

[ ART JOURNAL ]



Peace and Joy-Ming Blue by Yang Li-ly and Chen Shih-hou.



The Circus of Den-Den-Ciao-Jean by Tsui Yung-yen.



Formosa Cow by Lou Su-mei and Lee Pei-ti.



The Taiwanese Graceful Girl by Kelly Kao.



Taiwan Ahead to Walk by Tseng Hui-chuan.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PILOT INTEGRATED MARKETING

# Grabbing the bull by its horns

Jasper Huang (黃嘉祥) says his bovine sculpture expresses different aspects of Taiwan: the cow itself represents the country's agricultural past, colorful embroidery draped over the cow's back points to the work of its artisans, and the Swarovski crystals embedded in the cow's hide symbolize the consumerism of its urban centers.

"Taiwan is a young country and I wanted my sculpture to reflect common symbols from the past until today," said Huang, a 31-year-old who in 2000 took top honors at fashion design competition held by *Elle Magazine*.

Like Huang's *Who Is the Next Rocking Cowboy?* (誰是下一個 Rocking Cowboy?), many of the other 108 life-size fiberglass cows scattered throughout Taipei as part of *CowParade Taipei 2009* also address aspects of Taiwanese culture, art or society. Taipei is the second Asian city to host the public art exhibit, after Tokyo, which, according to organizers, has over the past decade seen more than 5,000 cows designed by roughly 10,000 artists attract half a billion viewers at five dozen exhibitions throughout the globe's major cities.

Jerry Elbaum, president of the for-profit CowParade Holding Corp, said the cows have become a global art institution, partly because of their uniqueness and also because CowParade fosters art education. Each CowParade concludes with a gala during which selected cows are auctioned off to the highest bidder, events that have raised a total of US\$25 million for charitable causes, Elbaum said. The Taipei auction will be held in April.

"Taipei is the finest CowParade that has [yet] been produced," said the former attorney, who took courses on Chinese art history in college. "I have never seen an array of art that I have seen in this exhibit. It's such a top level of perfection and creativity. I have yet to see a cow [in Taipei] that I didn't like."

But not everyone, it seems, loves the three-dimensional bovine canvases. From Madrid to Stockholm, the exhibit has seen its fair share of accidental damage, theft and vandalism — so much so that a "cow hospital" is now a part of many exhibits.

"It's mostly vandalism," Elbaum said before going through a litany of examples. During the New York exhibit in 2001, a group of pranksters were caught attempting to lift a cow into the back of a pickup truck in the early hours of the morning. In 2002 hooligans damaged cows in London's Piccadilly Circus. Last year in Madrid several cows were completely destroyed.

When the exhibit appeared in Stockholm in 2004, a group called The Militant Graffiti Artists of Stockholm took the position that CowParade was not art and demanded that the company issue a statement saying so. "If we did not make a statement that CowParade was not art they would kidnap one of

*A beheading in Stockholm, attempted theft in New York and vandalism in London are some of the problems CowParade, a public art exhibition, has encountered over the past decade — and Taiwan's herd isn't faring much better*

BY NOAH BUCHAN  
STAFF REPORTER



Can't touch this: A man seems blithely unaware of the yellow notice on the base of this cow sculpture outside Sogo's Fuxing branch.

PHOTOS: RON BROWNLOW, TAIPEI TIMES

**EXHIBITION NOTES:**

**WHAT:** COWPARADE TAIPEI 2009  
**WHERE:** TAIPEI CITY  
**WHEN:** UNTIL MARCH 31  
**ON THE NET:** COWPARADE-TAIPEI.COM



our cows and behead it," Elbaum said with a grin. They gave him 48 hours to respond.

Elbaum refused and two days later a headless cow appeared in a popular shopping mall — an event that made headlines in the US. The sculptor reattached the head and the cow went on to command the highest price at the auction. "It wasn't a particularly good piece of art," Elbaum said, "but it had a good story behind it."

Elbaum expects a certain amount of vandalism and general wear and tear in Western cities, but he is flabbergasted by the destruction that has been inflicted on the herd in Taipei. "Having been [to Taipei] a couple of times, I couldn't have imagined seeing much damage to the cows," he said. "People respect art here and they are not going to damage them. But it's happened."

The numbers are indeed startling. "About 50 to 60 percent" have been damaged, said Aaron Yu (游博霖), an account executive with Pilot Integrated Marketing (先勢公關), one of the Taiwanese firms organizing the event.

Qisada Design (佳世達設計團隊), an artist collective, affixed thousands of black and white keyboard keys to their cow to create *The World in the Eyes of Technology* (科技世界), which is located across from Taipei City Hall. Some of the keys have fallen off because parents encourage their children to climb the sculpture so they can snap photographs.

