

[ART JOURNAL]

A chip off the old block

Huang Ma-ching's woodcarvings reveal an intimate love of nature

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER



“Plants, the wind, snails, frogs, birds and fishes, all display the beauty of the coast around Lugang (鹿港) and the ecology of Taiwan.”

Apt words written by master carver Huang Ma-ching (黃媽慶) to describe some of the flora and fauna found in and around the old port town located on the central-west coast of Taiwan, an area known for its tradition of woodcarving.

The National Museum of History is currently displaying more than 50 of Huang's sculptures that cover the past decade and reflect the artist's deep respect for the country's environment.

Approaching the narrow hall on the second floor that houses the exhibit, the smell of camphor (樟木) — Huang's preferred medium — serves as a palliative to the funk of Taipei's streets.

The carvings on display are collated from Huang's earlier series variously titled *Nature*, *Lotus*, *Sea*, *Gourd* and *Transmission*. The works depict the farming and fishing culture of Changhua County, where Lugang is located, and lend the exhibition a rustic feel. But nature, rather than the area's traditional

subsistence lifestyle, is Huang's primary preoccupation.

Sponge Cucumbers (絲瓜系列) is representative of Huang's stand-alone carvings. The intricately sculpted wavy lines of the cucumber's body converge just below the rough stem and the single wilted leaf is suggestive of autumn. A solitary snail sits on the vegetable's body and reminds the viewer that more than just farmers gain sustenance from agriculture. The wilted leaf at the stem's summit is a brilliant flourish both because it hints at nature's life cycle while at the same time demonstrating Huang's considerable carving skill.

Huang began his career at the age of 14 as an apprentice under the tutelage of Wang Jin-xuan (王錦宣), a master sculptor who taught him to carve intricate designs on temples as well as Japanese-style latticework transoms — elements of which are discernable in his work over the past two years that show detailed scenes of insects and vegetables.

Though not as spectacular as the stand-alone works, these framed sculptures are detailed to the point of obsession.

One criticism, though minor, is that the museum director's words are used to

introduce the exhibit. A third of those words are given over to a brief history of Chinese sculpture that, though interesting, is only indirectly related to Huang's work and the sculptures on display. It would have been far more edifying to use Huang's own words (found in the preface to a book of Huang's work located at the exhibit's entrance) because he explicates more clearly his influences and goals as an artist.

Still, the museum has done an admirable job in displaying the works of one of Taiwan's finest masters of wood sculpture.

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: The Melody of Life: An exhibition of Huang Ma-ching's Woodcarvings (生命之歌: 黃媽慶木雕展)

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 Jan. 4

TICKETS: NTS30

ON THE NET: www.nmh.gov.tw



Lugang's flora and fauna are the inspiration for Huang Ma-ching's realistic carvings. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF HISTORY



Celebrity Interview

Gap

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TT: Is it easy to get lost in visual styles?
CM: Absolutely. We are trained to look at things from this or that angle. But you have to stop looking and see what happens. Films are not about angles. They are about characters, their surroundings and how they survive and live in these environments.

TT: There are quite a few leading roles in *Parking* and they all appear natural and rooted in life. How do you build up a character?

CM: The first thing to start with is to think of what they do and how they live. But to me, the principal aspect is the character's state of mind. I worked with a psychologist for two-and-a-half months to understand and analyze the characters. I will say that characterization is the most demanding part of the making of a film.

TT: Did you revise your characters to suit the actors during the shooting of the film?

CM: Definitely. My way of working is to put aside the script when it is finished and change the dialogue on a daily basis after the shooting begins, since the characters emerge from the haze of the script and become clearer each day on the set.

Once I come to know the actors better, I am able to appropriate their habits, gestures and senses of humor and incorporate these in the personas of the characters they play, and bring the two closer to one another. It's probably why a lot of people say the performances seem to be on the same wavelength even though the actors come from different backgrounds.

TT: How do you work with your actors?

CM: I have an aversion to rehearsals. I like to show up on the set with different dialogues every day so that the actors don't have time to memorize the lines. They can improvise when their minds are uninhibited.

There are actors who do exactly the same thing for 10 takes. That is not what I want.

TT: It seems to me that you make a few references to Chinese-language films in *Parking* ...

CM: I do?

