

[ART JOURNAL]



Nauman tops Venice Biennale

Influential American artist Bruce Nauman dominated the 53rd Venice Biennale, the oldest and one of the most prestigious contemporary art fairs

BY MARTIN GAYFORD
BLOOMBERG

For once, the jury got it right.

The 53rd Venice Biennale belonged to Bruce Nauman of the US, and to fail to award him the Golden Lion for best national participation would have been distinctly eccentric. His extended exhibition dominated the Biennale.

The extent of Nauman's influence on art in recent decades is underlined by a visit to East-West Divan showing work from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran in the Scuola Grande della Misericordia. Up the grand staircase of this atmospherically decrepit building hangs a series of chandelier-like neon pieces — a Nauman signature medium — in Islamic script.

Nauman's tour de force this time was a throwback to Biennales of years gone

by, dominated by one towering artist. The late Robert Rauschenberg did so in 1964, signaling the triumph of New York as a cultural capital. I wonder: Will it ever happen again?

At the Peggy Guggenheim Collection there's a delightful tribute to Rauschenberg, who died last year, in Gluts (through Sept. 20). This series of works from the late 1980s was made of junk metal — street signs, a squashed bicycle, an old fan — riveted together with casual elegance, a terrific eye for color and what can only be called joie de vivre. Though not part of the official Biennale, this is one of the best (modern) things to see in Venice.

For the rest, if not quite Biennale lite, the pickings were on the slim side. In the Arsenale, the exhibition Making Worlds, curated by the Biennale Director Daniel Birnbaum, begins with a beautiful, haunting piece by the Brazilian artist Lygia Pape, who died in 2004, featuring filaments of golden wire gleaming in a darkened room like diagonal shafts of light.

Next comes a piece by Michelangelo Pistoletto, a veteran of the Arte Povera movement, made up of 22 huge mirrors, about half of which were personally smashed in situ by the artist himself (a striking piece of art theater, if nothing else). After that,

there wasn't a great deal more in the echoing length of the old Venetian naval warehouses.

Paul Chan's *Sade for Sade's Sake* (2009), a shadow projection of figures engaged in a variety of sexual activity, understandably created a buzz. Watching all five hours and 45 minutes would be excruciating enough to please the marquis himself. A much pleasanter experience is offered by Cildo Meireles, another Brazilian, in a series of rooms of intensely saturated color — brilliant reds, blues, greens and yellows.

Among the national pavilions, the traditional heavyweights were punching below their usual weights. For the UK, Steve McQueen's film *Giardini* was low-key. Liam Gillick, who, though British, was representing Germany, produced an installation of profound dullness with large quantities of timber shelving and a stuffed cat.

Andrei Molodkin, one of the Russian contingent, did better with *Le Rouge et le Noir* (2009), an installation in which blood and oil, respectively Russian soldiers' gore and Chechen crude, pump through translucent figures of the Victory of Samothrace. It's straightforward, yet makes its point: This is the reality of military success.

There's not much painting on view, though Miquel Barcelo for Spain is



Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto, above, performs during his installation entitled *Twenty Two Less Two* at the 53rd Venice Biennale on June 5.

PHOTOS: REUTERS

showing rough-cast pictures and ceramics, somewhere between prehistoric cave art and abstract expressionism. Adel el Siwi in the Egyptian Pavilion also is showing paintings that draw on both national traditions, in his case going back to the Pharaoh Akhenaton and international modern art.

The most positive aspect of the Biennale, which as usual has as much terrible stuff as good, is the way in which contemporary art is an activity in which the whole world is peacefully joining.

For more information, visit www.labien-nale.org.

Painting and photography: windows to the soul

Ariel Kuo (郭瓦君) leads me through the tiny alleys that surround her Tainan studio and residence. The narrow cobblestone roadways are lined with functional buildings, surreptitiously placed potted plants and walls of multicolored tiles — all of which serve as inspiration for Kuo's solo exhibition at the Dogpig Art Cafe (豆皮文藝咖啡館) in Kaoshiung.

