

[ART JOURNAL]



Wu Tien-chang's *Spell to Shift Mountains and Overtum Seas* (2005), above, and *Spirit Dreaming Conjuraton* (2004), below.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MAIN TREND GALLERY

Celebrity Interview

Eccentric

CONTINUED FROM P14

They opened a shop together on Kings Road and in the four decades she has been designing fashion, Westwood had a phenomenal influence on the way we dress. As well as the safety pins and rips and zips and bondage trousers of the punk look, her 1979 collection, *Pirates*, became the template for the New Romantic movement. For years she and her clothes were ridiculed, but she has arrived at national treasure status.

I recently interviewed her oldest son, Ben, who is a pornographer. He has recently been campaigning against the government's plan to criminalize the possession of extreme pornography. What does she make of his career choice? "It's such a cliché, that pinup styling," she says. "I think it's boring because of that. Otherwise, I think it's fine. But I think he should make the women look more glamorous, more interesting. But then it probably wouldn't be porn if the women looked too strong."

Maybe it offends her feminist principles, I suggest. "Oh no, I'm anti-feminist," she says. "They don't see the wood for the trees and everything has to be viewed from this feminist point of view. I know women have suffered and I think it's great that people stand up for women's rights but the problem with feminists is that they somehow consider women to be superior beings. And in the end, they just want to be men anyway. They want to do men's work." I try to ask her what she means by "men's work" but she steamrollers on. "[Feminists] certainly underestimate the power women [have had] in influencing their children, or men."

I was hoping to see Westwood's third husband, Andreas Kronthaler, but he isn't in the studio. Westwood met him when she was teaching a class in Vienna and he was one of her students and they married in 1992. "It's amazing, it's incredible," she says of their relationship. "I feel so sure about it. He's so supportive and we're just so interested in each other. He's an amazing person."

Does he mind being in her shadow? "No, not at all. He's not in my shadow anyway. He's a very bossy person actually. He prefers to let me do the public things. He has an original point of view, he's extremely interesting. What is good about him is that he likes to go out. He goes to the pub across the road and he just loves to look at people. So when he goes down the club, or is watching TV, I can get on with my reading."

Kronthaler is 25 years her junior and she has often spoken of how he goes off on holiday without her ("I hate to travel"). It is perhaps mean to even suggest it, but does she ever worry he will leave her? "No, I don't. But it's difficult to say that and one doesn't want to sound complacent. I know he's committed to me. We support each other, intellectually and in all kinds of ways."

Is it important for her to be in love? "No, it wasn't. One of the greatest periods of my life was when I was without a man, sexually or any real way, for about 10 years. Except that wasn't really true because I was very close to my friend Gary Ness, who is dead. He was a homosexual but I was very attracted to him. I was not looking for a man at all, and if you want to find a man, maybe don't look for one and you might get one."

Last year, Westwood launched her 22-page manifesto to rescue mankind from mediocrity, called *Active Resistance*. It has a cast of 20 characters who pop up throughout it, including Alice from *Alice in Wonderland* and Pinocchio. It is, you gather, quite bonkers, but marvelously so, didactic, snobbish and thoroughly subjective. She hates modern art, for instance. What does her friend Tracey Emin think about this? She gives a little laugh. "I feel very guilty because it's very one-sided. She loves my clothes and I..." she pauses. "Andy Warhol, Tracey Emin — I couldn't give tuppence for it. She says, 'Have you changed your mind about modern art yet?' and I say, no. But we're very good friends."

The main enemy, she says, is nonstop distraction, by which she means television, the cinema, the Internet, adverts, the press and fashion magazines. "If people are not thinking then we really don't have any future," she says. "We live in this terrible, terrible danger because everyone is not thinking." We remedy this, as far as I can tell, from reading lots of books and appreciating art and culture. "My manifesto is saying, essentially, every time you learn something, you see something you understand, you are helping to change the world and you are a freedom fighter. Even if it just means looking a word up in the dictionary you didn't know before."

One of the messages of her last collection was "don't buy clothes" and she rails against consumerism, strange for a fashion designer who produces several collections a year, for an industry that is nothing if not about consumers. "You might think that's really disingenuous of me, but I'm serious," she says. "I'm not here to defend [being a fashion designer], it's something I do."

