

[ART JOURNAL]

Greek geometry, Chinese philosophy

Taipei National University of the Arts is celebrating Lee Tsai-chien's 80th birthday with an outdoor exhibition of his abstract sculpture at its scenic campus

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER



Above: The symbol for infinity was the inspiration for *Unlimited Extension*.
Left: Sculptor Lee Tsai-chien poses in front of his steel sculpture *Ring*.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MAIN TREND GALLERY

Lee Tsai-chien (李再鈞) expected to expand his knowledge of Chinese sculpture when he set out for Europe's galleries and museums in the early 1970s. What he didn't expect to investigate, however, was the long tradition of Western sculpture dating back thousands of years.

"Traveling to China at the time was out of the question," the 80-year-old sculptor said. "And when I traveled through Europe, I discovered for myself the ancient Greeks."

What began as a search for Chinese sculpture ended with a book on Greek art and an enduring interest in the geometric forms that the ancient Greeks were obsessed with — an obsession that permeates the 16 abstract sculptures made from steel that are currently on display at the National Taiwan University of the Arts' campus until March of next year.

The exhibition literature states that it is the largest outdoor exhibition of sculpture ever in Taiwan, and the lush grounds of Aigrette Down (鸞鶯草原) — a

series of rolling hills to the left of the university's front gate with stunning views of Taipei — serve as an ideal space for Lee's large sculptures. Each sculpture can be seen as a meditation on an Eastern philosophical concept — whether Buddhism or Taoism — or Greek geometrical forms.

Jiang Yen-chou (江衍畴), the exhibit's curator, breaks Lee's abstract sculptures down into four periods both thematically and chronologically. "Finite and Infinite" dates to Lee's earliest period — a time when he was establishing his personal style working with geometric shapes and surfaces. Using the symbol for infinity (∞) as inspiration, *Unlimited Extension* fuses three pyramids together in a way that resembles a closed ring. The surfaces proceed inward and outward and form an "unlimited extension" that goes on to infinity.

Lee's "Decomposition and Composition" period reveals an interest in the five Platonic solids. It seems natural that the mathematics underpinning ancient metaphysical



ideas would give way to an aesthetic of geometric forms. *Cubed* (元) is made up of three separate but linked cubes and demonstrates a mathematical theory through the combination of geometrical shapes.

A close reading of Buddhist and Taoist philosophy marks a transition to "Substance and Formlessness," Lee's third period, though still remains true to the geometric forms of the earlier works. *Two for One* (二而不二) incorporates the ideas of

substance and formlessness, the physical and the imagination by juxtaposing two towers of stainless steel, the center of which is polished so as to provide a reflection of one with the other.

Lee shifts ideas inward in the final period, "Abstraction and Sense of Poetry," and translates his personal experience into monumental sculptures. *Dew* (露), which stands in front of the university's Administration Building,

is a tall, slightly askew sculpture cross-sectioned with small bead shapes, which symbolize drops of dew and reveal Lee's increasing interest in the natural world, "the most talented artist," he said.

Like much abstract art, the works are somewhat difficult to penetrate unless given a clear guide as to what the artist is attempting. Fortunately, the title of each piece gives a hint as to the works' multiple meanings.

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: Between Philosophy and Poetry: Sculpture Exhibition for the 80th anniversary of Lee Tsai-chien
WHERE: Taipei National University of the Arts (台北藝術大學), 1 Xueyuan Rd, Beitou Dist, Taipei City (台北市北投區學園路1號)
WHEN: Until March 31, 2009
TRANSPORTATION: Shuttle buses to Taipei National University of the Arts depart from Guandu MRT Station's (關渡捷運站) exit No. 1 every 30 minutes
ON THE NET: www.maintrendgallery.com.tw

Rainy days are here again

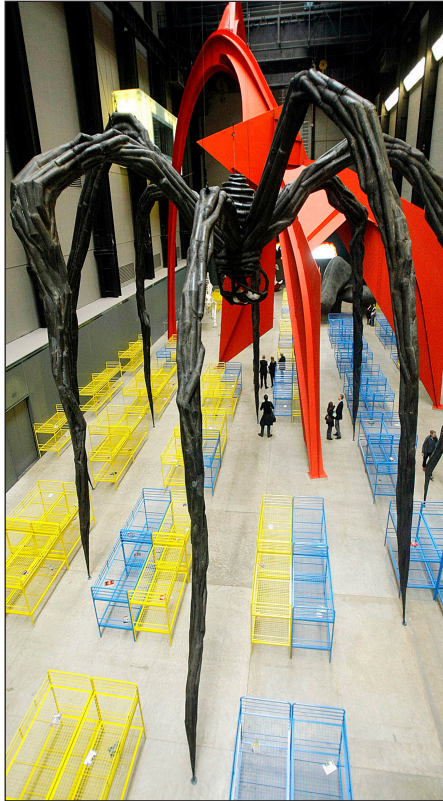
Visitors to the Tate Modern are about to face an apocalyptic vision of London partly inspired by the World War II Blitz and the July 7, 2005 transit bombings

BY FARAH NAYERI
BLOOMBERG



Above: A woman participant poses for the media as she reads a book in the interactive art exhibit *TH.2058* by French artist Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, at the Tate Modern in London, on Monday. The exhibition explores the notion of shelter, inspired by ideas of real and fictional situations when London has been under attack, by both war and the weather.

