations. Yu Peng's drawings on scrolled paper and the surfaces of sturdily constructed plain wood furniture depict what he says are his own anxieties "and the uneasiness that I witness in other people." Often erotic and appearing clumsily or hastily executed, the cluttered compositions of Yu's *Landscapes of Desire* (1998), according to curator Lai Ying-Ying, "completely subvert Chinese cultural morality and the orthodox values of ink painting." Liu Shih-Fen's installation, *Book of Cryptic Comments* (1996), was rigidly ordered by comparison. The work was comprised of 119 pages from a medical textbook on heart murmurs arranged in a grid of 17 lines across, seventeen tiers high. Liu, a nurse at Taipei Veteran's Hospital, has decorated each page with squiggly drawings and found items to illustrate her own notions about "murmurings": the inaudible musings and muttering below the level of language.

The remaining work in the exhibition, Yuan Guang-Ming's serenely minimal video projection *Fish on Dish* (1992), played fast and loose with the exhibition's title. While other works held the viewer at arm's length, peering closer at the illusory swimming goldfish only increased the viewer's fascination and admiration for the artist's technical prowess in creating an artwork as intangible as a child's song.

For viewers without an

intimate knowledge of the social and cultural concerns that impact daily life in Taiwan, *Close Up: Contemporary Art From Taiwan's* emphasis on photography and new media revealed mainly that this group of artists is *au courant* with contemporary art practice.

Paula Gustafson

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Taiwan's fractured history is a rich proving ground for contemporary art. CLOSE-UP: CONTEMPORARY ART FROM TAIWAN, a survey of the film, video, painting,

performance and many hybrid forms that find expression in Formosa's teeming artistic life is offered for view this summer at the Charles Scott Gallery on Granville Island. It features the work of eight artists, among them Wu Tien-Chang, whose *Farewell Quemoy* is detailed here.

Wu challenges and deconstructs the myths of Taiwanese history. He uses the postures and sets of stilted studio photographs of the early 20th century to evoke the island's past, framing his images in kitschy coloured lights.

Curated by Taipei's Fine Arts Museum, Close-up is organized thematically into three categories. The first, People and the Land, scrutinizes the complex issue of identity in Taiwan — a region where hundreds of thousands of refugees from Communist forces in mainland China planted themselves on top of a racially diverse indigenous culture. (The island of Formosa was home, since the 16th century, to a diverse blend of Malay-Polynesian immigrants. It was also occupied by Japan for much of the 20th century.)

The second section, entitled History and Culture, considers the idea of belonging in a society riven by ethnic and political divisions. The third part, Family and the Individual, struggles with the nature of memory and its relationship to "childhood, family and life in a post-modern metropolis."

"Taiwan is a dynamic and energetic society," observes the Charles Scott Gallery's director, Greg Bellerby, "and like many other Asian countries, there is a profound sense of rapid movement and change that permeates day-to-day life. Western visitors can be overwhelmed by dense and frenetic cities like Taipei that feature streets congested with traffic, sidewalks crammed with scooters, bargain sales tables and food stalls, and buildings laden with flashy neon signs." Unlike other countries in southeast Asia, Taiwan has a determinedly outward-looking attitude, and a generation of its young artists has been encouraged to study and travel abroad. As a result such western ideas as feminism and gender politics have become prominent in Taiwanese art.

"Although its history has been dominated by colonialism and political instability, Taiwan has changed in just a few decades from a relatively rural society to a highly successful industrial and technological society," Bellerby observes. Close-up opens July 15 at the Charles H. Scott Gallery. See listing page 26.

— Michael Scott