"I didn't want to do it in the first place, I wanted to read books, but I knew I was good at it. But don't consume crap, make a choice."

'Replacement culture'

In his introduction to the *History of Chinese Photography* (中國攝影史), Juan I-jong (阮義忠) discusses how people in late 19th- and early 20th-century China worried that a camera's flash and the subsequent photo would capture their soul.

Painter, photographer and digital artist Wu Tien-chang's (吳天章) images in a way do exactly that. But rather than possessing an individual's immaterial nature, Wu digs down into the depths of the Taiwan's hybrid culture and resurfaces with digitally created "paintings" that explore the country's shifting identities. Eight of his most recent works are currently on display at Main Trend Gallery until Dec. 13.

"Taiwan is a replacement culture (替代文化)," Wu, 53, said over coffee and cigarettes at the gallery last week.

He explained that Taiwan is a conglomerate of the many different cultures — Aboriginal, Dutch, Japanese, Chinese — that have lived on and controlled the island, where one culture replaces or is superimposed on previous cultures.

"This is why it is difficult to establish any sense of identity," he said.

It has been more than a decade since Wu held a solo exhibition. Main Trend, a converted factory and

Taiwan's largest art gallery, provides an ideal setting for his monumental digital images.

The works hung in the gallery reflect Wu's ongoing preoccupation with Taiwan's past and present and can be seen as a kind of pastiche of the island's many cultural influences. The resulting layers of meaning require considerable patience to deconstruct.

Wu's oeuvre can be described as portrait painting. Whether in the five overtly political oils he painted during the Martial Law period that depict different stages of former president Chiang Ching-kuo's (蔣經國) life or in his works from the 1990s that employ portrait photography to illustrate how consumerism overshadows Taiwan's search for its own identity, his works are all an investigation of individuals' places in a society that they create but that also has been forced upon them.

More recently, Wu has dispensed with oil painting and portrait photography altogether in favor of digital images that he manipulates on a computer but calls "painting."

Characters that wouldn't look out of place in a Barnum and Bailey sideshow appear in burlesque poses in front of backdrops common in early portrait photography (though here

Wu Tien-chang's eight monumental digital 'paintings' seek to capture the essence of Taiwan's soul

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER

with turbulent landscapes or haunting clouds of purple, blue and shades of dark gray). *The Blind Men and the Blind Street* (瞎子摸巷) is indicative of Wu's visual style, in which images are finished with a surface that resembles the metallic sheen of chrome and where clownish figures dressed in costumes culled from different cultures are seen attempting to overcome some apparent or vague obstacle.

Day a Good That Is All Right (日行一善) is as bizarre as its title's syntax. Two androgynous dwarfs dressed in glossy gold Boy Scout-style uniforms with flashy military insignia and made-up faces carry an injured comrade on a stretcher through a nondescript landscape. The victim is paradoxically smiling in a way that remarkably resembles former president Chen Shui-bian's (陳

水扁) smile. The grin seems unmistakably Chen's, and the blatant similarity creates a hilarious though tragic figure that harks back to Wu's earlier overt works of political satire.

Elements of Taiwan's local — particularly religious — folk culture are worked into other images that come off as overtly sexual.

Spell to Shift Mountains and Overtum Seas (移山倒海) sees a man dressed as a spirit medium attempting to bridge the chasm between the two sexes, which here appear as headless naked bodies holding replicated heads of the medium in their outstretched hands — as if to suggest that the medium becomes the individual requiring sexual release.

Spirit Dreaming Conjuraton (夢魂術) continues the exploration of sexual imagery. Embracing in the center are three figures dressed in outfits resembling Elvis' tacky Liberace-inspired 1970s stage clothing. On both sides of the figures, a spirit medium dances above a partially naked figure in repose over a bed of water.

After discussing the images with Wu and his career as an artist — one that saw him actively involved in the *dangwai* (黨外, outside the KMT) movement — I was left with the impression that he is somewhat

pessimistic about Taiwanese finding their own identity through the glitz and distraction of contemporary global culture. Nevertheless, the works revel in the island's diversity of cultures and are rich enough in symbolism to keep the observer transfixed for hours.