PHOTO: AP



Right: A view of Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's *TH.2058* as seen during a media preview at the Tate Modern in London, on Monday. The French artist has transformed the gallery's vast Turbine Hall into a shelter for residents fleeing floods and endless rain in an imagined London 50 years from now.

PHOTO: AP

Tate Modern, the museum converted from a London riverside power station, filled its vast entrance hall starting on Monday with a futuristic shelter containing colossal sculptures and 200 bunk beds strewn with books.

TH.2058 is the ninth installation in the Turbine Hall from a series sponsored by Unilever. Artist Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster imagines a place 50 years from now where Londoners seek refuge from continuous rain, surrounded by books, sculptures, and a giant screen projecting science-fiction film clips, Tate said in the exhibition's press release.

"It rains incessantly in London," Gonzalez-Foerster wrote in an essay dated October 2058 handed out to reporters. "Not a day, not an hour without rain, a deluge that has now lasted for years and changed the way people travel, their clothes, leisure activities, imagination and desires."

The work depicts an ecological apocalypse. Viewers slip through colored plastic curtains into a stark shelter where steel, mattress-less bunk beds are lined up. Each has a book on it with a catastrophe-related theme: *The Drowned World* by J.G. Ballard, or *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, or *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, by Marguerite Duras.

The books are refugees from the torrential rain, which beats

down in a haunting sound track beamed through loudspeakers. The odd droplet of water falls on the viewer's skin.

TURBULENCE AHEAD

"Turbulence — fasten your seat belts," advised Gonzalez-Foerster at the Tate press briefing, evoking her broadly themed work, and dismissing reporters' repeated efforts to connect it to the current global financial meltdown. The French artist, born in 1965, dressed youthfully in a striped sailor's top and blue jeans, her long stringy hair loosened to the waist.

The bunk beds are placed at the feet of monumental sculptures — larger-than-life replicas of Louise Bourgeois' giant spider (*Maman*, 1999) and Calder's *Flamingo* (1973), among others. The sculptures have been brought inside the shelter to stop them from growing bigger and bigger in the tropical rain.

On the back-wall screen are edited clips of futuristically themed films: from *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Nicolas Roeg) to *Planet of the Apes* (Franklin J. Schaffner) to *Repulsion* (Roman Polanski).

DOORS TO WORK

Gonzalez-Foerster said there were many possible "doors" into her work, and levels on which it could be read. She was drawn to participatory art after working as a

museum security guard and being "so shocked to see how little time people spent looking at the works."

"I've always been obsessed to keep the viewer longer," she explained.

Visitors to the Turbine Hall, where *TH.2058* will be shown through April next year, can lie on a bunk bed and read a book, peering through the steel grid of the bed above at the belly of Bourgeois' spider.

Flashbacks to World War II and Blitz-era London are not accidental. Gonzalez-Foerster says she clearly remembers a wartime photograph of a reader browsing a book beneath the bombed-out ceiling of the British Library.

She herself is a by-product of World War II: Her father did his military service in Germany, where he met her mother. Without the war, "I would never have been born," she said.

Previous participants in the Unilever series include Doris Salcedo, who, through April this year, showed *Shibboleth*, a 167m crack in the concrete floor of the hall; and Carsten Hoeller, who installed slides between October 2006 and April 2007 that visitors could slip down.

Unilever announced today that it is extending its support for the Turbine Hall installations until 2012, at a cost of US\$3.75 million.



Celebrity Interview

Cursing

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Her parents divorced when she was 6. "It was the happiest day of my life. I remember my sisters crying and saying, 'She doesn't understand.' I was sad, too, but I was sad because I'd learned a dance, and nobody was watching. I remember thinking, 'I don't understand? They're moving away from each other! I couldn't be happier.' Every single night was screaming. I look back on it even now, and I totally got it. I was happy." By her early teens, though, she had become deeply depressed, and a chronic bed wetter. (She was dispatched to see a local psychiatrist. At their first appointment, he prescribed Xanax; when she arrived for her second appointment, it turned out that he'd hanged himself.) The cloud lifted only after she arrived in New York, aged 18. "I remember describing my depression to my stepdad, and saying, 'I feel like I'm homesick, but I'm home.' And then I arrived in New York, and I swear, the day I moved there, it felt like I was home. I felt like I was a bear who'd been raised in the, in the ..." She trails off. "I don't know. I don't know where bears aren't raised. But you see what I mean."

