

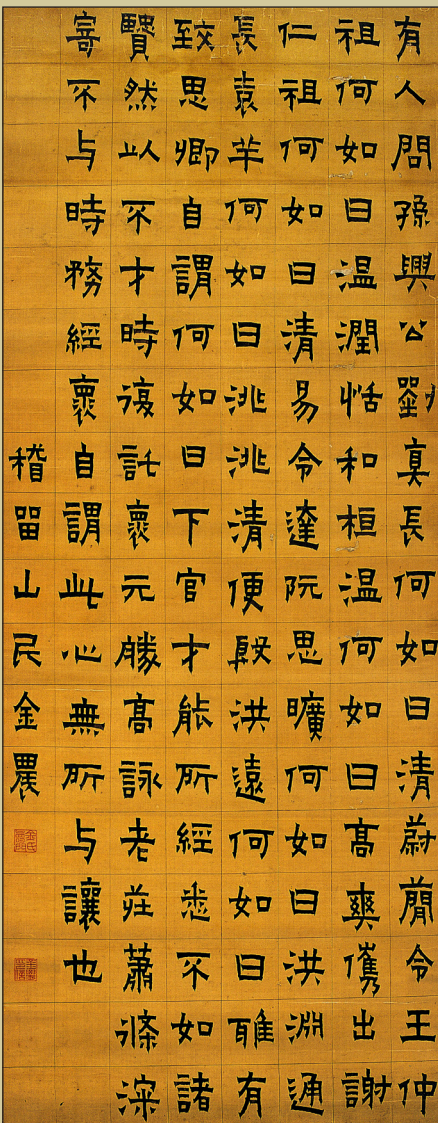
About as edifying as wallpaper

Lack of context and vague descriptions make it difficult for the average visitor to fully appreciate the ink paintings and calligraphy currently on display at the National Museum of History

BY **NOAH BUCHAN**
STAFF REPORTER

The title of the National Museum of History's ongoing show of calligraphy and ink paintings, *A Drop in the Ocean: Modern Contemporary Chinese Calligraphy and Painting Exhibition*, obscures the fact that some of the works on display date back as far as the Ming Dynasty.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NATIONAL MUSEUM OF HISTORY



I used to be drawn to a small noodle shop in Shida because it was wallpapered with different stylizations of the Chinese character for book (書). Although no explanation of the styles was offered, I enjoyed contemplating the different types of calligraphy over a bowl of wonton noodles (餛飩麵).

The current exhibit at the National Museum of History, *A Drop in the Ocean: Modern Contemporary Chinese Calligraphy and Painting Exhibition* (滄海一粟——近現代書畫展), could have been an excellent opportunity to educate the public about the long and revered Chinese traditions of ink painting and calligraphy, which are said to date back at least two millennia. What has been presented instead is an exhibition that is barely more edifying than the wallpaper in that now-closed noodle shop.

Apart from a brief four-paragraph introduction, there are no explanations — in Chinese or any other language — as to the exhibit's purpose. Although a title and artist are given for each work, the medium is not listed, and there are no dates or other clues as to why these works should be worthy of viewing, aside from hackneyed appeal to clichés such as “the meaning of life” and “cultivating one's emotions and feelings.”

Consequently, viewers are left to figure out for themselves the meaning, context and tradition of each of the more than 300 ink paintings and calligraphic works that have been handsomely hung in glass cases throughout most of the museum's second floor. The title of the exhibit is also misleading because fully

two-thirds of the works on display were created before the “modern contemporary” period.

Part of what makes an object worthy of being placed in a museum is the tradition within which it exists. The genius of Chu Teh-chun's (朱德群) abstract expressionist paintings, for example, only makes sense in the context of his evolution as an artist in a particular place and time. (An excellent retrospective of Chu's work is currently on display as a special exhibit on the museum's first floor. For details on that show, see the review on Page 15 of last Wednesday's *Taipei Times*.)

It is difficult to believe that the curator or the two collectors who lent the works on display didn't know the precise dates of the scrolls and paintings, which presumably were appraised before being hung. And since the artists' names are given, the curator or museum could have at least provided the dates of the artists' lives.

Chinese calligraphy has five essential styles, which are sometimes used in combination, and the museum could have taken advantage of some of the works on display to reveal the evolving and changing nature of calligraphy, the manner in which it was taught and why it was so important to the literati throughout Chinese history. The same applies to the ink paintings. Unfortunately, Wikipedia gives better descriptions of both traditions (“East Asian script styles” and “Chinese ink painting,” respectively) than this exhibit does.

