

Talkin' 'bout their generation

Chinese artists Yang Na and Mu Lei examine female sexuality and foreign threats in a new exhibit at the Metaphysical Art Gallery

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: The Fable of Fairy Tale (童話寓言)
WHERE: Metaphysical Art Gallery (形而上畫廊), 7F, 219, Dunhua 5 Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市敦化南路一段219號7樓)
WHEN: Until Oct. 4. Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 11am to 6:30pm. Tel: (02) 2711-0055
ON THE NET: www.artmap.com.tw



The generation of Chinese artists born after 1980 differs from their creative forebearers. Rather than use foreign brand names or domestic government figures to make political statements, these artists seek to create works that reflect their own lived experiences.

These are the views expressed by Yang Na (楊納), 27, and Mu Lei (穆磊), 25, two Beijing-based Chinese artists whose oil paintings are currently on display at the Metaphysical Art Gallery in an exhibit titled The Fable of Fairy Tale (童話寓言).

"I think good artists express what is around them," Mu said. "Older artists depicted Mao [Zedong (毛澤東)] or [the] Tiananmen [massacre] because that was part of their lives. We are different. We only know Mao from books and were too young to remember [Tiananmen]."

Mu and Yang hail from a generation of artists that Taiwanese art critic and Fable of Fairy Tale curator Victoria Lu (陸蓉之) dubs "animamix," a term that combines "comics" and "animation." Though trained in more traditional mediums, their aesthetic embraces the latest global technologies and fads.

Yang's canvases sardonically explore female sexuality. They allude to the unhealthy control that contemporary fashion exerts over her generation of women who obsess over the latest trends.

Her palette is culled straight from the world of cosmetics as seen in magazines like *Vogue* or *Cosmopolitan*. Lipstick reds, eye shadow blues and mascara blacks appear on a canvas of alabaster whites. Petite noses, false eyelashes, plucked eyebrows and lips covered with lip gloss are set perfectly — too perfectly it seems — on a large face that has the glow of porcelain and a small curvaceous body.

But the surface sexuality feels superficial and hollow — a hodge-podge of parts drawn from movies, videos and Internet games. The woman in *Shattered Incantation* (破碎的魔法) listlessly gazes at the viewer as blood spurts out of the cherry red heart she crushes in her hands. Black sperm swim around her head and are almost indistinguishable from the mane of hair that falls in curls down her arched back. The painting suggests both the power and shallowness of her feminine sexuality.

Golden House for My Beloved (金屋藏嬌) presents a studded door with a large keyhole behind which a waifish and pale young woman uses her right hand to apply lipstick to her mouth as her left hand caresses her breast. She wears a tight-fitting black jumpsuit that is unbuttoned down to her navel, revealing a portion of her pink areolas, an exposure that provides the same sense of voyeurism as the phallic keyhole that we look through.

Where Yang adopts a hyper-sexualized visual language in her work, Mu juxtaposes the head of Yang (who is his model in this series of paintings) with high-powered military hardware.

Her head appears at the top of *Black Strong Waves* (黑色波瀾). From her mouth drips a black oily liquid that explodes onto white submarines that litter the reflective watery surface below. *White Strong Waves* (白色波瀾) gives us the same battle scene, but with spittle instead of black. The diptych recalls the story of David and Goliath, where a seemingly weaker opponent battles and defeats a larger foe.

B-2 bombers replace submarines as the symbol of military might in *The Taiji Rain Helmet* (太極雨盔). The female character wears a helmet emblazoned with a yin-and-yang symbol, a protective covering that the planes crash into. It implies that China's people and traditions have the strength to withstand the onslaught of foreign powers.

Although both artists employ the exaggerated and cartoon-like characters and themes of many other artists of their generation, it's difficult not to walk away from The Fable of Fairy Tale thinking that nationalism (albeit unintentionally) underlies their ironic images.

Their paintings evoke, at least for this reviewer, nostalgia for a simpler time free of the negative influences of global fashion trends and a fear of foreign powers that is now focused on the US' military industrial complex. They have picked up on the resentment many in China continue to feel toward external influences that are intimately tied up with history and not of their own device. As such, the works of Yang and Mu provide us with an invaluable glimpse into the preoccupations of an emerging generation of artists — one that on the surface seems content to recreate and criticize the phenomena that they see around them but on a deeper level is re-evaluating what it means to be Chinese.

Right: Mu Lei's *Black Strong Waves*.
Left: Yang Na's *Madam Snake Black*.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF METAPHYSICAL ART GALLERY



After Klimt, Vienna museum fears restitution of 'stolen' Vermeer

Three years after a Vienna museum had to restore five Klimt paintings stolen by the Nazis to their Jewish owners, the city's art museum fears the same fate for a piece by Vermeer.

Austria's culture ministry revealed at the weekend that it had received a request for the restitution of *The Art of Painting* by 17th-century Flemish artist Johannes Vermeer, which has been on display at the Kunsthistorisches Museum since 1946.

The painting was bought in 1940 by Adolf Hitler for his planned museum in the northern Austrian city of Linz.

It would be a "painful loss," Kunsthistorisches Museum director Sabine Haag said of a potential restitution.

"It's an absolute jewel," she added about the painting, noting that it was still too early to even consider giving it back.

Under a 1998 restitution law, Austria has already returned to their rightful owners some 10,000 artworks stolen by the Nazis after they annexed Austria in 1938.

In the latest case in April, the city of Linz returned a painting by Viennese master Gustav Klimt to the Jewish family that was robbed of it under the Third Reich.

In 2006, Vienna's Belvedere Museum had to restore five major paintings by the artist to the descendants of the previous owner.

The Vermeer piece however is more debatable, according to experts.

The painting, which had belonged to the Czernin family since the 19th century, was officially sold to Hitler in 1940 by Jaromir Czernin for 1.65 million Reichsmark.

Requests to have it returned to the family in the 1960s were rejected on the grounds that the sale had been voluntary and the price had been adequate.

But a new report commissioned by the family has concluded that the sale was made under duress.

The heirs of a prominent Austrian family want the government to return a famous 17th-century painting that they say was sold under duress to Adolf Hitler in 1940

BY PHILIPPE SCHWAB
AFP, VIENNA



Flemish master Johannes Vermeer's *The Art of Painting*.

PHOTO: AFP

"[Jaromir] Czernin had no choice: he had to sell in order to guarantee his family's safety," the family's lawyer Andreas Theiss told *Der Standard* newspaper.

The brother-in-law of chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg, who ruled Austria with an iron fist from 1934 to 1938 and attempted to oppose Hitler's annexation of his country, Czernin was also married to a woman of Jewish descent.

However, Eva Blimlinger, scientific head of the Austrian commission studying the origins of artworks, concluded after examining the new expert's report that it contained "no new documents" from 40 years ago, according to *Der Standard*.

Opposition Green deputy Wolfgang Zinggl, who has pushed for the restitution of artworks in Austria, meanwhile said: "This case threatens to overshadow others that are more obvious and have already been delayed too long."

The Israeli community, for instance, has long considered stolen over a dozen works at Vienna's Leopold Museum, including seven by Austrian artist Egon Schiele.

But unlike most of the country's art museums, the Leopold is a private institution and as such not subject to the 1998 law.

"As far as public collections are concerned however, museums follow the commission's recommendations quickly and without challenging them," said Zinggl.

The commission, whose recommendations are always followed by the ministry, systematically examines the origin of each piece that has entered public collections since the Third Reich. Given that less than 40 paintings by Vermeer exist in the world, *The Art of Painting* could easily fetch a similar price.

In 2004, a small Vermeer was sold by auction house Sotheby's for US\$180 million.

EXHIBITIONS

The examination of innocence and childhood link Taiwanese artists Chou Chu-wang (周珠旺), Wu Keng-cheng (吳耿楨) and Chang En-tzu (張恩慈) in their group exhibition **Pure and Naughty** (純真X頑皮). Chou's drawings and sculptures highlight the cute yet potentially cruel aspects of children. Wu explores paper-cutting techniques to create naughty and playful red figures, which he arranges on rotating glass surfaces. Fairy tales such as *Bambi* and *Snow White* are metaphorically turned on their heads through Chang's weaving.

■ Project Fulfill Art Space (就在藝術空間), 2, Alley 45, Ln 147, Xinyi Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市信義路三段147巷45弄2號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 2pm to 9pm, closes at 7pm on Sundays. Tel: (02) 2325-0023
■ Until Oct. 25

The Zebra in Flowery World (花花斑馬) is a solo show by contemporary Taiwanese painter Lai Yu-cheng (賴昱成) that depicts exotic animals existing in a post-apocalyptic landscape free of humans. The animals wear breathing apparatuses that enable them to survive on a planet of brown hills punctuated with neon-pink and orange vegetation.
■ Butchart Contemporary Art Space, 155, Linong St Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市立農街二段155號). Open daily from 11am to 9pm. Tel: (02) 2820-9920
■ Until Oct. 10

Sculpting in Time (雕刻時光) is a new series of expressionist works by renowned Taiwanese painter Yang Chi-hung (楊熾宏). Yang's large canvases merge the furious styles of Western abstraction with the ideal of contemplation found in Chinese-literati painting.
■ Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall (國父紀念館), 505, Renai Rd Sec 4, Taipei City

(台北市仁愛路四段505號)

■ Until Oct. 18

US ceramicist Deborah Sigel focuses on the radiance of blooming flowers in her solo exhibit **Fresh**. The popular image of a flower is generally that of the bloom even though its existence is short-lived. Sigel seeks to suspend a flower's beauty in time and draw the viewer's attention towards its innate symmetry and balance.

■ Yingge Ceramics Museum (鶯歌陶瓷博物館), 200 Wenhua Rd, Yingge Township, Taipei County (北縣鶯歌鎮文化路200號). Open Tuesdays to Fridays from 9:30am to 5pm and Saturdays and Sundays from 9:30am to 6pm. Tel: (02) 8677-2727
■ Until Oct. 18

Lilies of Taipei is a collection of new oil paintings by British artist and Taipei resident Timothy Nathan Joel.

■ Lili Arts Space (莉莉藝術空間), 2F, 760, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 6, Taipei City (台北市中山北路六段760號2樓). Open daily from 11:30am to 9pm. Tel: (02) 2876-0798
■ Until Oct. 4

The sounds of nature, people and traffic are among those that Taiwanese artist Chang Yung-ta (張永達) recorded for his installation **Y Phenomenon (#1~#3)** (Y現象 (#1~#3)). Chang collected the sounds while participating in an internship at the Yamaguchi Center for the Arts and Media in Japan.

Using digital modulation techniques, Chang rearranges these sounds into tiny modules of light that are located throughout the exhibition area.
■ National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts (國立台灣美術館), 2, Wuchuan W Rd Sec 1, Taichung City (台中市五權西路一段2號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 9am to 5pm. Tel: (04) 2372-3552
■ Until Oct. 18