

TAIWAN CONTEMPORARY ART LINK
台灣當代藝術連線



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TAIWAN CONTEMPORARY ART: INCLUSIVENESS THROUGH INDIVIDUATION?

By Hill Gates

Political & Economic Background:

Taiwan today is a free-standing society with aspirations for, and all the practical bases that support, full nationhood. Despite a population of only twenty million, the island enjoys a strong and sophisticated economy. Relationships with the United States, Japan, southern China, Southeast Asia, and other regions promote profitable trade and powerful international awareness. The political liberalizations of the last decades have reshaped economy and society such that Taiwan retains a decisive core of state banking, communications, and industry while sustaining a rich spectrum of private enterprises. Like other successful Asian nations, Taiwan limits the role that foreign corporations play in its economy and culture. As democratization transfers resources from the former ruling party-state to a more pluralistic government, the pool of social goods such as education should continue to dampen local market inequalities, ensuring a balanced and self-directed society eager for self-expression.

Political democratization has promoted citizen equality in Taiwan, but the social results of market-economic development have been more mixed. Barriers of ethnicity, gender, and class still compartmentalize people into groups with differential access to life's necessities and pleasures. Art thrives on such complexity. Gender and

ethnicity particularly stimulate creativity, but perceptions of class are muffled by a recent history of great social mobility.

Class, Ethnicity, and Gender:

In ethnic identities, old stereotypes are fading fast. When I arrived in Taiwan in 1968, it was convenient to categorize all "Mainlanders" as government, military, or big capitalists, to lump all Taiwanese as owner-operators in agriculture and industry, and to marginalize all Aboriginal people as athletes and entertainers. Even then, however, Aboriginal artists produced for a world market. The urban elite met in cosmopolitan coffee-houses such as the famous Tiancai --"Genius"--to argue art, literature, and politics. Working-class migrants kept alive the popular arts of their homelands such as papercutting and regional cuisines. During the 1970s, Taiwan's formerly large population of small-farmer households rapidly diversified into an energetic business class and another of skilled, literate workers in factories and offices. Many farmer, laborer, and military children joined the white-collar ranks of government and big business. Today, Taiwan's most successful households form a world-class elite of mutually dependent entrepreneurs and administrative technocrats. Among them, ethnicity no longer precludes friendship, marriage, or access to occupations.

Poverty still shadows some families, and ordinary blue-collar workers find their lives much narrower than the lifestyles presented as "ordinary" on television. Ethnic divisiveness is more perceptible among the less than among the more successful classes.

As in every nation, gender separates women from men, and sometimes deletes them from public recognition. Some artists honor women previously occluded from our view: in this exhibition, CHIEN Fu-yu's "YAO Min-hsuan: Taiwan's First Female News Reporter after Taiwan's Retrocession" is a serene portrait of a woman finally accorded due regard. The local warm-spirited feminism has built firmly on the Chinese tradition that grants equality to talents, especially those of brush and word. Still, women make up only ten percent of the artists in most Taiwan exhibitions. Many works by women, such as HOU Shur-Tzy's Guess Who You Are series, speak and criticize from a gendered position.

Differences in History:

Taiwanese of my own and older generations have experienced one of history's greatest and most rapid social transitions. A painting on my study wall captures the motion from past to present, from village to city, from a harsh frugality that now glows with the tender memory of simple pleasures. Huang Tingting's "Taidong Railway Station"

(1999) is a modest building, its empty track bathed in gilded sunset light. The invisible train carries a nostalgic viewer suspended between duties, luxuriating in the unpeopled rurality of field and forest, enjoying a complex proto-post-modernity that encompassed both trains and water buffalo. The old stations are gone now, metamorphized into strip malls; the real past was not always so idyllic. In this exhibition, CHEN Shun-chu's photographic series, "Family Scene," stresses the variability of a single history seen through the many colours of memory.

Themes of history and place as nostalgia and critique are abundantly explored as artists relate what they know, remember, and imagine. Many contemporary works memorialize and celebrate the long-suppressed colonized past. The devastating rebellion against Nationalist rule--"February 28, 1947"--is now recognized and mourned in painting, sculpture, and film by artists such as OUYANG Wen and LIN Sien-mo; numerous exhibitions of such art were held in the mid-1990s, including one at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in 1996. The unfocused sorrow of dislocation, post-war poverty, and the costs of early industrialization darken many recent paintings by older artists such as LIAO Te-cheng; pain radiates from long-censored works by printmaker CHU Ming-kang and painters HUANG Yen and HUANG Rong-Tsai. Both leading and following their fellow citizens, youth seems to question the past with greater affection, and the present with greater playfulness.

