

[ART JOURNAL]

Ancient maps and modern conveniences

The National Palace Museum has put on display a selection of its vast collection of maps, while the Taipei Fine Arts Museum is mounting an exhibition by Hsu Pang-chieh, the first in his hometown

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Lin Tien-jen (林天人), one of the researchers behind the National Palace Museum's (國立故宮博物院) new exhibition *Outlining Geographical Expanse With a Brush* (筆畫千里——院藏古輿圖特展), is excited by maps. "Maps represent the physical horizons of those in power," he said, as he led a group of journalists around the small display chamber filled with maps of various sizes and styles. "They are symbols of power. I like to emphasize that maps are not just documents that provide information, they also represent the way people in past times viewed the world."

The exhibition, which runs until Dec. 31, puts on display a small portion of the Museum's huge collection of maps, including maps used for civil engineering projects, coastal defense and in reports from governors to the Chinese emperor. "These maps are extremely precious, for in most cases they are unique. Unlike Western maps, which often employed etching or other technology [which allowed accurate mass reproduction], most of these maps were hand drawn. In many cases they use the techniques of landscape painting, and can be very beautiful," said Lin, drawing attention to *Memorial to the Throne With Map of Wu-li-ya-su-tai* (烏里雅蘇臺籌防圖), a map composed by a military inspector stationed in modern day Xinjiang Autonomous Region to outline the defensive posture of the Qing government against the restive local nomads. Its use of semi-abstract water color techniques makes it enormously attractive to look at. It is fascinating to speculate on the man behind the map and appreciate that this picture, along with an accompanying report, where a means of providing classified military data.

Unfortunately the lack of detailed notes in the exhibition, either in English or Chinese, is a major obstacle to non-specialists who without the assistance

of a guide will find appreciation of the full impact of this and other fascinating documents on display difficult. The excellent catalog, however, available for NT\$450, provides detailed Chinese notes and invaluable closeups of sections of various maps. An effort has been made in this volume to provide short introductions to the four sections of the exhibition in English, but these do little more than whet the appetite for more specific information.

One of the show's highlights is the *Map of Taiwan and the Pescadores* (臺灣圖附澎湖群島圖) from the Yungcheng period (1678-1735) of the Qing Dynasty. This detailed map, which among many other fascinating features shows the Taipei basin as a lake, provides endless interest for anyone familiar with Taiwan's geography. "We had written accounts of how there was a lake in this area," Lin said, "but this was invaluable corroborative evidence."

According to the Museum's deputy director, many of these maps are on display for the first time, and given the fragility of many of these documents, the exhibition will be divided into two sections, with the current exhibits being rotated out in October.

Over at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (台北市立美術館), an exhibition by Taiwanese-born artist Hsu Pang-chieh (徐邦傑), the first in his hometown, opened last week. Titled *Neglected Existence* (被遺忘的存在), the show consists of works from 2002 to 2008 and comprises two series, one of oil paintings of ghost money, often in such extreme closeup so as to blur the line between representation and abstraction, and the other of charcoal drawings of enormous refinement, whose subjects are spaces and textures rather than the objects that are depicted.

In this first series of works, Hsu takes stock of his own cultural heritage in the symbolic value of the spirit money

he represents on canvases. He obviously delights in the painstaking realism of the representation of a very ordinary object, but the closer he gets to the object, the more abstract it becomes. He calls this "abstract realism," and in works such as *Full House*, a stack of ghost money painted in extreme closeup and meticulous detail becomes an imaginative space for the viewer to contemplate lines, textures and light, the representative subject having been pushed into the background. In other works such as *Palace*, Hsu pulls back slightly and uses stacks of money to create an architectural space that evokes and comments on the Chinese priorities of family and home, as well as the inevitability of death and decay.

In a second room, Hsu presents a series of charcoal drawings that come across as somewhat conventional academic exercises in representations of space. Closer inspection reveals that Hsu is once again more interested in something that lies beyond the object depicted. *The Lonely Loo* (2003) is a study of surfaces, light and textures that makes the image of a public lavatory something supremely nuanced and faintly mysterious. His three-part series *Lady's Room* (2006) takes this focus on space and texture one step further. The first panel depicts a rather decrepit lavatory in the same kind of painstaking care as can be found in *The Lonely Loo*, but then the second panel zooms into a section of wall around the lavatory window, and the third becomes an abstract of peeling paint, mold and damp as seen under a microscope.

