

[ART JOURNAL]



Tsai Erh-ping's fascination with nature began during his childhood when he would catch geckos and paint their tails. His jewelry and sculptures evoke the essence of Taiwan's tiny creatures and the places they inhabit.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TSAI ERH-PING

Nature's spirit, an artist's dream

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER

When he was a child, Tsai Erh-ping (蔡爾平) was fond of chasing the geckos that populate his hometown of Beigang (北港) in Yunlin County (雲林縣). After catching the small creatures, he would paint their tails in a multitude of colors. "I was a naughty boy," he jokingly said last week in an interview at the National Museum of History where his sculptures and jewelry are on display until March 1.

"I would catch the geckos and paint stripes or dab dots onto their tails. That's how I got my start as an artist. It was out of love — a love for nature," he said. "As I grew older, the naughtiness disappeared but the love of nature remained."

Tsai Erh-ping's jewelry and sculpture exhibit at the National Museum of History is a meditation on his influences and a personal statement of how he feels about the natural environment

Tsai's fascination with the natural world informed his early experiments making jewelry. He renders the form and spirit of spiders, centipedes, birds and, of course, geckos in carefully crafted brooches, pendants and pins. He later refined his unique and detailed style as a master's degree student at Parsons School of Design in New York. The sculptures are impressionistic representations of Taiwan's flora and compliment the jewelry of insects, amphibians and fish.

The aesthetic preoccupations of the three-decade US resident — Tsai usually returns to Taiwan twice a year to hold workshops — fall into the same milieu as a growing number of Taiwanese sculptors, such as Huang Ma-ching (黃媽慶), who look to nature as their muse. But whereas Huang's medium is wood, Tsai employs porcelain, colored clay, semi-precious stones and metals to make his jewelry and sculptures.

The jewelry pieces on display reveal Tsai as a master craftsman. Whether centipedes crawling over mud, crabs emerging from a hole or a cicada resting on a mangrove's tangled root, the insects, crustaceans and other invertebrates are all realistically rendered in a rainbow of colors.

Although the sculptures aren't as original or spectacular as the jewelry, Tsai's glazing process makes them unique because the colors — muddy browns, ocean blues, forest greens and fiery oranges — delicately replicate the natural environment in which the crabs, mudskippers and butterflies exist and are emblematic of the multitude and

richness of Taiwan's ecology.

As his mischievous tale of childhood suggests, the 59-year-old Tsai is in every way a character. His speech is a mixture of humorous anecdotes about his youthful exploits and New Age wisdom about the "connectedness" of nature.

"Life is very precious," he said. "There is no higher or lower level, poor or rich. There is only being respectful — for me, the bug is equally as precious and deserving of respect as people."

Tsai's environmental awareness, coupled with a salesman's gift for storytelling — honed early in his career selling his brooches out of a case in New York's Central Park and later through his business Jewelry 10 — have served him well over the past few decades and earned him a reputation as a proponent for ecological preservation, though he is not affiliated with any environmental organization or movement. His is more philosophy than activism, a conviction he picked up from his father and one that underpins all his creations.

Tsai said the exhibit is a tribute to two of his formative influences: his father, a well-respected physician who taught him about ecology, and his teachers who initiated him into the deeper mysteries of sculpture and the materials used to create works of fine art. As such, the exhibit is a reflection on his influences and a personal statement of how he feels about Taiwan's — and by extension, the entire planet's — natural environment.

"My father taught me everything I know about the universe and the natural environment, which served as a gate for me to approach the natural world and understand it, whether from a philosophical or scientific perspective," he said. "My teachers taught me that sculpture is not just about the surface but what is underneath."

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: A Window to a Sculptor's Dream: Another World of Millefiori Porcelain by Tsai Erh-ping (原鄉陶夢—蔡爾平彩鑲瓷暨陶藝創作展)

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 March 1. The museum is open daily from 10am to 6pm, closed on Mondays

TICKETS: NT\$30

ON THE NET: www.nmh.gov.tw

A prostitute banter with a soldier in Taipei's Wanhua (萬華) District. A cigarette vendor crouches beside her makeshift stand for a brief rest. A young woman poses outdoors wearing a sleeveless floral dress.