I visited the exhibit three times and spoke with museumgoers of different ages to gain a

sense of what they were or were not seeing. A younger university-educated woman showed tremendous patience with my incessant questioning because she often couldn't answer even the most basic questions: What dynasty did this painter live in? What does that classical poem mean and was it written by the calligrapher? An older gentleman preferred to lead me to the ink paintings and scrolls he had some familiarity with, but, aside from noting that the artist was well-known, he often couldn't answer the question: What makes the works worthy of being hung? Most visitors, meanwhile, walked briskly through the calligraphy sections and only paused briefly to look at the ink paintings.

In other words, Taiwanese visitors, especially the majority who stopped studying calligraphy after high school, are going to be nearly as confounded as to what they are seeing as this reviewer.

According to the exhibition literature, “Chinese calligraphy and painting is an activity contributing to one's peace of mind and inner tranquility.” The arrangement of this exhibit, however, creates confusion and annoyance, raising more questions than it answers. Another gem from the four-paragraph introduction: “So many pieces ... make us wonder what they contain and imply.” Exactly.

Rather than edify the public, the exhibit's purpose, it would seem, is to advertise the “modesty” (this from the first paragraph of the introduction) of the two collectors who allowed the museum to show their collections.

“Finally, it is also hoped that, in the future,

more collectors will be willing to show their collections so that audiences can have more opportunities to look at and understand ancient masterpieces,” the exhibit's literature states. Hopefully, the next such exhibit will provide more information on the works on display, so that those who are not curators, art experts or collectors can understand why they are looking at the scrolls and paintings in front of them.

CORRECTION:

Last Wednesday the ticket price for the Chu Teh-chun 88 Retrospective (朱德群88回顧展) at the National Museum of History was incorrectly listed as NT\$30. The ticket price is NT\$150; concession tickets are NT\$100. The Taipei Times regrets the error.

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: A Drop in the Ocean: Modern Contemporary Chinese Calligraphy and Painting Exhibition (滄海一粟——近現代書畫展)

WHERE: National Museum of History (國立歷史博物館), 49 Nanhai Rd, Taipei City (台北市南海路49號)

WHEN: Until Dec. 21. Open daily, from 10am to 6pm; closed on Mondays

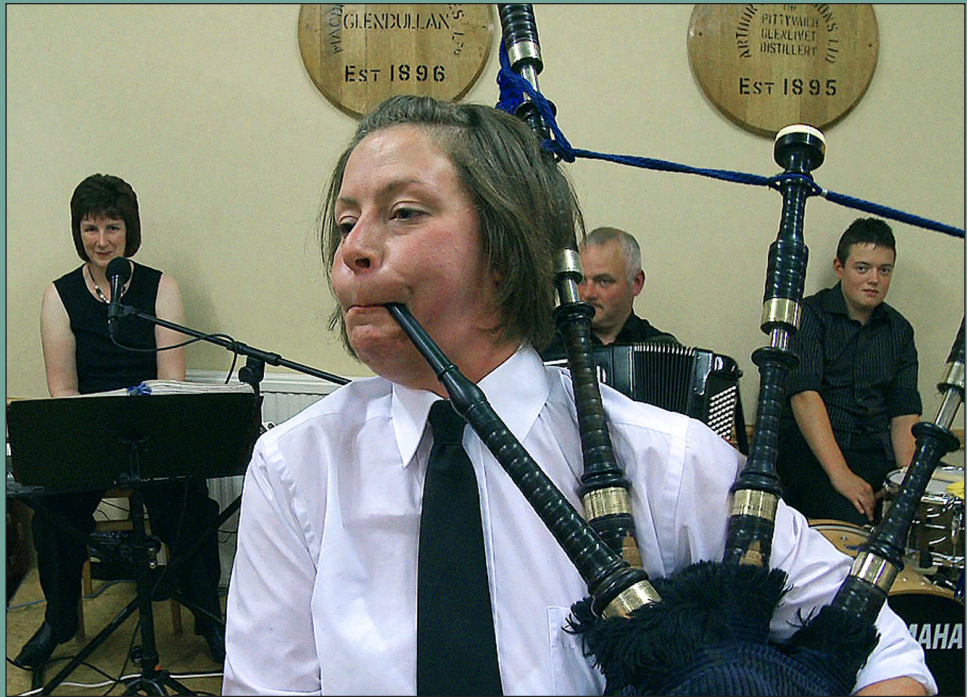
TICKETS: NT\$30

ON THE NET: www.nmhm.gov.tw

Whisky galore

Glenfiddich has hit on a disappointingly rare art-marketing ploy — one that gets things right

