

[ART JOURNAL]



Celebrity Interview

Canvases in motion



Lee Lee Nam combines iconic paintings from the Eastern and Western canons with his own digital flourishes to create video installations that are sublime to behold

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER

Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* greets visitors as they enter Metaphysical Gallery's latest exhibition. Only this one has eyes that move and follow the lugubrious movements of small aircraft that fly in front of her dropping parachutists.

Mona Lisa's Smile is the first of 15 video installations, collectively titled *Myth Inside Monitor*, by South Korean artist Lee Lee Nam. It is ideally placed in the entranceway to the gallery both because it lures the viewer in further and hints at the content of the other works. Lee begins each work with an iconic painting culled from the Western or Eastern painterly canons (sometimes both together in the same work) and, using digital technology, adds his own visual elements. What emerge are sublime meditations on the various cycles found in nature and the contrast between the natural world of plants, insects and animals, and the human-created world of visual art and architecture. The running time of each video ranges from three minutes to 10 minutes.

The Conversation Between Monet and Sochee brings together many of the phenomena Lee investigates, such as day and night and the contrast between tradition and modernity.

Two 19th-century paintings — an Asian landscape painting by South Korean artist Sochee (whose real name is Huh Ryun) and an impressionist landscape by Claude Monet — are placed together side by side, highlighting the differences between the two styles of art. As the video progresses the paintings begin to interact, seasons change and day turns into night. The foreground comes alive with the

movement of the painting's original characters (in this case fishermen), while a cityscape emerges in the background.

Lee seems preoccupied with the differences between natural landscapes and his own digitally created cityscapes. Large illuminated buildings and cranes emerge in the craggy rocks of a traditional Korean mountain scene in *New Gemgangjeondo*. Another video, *Circulation — Nature — Human-2*, shows a single rock jutting out from a body of water — a metaphor, perhaps, for the Earth. The rock, which at first provides a home for trees and shrubs, becomes the surface for a city that gradually emerges.

The Landscape of Moon Jar-2 playfully shows the four seasons in progression and the effect each one has on the "moon jar." Butterflies dance around a blossoming branch that juts out of the white porcelain jar. As the seasons pass, the joyous butterflies disappear, petals fall from the branch, and snow falls gently onto the surface of the wood and jar.

Not content simply to have monitors hanging from the walls, Lee embeds them into a variety of objects. The remarkable *Digital Eight-fold Screen* is, as the title suggests, eight folding screens, each with a monitor displaying a traditional work of art. *Korea — Towards the New World* employs the same idea, except here the monitors are significantly smaller — the size of a credit card and almost as thin — and serve as the masts of a boat.

One minor criticism of the exhibit is that seating is not provided — a flaw that might inhibit visitors from giving the works the contemplation they so readily deserve.



South Korean artist Lee Lee Nam's video installations are delicate meditations on nature's cycles. PHOTOS COURTESY OF METAPHYSICAL ART GALLERY

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: Lee Lee Nam's *Myth Inside Monitor*
WHERE: Metaphysical Art Gallery (形而上畫廊), 7F, 219, Dunhua S Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市敦化南路一段219號7樓)
WHEN: Until Jan. 4
DETAILS: Open Tuesday to Sunday from 11am to 6:30pm
ON THE NET: www.artmap.com.tw

Stun

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As such, Wu Bai is not interested in being hailed as a social commentator. "There's no way [my music] can be like English or Irish music, where they can talk so directly about politics or the situation in society," he says. "Of course there are people that will just go out there and sing about these things, but I don't feel that I'm this type of person. I use myself more, my own feelings to express what I want to say [in a song] ... it's my own anger. It doesn't come from government policies or whatever. It comes from watching the news on TV. I can't stand it. I think 'how can this stuff be broadcast?'"

That anger often has the potential to make entertainment. He talks about his original idea for a music video for *News Show*: he wanted to parody the sensationalist "horror movie" mentality of Taiwanese TV news media by having "a pretty female newscaster with blood spurting out of her eyes."

"She'd be there talking and smiling, with blood all over the floor," he said with a hint of glee.

But it was not to be. "No one would broadcast that," he said.

BORN AGAIN

Wu Bai says that the sci-fi rock album concept gave him a renewed sense of a freedom from Mando-pop songwriting formulas. "The lyrics, melodies — they could all be free. I didn't have to worry that 'oh, but Chinese songs have to be this way.'"

A yearning to reshape Mando-pop to his personal liking has been a recurring interest for the Chiayi (嘉義) native, whose first instrument was the tuba. "I didn't like other people's songs and I didn't like any of the Chinese songs I was hearing. So I went and did something completely different from them," he says laughing. "And that even includes stuff I did before."

He says he doesn't "like the logic of Chinese songs (華語歌)," because they are too commercially oriented. "No one is saying, I want to invent a new kind of music. Look at Western music — metal was invented, and then nu-metal. And then with rock, there's this kind of rock, that kind of rock ... I didn't have any of these things [when I started]. Before it was all ballads. Now it's R 'n' B."

But for Wu Bai, creative desire takes precedence over musical style or genre — which he believes marks the difference between Asian and Western pop. "It's because of me, not because the way I play guitar, or how I sing. It's my thinking, my attitude, the way I look at things," he says.

IT'S ALL ABOUT MOOD ... AND THE PURSUIT

Wu Bai says his songs are ultimately grounded in one thing: "It all comes from the mood of a story. With a mood, I ask: What's the story? What guitar makes that sound? How do I sing it? What words do I use? It's not the story first, it's the mood first."