Silverman didn't last long at New York University: she was spending every evening handing out flyers for comedy clubs in exchange for time on stage, and would often fall asleep during lectures; she soon quit to pursue comedy full-time. In footage of her early shows, she can be seen mocking the cliches of live stand-up — "I like having sex! Are there any sex people here tonight?" — and exploring the humorous potential of her Jewishness: "My sister's getting married, and they're taking each other's names, so she'll be Susan Silverman-Abramowitz. But they're thinking of shortening it to just 'Jews.'"

By 22, she'd been hired as a writer on *Saturday Night Live*, any trainee American comedian's dream job. She was fired almost immediately. *SNL* at the time wasn't welcoming to women, nor to comedians with a distinctive voice who couldn't write for a variety of characters. Besides, one imagines NBC executives blanching at some of Silverman's jokes, such as this line, about a law requiring women seeking an abortion to wait 24 hours to consider their decision: "I think it's a good law. I was going to get an abortion the other day. I totally wanted an abortion, and it turns out I was just thirsty."

Then, in 2001, after various small roles in film and TV, she made an appearance on Conan O'Brien's late-night talk show that has since become notorious. During the interview, Silverman recounted being summoned for jury service and wanting to find a way to get out of it. "So my friend said, why don't you write something really racist on the form, like, 'I hate Chinks?' Yeah, but you know, I don't want people to think I'm racist — I just want to get out of jury duty. So I filled out the form and I wrote" — at this point she beamed, smugly — "I love Chinks." As O'Brien buried his head in his hands, Silverman added: "And who doesn't?"

This joke is, of course, not racist, but about racism: the humor is in Silverman's apparent belief that changing the word "hate" to "love" acquires her of bigotry. Still, one could argue that "Chinks" is an easier word for Silverman to use than for people of Chinese heritage to have to hear, and it provoked a furious attack from Guy Aoki, the president of a lobby group called Media Action Network for Asian-Americans. The resultant furor culminated in a disastrous joint appearance by Silverman and Aoki on the talk show *Politically Incorrect*, in which Silverman tried to defend the joke before losing her cool and calling Aoki a "douchebag."

She says the experience taught her never to try to defend her humor. "It's so subjective, comedy," she says now. "If you don't find something funny, it can easily be truly offensive, so I usually just say I'm really sorry." (Notably, she declined to apologize for another infamous appearance, in the 2005 documentary film *The Aristocrats*, in which her comic turn ends by straightforwardly accusing a real, much-loved American TV personality of rape.) In her stand-up act, she says that the "Chinks" affair taught her another lesson: she learned that racism is bad. "And I mean bad, like in that black way."

Silverman's humor, which works so well when her topic is the way in which we discuss relations between social groups, only really fails when her targets are individuals: then, it can seem cruel. "Wow, she's amazing," Silverman said of Britney Spears at the 2007 MTV Music Video Awards at which the troubled singer tried to stage a comeback. "I mean, she's 25 years old and she's already accomplished everything she's going to accomplish in her life. It's mind-blowing." At another MTV event, days before Paris Hilton was due to go to jail, Silverman drew loud cackles from the audience with a lewd joke at her expense. Hilton, who was in the audience, looked frozen and mortified; unexpectedly, you found yourself feeling sorry for her.

Silverman seems uninterested in exploring what it means to be a woman in an overwhelmingly male-dominated business. Early last year, when the journalist Christopher Hitchens wrote an article in *Vanity Fair* entitled *Why Women Aren't Funny*, Silverman was endlessly pestered to write a rebuttal. In fact, the Hitchens article didn't live up to its title — it merely speculated about why men more often use humor to attract women than vice versa — and Silverman didn't disagree with it. "Snore," she says today, when the topic arises. "That article was just saying that in general, men who are not necessarily attractive, as a survival skill, use humor to get girls. And for women it is not that way. There are other things you do to get men that are very superficial, very materialistic — and that says more about men than it does about women. The reason there are lots of funny women is because of other survival skills they've had to develop, whether because they're fat or they're hairy or they've had a rough life, and they have to create this shell of a sense of humor in order to survive through it."

Make no mistake: Sarah Silverman does not want any of your labels. "People are always introducing me as 'Sarah Silverman, Jewish comedian,'" she says at one point during her stage act. "I hate that! I wish people would see me for who I really am. I'm white!"