



Ben Sloat's photographs, clockwise from left: *Man Harvesting Water Vegetables*; *Taoist Temple, Madou*; *Tourists in a Flower Field*; *Unfinished Bodhisattva*; *Rainbow*. PHOTOS COURTESY OF BEN SLOAT



Taiwan's rural south through the lens

Ben Sloat's Yellow in August records Meinung's landscape and how it is intimately bound up with the cultural heritage and spiritual beliefs of the area's people

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER

Ben Sloat's two-dozen photographs currently on display at Taipei City's American Cultural Center in an exhibition titled *Yellow in August* are firmly rooted in the documentary tradition of Swiss-American photographer Robert Franks, who 50 years ago traveled across the US taking pictures that challenged traditional notions of American life by depicting all strata of society.

Like Franks, Sloat views photography as a journey. But rather than spending two years wandering across the US, Sloat spent the better part of the past year photographing the region surrounding Meinung (美濃) Township in Kaohsiung County, where he recorded the area's landscape and how it is intimately bound up with the cultural heritage and spiritual beliefs of its people.

"I'm interested in iconography and mythology and how we create our own iconography that surrounds our life," he said in an interview earlier this month. "Taiwan has the Confucian idea of society and a Buddhist idea of the afterlife and a very Taoist idea of interaction and an almost animist idea of the land — the land as embodied by spirits and gods."

Sloat, 32, teaches photography, digital media, and photo history at the Art Institute of Boston, Massachusetts, and took a year off to photograph the region after obtaining a Fulbright Scholarship. His mother hails from Kaohsiung, which prompted Sloat to choose Meinung as his base, an area that he says "parallels other [places] in Taiwan."

One of Sloat's concerns is how people retain their identities in the midst of change, he said.

In *Clan House Concrete*, Sloat investigates the tension between new and old. The photo shows a run-down traditional clan home sandwiched between and dwarfed by two recently built structures. The image alludes to the inevitability of change.

"Who doesn't want to live in a brand-new house? But how do you preserve the old-style Hakka houses, which have a different kind of cultural value?" he said.

Sloat's photography doesn't offer us any simple or direct answers to those questions. And yet, his images depicting religious practices suggest that although much has changed, much remains the same.

HEAVEN ON EARTH

One obstacle confronting any photographer wanting to portray Taiwan's rich and diverse religious culture is doing so without, as Sloat said, "exoticizing or objectifying it." There is probably no amount of research that can prepare a person for the sight of an entranced spirit medium self-flagellating with a spiked mace.

Taoist Flagellants shows, in the foreground, a spirit medium and his retinue performing a ceremony on a large cement platform, while *Man at Parade* is a close-up of a martial character in the middle of a crowded street procession. Taken individually, both are stereotypical images of Taiwan's religious culture. Combined, however, they hone in on the function of these performances to provide

contact between the earthly and heavenly realms.

With so many roadside graves and cemeteries dotting the area's landscape, it is unsurprising that death frequently appears in this series. *Tomb in Rice Field* shows a burial mound located in the middle of a rice paddy and deftly illustrates the intimate connection between man, the spirit world and the land.

Farmland Next to River shifts the perspective to a semi-urban setting. A farmer walks along the side of a garden plot located in the middle of a canal's dry bed, framed by buildings one side, an image that encapsulates man's desire to control nature.

There is much else on view here of interest (I particularly liked *Man Harvesting Water Vegetables*, a superb photo of a naked man emerging from a swamp that echoes the myth of Nuwa (女媧), the Chinese goddess who fashioned humans from the mire). And although Sloat's *Yellow in August* doesn't provide as large a survey of society as Franks did with *The Americans*, his photographic journey leads down many fascinating roads.

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: *Yellow in August*
WHERE: International Trade Building, 21F, 333, Keelung Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市基隆路一段333號21F)
WHEN: Until Aug. 7
ADMISSION: Free, but registration is required. Call: (02) 2723-3959 X227 or X214



ALL CHANGE

From Aug. 5 the Features Section will sport a new look. The pastel shades are going and in their place will be bold, bright colors that present content in a more approachable format. We're rearranging the daily sections to form a more logical sequence, with art stories and art exhibition listings, for example, being published together on Wednesdays. The CD, technology, book and DVD reviews will run on Sundays rather than Wednesdays. There will be new puzzles and new cartoons. If you have any comments or queries, send an e-mail to features[at]taipeitimes.com or find us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/taipeitimes and leave a message.