Hsu writes in his introduction to the show that, "The existence of objects is forgotten because we tend to functionalize everything." The paintings presented in *Neglected Existence* undermine this functional aspect of things, and reveal an underlying skein of being that is both banal and sublime.



Celebrity Interview

There

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In the past five years, the chances of another X-Files movie seemed slim, thanks to a long-running lawsuit with Fox TV. "We talked about another movie as far back as the last one, 10 years ago. But Fox approached us in 2003 and said, 'Let's go.' We were ready to go, but then there followed what I would call a contractual thing over the series' profit, and what started out as a negotiation had to turn into a lawsuit — it's complicated — in order for me to protect my right to negotiate. It took years to settle, and at that point I didn't think there could ever be a second movie. Then, after everything was resolved, Fox called and said, 'Remember that movie you had in mind? You'd better get ready to do it now or never, because there's a Writers Guild strike looming.' So it was years of stasis, and then a mad rush."

Of course, in the interim, his stars had been doing other things as well. David Duchovny has recently been seen leaping naked from bedroom windows as the charismatic cad Hank Moody in *Californication*. Gillian Anderson, meanwhile, has reinvented herself in the UK (where she spent a long period in her teens), carving out a new identity in period dramas such as *Bleak House* and the *House of Mirth*, where her John Singer Sargent-style looks serve her well. How was it for them, returning after such a long hiatus?

"They'll tell you it was hard, but I felt they stepped back into it with a facility that they both developed through so many years of doing the show. I think what you cannot discount is how much those 202 episodes did for them as actors. They brought back an artistry beyond technique, with these other roles and experiences enriching, deepening them, stretching them. Then they had to come back into shape, as it were, back to the original roles."

One particularly eye-catching piece of casting is the use of comedian Billy Connolly in the "monster of the week" role of Father Joe, a pedophile priest — more sympathetically depicted than one might anticipate — whose supposed psychic abilities help Mulder and Scully disinter a series of murder victims but also place him under suspicion. (It's bracing to hear Anderson say things like, "Well, let's not forget, he buggered 37 altar boys.") Is Connolly an X-Files fan?

"No, he's not, actually," Carter says. "I'm a fan of his, and we wrote the part especially for him. I saw him in *Mrs. Brown* and I thought he was fantastic. When we were filming in Vancouver, we found he's a lot more widely known outside the US. There's a much more direct connection to British culture in Canada, and everyone knew *The Welly Boot Song*. But I loved *Mrs. Brown*, and I also heard him on a George Martin record [singing *Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite*], based on the Beatles song. And between noting those two things, I'd spent some time down in Baja California, and someone told me — another Scotsman who lives down there — that he had seen Billy Connolly down there, by himself, walking down a road literally in the middle of nowhere, and I thought, 'That is so bizarre! Somehow Billy Connolly and I are meant to work together!'"

Is there a difference between *The X-Files* pre- and post-9/11? Some believe those terrorist attacks involved a government conspiracy and cover up; the attacks came just as *The X-Files*, which was speciously linked in the 1990s with rightwing fantasies about new world orders, alien abductions and the militia movement, was concluding its final season.

"I think we changed, the world changed, once and for all and forever. You could tell a story about this new zeitgeist, but we chose not to. We chose to tell a more classic X-Files story that goes back to the basic fundamentals of the show: it's only as scary as it is believable, if it takes place within the realm of 'extreme possibility,' and it doesn't always need a political context to be interesting."

Then there were the show's famously attentive (and anal-retentive) fans, posting their approval or lack thereof on a million X-Files bulletin boards, which was both a good and a bad thing, says Carter. "That was the revolutionary thing about the show. We had an immediate connection with our fans, which first created an intimacy, which in turn created an incestuousness, which then created politics, which created all the things that go with that ease of communication."

"While it's been a great thing, it could also be a dangerous thing, if you try to please or appease everyone, which we don't. We don't read fan fiction, we don't take ideas from fans. We listen to them, which you can do to the point of insanity. Oh, we had lobbies, quorums, caucuses — you could go on and on — all of them trying to make us go back to Scully's original hairdo! You could get lost in this stuff pretty quickly. So we always do what we do best, which is go with our gut instincts. The scary thing is that there are fans who now know more about *The X-Files* than I do."

NOTE: *The X-Files: I Want to Believe* is released in Taiwan on Friday.