He doesn't consider songwriting difficult, but hard work — he spent two months alone in his studio writing *Spacebomb*. "Songwriting is a little like looking into an antique mirror ... you dive into it, and when you start out, everything is black ... You must face yourself in the dark and slowly bring something out."

By virtue of this process, he finds songwriting "more satisfying" than playing live. "Songwriting is more of a search ... when you create something new, the joy is very big ... But playing live, I'll finish a show and tomorrow I'll be off for hot pot and will have forgotten about it by then."

Not that he disparages live performances — far from it. Wu Bai and China Blue distinguished themselves early in their careers for raucous high-energy shows, which he considers an art form. "Each live performance is a work [of art] in itself. So it's also not relaxing. If everyone's unhappy, then I'm unhappy. If everyone's happy, then I'm happy."

Although he has yet to announce tour plans for next year, Wu Bai plans to expand on the concept behind *Spacebomb* by launching a new Web site, spacebomb.info, which will further develop the characters and themes from the album. He describes the site as "taike going into space."

Nearly 20 years after he revolutionized Taiwanese rock, he shows no signs of weariness. "This is the only thing I can do. It's never tiring, it's quite fun. For me to go searching for a new sound, new concepts, new ideas — I need this. It keeps me alive."

Wu Bai and China Blue play this Saturday at 9pm at Party Room, Core Pacific City Mall (京華城), 12F, 138, Bade Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市八德路四段138號12樓). Tickets are NT\$900 and are available at the door or through www.ticket.com.tw.

Surf's up for cultural awareness with fusion art surfboards

Three years after ugly race riots on Sydney's Cronulla Beach, art, in the form of surfboards adorned with Islamic images, is being used to bridge the city's racial divide

BY MADELEINE COOREY
AFP, SYDNEY



Australian artist Phillip George holds one of his surfboards at Bondi Beach, Sydney. Decorated with Islamic images, George said the artwork on his boards is designed to demonstrate the beauty of Islamic art using an Australian icon. PHOTO: AFP

An Australian artist has combined his love of the surf with that of the Middle East, producing surfboards adorned with Islamic art in a fusion he hopes will help broaden understanding.

Three years after ugly race riots between white and Lebanese Australians rocked Sydney's Cronulla Beach, Phillip George has opened an exhibition of surfboards bearing Muslim motifs.

"It's a way of getting an Australian iconic image like a surfboard and putting it together [with Islamic artwork] as a new Australian icon," he said.

"They are, in a soft way, saying, 'Well, everyone's got a right to be here.'" The *Inshallah* or "God willing" surfboards were partly inspired by the violence of Dec. 11, 2005 in which mobs of white Australians descended on Cronulla and attacked Lebanese-Australians to "reclaim the beach."

The riots were the worst of modern times and sparked a series of retaliatory attacks in which churches, shops and cars were trashed.

George was surfing in the eastern Sydney beach of Maroubra on the day of the riots. And even he, despite his long love of the Middle East, received an unsolicited text message inviting him to go to Cronulla "and help bash a Mussie [Muslim]," he said.

He hopes his exhibition, in which all the surfboards face the Muslim holy city of Mecca, brings the "joy and wonderment of Islamic art" to a broader audience.

"The mainstream community may not go to an art gallery to look at Islamic art," he said from Bondi Beach.

"But when you put it on a surfboard, they go, 'Oh, wait a minute this is something different on a surfboard.' You walk down the beach with a board like that and people stop."

The surfboards, 30 of which form the new exhibition at Sydney's Casula Powerhouse art center, are adorned with photographic images taken from mosques and other Islamic sites seen on his travels in the Middle East.

"It's not pointing the finger at anybody, it's not blaming anybody. It's just saying, 'Hey look this artwork coming out of Islamic culture.'"

"So I'm saying have a look at the Ottoman artwork, have a look at the Persian artwork, have a look at the Arabic artwork — isn't it beautiful?"

RESPECT FOR TRADITION

George, who is of Greek descent, is not a Muslim. But he said the work is done with "the utmost amount of respect" for the Islamic tradition and the surfboards, which are priced at US\$6,580 each and will never be used in the surf.

"Some say you can't have *inshallah* on a surfboard. The two surfboards which have *inshallah* on them will never go in the water because they are artworks," he said.

"They are not going to have people put their feet on them."

George is not the only artist who has been inspired by the events of late 2005. Roslyn Oades spent two years

interviewing people from Cronulla and from Sydney's Lebanese communities following the riots for her play *Stories of Love and Hate*.

Speaking to 65 people — from surfers, to Lebanese youth, police, and the media who covered the event — she has created a play that dissolves the stereotypes of "Lebanese thugs" versus "racist rednecks."

In Cronulla, she found a community hurt and angry at its unwanted fame and loathe to be subjected to yet another of the re-education or peace projects that they endured in the aftermath of the violence.

"It was such a wounded community I found," she said.

"They felt that they had been scapegoated as the racist capital of Australia whereas a lot of people jumped on the bandwagon at the time. There were people coming from all over New South Wales to be there that day."

In researching the play, which uses word-for-word dialogue from her interviews, Oades also found that some Lebanese Australians were still hesitant to venture back to the Sutherland Shire's Cronulla Beach.

"A lot of people from outside of the Shire that are of Lebanese Australian origin don't go there any more or are hesitant to go there," she said.

But she said time has managed to soften some of the hurt.

"Maybe three years is a good time for people to reflect on the event and on where Australian culture sits now," she said.