The exhibit, *Place* (地方), features Kuo's photography and paintings in an artistic dialogue that reveals her impressionistic search for the soul of Tainan — and by extension Taiwan.

The exhibit is divided into three sections. The first displays images of colorful ceramic tiles, floor mosaics and other architectural wall and floor coverings that Kuo photographed as a means of investigating color and pattern. These studies are then deconstructed and recreated as canvases of solid color, which are found in the second section, and become the palette for her representational works in the third section.

The relationship between the photographs and canvases of solid color (or "color charts," as Kuo calls them) are exemplified in *Detail 4 (Alley No. 2)* (巷子底 No. 2) and *Alley No. 2* (巷子底 No. 2). The blanched brown rectangular tiles, white window frame and blue blinds depicted in the photo are reconstructed as blocks of solid color on the six canvas panels.

It's a good idea: placing the photographs and panels of color in the same exhibition draws the viewer's attention to the colorful details of Taiwan's often drab cityscape of concrete-block buildings and suggests that these edifices might be deserving of a second look.

However, the transition from the colored panels to the representational works is less fluid, perhaps because Kuo is trying to do too many things at once. In her artist's statement, she said she wants to separate the rational and the emotional aspects of the artistic enterprise and

Place is an exhibition that uses photography and painting as a means of capturing the soul of Tainan. It only partially succeeds

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER



Place-Tainan No. 14 by Arielleira K, an alter ego of Ariel Kuo.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ARIEL KUO

then bring them together in one exhibit. The colored panels and photographs investigate the former while the representational works largely cover the latter.

But it isn't clear how the artist makes the transition from the rational to the emotional, from the pictures and panels to pictorial representation.

At first glance, *Tainan-Place No. 14* (地方—台南 No. 14) and *Tainan-Place No. 15* (地方—台南 No. 15) are an interesting study of contrasts. The former depicts a 7-Eleven sign over a background rendered in a mosaic of greens, grays and browns, with a pathway of white winding into the distance. It suggests functionality and convenience with a touch of the hectic. The latter features a Starbucks sign with the same mosaic background, but in orange, gray and white. It evokes the leisurely lifestyle that has come to define Tainan for many.

Within the context of the exhibit, however, these paintings fail to express any deeper insights into the atmosphere of Taiwan's former capital city.

Additionally, some representational paintings avoid the use of vibrant color. *Place-Tainan No. 3* (地方—台南 No. 3), with its claustrophobic interior of grays, whites and blacks, does more to depict the colorless buildings erected in the 1950s and 1960s than the wonderfully colorful decorative fixtures depicted in the photographs and recreated in the color charts. This reviewer found it difficult to understand how these canvases represent the "place" called Tainan. (Is it a mixture of the frenetic, languid and confining?)

Some might also balk at Kuo's explicit use of the 7-Eleven logo in her work. Yet with more than 4,800 units throughout Taiwan, 7-Eleven is undeniably part of the nation's culture, as is to a lesser extent Starbucks. Regardless, one is left with the impression that the historic city of Tainan (and Taiwan in general) is a collection of convenience stores, franchise coffee shops and buildings with somewhat colorless interiors.

Kuo sets out to reveal the dynamic and multilayered aspect of Taiwan's culture through the colorful details of Tainan's architecture. With the photographs and color charts it works because they offer the viewer an examination of phenomena that many take for granted. But the representational pictures digress into kitschy renderings of commonly seen buildings and interiors — ones that don't do justice to Taiwan's complex culture.

Celebrity Interview

Johan Ku.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHAN KU

Knit

CONTINUED FROM P14

TT: I notice that the structure of the collar and knitted patterns are a prominent feature in this series of designs.

JK: I like high neck design. I say it's needle wear, but it's also crochet with knitting. And, because it is a three-dimensional creation, I can use a more dramatic contrast in the front and back. This makes it sculptural in appearance.

TT: Is fashion a good investment to make? Will these knitted sculptures appreciate in value?

