

[ ART JOURNAL ]



# Over the rainbow

France-born artist Olivier Ferrieux's new book is a testament to his friendship with color

BY CATHERINE SHU  
STAFF REPORTER

When other children were scribbling with crayons or smearing finger-paints, Olivier Ferrieux was becoming best friends with color. As a little boy, the artist and writer remembers, he was shy and scared of ghosts. Red inspired him to be brave, sending a wave of courage through him. Orange, on the other hand, helped him regain his self-confidence after his father chided him for poor grades.

"Orange gave me the feeling that I could achieve my dreams, and I needed that as a teenager," he says.

The France-born artist pays homage to his close relationship with colors in *Couleurs* (十顏十色), which was published last month. The book is divided into 10 chapters, each of which honors a particular hue with a prose poem in French and Chinese and Ferrieux's distinctive, nuanced pen-and-watercolor illustrations.

An exhibition of Ferrieux's artwork, including pieces from *Couleurs*, is on display at Alliance Francaise de Taiwan (台灣法國文化協會) at National Taiwan University through Oct. 31, and he will be performing at the Taipei Poem Festival (台北詩歌節) at Nanhai Gallery (南海藝廊) along with musician Arnaud Lechat on Nov. 16.

The seeds of *Couleurs* were planted when the *Liberty Times* (the *Taipei Times*' sister newspaper) approached Ferrieux last year to write a series of articles accompanied by illustrations, which now form the basis of the book. Ferrieux chose to write about colors, he says, because he had never written about the effect they had on him.

In Ferrieux's personal spectrum, the

attributes of colors become more complex as they move toward the cooler shades of the rainbow, in the way that children mature as they grown older. A little boy may draw on red for courage as he hides from ghosts, for instance, but blue's strength is in nourishing hope and staying true to oneself. Purple, on the other hand, helps inspires the kind of self-confidence that allows you to in turn become more generous and openhearted. And while white is often viewed as the color of innocence and purity or of mourning in different cultures, Ferrieux sees it as a mirror: "It projects your feelings back to you. It is a peaceful color, but it will keep reflecting your feelings, and if you are unhappy it can be dangerous."

Out of all the colors, Ferrieux now identifies the most with green, which he describes as a hue that allows you to transform feelings of loneliness into ones of quiet solitude. "To me, it is like when you are out walking without friends. You pluck a blade of grass and rub it into your fingers, and as the color sinks into your skin, you feel like you are releasing your emotions and becoming more carefree," he says.

Ferrieux was born in 1963 near Lyon, France, where he studied fine art in university. In 1995 he left France for Taiwan "to breathe," he says, and to indulge his love of Mandarin.

"I loved learning Chinese. It is very relaxing because writing the words are almost like drawing. Each character is like a person. Some are friendly and open, some are nervous and withdrawn, others are happy and carefree," says Ferrieux, who at a recent book signing at Alliance Francaise drew each

person's Chinese name into an illustration featuring dachshunds with superlong bodies, soaring birds, grinning snails, plump clouds and other whimsical motifs.

Despite his training, Ferrieux's art career in Taiwan did not take off until, driven by unemployment, he decided to start selling small, palm-sized paintings by the side of Hankou Street (漢口街). Ferrieux painted as he sat by his makeshift stall, drawing the attention of passersby, something that inspired him to start pairing words with the pictures.

"People would look over my shoulder and ask, 'What is that?'" when I was working, so I started to make stories to go with the paintings," says Ferrieux. "That was a great opportunity that I think can only have happened for me in Taiwan because in Paris most people wouldn't do that. They would discreetly take a peek and then walk on."

Ferrieux eventually started getting publicity for his artwork, including a cover story in *Xfun*, a design magazine, and from there on his career started to take off. Since then, he has written several books, including *Couleurs*, found steady work as an illustrator and exhibited in New York City, Lyon and Taipei. Ferrieux also created permanent art installations for two of Taipei's underground walkways. One, near the Ximpu MRT Station (新埔捷運站), was completed in August, and features impish figures dancing along the arches that shelter each set of stairs. Another is a series of colorful mosaics in an underground alcove near the Lin Family Gardens (林家花園).