Artist Tsui Yung-yen's (崔永熾) creation, *The Circus of Den-Den-Ciao-Jean* (賤賤腳尖兒馬戲團之牛不懼馬戲), is located in the plaza outside a Fubon Bank branch on the intersection of Civil Boulevard (民大道) and Dunhua North Road (敦化北路). The cow is painted yellow with red flowers and topped with three circus performers. Tsui said the thumb of one character has been badly damaged and a decorative ring has gone missing. Twice. "I think it's my design problem," Tsui said. "It's public art and artists should know that people are passionate and very excited about the cows ... It's damage caused by excited children and parents wanting to take pictures."

Tsui said she spent a lot of time looking at cows from other cities and discovered that Taiwanese artists have more of a tendency to embellish the three basic fiberglass templates — standing, reclining and grazing — with decorative details.

She thinks what makes the Taipei cows fine works of art is also what causes them to damage easily. "The cows in [Taipei] are more delicate because most ... are designed by artists," she said. "Artists here look at [the cows] as works of fine art. We knew they were going to be put on the street but we didn't imagine they would be damaged."

Organizer Aaron Yu said Taipei residents, unlike the artists, see the cows as toys, not art. "They're curious about the cows," he said. "They rarely see this sort of [thing] and they think it's an opportunity for them to play."

However, he noted that "no cows have been stolen, lit on fire or seriously damaged," and no act of vandalism has been reported.

And while CowParade Taipei doesn't have its own "cow hospital," there is a team of "doctors" who roam the city fixing damaged members of the herd.

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— Jerry Elbaum, president of CowParade Holding Corp

## Doyen

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 14

When I talked to my sister Lily (溫慶玉) about this, the first thing we decided was that we must absolutely serve Chinese food. I adore Chinese food and I don't think there is a single cuisine in the world that is more delicious. Sanyu (常玉聰) is named after my favorite artist, who I absolutely adore. He moved from China to France, where he studied art, and as a result his work had a very particular style, with a Western sense of color. That influenced the restaurant's ambiance and the colors we used in there. The food we serve there is based on recipes I remember from my childhood. The menu is very nostalgic for me and at the same time typical of old Chinese-style cuisine.

When you go to the building itself, you can go shopping in FIFI's Market, go to Khaki for coffee, then head up to Sanyu before finishing the evening at W Bar on the third floor, which has a more dramatic atmosphere. I wanted to create something that would let people know that Taiwan is not just about oyster omelets or Snake Alley.

**TT: What do you think the place of Taiwanese designers in the international fashion scene is?**

**IW:** I think Taiwanese designers, in terms of their fashions, have already reached the same standards as international designers. But Taiwanese culture doesn't really focus on fashion, because every country has to get to a point where it is very wealthy in order to do so and Taiwan has only really reached that level within the last 30 years or so. So from that aspect, Taiwan fashion is still developing.

In my own background, I didn't have any big investors or big companies backing me up, so I built my business piece from piece, starting from my studio on Dihua Street (迪化街). I think that Taiwanese designers are on the

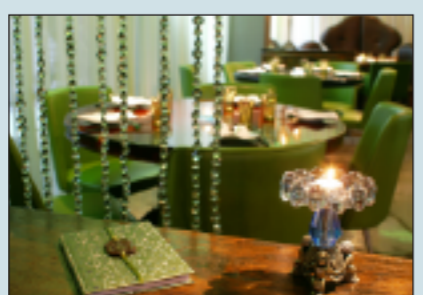
same footing with the rest of the world in terms of high fashion, but what we don't have is the same kind of financial backup. Our disadvantage is that we don't have such a big stage and investor support. We don't have the ability that major international brands do of being able to drop several million dollars on a single ad campaign.

**TT: Shiatzy Chen (王陳彰) recently showed in Paris Fashion Week. Since you've already held presentations on your own in Paris, do you think you might also want to participate in the official fashion week there?**

**IW:** To be honest, sometimes I don't think I have the spirit of a businessperson [laughs]. People call me every day asking when am I going to go to China or Europe or America, but I like focusing on what I am doing here.

**TT: Will you be expanding your business here with new restaurants or other projects?**

**IW:** Doing business is pretty nerve-wracking right now. Instead of opening a new restaurant, I think I might have to close one or two. I think we have too many. It has to do with the economy, which has impacted our non-fashion businesses. We have to come out with a new collection every season, regardless of what the economic climate is, but I think we have to be a bit more careful about our other projects. In the past, it was like whenever we wanted to open a new restaurant, we would open it. But now we have to be more methodical and we would have to spend a lot of



## Celebrity Interview



Isabelle Wen, with microphone, stands next to models wearing her designs.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ISABELLE WEN

time putting together a business model that is truly unique, otherwise it's just not worth it.