Top: Ladies' Room 1, charcoal on paper.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TEAM

Above: Memorial to the Throne With Map of Wu-li-ya-su-tai.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NPM

EXHIBITION INFORMATION:

WHAT: *Outlining Geographical Expanse With a Brush* (筆畫千里——院藏古輿圖特展)

WHERE: National Palace Museum (國立故宮博物院), 221, Zhishan Rd Sec 2, Shihlin Dist, Taipei City (台北市士林區至善路二段221號)

WHEN: Until Dec. 31, with exhibits rotated out in October

ADMISSION: General admission, NT\$160

WHAT: *The Neglected Existence — Solo Exhibition by Hsu Pang-chieh* (被遺忘的存在——徐邦傑個展)

WHERE: Taipei Fine Arts Museum (台北市立美術館), 181, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市中山北路三段181號)

WHEN: Until Sept. 14

ADMISSION: General admission, NT\$30



Above: Painted houses on Tory Island off Ireland's northwest coast.



Right: Patsy Dan Rodgers, the "King" of Tory Island, poses with one of his paintings in front of the island's art gallery.

Far right: Fishing boats near the port of Tory Island.

Donkey tails, dogs and dolphins: Irish island saved by art

On the isolated outcrop of Tory off the northwest coast of Ireland, islanders have used an unlikely weapon — art — to maintain their ancestral home in the face of government efforts to evict them

BY LOIC VENNIN
AFP, TORY ISLAND, IRELAND

Locals on a tiny storm-ravaged island off the coast of Ireland have battled to survive over the centuries — but now hope that art will help save them.

The island of Tory, lashed by Atlantic swells off Ireland's northwest coast, at one time appeared condemned to slow death, with plans drawn up to relocate its 142 residents and leave the ocean to do its worst.

But everything changed when an English artist named Derek Hill arrived one day and encouraged local fishermen to put paintbrushes, rather than nets, in their calloused hands.

"We used art as a weapon ... and the government started to put money. A priest came, then a secondary school, a ferry, power and a port," said Antoin Meenan, 48.

He was speaking on a rare recent sunny Sunday when the unforgiving wind and rain whipping in from the Atlantic had subsided, and as Tory islanders gathered in their only hotel-pub-restaurant to celebrate the arrival of a new lifeboat.

Young girls were in their prettiest dresses. The boys had combed their hair. Pint glasses were filled with Guinness as a Gaelic tune floated from the accordion.

Outside, children played on bikes on the island's only road while a group of teenagers chatted, leaning against a fishing boat that looked like it had not put to sea in a long time.

A curious group looked on as Ben, the pub landlord's Labrador frolicked with a dolphin with whom he had made friends. On Tory, where storms can last for weeks, you make your own entertainment when you can.

Only a couple of dozen granite houses stand up to the constant wind on this 5km-long spit of peaty land. The mainland is about an hour away by ferry over choppy seas.

The Irish government in Dublin has tried to relocate people several times, notably in 1974 after Tory was cut off for nearly two months by storms.

But Patsy Dan Rodgers, 64 and Tory's most famous resident, refused to budge.

"My family has been here for 3,400 years," he says, his sailor's cap pulled down over craggy features.

Patsy is the *ri* or "king" of Tory. But no-one on this fiercely independent Gaelic-speaking outcrop calls him "your majesty," except perhaps after too much Guinness.

Instead, the title is a Gaelic tradition that dictates that the community must have a representative.

"Tory was an island which was left with nothing," he recalls. Until the "miracle" of Hill's arrival in 1955, there was no ferry, no electricity and not even a priest, he said.

Tory's painters were born when a local man named James Dixon looked over Hill's shoulder when he was at his easel and said: "I think I could do better myself."

Hill said: "You're on!" And he set about encouraging his pupil, sending him artists' materials. Dixon, though, drew the line at paint brushes, preferring instead to use the hair from his donkeys' tails.

Dixon was quickly joined by other would-be artists, including Patsy.

Their naive art style depicts landscapes and daily life on the island: the lighthouse in the setting sun or Ben the dog playing with his dolphin friend.

Patsy saw in it his dream of saving his island, as their reputation spread beyond Ireland and their works were shown in galleries as far afield as Chicago.

"In Belfast, Dublin, Scotland, France I was given a platform to give an account on the plague, on the difficulty of the island ... that we wouldn't survive without help," he said.

But it is still a fragile prosperity.

The ramshackle building that hardly passes for a gallery for the islanders' canvasses faces the sea. A lack of funding means it has no heating and the damp is taking its toll.

"I couldn't make a living out of it (painting)," says Meenan, who was forced to give up his job as a salmon fisherman because of restrictions. "I'm on welfare but it's no work."

Patsy is also worried.

"It's a miracle we're still here if the teenagers are gone ...," he says, his voice trailing off.