GALLERY NOTES:

WHAT: Shock, Shot — Wu Tien Chang's Solo Exhibition (囂·相—吳天章2008個展)
WHERE: Main Trend Gallery (大趨勢畫廊), 209-1, Chengde Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市承德路三段209-1號)
WHEN: Until Dec. 13
DETAILS: Open Tuesdays through Saturdays from 11am to 7pm. Tel: (02) 2587-3412
ON THE NET: www.maintrendgallery.com.tw

'Pollock' may fetch a pretty packet

Retired truck driver Teri Horton bought a painting at a thrift shop in California for US\$5 in 1992 and planned to throw darts at it. Now the disputed work is on sale in Canada for US\$50 million

BY JOHN KIPPHOFF
BLOOMBERG

A start-up gallery along Toronto's beachfront, defying the global credit crisis, is asking US\$50 million for a disputed Jackson Pollock painting bought for US\$5 at a California thrift shop in 1992.

Teri Horton, a retired US truck driver, bought the piece as a joke for a depressed friend before realizing it may be the work of one of America's most famous artists. After failing to find an American gallery or auction house willing to sell it, she hooked up with the Gallery Delisle in Toronto.

"This is a great chance for Canada," gallery owner Michelle Delisle said. "There's no question this is a Pollock. It's a class thing — if Teri were a Harvard grad or a blue blood, the painting would have found its way into Sotheby's or a museum already."

The Pollock sale comes as the worst financial crisis since the Great

Depression spreads to art. In New York auctions this month at Sotheby's and Christie's International, as many as a third of works remained unsold, and prices fell short of estimates.

Christie's, the biggest auction house, sold US\$113.6 million of contemporary works on Nov. 12, half its presale low estimate. Almost a third of 75 lots found no buyers in a room that included tennis player John McEnroe, actress Salma Hayek and billionaire Eli Broad. Among the rejects was a self-portrait by Francis Bacon that Christie's had estimated would sell for about US\$40 million.

Delisle, who opened her gallery in May, began showing the painting over the weekend and will keep it on exhibit until Friday. Bids will be accepted at any time.

She first learned about the work from a 2006 documentary, *Who the Hell is Jackson Pollock*, which chronicles Horton's struggle to have her Pollock authenticated by US experts. Horton, who originally thought the painting was ugly and had planned to throw darts at it, says the US art establishment doesn't deserve the work.

"I don't trust them — they all want a piece of the painting," said Horton, 76, who has rejected offers of US\$2 million and US\$9 million.

Pollock, a US pioneer of 20th-century abstract expressionism, is best known for his postwar canvases of paint drips and swirls. The biggest collection of his works is in the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Horton hired a Montreal art restorer,

Peter Paul Biro, who used digital imaging and the help of a retired Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer to match a fingerprint on the back of the piece to that on a paint can in the artist's East Hampton studio.

The Pollock-Krasner Foundation Inc neither endorses nor refutes the painting's authenticity, according to Horton and Delisle. Kerrie Buitrago, a Pollock-Krasner executive in New York, declined to comment in an e-mail.

"It's not the role of the foundation to authenticate," said Joan Washburn, 78, of New York's Washburn Gallery, which represents, among others, the estate of Jackson Pollock, who died in 1956 at the age of 44. "I'm surprised it has showed up in Canada. That painting's been around for ages. It's highly unlikely that it would have turned up in a thrift shop."

The US\$50 million price for Horton's painting is "reasonable," given that another Pollock was sold for US\$140 million in 2006 to a Mexican buyer, Delisle said. She expects an investor looking to "park" cash, rather than a collector, to scoop it up, and predicts the buyer will be Canadian. The work may fetch a third more in a few years, she said.

The sluggish art market may post less of an obstacle for Delisle than concerns about the painting's origins, said David Silcox, president of Sotheby's in Canada.

"The market's down appreciably, but it's not as bad as thought," Silcox said. "In Canada there are certainly people who could afford US\$50 million, but they'd not go near it if there's a whisper of doubt about the authenticity."



Teri Horton stands next to a disputed Jackson Pollock painting at the Gallery Delisle, in Toronto last Thursday. Horton failed to find an American gallery or auction house to sell the painting, which she found on sale for US\$5 at a thrift store in 1992.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG