

[ART JOURNAL]

Scaled to fit

Many of Lee Tsai-chien's sculptures at Main Trend Gallery are smaller versions of his earlier monumental works, many of which have an architectural flair

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER

In 1984, the newly opened Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM) caused an uproar in Taiwan's art community when its acting director Su Jui-ping (蘇瑞屏) had Lee Tsai-chien's (李再鈞) *Finite to Infinite* (無限的無限) painted gray without the sculptor's permission because a retired Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) soldier complained that from a certain angle the work resembled a red star, China's symbol of communism.

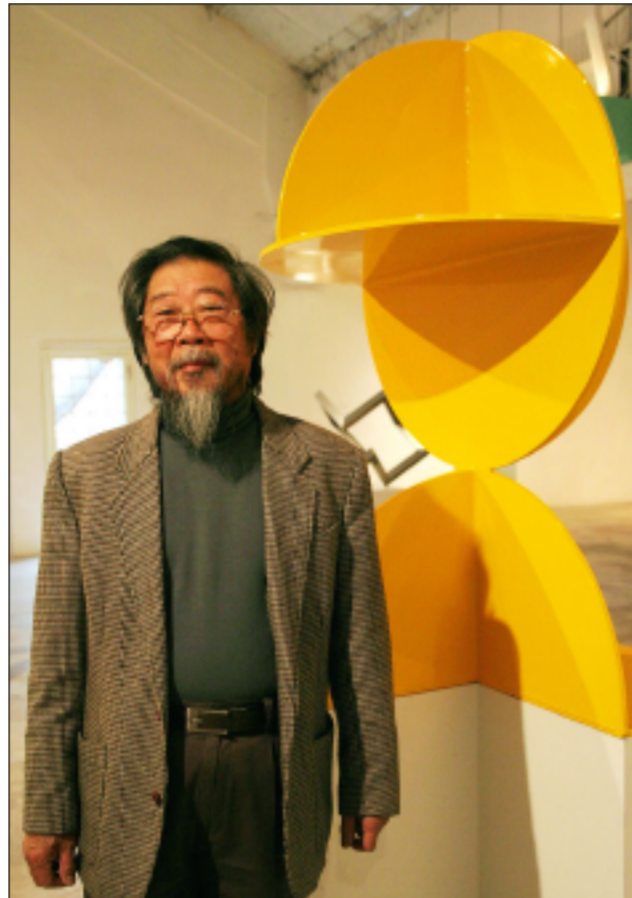
The controversy, which ended almost two years later when the museum returned the sculpture to its original red, soured relations between Lee and TFAM for the following two decades. In 2003, however, TFAM commissioned Lee to make another sculpture, which today is on show at the front entrance of the museum and is called *Homerun* (紅不讓). Scaled-down versions of both sculptures form part of a solo exhibit of Lee's work that is currently on display at Main Trend Gallery (大趨勢畫廊), a five-minute walk from the Yuanshan (圓山) MRT Station.

"I called it *Homerun* because of what happened with the museum," Lee said in an interview with the *Taipei Times* last week. "It was a victory after 20 years."

As the title of the latter sculpture suggests, Lee, 80, approaches both his life and work with a playful sense of humor. Though underpinned by philosophical and mathematical principles, the sculptures, Lee implies through his gestures and speech, are meant to enlighten the intellect.

Lee is known for his monumental sculptures that adorn the lobbies of large corporations or the plazas of art museums. The 20 works at Main Trend, though smaller, retain the geometrical features that define his work. Some are made from stainless steel and metal with enamel — hallmarks of his earlier work — while the later sculptures were constructed using scrap metal, which gives them an almost primitive feel.

Between Falsehood and Reality (虛實之間) is vintage Lee both in the shapes and materials used. What appear to be



Sculptor Lee Tsai-chien stands next to *Five 3/4 Circles*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MAIN TREND GALLERY

two cubes stacked one on top of the other is in fact a group of interlocking triangles welded together. The upper half is made of dull and polished stainless steel while the lower half is made from rough copper plating. The piece combines opposites, dark and light, good and evil, yin and yang.

Lee said the sculpture's architectural features have led more than one architect to comment that it should be made into a house or building.

"It would look a lot better than [Taipei] 101," he quipped. It isn't difficult to imagine the stable vertical and horizontal

lines being used to construct a structure similar to the Central Chinese Television (CCTV) Headquarters building in Beijing.

As if Alive (恍若在世) resembles the spires of Cambodia's Angkor Wat and conjures up ideas of religious worship. The five narrow and tower-like edifices are fashioned from the parts of used car engines. Lee said that Buddhist funerary pagodas that house the ashes of dead monks inspired the sculpture. He said that the pieces of metal, originally used in vehicles, are here transformed into a work of spiritual significance.

Lee has recently shifted his focus to the expression of emotion, and translating his own experience into his work. *Considerate and Warmhearted* (古道熱腸) is a five-segment, primitive totem-like structure constructed from exhaust pipes and painted in blue, green, orange, yellow and red. When I asked Lee if the colors symbolized the five elements (五行) — wood, fire, earth, metal and water — from Chinese cosmology, he replied that they bear a more personal resonance.

"They represent the materials, such as wood or stone, we sculptors use in our art," he said. After thinking for a moment, he added, "They do look like sausage links."

Lee is an artist who doesn't take himself too seriously, even though he works with Buddhist and Platonic concepts. The simplicity of his later work reflects Lee's recent approaches to sculpture, one that finds him stripping away all extraneous form. "It's minimalist," he said.

CORRECTION

In an article published on March 25 ("One foot in the East, one in the West," on Page 15) we ran the wrong photo. The photo in the story was of Wang Yu-qing (王宇清), former director of the Taiwan Museum of History and not Chiang I-han (姜一涵). They don't even look similar. The *Taipei Times* regrets the error.