TT: Jack Kao's (高捷) role reminds me of the one he plays in *God Man Dog* (流浪神狗人). The section where Chapman To (杜汶澤) plays a Hong Kong tailor is quite Wang Kar Wai-esque.

CM: There are certain types of music, narration and visuals that have come to be known as Wang's signatures. If mine seem similar, then I guess you can call it a tribute.

If I ever talk about other Taiwanese films in my works, I would make it a satire. [Chung pauses.] Taiwanese films sometimes appear self-mutilating to me. Yes, you can tell stories about people who are wretched or traumatized, but the dignity must always be there. I loathe watching films that only show how miserable the characters are.

Look at the films of Yasujiro Ozu. The man's wife is dead, his daughter has been married off, and he has to live the rest of his life alone. What about Aki Kaurismaki's characters? Aren't their lives miserable? But they deal with their situations and lives with dignity.

TT: Is that also the reason why you choose to maintain a distance from your subjects in *Doctor* and *Parking*?

CM: Rather than trying to pull the audience right into the story, I like to keep a distance between the two. To me, one of the cinema's great attractions is that distance.

TT: *Parking* has a strong visual style. What was your inspiration as the film's cinematographer?

CM: Are you familiar with the paintings of Edward Hopper? [Chung quickly scrolls through several files on his computer and shows me a few of Hopper's scenes of American urban landscapes.] Look at his use of light and shadow and how his characters are portrayed in terms of their relation to the environment. [Here, Chung clicks on *Nighthawks* (1942).] Hopper's city is lonesome and desolate. I wanted to give Taipei the same noir feel and look.

TT: Is it easy for you to be both the director and cinematographer on the set?

CM: It is actually easier because I don't need to communicate with another person. We hired a cinematographer at the beginning. But he ran away, probably because he couldn't stand me. [Chung laughs.]

I started doing the cinematography for all the commercials I have directed after an advertiser made me the cinematographer and Hou Hsiao-hsien (侯孝賢) the director for a car ad in 2000.

TT: What are your plans for the future?

CM: I will keep making commercials and feature films. Unlike filmmaking, making commercials is not about how you create a piece of work. It is about instant pleasure and satisfaction, and it is fun.

When the going gets tough

Auction previews are an excellent way to catch a glimpse of paintings and sculpture by some of Asia's top artists before collectors scoop up their work

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER

The economic downturn isn't stopping Taiwan's auction houses from holding their fall auctions.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF RAVENEL AND ZHONG CHENG

Local auction companies are nervously readying their fall auctions amid continuing turmoil in Taiwan's financial markets and fear that many works, as with recent auctions in London and New York, will remain unsold.

Art professionals generally agree that a work of art should not be sold at auction within five to 10 years of its creation.

Fully one-third of the works to be sold in the forthcoming auctions at Ravenel and Zhong Cheng (中誠) were completed in the past three years — a turnaround time, Lawrence Chuang (莊國琳) of Main Trend Gallery says, that makes appraising the art difficult and long-term valuation questionable.

“There isn't enough time for the work to stably appreciate in value,” he said.

For those who don't have a few million New Taiwan dollars to shell out on art, however, auction previews are an excellent chance to check out some of Asia's finest contemporary artists before collectors and investors scoop them up for their private collections.

Ravenel's two-day preview runs from Friday through Saturday with the auction on Sunday featuring 147 works of modern and contemporary paintings and sculptures from Taiwan, China, Japan and South Korea. The auction house is Taiwan's most reputable.

Zhong Cheng's preview takes place on Dec. 12 and Dec. 13, with the auction on Dec. 14. The 148 works up for grabs include paintings and sculptures by Chinese and Taiwanese artists.

The previews and auctions all take place at the Fubon Life (富邦人壽) Building.

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: Autumn auctions

WHERE: Fubon Life Building (富邦人壽), B2, 108, Dunhua S Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市敦化南路一段108號B2)

WHEN: Ravenel's preview is on Friday and Saturday, and the auction is on Sunday; Zhong Cheng's preview is on Dec. 12 and Dec. 13, and the auction is on Dec. 14. The previews for both auctions are from 10am to 7pm, and the auctions are from 2:30pm to 7:30pm

ON THE NET: www.art106.com; en.ravenelart.com