BY **BLAKE CARTER**
STAFF REPORTER



Above: A still from Yuan Goang-ming's *Disappearing Landscape: Scotland*, filmed with his improvised camera-on-a-wire technique. Left: Yuan Goang-ming took part in this year's Glenfiddich Artist in Residence program.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF YUAN GOANG-MING AND GLENFIDDICH

Things can get pretty ugly when art and commerce mix. Gallerists pressure artists into sticking with styles that sell. If a buyer wants to purchase a painting by Zhang Xiaogang (張曉剛), they want it to look like a painting by Zhang Xiaogang. Government and private sector funding often come with implied or explicit censorship. But Scottish whisky distiller Glenfiddich seems to have found a pleasant alternative — something buzzword-happy politicians would invariably describe as a win-win situation.

In 2005 the Glenfiddich Artists in Residence program expanded to sponsor non-European artists, and every year since then the company has selected a Taiwanese artist for a two-month stay at the Glenfiddich Distillery in Dufftown, Scotland. VT Art Salon (非常廟藝文空間) is currently hosting an exhibition mawkishly titled *A Heartbeat of Time* showcasing works created by the artists during their residencies.

Tech artist and influential Taiwan National University of the Arts instructor Yuan Goang-ming (遠廣鳴), this year's participant, finished his residency in September. The 43-year-old Taipei native managed to return from his stay in the northern Highland town — population 2,000 — with his English more or less intact.

“At the beginning I didn't understand Scottish English at all,” Yuan laughs, coughing a little after being cajoled into downing a shot of whisky for a press photo at an 11am conference last week. “It's like another language.”

Although something of a new-media art legend — well-known for works like *Fish on Dish* (1992), in which he projected the image of a swimming goldfish onto a white ceramic plate, and *City Disqualified* (2001), in which he digitally combined 300 pictures of a normally bustling Ximending intersection to create a scene devoid of human life — Yuan has no overly grand idea of what art should be and seems content with his teaching job and domestic life. He took a five-year break from making art after 2001, bought a house in Tamsui and got married.

But last year he got the itch again and began working on what became an exhibition at IT Park called *Disappearing Landscape*. He created a technique in which he wheels a camera along a wire from one point to another — in this case, through an abandoned house next to his, through his house, and then through another abandoned house and out

into a field. After filming, Yuan spends hours in front of a computer painstakingly editing out the wire to which his camera was attached.

Yuan says that after his five-year hiatus he wanted to “make some works about my new, ordinary life,” something he did in Scotland as well.

One problem with works by Taiwanese artists abroad is a tendency to create “tourist art”: boring documentation of everyday life or attractions in whatever country they find themselves in, presented with a wide-eyed excitement. How is this different from a vacation photo album? Or worse: Aren't such products sold in airport souvenir shops?

Yuan's work from Scotland toes the line. He has two works showing at VT, both videos. In *Disappearing Landscape: Scotland*, Yuan uses his wire technique, splicing together scenes from his life and surroundings in Dufftown. While it is documentation, the cinematography is worlds above your average video art and the shots have a mesmerizing quality, which leaves the viewer wondering how Yuan achieved the effect, even though he's very open about discussing his technique. One memorable take has the camera traveling through the busted-out windows of an abandoned van.

Although video makes up a large portion of today's visual art, the medium still seems to be struggling to find its feet. But Yuan is certain of its continued relevance. “It's just like pigment or a brush or a chisel,” he says.

Aside from Yuan, the exhibition at VT allows the viewer to see the difference in how the four Taiwanese artists responded to their residencies.

The sponsor demands nothing of the artists except that they leave behind one piece of artwork.

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: A Heartbeat of Time

WHERE: VT Art Salon (非常廟藝文空間), B1, 47 Yitong St, Taipei City (台北市伊通街47號地下一樓)

WHEN: The show runs through Dec. 6. VT Art Salon is open Tuesdays through Thursdays, from 2pm to 11pm, and Fridays and Saturdays, from 2pm to 1am

TICKETS: Admission is free



Celebrity Interview

Name

CONTINUED FROM P14

The problem for him, he says, is he only ever Googles his own name, so, as he's always getting into trouble, he reads a lot about how horrible everyone thinks he is, and gets upset. Not that it stops him. His career trajectory is, all too often, get hired, get cocky, get sacked. Which is pretty much what happened last week, as well as at XFM radio station (for reading out porn), during a Steve Coogan film (for using prostitutes) and at MTV (for turning up the day after 9/11 dressed as Osama bin Laden and introducing his heroin dealer to Kylie Minogue).

Still, he's on a real work mission at the moment. After his acting success in last year's *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* and hosting the VMAs, America is very interested. “People ask me: ‘Do you want to be a niche, avant-garde, Bill Hicks kind of comedian, or do you want to make US\$100-million movies?’ And I want to be able to do what I want artistically, in stand-up, writing and films, and for that you have to be able to access a huge number of people. You have to be huge. By 2011, Miranda, I want to be able to host not only the VMA awards, but an awards ceremony of my own devising.”

So you're going for world domination?

“Yes. That is what I will do,” says Russell. “In an Edmund Hillary way, because it's there. What am I gonna stop for? What would stop me? I'll just carry on until there's nothing left.”

How to interview Russell without his mad flamboyance stealing the show? Let's take time out for a recap of his life. Born on June 4, 1975, in Essex, he was an awkward, unhappy child, obsessed with his mum, Barbara, to the extent of thinking they should get married. They had an intense, loving relationship, though a stressful one. They were poor, Barbara suffered cancer three times during her son's formative years, and when Brand was 7 she hooked up with stepdad Colin, whom Brand hated. Brand's dad, Ron, had left when he was 6 months old. As a little boy, when Russell went round to visit, Ron let him watch Elvis films and porn while he “diddled birds in the room next door.”

All this is in *My Booky Wook*, which also details Russell's teenage bulimia; the tutor who fiddled with him; his addictions to drugs and sex; the rehab he went through for both. And how, when he was 16, his dad took him to Thailand and immediately hired three prostitutes: two for Ron, one for Russell.

Russell partly attributes his crazy ambition to his dad, who played motivational tapes in the car. Ron also ignored Russell for much of the time, which must have something to do with his son's world-beating attention seeking. Their shared hobbies were sex and football, and they have recently been on good terms, as Ron appears on Russell's *Ponderland* DVD — Russell phones him up and gets him to color-code his penis. However, when I mention his dad, Russell tells me they're not speaking at the moment. “Of course I love him, but there's something I'm not at ease with in my relationship with him. I feel a lot of difficult things, but I recognize he's just a person trying his hardest.”

To me, these father-son problems, coupled with his claustrophobic devotion to his mum, must partly explain Russell's strange approach to masculinity and femininity. Despite foppish appearances, Russell works hard to be a stereotypical bloke. He's obsessed with women and football and, he says, “through my sexuality and through performance, I've claimed an alpha masculinity that would have otherwise been inaccessible to me.”

There's an incident in his autobiography where an elderly neighbor, clearly trying to look after this strange little boy, spends time with Russell in his garden before nipping into his house. “Don't stamp on the flowers,” he says before he goes in. Russell stamps on the flowers and the neighbor never talks to him again. I bring this up.

“Yes, if love comes with some kind of cost, I'll take loneliness!” he laughs. “I wonder why I would do a thing like that, and I imagine it must have been because I didn't really feel stable or happy or have any trust in the adult world. I really try and be nice now. And I still do things where I'm rude and aggressive and use intelligence to belittle people and all sorts of things. But I'm always trying to monitor it, and I honestly think that I spend more time now laughing about my vanity and obsessions than imposing the consequences on others. And there are loads of things that I question, there are loads of things that I doubt. But I know I'm a good man, I know I'm in alignment with things that are beautiful, and this gives me a great deal of strength.”

Russell Brand's intentions are undoubtedly good. He wants to spread the love, to bring joy, to show people that they shouldn't be fettered by stupid rules if it doesn't make them happy. But good intentions aren't always enough. Nasty results can outweigh whatever niceness was meant. It's like the traditional “Did you spill my pint?” argument. You may not have meant to, you might even have been leaning over to give me a hug and tell me I'm great. But the fact is that I'm left standing here, dripping, covered in beer.