**TT: Which restaurants might you close?**

**IW:** I haven't really put a lot of thought into it, because it's a difficult thing to think about. But we have a cafe, a very cute cafe named Midnight Cafe, and even though I really love it, we might have to let go of it because the rent is climbing.

**TT: How has the economy impacted the fashion side of your business?**

**IW:** Our customers are all a bit more mature, in that they are not teenagers, they are women who are around 30 and above. I think our typical client is someone who is well off. At the same time, I don't think a single person has not been shaken by the crisis. So a customer who previously purchased NT\$30,000 to NT\$40,000 in clothes every season might just buy half of that now. Their spending habits have definitely changed.

**TT: Do you think it has impacted the way you approach clothing design? Have you started thinking about catering to women who right now want to spend their money on investment pieces they can keep and wear for years instead of trendier styles?**

**IW:** As a matter of fact, when I was headed out this morning, my mom called me and that's the first thing she said after asking about my health: "Fifi [Wen's nickname], let me tell you, if you want to design clothes, you have to design classics, the basics, because the economic crisis has changed everyone. They don't want to buy luxury clothes like yours." She said this to me, it was very funny and it's a coincidence you bring it up.

But I think every designer has a trademark style and I don't think any one of us would alter what we do because of the economy. I don't have it in me to design Gap or Banana Republic-like clothing. That's not my character. Even in this economic climate, you'll still find clothes that are fun. It's the most beautiful, extreme and luxurious designs in each collection that capture the attention of consumers. But not all pieces are like that; I would say only about a third of each season is like that.

For my spring/summer collection, instead of toning down my designs, I focused on making them more comfortable and free. I think freedom is this season's most important theme. Freedom and romance, instead of

drama. I don't think it's what like most people assume, that an investment piece has to be very basic. I think it's the opposite actually: a piece of clothing must be very beautiful and unique and very luxurious so you will want to keep it.

**TT: Your last collection was named after Modigliani. How did you take your inspiration from his paintings and translate it into clothing?**

**IW:** Actually, I did the designs first for last season and then I chose the name. I always think about the relationship between fine art and clothing because I've always been a painter, starting from when I was a child. I've never separated the two things. Last season was about the colors. I used a lot of blues and dark grays and those colors are very reminiscent of Modigliani. It's very deep and mysterious.

A lot of the clothes also have small collars crocheted from yarn, which give them a 1920s feel. One of Modigliani's strong points was his portraits and he was very good at capturing the detail in clothing. I saw those paintings and incorporated elements from them into my clothes.

**TT: What is the inspiration for this season's collection?**

**IW:** Our spring/summer collection is called "June." Spring and summer both evoke a sentimental mood for me, one that's not so cheerful and carefree. And in the next few years, even with the recession, the world needs to slow down and it needs love and peace. It's a lot like the 1960s, actually. Back then there were a lot of artsy people who wanted to challenge traditions and customs and that is how the hippies were born. This collection kind of has that atmosphere and the ideas in it. We joke that it's for royal hippies, hippies with a certain amount of purchasing power.

When I think of the women who

wear my clothing, I think it appeals to them not just because it's pretty, but also because they have minds of their own and don't want to look like everyone else. I make things for women who like art and who aren't really into super trendy clothes but designs that take their cues from art and culture instead. They also like romantic clothing, and they are financially independent and earn their own money.

I also have clients who will save up and purchase my clothing every two or three months. I really appreciate those customers and I don't feel like you have to be rich to enjoy my clothing. My intention isn't to design a hyper-exclusive brand. I hope that everyone can afford to wear my clothes.

**TT: I read in a previous interview that when you started out about 20 years ago, Taiwanese consumers favored international designers over Taiwanese brands. Do you think that is still the case?**

**IW:** I think Taiwanese people now love Taiwanese brands. That's how I feel, or maybe that's because I've been lucky. But international brands have a lot of power and financial clout.

**TT: What countries do you think are the most receptive to Taiwanese designers?**

**IW:** About 15 years ago, I opened a few stores in the United States and the reception was actually very warm. Customers thought it was unusual and they liked that, but we didn't have the manufacturing resources to expand our size range to fit the different requirements there, so I ended up closing the stores.

**TT: Do you want to open stores in Europe?**

**IW:** I think the moment has passed in Europe and America. They are no longer fresh markets, because the fashion industry there is already so saturated. I think in the next 10 years we will have to look toward the Chinese market if Taiwanese brands want to expand.