Ferrieux is currently working on a new book that will combine his artwork with his poetry. When he works, Ferrieux says, he



Top right and top left: Illustrations from Olivier Ferrieux's new book *Couleurs*. PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHINA TIMES PUBLISHING CO

Above: Olivier Ferrieux with his artwork near Taipei's Ximpu MRT Station. PHOTO: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES

writes in French and in Chinese first and then creates illustrations to fit his words. The process is sometimes difficult. "It's like my hands don't want to listen and write what my brain wants them to write sometimes," he says. But when everything finally comes together, "It's like my hands are dancing as I write across the page."

## Before Photoshop there was ...

Before the invention of software programs like Photoshop, photographers often viewed the clicking of the shutter as the end of the creative process. For Jerry Uelsmann, it was always the beginning. The American photographer spends most of his time in the darkroom manipulating the images he takes, transforming them into works of irrational beauty. A sampling of roughly 100 works spanning Uelsmann's half-century artistic career is on view at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

Judging by the crowds of people lined up to view the images last week, Uelsmann has a respectable following in Taiwan. This, perhaps, is unsurprising in a population of digitally literate amateur photographers who snap images of nature or people and then place them, sometimes manipulated, on their blogs.

But don't expect cutesy or pedestrian photographs in this exhibit. Uelsmann's visual syntax reaches deep into the human subconscious and surfaces with images that juxtapose incidental objects onto a visual landscape that is surrealist in its composition.

Uelsmann's process of creating photographs sets him apart from proponents of straight photography such as Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, photographers whose style was influential during the last half of the 20th century. The creative tool for these realist photographers was the camera itself, where, for example, a small aperture setting would be used to secure great depth of field to record and accurately recreate the human figure, plants or landscapes.

Uelsmann's primary tools for creation are found in the darkroom. Employing several enlargers, he sandwiches multiple negatives together and in the process creates emotionally and psychologically powerful silver-gelatin (black-and-white) prints containing easily recognizable images — clouds, a rowboat or waterfall — which are then juxtaposed to create an irrational visual order.

The prints chosen for the TFAM exhibition emphasize the relationship between the natural world of trees, rocks and water and the world

Although Jerry Uelsmann draws on surrealism and abstraction, he manages to create a dreamlike world of photography that is all his own.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TFAM



*Jerry Uelsmann's visual syntax reaches deep into the subconscious and surfaces with powerful dreamlike images*

BY NOAH BUCHAN  
STAFF REPORTER

created by humans. One photograph features a dense forest enclosing a rustic study with its books, wooden tables, shelves and chairs. Another image shows the head of what appears to be a Greek sculpture lying vertically in a bed of rocks. The juxtaposition of the natural creates an interesting meditation on the relationship between nature and humanity. In most of these images, it is the human creations that are decaying and in the process of returning to the natural world.

Memory, shifting and illusive, is an evident theme in some of the images. Two hands hold up an open book where a woman's face is indistinctly etched on to the surface of a page. A small window with prison bars separates the black inner sanctum with the illuminated external world, which is only vaguely apparent in the distance — as if to suggest that humans are prisoners and the woman's image fades with the passing of time.

The majority of the works are untitled. Those that are labeled provide a hint to where Uelsmann's influence comes from. Titles such as *Memories of Max Ernst*, *Homage to Duchamp*, *Homage to Man Ray* and *Magritte's Touchstone* suggest Uelsmann's visual vocabulary is inspired by painters — especially the gravity-defying images of the surrealists — rather than photographers.

Curiously, the only photographer mentioned in this exhibit is the French master Eugene Atget who sold his photographs to artists (a practice common at the turn of the 19th century). Uelsmann reverses this tradition by drawing on the works of abstract and surrealist masters and yet manages to create a visual world that is all his own.

### EXHIBITION NOTES:

**WHAT:** Whispers of Blended Shadows: The Art of Jerry Uelsmann

**WHERE:** Taipei Fine Arts Museum (台北市立美術館), 3C exhibition areas (3C展區), 181, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市中山北路3段181號)

**WHEN:** Tuesdays through Sundays from 9:30am to 5:30pm. Until Jan. 11 next year

**ENTRY:** NTS30 general admission

**ON THE NET:** www.tfam.museum



## Celebrity Interview

### Know

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Because you feel guilty?

"Because it's not a good place to be.

Deep down, we'd like everyone to be happy, because then you're happy."

What really seems to hook his interest here is the science of a successful script. Fellow-feeling is just how your brain works, and understanding that is important because Gervais wants to harness it for dramatic ends. "Laughing is infectious. Crying makes you feel a bit sad," he says. "We're hard-wired. So if you get empathy on screen, it hits you on an emotional and subliminal and fundamental level."

He warms to his theme. "Someone can do a hundred of the best one-liners. You'd laugh. But they could throw in a false punch line and you'd still laugh because you've got the rhythm. You won't remember one of them, and you won't care. But with Laurel and Hardy, say, I like them because I want to hug them. I laugh because I fucking love them. I can't laugh at someone I don't like. If someone's hurt you it's not funny. It's not that you stop yourself laughing; it's just not funny."

Fail to appreciate that, he thinks, and your comedy can't resonate with the audience. "After *The Office*, there was a rush to play unsympathetic characters. But with a lot of them, there was no redemption and no worthwhile journey. You need representation, not just embarrassment. *The Office* would never have worked had Tim not existed. You need someone to roll your eyes with. You can't just have decapitated jokes. Then what you've got is a sketch show."

It's strange to hear Gervais explain his puppet mastery. He seems to split his audience into two: his peers, and the rest of us, who'll laugh at anything, who'd even lap up the likes of *When the Whistle Blows* (the terrible fictional sitcom that transforms Millman from one of the *Extras* to being a star). He's stealth-feeding us quality while we're distracted by trash and color. "I like doing things that are Trojan horses," he says. "You start people watching with the knockabout stuff but then you take them to a different place. I know fully that with *The Office*, people tuned in for Brent and kept watching for Tim and Dawn."

Does he really think we need nourishment smuggled into our diets? "Of course. Otherwise it's empty. It's just white bread. And it's a matter of bothering to make it good. You're going to be there anyway. People make bad television and get promoted just because they made television. Aim high — then, if you fail, you're still slightly higher." So, not all altruism, then, but a glimmer of empathy. "Think of the people that aim low and still fail. There must be nothing worse than selling out and still being fucked."

Gervais appears to have avoided selling out. He has not had his inward-tilting teeth fixed. He has not lost weight. And he still managed to bag the romantic lead in a Hollywood comedy. "Hang on," he says, "it's not a romantic lead." Isn't it? "It's not a romantic lead in the sense of being a hunk you should take seriously. It's hopefully not one of those vanity projects where you want to go: that's ridiculous. When I work out and wear a toupee and lose weight and unironically get the girl, that's when I'm trying to be a romantic lead. If I am a romantic lead, it has to be firmly in the mould of the unlikely loser."

But his appearance at last month's Emmys didn't suggest an unlikely loser. He gave a speech to announce a set of nominees, but it ended up an extended ribbing of the US star of *The Office*, Steve Carell. ("Look at his stupid face ... I made you what you are and I get nothing back. Have you even been to see *Ghost Town*? I sat through *Evan Almighty*, now give me my Emmy back. Give me the Emmy. I'll tickle you.") It was the hit of the show, though only, Gervais says, "because the rest was so fucking dire," and helped build rumors that he will present the Oscars come February.

The character Gervais presented at the Emmys — convinced of his own rightness — has some odd similarities to Pincus. It's easy to imagine producers (witheringly dismissed in Gervais' speech) taking that character aside and telling him to stop behaving like a jerk, just as one of Pincus' colleagues does in *Ghost Town*. Is that something Gervais would do? "Yeah, but I don't generally use a word like that."

How would he word it? "Blokes usually say, 'Stop being such a fucking cunt.' It's not Keats, but there is a certain poetry — you've got to take that one seriously."