JK: The history of fashion design is only 100 years old so compared to other art forms like painting, which has been around for much longer, it's difficult to say what the investment value is. But I believe that this kind of clothing cannot be produced a second time — like a painting by Picasso.

TT: The progress of your career is interesting. You started out as a graphic designer and then switched over to fashion design. Why?

JK: Actually, it was fate. My grades weren't good enough to study graphic design so I went into fashion design instead.

TT: You've mentioned that graphic design is a good stepping-stone for fashion design.

JK: Sure, especially sketching. This is a basic skill that fashion designers need to use to communicate with others and explain their designs. Also, as I understand fashion history, many fashion designers were not originally from this field. They come from fields such as architectural design, interior design and of course graphic design. And then they transferred over to fashion design.

TT: What attributes do these people bring to fashion design?

JK: They use a different point of view to look at this industry and they can figure out much more interesting ideas than those who are only in this field.

TT: When did you establish your studio?

JK: In 2005 I established my own studio. As a human I have to earn money [laughs]. I did many commercial projects — not so creative or interesting, but as my bread and butter, for example, the television drama *Basketball Fire* (籃球火).

TT: How did you feel about that?

JK: It was a big project for me and I earned money. But the design was not really creative. I still need to prove that I'm not only capable of doing creative things, but also commercial things as well. I also think that's why [Central] Saint Martins accepted my application because they still focus on ready-to-wear clothing that is creative. So I showed two collections of my creative ability and two that show my commercial ability.

(Ku was one of eight students accepted into the needle wear program at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, one of the top institutions of its kind in the world. His 25kg portfolio consisted of works from five of his collections, including "not only knitwear but also swimsuits or something to show my flexibility as a designer," two light garments, and hundreds of sketches of his work.)

TT: Speaking of Central Saint Martins, this is the first time the British Council has given a scholarship to a student in Taiwan for fashion design.

JK: That's right.

TT: Why do you think they were willing to provide this kind of scholarship and what do you hope to accomplish?

JK: When the judges interviewed me, I wasn't only talking about myself. I talked about the entire Taiwanese fashion industry and how I can benefit this industry as a designer.

TT: In what ways could you benefit the industry?

JK: I told them that the background of our fashion industry is that nobody knows how to run a fashion house. Central Saint Martins can provide this kind of background. Their best students are given the opportunity to become interns at luxury fashion companies such as Dior. I can learn those things and bring them back and I can become a bridge between the Taiwanese fashion world and the international fashion world.

TT: So eventually you plan to return to Taiwan? It's difficult for me to imagine that if Dior, for example, offers you a job that you would return to Taiwan.

JK: I am Taiwanese. I cannot change that. And Taiwan is the nation where I grew up and even though there are many drawbacks, I think that after a few years experience abroad I will return to Taiwan. Then I will create my own line while maintaining a connection to the global fashion industry.

I didn't apply for any scholarships from Taiwan Textile Federation (紡拓會) because they tell all the applicants that they have to return to Taiwan immediately upon graduation. I don't think this works. I mean, how can you really learn about the European fashion industry in school? You need to do that in the real fashion industry.

TT: So working in the industry is as important as going to school before setting out on your own.

JK: Right. When you have to run a fashion brand it's not just producing an item. You have to put a lot of budget into marketing and communication. So maybe you have to spend five years and when everyone knows you, you can sell a T-shirt for a very high price.

And this is what I told the judges of the British scholarship committee. I told them that I can bring that knowledge back to Taiwan because the model of the international fashion industry is totally different than what we have in Taiwan.

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: *Place* (地方) — Ariel Kuo Solo Exhibition (郭瓦君創作展)

WHERE: Dogpig Art Cafe (豆皮文藝咖啡館), 2F, 131, Wufu 4th Rd, Kaohsiung City (高雄市五福四路131號2樓)

WHEN: Until June 28. Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 5pm to 12am. Tel: (07) 521-2422

ON THE NET: www.arielkuo.com