Art and Identity:

Artistic expression in Taiwan has been shaped by the islanders' long experience as a separate people. Far from isolated, the Taiwanese have formulated their values and imagery from a unique balance of influences: their enduring Aboriginal communities; the regional cultures of China's south coast; a Japan that once colonized but now cooperates in Taiwan's powerful economy; Nationalist leaders that preserved a constricted modern heritage; and the English-speaking West where so many of today's Taiwanese have sojourned. As this rich and representative exhibition of contemporary Taiwan art so vividly illustrates, the autonomy of the 1980s and 90s has fostered an eager experimentation with old and new forms--localized, generationally nuanced, and cosmopolitan.

Professor Chuang Yen-kuei, a Taiwan "flown seed" now rooted in the United States has argued that alertness to global affairs, bilingualism, and a taste for the new and fresh are inherent in Taiwanese identity. Yet its sophisticated daughters and sons maintain a coherent, subtle "Taiwaneseness"--as YAO Jui-chung's photographs, "Recover Mainland China," and WU Tian-chang's mixed media series, "Dream of Past Era," display with clever irony.

Like identity, art grows in the space between fantasy and reality. For the first time in history, Taiwanese imagination is radically free to spin fantasies of personal vision for common contemplation. This imagination runs riot in LIU

Shih-fen's mixed media, "The Multiple Sophism of Skin & Membranes" (see section on LIU Shih-fen), and in YUAN Goang-ming's colour poem "Fish on a Dish."

As Taiwan artists explore their now-limitless world, what attitudes and ideologies, what aesthetic criteria resonate with their fellow-Taiwanese? Reducing such subtleties to mere written English is risky, but three observations seem especially salient. First, formally, Taiwanese artists engage with and destabilize modern/post-modern dichotomies through an incisive two-dimensionality using the indigenous calligraphic line; various twentieth-century influences, digested during the Japanese and Nationalist periods, have developed their own aesthetic. Second, thematically, Taiwan visual artists are committed to honoring their once forbidden recent past as well as to capturing the explosive present. And third, expressively, Taiwan's artists update and localize the dialectic between luxuriance and sparseness that many peoples experience in societies undergoing great commercial expansion.

An Embarrassment of Riches:

Contemporary Taiwanese talk endlessly of their paradoxical impoverishment by wealth. The theme of simpler times and places prompts much creative work, as we have seen, and the critique of contemporary excess motivates many artists as well. PENG Yu's hallucinatory re-imagining of "traditional" landscapes alludes to the past in frighteningly edgy ink while representing the present as a purgatory of desire and gluttony. Taiwanese at all levels of society debate the meaning of true riches, discussing and painting and writing and singing the value of the commodity, the purchasable, as against the value of things money cannot buy: self-fulfillment, embodied discipline, captured memory, the hope for still-formless future goodness. As society raises standards through market competition, an old boundary blurs between the professional "made-for-sale" and the amateur "made-for-the-making." In life as in art, Taiwanese compromise between sophistication and naivete, between craft and slickness, between the unvarnished truth and the saleable subject.

What we do not see in contemporary Taiwanese art is also revealing. Taiwan artists do not much make, nor purchasers often buy objects that simply emulate the Chinese past. Nor do they obsess over the global encounter, or orientalize themselves. To my eye, however, their grapplings with identity sometimes overemphasize the hyperindividualism to which prestigious persons easily fall victim. The vital street-life, the human-built landscapes, the powerful but puzzling religious currents of popular religion, and the paradoxes of poverty seem to rush past below the radar of elite art. The achievement of an intense and cultivated consciousness of self, of sex, of nation has not yet reached its most mature goal--the capacity to touch and teach people still socially separated by access to wealth. Artists begin by finding their own distinctive voices; they become great by articulating meaning for the widest possible audience.

Hill Gates currently teaches in the Department of Anthropological Sciences at Stanford University. She has published numerous articles on gender and class in Taiwan.