

[ART JOURNAL]

Unravel the rebus

Mark Caltonhill's visual couplets are a playful take on a traditional literary form

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER

The primary thing that I want people to do is look at them and go 'how pretty.' It's like you heard a song and went 'that sounds nice,' and then you start thinking about the lyrics afterwards. So the first thing I want is that they are attractive to the eyes."

This was how Mark Caltonhill described his unique and arresting rebus-like poems, which update the traditional Chinese spring couplet, or *chunlian* (春聯), with the help of a digital camera.

"Basically they are two stanzas, seven lines in each," he said. "Seven ideas, seven concepts, seven lines of poetry in each of the two stanzas with lots of correspondence."

More than a year in the making, the 10 couplets — collectively called *The Malarkey Phenomenon* — are currently on display and sale at Citizen Cain, a restaurant on Dongfeng Street (東豐街), which will host a reception for the show this Sunday beginning at 1pm. Interspersed among the couplets will be *Malarkey's Amusement Park*, a series of playful poems on photographs.

The exhibition also marks the soft launch of Caltonhill's self-published book of writing, also called *Malarkey's Amusement Park*, as well as a call for poetry and verse for a forthcoming compilation of writing by expats living in Taiwan that Caltonhill plans to publish in the summer of next year (submissions can be forwarded to jiyue.publications@gmail.com).

Caltonhill, who has lived in Taiwan on and off since 1992, working as a performer, translator and writer (his book *Private Prayers and Public Parades* was reviewed on Page 18 of the Nov. 9, 2003 edition of the *Taipei Times*), employed his considerable knowledge of Taiwanese culture, Chinese characters (he has a master's degree in Chinese from the University of Edinburgh) and his travels throughout the country to create the couplets, which were printed on rice paper and professionally framed as silk scrolls.

HuHu (湖湖), based on a trip Caltonhill took to Penghu (澎湖), is fairly representative of the hanging

scrolls in how the traditional couplet form is altered (digital images replace stylized characters) to investigate or meditate on a variety of themes.

In the couplet, Caltonhill juxtaposes images of Chinese characters either standing alone or in profusion — in one line characters have been spray-painted on a plastic container, in another they are on a menu written on a wall — with images of Penghu.

The second character in the Chinese word for Penghu, *hu* (湖), forms the first line on the right-hand scroll. The top line of the left-hand scroll is the Chinese character *hu* (滬), which means weir. "It is a poem working on two levels," Caltonhill said. "Going to Penghu and seeing all these things and the human relationship with his environment."

The visual language that gives the couplets meaning is also what makes them difficult to unravel.

"To decipher the poems you need to know where [pictures of] the characters were taken," he said.

The references are indeed idiosyncratic, and unless you've been to the restaurant or prison wall the images capture, it's difficult to see any immediate deeper meaning — though Caltonhill pointed out that this was his intention. Written proficiency in Chinese and a deep knowledge of Taiwan's history are helpful when deciphering the scrolls, so if your Chinese isn't up to snuff be sure to bring along a friend who can point out the homophones.

Although the "lyrics" are written in Chinese, the visual music reveals a playful understanding of a traditional poetic form that rewards repeated viewing.

Those wishing to submit poetry, lyrics or verse to Caltonhill's publishing company JiYue Publications (齊月出版社), which he established as a result of his "frustrations trying to get books published in Taiwan and the similar experiences of other writers," should send submissions to jiyue.publications@gmail.com.

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: A Double Dose of Malarkey
WHERE: Citizen Cain, 67, Dongfeng St, Taipei City (台北市東豐街67號). Tel: (02) 2708-4557
WHEN: Opening reception on Sunday at 1pm; exhibit runs through Feb. 28, 2009. Citizen Cain is open daily from 6pm to midnight



Mark Caltonhill's arresting rebus-like couplets require a considerable knowledge of Chinese to unravel.



Celebrity Interview

Rise

CONTINUED FROM P14

TT: What was working with director Liu like?

MM: Liu is a perfectionist. He always thought what we gave wasn't enough. The feeling of frustration became a daily routine for me. For the violent scene on the beach, I remember there are only four words on the script to describe what we should do: run, chase, wrestle and scuffle. Liao and I put on what we thought was a violent act. But the director scolded. Before the camera started rolling for the second time, Liao slapped me across the face, twice, with all his strength. I was stunned. Adrenalin raced through my veins, and I felt like a boxer ready to fight. I got to beat the crap out of Liao too. It felt great [laughing].

TT: How did Liu approach the movie?