These are some of the scenes captured on film by Lee Ming-tiao (李鳴燭) in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The Taipei Fine Arts Museum is currently holding a retrospective of Lee's photographs, many of which hark back to Taiwan's Martial Law-era past and serve as a visual narrative of phenomena that no longer exist, such as legal prostitution, and others, such as photographing stylish women in natural settings, that remain.

The museum presents 220 black-and-white and color photographs that Lee snapped from the 1940s through the 1990s and which are arranged in five sections: Outdoor Scenes, Inner Landscapes; The Human Character; The Feminine Form; Explorations in Abstraction; and Travel Pictures. Also on display are a variety of Lee memorabilia including his Rolleiflex twin-lens and Hasselblad cameras.

The exhibit focuses overwhelmingly on Lee's early black-and-white images of street scenes and country landscapes from half a century ago. In the section titled Outdoor Scenes, Inner Landscapes, one black-and-white photo shows a rickshaw driver ambling along an otherwise vehicle-free, unpaved street as vendors on either side flog their produce and wares. Another image shows ducks running in the enclosed courtyard of a traditional Chinese-style home. A third shows a man walking alongside a water buffalo through rice fields.

Lee's lens eschewed the famous and powerful. Aside from a few photos of Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) and his wife Soong Mei-ling (宋美齡) — images that are blurry and perhaps thus suggestive of how removed the dictator and his wife were from the ordinary people — his camera captured the anonymous, the rural and the poor.

As the section The Human Character reveals, Lee's technique was a combination of planning and spontaneity. He would arrange the composition and set the aperture and shutter speed in advance and wait for a subject to appear. He then adjusted the focus and snapped the photograph. In most photos the subject is oblivious of the lens, which permits Lee to depict the innocence of a fisherman at work or children frolicking in the Tamshui River. It is difficult to imagine parents allowing the latter to occur in the polluted river today.

The Feminine Form should be of particular interest for waipai (outside photography, 外拍) photographers because of the similarities between these early photo clubs and those that populate the Internet today. [See story on Page 13 of the May 18, 2008 edition of the Taipei Times.]



Lee Ming-tiao's photographs depict street scenes, country landscapes and the lives of ordinary people at home, work and play.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TFAM

contrast with those found on amateur photography Web sites today (no bunny ears or night market fashions here).

Lee's later travel photography employs color film and dates from the 1990s, a time when his intrepid lens captured the young and old of people in far-flung destinations such as Nepal, India, Kenya, Morocco, Spain and Peru. Although the images are well rendered and retain a focus on people, they don't possess the same raw power or resonance as his black-and-whites of Taiwan. Indeed, many come off more as picture postcards of exotic locales unlike his earlier studies of Taiwan's rural landscapes and people.

Perhaps this is because the world captured in the earlier images no longer exists. Lee's later travel photos may evoke the same kind of nostalgia four decades into the future.

Regardless, Lee's photography provides an intimate look at Taiwan's past and illustrate for the viewer a contrast with what we see today, making a trip to the Taipei Fine Arts Museum a worthwhile venture.

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: Lee Ming-tiao Photography Retrospective (李鳴燭攝影回顧展)

WHERE: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Gallery 3B, 181 Zhongshan N Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市中山北路三段181號)

WHEN: Until April 5. The museum is open daily from 9:30am to 5:30pm, closed on Mondays

TICKETS: NT\$30

ON THE NET: www.tfam.gov.tw



Images of a bygone era

A retrospective of Lee Ming-tiao's photographs offers a visual narrative of Taiwan's postwar past

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER

In the late 1940s Lee and a group of photographers organized photo sessions using nightclub hostesses as models at scenic areas throughout Taipei or in the jazz clubs that were popular at the time. The tradition of photographing young women outdoors dates back to the Japanese colonial period and here reveals fashion-conscious women wearing form-fitting cheongsam dresses, or qipao (旗袍), with floral motifs. Their gestures and hairstyles demonstrate a uniformity of appearance and



Warriors

CONTINUED FROM P14

TT: You suffered from serious hypothermia during the race. What was it like?

