

[ART JOURNAL]

In your dreams

Ku Shih-yung's latest works provide a nostalgic view of the past that challenges Taiwan to re-examine its present and future

BY **BLAKE CARTER**
STAFF REPORTER



Right: Ku Shih-yung's *Oh! Formosa No. 4* (2009).
PHOTO COURTESY OF KU SHIH-YUNG
Above: Over coffee in Taipei, Ku Shih-yung discusses his current show.
PHOTO: BLAKE CARTER, TAIPEI TIMES



Ku Shih-yung (顧世勇) isn't known for making accessible art. His 2006 solo exhibition at Taipei's Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) included video, bubbles, bells, wax, trumpets and even a life-size dummy attached to a balloon floating above the museum that reportedly prompted a call to police about a possible suicide attempt. The former dean of the College of Visual Arts at Tainan National University of the Arts has penned dense essays on art and theory that reference aspirin-conducive writers like French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and philosopher Gilles Deleuze.

Given Ku's reputation, *Oh! Formosa* (美哉台灣) at IT Park Gallery (伊通公園) appears deceptively simple. The 49-year-old presents nine large digitally retouched photographs and two smaller unaltered pictures collected from old political magazines and flea markets. The images romanticize "the good-old days" when

the sun always shone and beach babes frolicked in the sand.

The average Taiwanese no longer believes the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) promise of "a brighter tomorrow" and has lost hope in the sullied idealism the Democratic Progressive Party once expounded, Ku says. Many prefer to dwell in a utopian past that may never have existed outside their imagination.

LIVING THE DREAM

Nothing too complicated about that. So is the show a sea change for Ku? Yes and no, he says.

"In the past my art didn't pay much attention to its place within Taiwan's context, but now I'm thinking more about it: political, economic and social problems. [I'm examining] the Taiwanese dream from 1949 until now, and I include a little criticism: If we're going to really face reality, we have to first abandon this dream."

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: *Oh! Formosa* (美哉台灣), A Solo Exhibition by Ku Shih-yung (顧世勇個展)
WHEN: Through May 2, Tuesdays to Saturdays from 1pm to 10pm
WHERE: IT Park Gallery (伊通公園), 2F-3F, 41 Yitong St, Taipei City (台北市伊通街41號2-3樓)
ADMISSION: Free

Ku laughs when I tell him that even my Taiwanese friends find his writing and some of his art hard to understand. He admits his new works are less "artsy," but says his concept has changed very little. Themes of "peace" and "utopia" in *Oh! Formosa* can be found in earlier works such as *Bubble Man* (2006) that hung above MOCA and its antecedent, a 1999-2000 video in which the artist blows a giant bubble that carries him into space, only to burst and send him hurtling back to the earth in a ball of flame.

BREAKING THE MOLD

Ku also stresses a cornerstone of his work that hasn't changed in 27 years. After following the conservative curriculum at National Taiwan University of Arts in Banciao, Taipei County, his graduate exhibition consisted simply of photographs of him sitting in a chair, viewed from behind, with nondescript views such as a window or wall in front of him. He called the series *Where Do I Sit?*

and the works showed no reference to the formal techniques he had studied.

"My 'hand' in the works I make isn't important," he says. "The expression is."

His statement echoes basic conceptualist dogma that for decades has pitted "idea" art against "formal" art and continues to generate heated intellectual discussion.

Ku's current show seems an effort by an insider to bring this discussion out of the highfalutin art circle and into the mouths and minds of everyday people. If so, his biggest challenge will be the same that many contemporary artists face: convincing the general public to drop by the gallery and give it a gander.

For those hesitant to make the trip to IT Park for a relatively small show, there are two nearby galleries also worth checking out: VT Art Salon is next door and 50m down the road is the newly opened Sakshi Gallery Taipei — a branch of its Mumbai, India-based namesake — that opens its second show of Indian art on Saturday.