Six years after sculptor Lee Tsai-chien and the Taipei Fine Arts Museum let bygones be bygones, the artist is exhibiting his work, including *As if Alive* (恍若在世), below, and *Sunray*, bottom right, at the institution.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MAIN TREND GALLERY



GALLERY NOTES:

WHAT: Lee Tsai-chien's Solo Exhibition (李再鈞雕塑個展)

WHERE: Main Trend Gallery (大趨勢畫廊), 209-1, Chengde Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市承德路三段209-1號)

WHEN: Until April 25. Open Tuesdays through Saturdays from 11am to 7pm.

TELEPHONE: (02) 2587-3412

ON THE NET: www.maintrendgallery.com.tw



Wired

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When he started researching *The Corner*, Simon had covered crime for the *Sun* for 13 years, but examining the drugs trade from the inside presented fresh challenges: two white guys hanging around the corner of Monroe and Fayette in west Baltimore were hardly inconspicuous. "We were initially regarded by many of the corner regulars as police or police informants," Simon and Burns write. It didn't help that some older dealers remembered Burns from his detective days. The police posed a different problem: those who didn't recognize them kept threatening to arrest them, assuming they were buying drugs; those who did recognize them stopped to chat, incurring the suspicion of locals. It took five months until the corner regulars "were convinced that whatever else we claimed to be, we weren't police. No one could recall seeing us buy or sell anything, nor did we seem to do anything that resulted in anyone getting locked up." By the time *The Corner* had become first its own mini-series and then, along with *Homicide*, source material for *The Wire*, west Baltimore had come on board to the point that throngs of spectators got in the way of filming. According to rumor, real wiretaps went silent during broadcasts, as dealers suspended operations in order to watch.

If there's a fault with Simon's work, it's that his characters can be so compelling, you forget to be angry about the situations he portrays. You find yourself laughing at the war-hardened wisecracks of *Generation Kill*'s Corporal Josh Person, say, or wondering at *The Wire*'s Marlo and his cold-blooded cool, without stepping back to take stock of the modern nightmares they're enduring. Simon, on the other hand, is very angry indeed. "You are sitting in the deconstruction of the American Dream," he says, indicating Baltimore. "Which is to say there was a fundamental myth that if you were willing to work hard, support your family, stay away from shit that ain't good for you, you'd do all right. You didn't have to be the smartest guy in the room. The dream wasn't that everyone could get rich. It was that everyone gets to make a living and see the game on Saturday, and maybe, with the help of a government loan or two, your kid'll go to college." His anger is wide-reaching: deprivation in Baltimore, imaginary WMDs in Iraq and Wall Street scandals are all part of the same betrayal — of capitalist institutions "selling people shit and calling it gold."

Simon doesn't respond well to the criticism that perhaps things aren't entirely bad — that his shows' unremitting pessimism distorts a world where some people do defeat the crushing force of social institutions. Last year, the journalist Mark Bowden made that charge in the *Atlantic* magazine, and Simon hasn't forgiven him. "This premise that *The Wire* wasn't real because it didn't show people having good outcomes in west Baltimore ... I don't know what to tell him. We didn't spend a series in a cul-de-sac with people barbecuing; it was the story of what's happening at the bottom rungs of an economy where capitalism has been allowed free rein. And if he's telling me it's not happening, I want to take his fucking entitled ass and drive him to west Baltimore and shove him out of the car, at Monroe and Fayette, and say, find your way back, fucker, because you've got your head up your ass at the *Atlantic*."

Behind Simon's general disillusion is a disillusionment with journalism, the only work he ever wanted to do. Raised in a secular Jewish household in the Washington suburbs, he wrote for his school magazine, then was so busy editing the University of Maryland newspaper that it took him five years to graduate ("with terrible grades"). In his final year he began stringing for the local paper, the *Sun*; his wife, the novelist Laura Lippman, is another former *Sun* reporter. The way he tells it, the central betrayal of Simon's life is the gutting of the *Sun* by profit-obsessed owners and Pulitzer-obsessed editors. One of those reviled executives, Bill Marimow, gets an obnoxious police lieutenant named after him in *The Wire*; Scott Templeton, the weaselly fabricator of season five, is modeled on a *Sun* colleague. (Other former staffers describe Simon as a perpetual picker of fights.)

The collapse of the US newspaper industry has left politicians free to pursue their unethical schemes unscrutinized. "The Internet does froth and commentary very well, but you don't meet many Internet reporters down at the courthouse," he says. "Oh to be a state or local official in America over the next 10 to 15 years, before somebody figures out the business model. To gambol freely across the wastelands of an American city as a local politician! It's got to be one of the great dreams in the history of American corruption."

The way Simon sees it, *The Wire* and *Generation Kill* are, above all else, an exercise in reporting: the pulling back of the curtain on the real America that should have been undertaken by newspapers, transposed instead into the multimillion-US dollar world of TV drama. "It's fiction, I'm clear about that. But at its heart it's journalistic." Newspapers, he says, launching into a new tirade, "have been obsessed with what they called 'impact journalism' — take a bite-sized morsel of a problem, make a big noise, win a Pulitzer. It was bullshit! But it was the only thing they knew. But what America needed in the last two decades was not 'impact journalism.' What they needed was somebody explaining what the fuck was happening to the country." The phrase he uses to describe the role newspapers should have been playing is also, you can't help feeling, one Simon would like to see as his own epitaph: "A counterweight to bullshit."

The Wire premieres in Taiwan on the MAX channel (currently known as Cinemax) at 9pm on May 14.