MM: Different directors handle their stories differently. Some choose to skirt around what is deemed violent and vicious. Liu chooses to show it all to the audience and he needs his actors to be capable of conveying such intense emotions. Liu has his own vision for the world he wishes to show and he couldn't care less about what others think. I think all directors have, more or less, such a quality about them.

TT: How did the director help you to prepare for the role of Li Chun, who comes across as a twisted masochist?

MM: I was under a lot of stress during the shooting. The director deliberately created an isolated environment for me. The film crew wasn't allowed to talk to me. Every day I returned to my room, feeling I wasn't good enough.

TT: How did filming the movie affect you?

MM: I spent three months staying at home, sleeping, sobbing uncontrollably and visiting a Chinese medicine doctor.

TT: What is the most unforgettable scene you made in the film?

MM: Well, it was my first day on the set. I took it easy and mingled. The scene we were scheduled to do involved me spewing up after being drugged by a customer [the scene was later edited out]. There were three huge bowls of soup noodles and a bottle of wine on the table. But I didn't give it much thought. After the lighting was set, the director turned to me and said, "Ok, now have a seat and eat." It took three hours to finish the shooting. I cried, screamed and puked all over Liao. I have not even the faintest memory of what I said on that day [laughing].

TT: In the film, you play a woman who goes as far as ending her life to prove her love for her lover. Are you that intense?

MM: When I was younger, yea, it used to be like "love is all that matters." I grew out of that, of course. Besides, I think all my intense feelings on the subject of love were used up in the film.

TT: Are there any similarities between yourself and Li Chun?

MM: Absolutely not, we are completely different. I want my boyfriend to be at my disposal [laughing]. I am more like Wang Yao in real life. I like to be in control. Liao is more like Li Chun. He is the Mr Nice.

TT: What is your understanding of the twisted character you played?

MM: I once asked the director how Li could fall in love with Wang. He is ugly, poor and violent [laughing]. Liu replied: "Don't you find the whole thing exciting?" At one point, I even told Liu that I couldn't identify with Li. "You don't need to identify. You are an actress," he said.

TT: In one scene, you and Liao are enchanting with your nude bodies glistening under a bright sunny sky. Did you prepare for taking your clothes off?

MM: Now I regret that I didn't [laughing]. I am easily tanned. Put me under the sun for 20 minutes and I will turn brown. I remember on the first day on the islet, the director let us run loose on the beach [the film was shot on location on one of Hong Kong's off-shore islets from May to August last year]. Two hours later, he yelled: "Umbrella!" [laughing]. There were two assistants holding sunshades behind Liao and I from that moment on. Liao worked out daily, which included aerobic exercise and running... two months before the shooting started. Liao's six-pack abs are the real deal. But I'm sure he is chubbier and paler by now [laughing].

TT: What's your own reading of the film? Does the story speak to you?

MM: I must admit that I feel critical of the film now that I can leave my character behind. First of all, I don't identify with the character. It is not love that brings the two together. It is some sort of game or the satisfaction of self-conquest both to the man and the woman. To Li, it is all about "I want to help you and save you." Well, at least people remember the film. I've read polarizing reviews. Some condemn it as disgusting and perverted. But it is fiction, and to me, that's exactly where the fascination lies. Don't you just find it exciting? To use the director's words.

TT: How badly do you want to take home a Golden Horse award?

MM: It will be a total lie if I say I don't care about the result. I would probably cry if I lose.

(Mok didn't win. Neither did *Ocean Flame*. The movie is now playing at local theaters.)

Whitechapel Gallery goes under the knife

London's Whitechapel Gallery is about to get back on the arts world map with a US\$20 million facelift

BY CAROL VOGEL
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, LONDON

The ear-splitting jackhammers on Whitechapel High Street here meld easily into the sonic landscape of this cacophonous and scruffy section of the East End, home to the Whitechapel Gallery since 1901.

For months now, the Whitechapel's Arts and Crafts building and its next-door neighbor, a quirky 1892 structure that was formerly a library, have been shrouded in dirty green netting as construction workers swarm through the two buildings. They are being joined as part of a US\$20 million renovation and expansion that has shut down most of the gallery since February last year.

More than four years ago, the Belgian architectural firm Robbrecht & Daem won a competition to enlarge the Whitechapel, the first art gallery in London built expressly to house contemporary art.

Working in collaboration with the London-based Witherford Watson Mann Architects, it is carving out 78 percent more gallery space, a vastly improved educational area, studios, a cafe, a bookstore and a research room devoted to the Whitechapel's archive. (Although the institution boasts no permanent art collection and plans none, it has a rich archive filled with photographs, correspondence and ephemera documenting its long history.)