JC: The temperature was minus 49°C centigrade that day. There was a blizzard, and I couldn't keep my body warm, no matter what I did. I didn't have much to eat because my gloved hands were too bulky to get the beef jerky out of the bag.

I started sweating when I tried to pick up my pace to catch up with the others. All of a sudden, my sweat iced up. I could feel my saliva, freezing cold, coming down from my throat to my stomach.

We walked about 12 hours that day. I was hypothermic for the last four hours. When I finally made it to the tent, I unzipped my coat and lots of ice cubes fell out.

YL: [Breaking into the conversation:] How did it feel to have your body temperature drop below 20°C?

JC: You have blurred eyesight. Your whole body shakes uncontrollably. Your head swims and you can't think straight. You can't sense the environment you are in and can't tell whether or not you are actually in the Arctic. You know that once your eyes close, they won't open again.

TT: Did you consider giving up?

JC: No, I never thought of withdrawing from the race, even though the organizer hinted that we might not be able to finish it. The competition is not about physical strength. You have to fight the demons in your heart because every morning you wake up the road ahead seems endless.

YL: Every day I thought of giving up and going back home [laughing]. Yeah, it is all about mental strength. I saw many contestants sent back to the base after they withdrew from the competition. Most of them were found to be physically fit [enough] to continue the race. When asked why they quit, they usually said they just felt it was impossible for them to carry on.

TT: What is the most difficult chore to do in the Arctic?

JC: Every little thing after you wake up.

YL: I had one more thing to do than you guys. Every morning in the sleeping bag, I had 10 seconds to put my contact lenses on my eyeballs before they turned hard. You can't wear eyeglasses because they break.

TT: How did you get your water supply?

JC: Everything involved with water is of the utmost importance in the Arctic, from urinating, cooking to boiling water for drinking. It takes about three hours to turn a bag of 2,500cc of ice into hot water. It's another one to two hours to cook instant noodles.

Every morning we prepared three bottles of hot water. If you drank it too quickly, you ran the risk of being dehydrated for the rest of the day.

TT: What was the most memorable moment, thought, feeling or sight you experienced during the expedition?

JC: One day before we reached checkpoint one, it started snowing. We looked ahead and saw the mountains and islands enveloped in millions of glittering diamonds. It was the snowflakes reflecting sunlight. Our whole bodies glittered with myriad snowflakes.

The most memorable moment was the one when I arrived at the finishing point. I felt all my cells and pores were filled with new life and energy. I felt I was being reborn and broke into tears.

YL: It was a moment of sheer excitement for me too. I was greatly moved that they had made it. They are the first Taiwanese group to reach the Magnetic North Pole, but there were less than five people to welcome them. All of a sudden, I felt that the movie was important after all as it bears witness to the important moment ...

TT: From *My Football Summer* (奇蹟的夏天) to *Beyond the Arctic*, you deal with the predicaments faced by Taiwanese athletes. Is it your intention to raise public awareness of these issues?

YL: Taiwanese athletes carry on their shoulders a heavy duty, that is, to fight for the country's glory. Whether it is the young kids like those in *My Football Summer* or professional athletes like Jason, such patriotic thought is internalized and rooted in the heart. But they all know that no matter how hard they try, they are always on their own. The country never gives them anything in return.

(My Football Summer tells the story of an international football championship team from Mei-lun Junior High School (美崙國中) in Hualien County (花蓮縣). The film won the Best Documentary Award at the Golden Horse Awards (金馬獎) in 2006.)

TT: What is the biggest difference between the finished film and what you anticipated and envisioned before the race?

YL: It is their laughter. I never expected so much laughing from the trio. They turned what was supposed to be a youth-inspiring sports film into a comic flick [laughing]. It is the power of laughter that kept them going.

NOTE: All of *Beyond the Arctic's* box-office earnings will be donated to charities that work with disadvantaged children and teenagers.