Ways of seeing

Mythology of Contemporary Art explores history and archeology using the concept of myth found in the sculptures and paintings of three artists

BY **NOAH BUCHAN**
STAFF REPORTER



EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: *Mythologies of Contemporary Art* (當代藝術神話)
WHERE: Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM), Gallery D, 181, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市中山北路三段181號)
WHEN: Until May 5. Open daily from 9:30am to 5:30pm, closed Mondays
TELEPHONE: (02) 2595-7656
ADMISSION: NTS\$30
INFORMATION: www.tfam.gov.tw

Clockwise from right: Zhang Hong-tu's *Re-Make of Ma Yuan's Water Album* (780 Years Later); *A Story About Affection* — *Beloved King Kong Vajradhara* by Yang Mao-lin; part of Tu Wei-cheng's *Stele No BM66-Gate of the Fleeing Souls*.
PHOTOS COURTESY OF TFAM



Myth is protean. Whether in the context of politics or culture, it is constantly shifting and changing. An exhibit at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM) attempts to capture the idea of myth in its artistic forms through the work of three artists.

Iris Huang (黃舒屏), the exhibit's curator, has done a splendid job in selecting the artists and laying out the exhibition area. The artists are given their own separate spaces in Gallery D of the museum (in the basement level), but these spaces are near each other for the purpose of thematic cohesion.

Titled *Mythology of Contemporary Art* (當代藝術神話), the show investigates popular culture, history and archeology (real and invented) through the sculptures of two young Taiwanese artists, Tu Wei-cheng (涂維政) and Yang Mao-lin (楊茂林), and the paintings of New York-based Chinese artist Zhang Hong-tu (張宏圖).

Tu's Aztec-like sculptures imitate the architecture and sculpture of an ancient civilization. The large stone slabs, bas-relief friezes and monumental steles deftly retain, through the use of color and material, the

appearance of old artifacts.

The arrangement of the sculptures resembles an archeological museum's exhibit, complete with photographs of the "excavation site," a documentary about the civilization by "historians" and "archeologists" and a timeline of the excavation process. Dark walls, objects behind glass and spotlights beaming down on the works provide additional impact.

Stele No BM66 — Gate of the Fleeing Souls (BM66號石牆 — 魂遁之門人) illustrates Tu's sculptural style and the civilization he continues to create. Two artificial stone steles stand in front of a large wall, the center of which is a circular tablet. Human figures in various positions, executed in bas-relief, serve as the plaque's focal point, circular itself.

Upon closer inspection the tableau reveals a series of interlocking technological instruments. The small figurines of man and beast common to ancient cultures are conspicuously absent here. Instead we find keyboards, electric sockets, computer game consoles and other relics that hint that this



ancient culture was similar to our own.

Zhang Hong-tu's 12 paintings *Re-Make of Ma Yuan's Water Album* (780 Years Later) (再製馬遠水圖 (780年之後)) also examine appearances and reflect on the passing of time. He explores the effects of human-made smog on the sky's color and how these environmental changes might affect visual representation.

The oil on canvas works are based on the monochrome studies of water done by the Song Dynasty landscape painter Ma Yuan (馬遠) and informed by early modernist pictorial techniques.

Although Zhang is not an impressionist painter, these works suggest otherwise. The use of color in *Re-Make of Ma Yuan's Water Album* — *S(780 Years Later)* (再製馬遠水圖 — S(780年之後)) could be taken from Claude Monet's *Impression, Sunrise*. However, the oranges and yellows of Zhang's sun are partially obscured, replaced by a murky purplish-gray — a visual alteration, Zhang suggests, that is due to air pollution.

Yang's sculpture series adapts material and idols from Taiwan's religious culture

and supplants them with images taken from popular consumer culture. Superheroes such as Wonder Woman replace Buddhist icons such as Vajradhara; a Taoist altar becomes a pedestal at which society worships cartoon heroes; spiritual images transform into fairy-tale products that could be sold in the market place.

A Story About Affection — *Beloved King Kong Vajradhara* (有關愛情的故事 — 金剛愛金剛) presents a gorilla on a lotus leaf embracing a figure that looks like a mermaid. The sculpture suggests that people no longer project their yearnings onto spiritual idols, but that today cartoons and superheroes are the symbols by which people make sense of their lives.

Though many of these works have been seen before at different Taipei venues (Tu's at a 2003 exhibit at MOCA, Taipei; Yang's at the *Madden Reality* exhibit that just ended at TFAM), bringing them together in one show raises many interesting questions about the mythology of creation and observation, while avoiding the theoretical jargon that could have easily bogged down this very enjoyable exhibition.