Until its reopening in April, visitors trying to make their way to the gallery's offices must navigate through Angel Alley, a narrow passageway next to the original building. Although the place is basically a construction site, the staff is camping out here. And this is where Iwona Blazwick, the Whitechapel's director, occupies a small, cluttered office with a view of another construction site, an unfinished office complex whose developers suspended work because of the current economic crisis.

"Our timing could not have been better," Blazwick said with relief. In 2004, when the economy was still robust, she was able to secure about US\$5.4 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund for the expansion, seed money that encouraged others to give as well. She said the Whitechapel had raised all but about US\$735,000 of the nearly US\$20 million needed from sources including the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, Arts Council England, the European Regional Development Fund, the London Development Agency and several charitable trusts, private donors and commercial galleries.

Blazwick said the expansion would allow the

gallery to show public and private collections that "have been languishing in crates or have never before been seen by the public." It will also continue to organize shows and commission new works.

"The Whitechapel is about presenting great art and working with a diverse community," she said.

The Whitechapel, founded "to bring great art to the people of East London," and the adjacent Passmore Edwards Library were built by 19th-century philanthropists to provide education and culture to an area known for its overcrowded slums, as well as its breweries, foundries, slaughterhouses and, incidentally, the notorious Jack the Ripper murders.

Inhabitants have ranged from the Sephardic Jews and Huguenot silk weavers who arrived in the 17th and 18th centuries to the Bangladeshi immigrants who streamed in during the 20th. An influx of artists has recently brought some gentrification and an explosion of galleries, with about 180 opening up over the last few years. Today the East End has the largest concentration of artists anywhere in Europe, Blazwick said.

Just as Tate Modern invigorated the downtrodden Bankside, across the river, just opposite St Paul's Cathedral, the expanded Whitechapel is expected to attract some 300,000 visitors a year and generate jobs and commerce locally.

The makeover was desperately needed, Blazwick said. The added space will allow the gallery to remain open continuously, whereas before it had to close about 10 weeks a year when installing new art. Its educational space was too small to accommodate even an average-size school class, and the former library had no wheelchair access.

Rather than gut the two buildings and completely remake the interior into sleek, blank white spaces, the architects opted to capitalize on the eccentric nature of both structures, retaining much of their Victorian flavor, from original brickwork to architectural details to skylights.

The Whitechapel was London's first showcase for many of the world's greatest postwar and contemporary artists. Its embrace of American art runs deep. In 1958 it held the first major show in Britain of Jackson Pollock's work; in 1961 it presented Mark Rothko's art; and in 2002, that of the photographer Nan Goldin. (It also was the first place in London to exhibit the work of the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo and British artists like David Hockney, Richard Long and Gilbert & George; the Whitechapel was among the first



An undated image shows an architect's projection of the proposed development of Whitechapel Gallery in London. The gallery brought Picasso's *Guernica* to the UK and is where David Hockney and Gilbert & George launched their careers.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

London galleries to show Lucian Freud.)

Its inaugural programming will take into account this distinguished past. In January 1939 the Whitechapel exhibited Picasso's *Guernica* on its first and only visit to Britain. Because the painting, which is in the Reina Sofia Art Center in Madrid, is now considered too fragile to travel, the gallery decided to borrow a tapestry that Picasso gave Parisian weavers permission to produce in the 1950s. It has been hanging since 1985 at the entrance to the Security Council Room at the UN in New York, a gift from the estate of Nelson A. Rockefeller.

The mural-size tapestry, which depicts the horrors of the Spanish Civil War, will be displayed in the former library's central reading room as the centerpiece of an installation by Goshka Macuga, a Polish-born artist who lives in London and was a nominee for this year's Turner Prize. The installation will be the first of a series of site-specific artworks there inspired by the history and architecture of the former library. Officials at the Whitechapel said it was

too early to describe Macuga's work other than to say that it would explore the relationship between art and propaganda.

Other exhibitions planned for the opening include a retrospective of the German sculptor Isa Genzken and a show of works from the collection of the British Council, which has been promoting the nation's artists since 1938 but has no permanent exhibition space.

A portion of the archives will be the focus of "The Whitechapel Boys," a show devoted to a group of painters and writers from the turn of the 20th century, most of them living in East London, who shared a Jewish ancestry.

While Blazwick acknowledged that London is already "a crowded cultural landscape," with scores of contemporary art galleries across the city, as well as Tate Modern, she said she hoped the Whitechapel would re-emerge as a major destination.

"Our broader programming is partly cutting-edge, partly historic," she said. "Now we will become more like a museum."