

Honore de Balzac's multivolume *The Human Comedy* vividly dissects the manners, customs and people of the tumultuous age in which he lived — from the French Revolution to the Bourbon Restoration. Taking the French writer's corpus as inspiration, the National Taipei University of the Arts has put together a group exhibit titled Comedies, part of its Kuandu Arts Festival, which purports to follow Balzac's project by presenting portraits of contemporary society.

"Two centuries ago, a remarkable French playwright, Balzac, described the human nature of [his country] in the 19th century in detail. We hope that, with visual codes, we can convey, shape, construct and deconstruct the spirit of comedy in contemporary times," the exhibition blur states.

The festival, held at the Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts (關渡美術館) and Aigrette Down (鶯鶯草原), includes two solo shows — one by Australian installation artist Jayne Dyer and the other by Taiwanese sculptor Chang Tzu-lung (張子隆). But the festival's main emphasis is the group exhibit.

Citing one of the 19th century's most insightful novelists as the foundation of an art exhibit is a risky venture because it creates powerful and far-reaching expectations.

Aspiring to emulate Balzac's approach is an achievable goal, as for example, dozens of local artists have created multi-layered characterizations of Taiwanese society.

Huang Chin-ho's (黃進河) paintings from the 1990s blend religious and folk symbols with the kitschy glitz of Taipei to critically portray the conspicuous consumption of contemporary society, while Hou Chun-ming's (侯俊明) woodcut prints from the same period parody the power of folk beliefs. Both artists created tapestries of Taiwanese culture by employing symbols culled from the past and present.

Comedies, however, fails to formulate any nuanced depictions of, or comments on, society — whether humorous or not. This probably has something to do with the exhibit's setup. Four established artists curated the show and chose a "team" of younger artists to exhibit their paintings, installations and sculptures within the confines of one of four subthemes: Real Comedy, Innovative Hybrid, Multiple Characters and Non-Academic Artists.

Although the categories were intended to focus the artist's (and the viewer's) attention, they are so vague that the works within one could easily be transferred to another without any loss of thematic coherence because there wasn't any in the first place.

Hung Yi's (洪易) sculpture of a dog emblazoned with a variety of red patterns taken from various cultures, for example, could have easily been placed in the Innovative Hybrid section rather than the Multiple Characters grouping where it is found.

In Chen Ching-yao's (陳擎耀) display of figures (also located in the Multiple Characters section), characters are

#### FESTIVAL NOTES:

**WHAT:** Kuandu Arts Festival  
**WHERE:** Comedies, a group exhibit, and Jayne Dyer's *The Book Project* are both on display at Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts (關渡美術館), Taipei National University of the Arts (台北藝術大學). Chang Tzu-lung's (張子隆) sculptures are on view at the campus' Aigrette Down (鶯鶯草原). Both the museum and Aigrette Down are located at 1 Xueyuan Rd, Taipei City (台北市學園路1號). The museum is open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 5pm. Tel: (02) 2896-1000 X2432  
**WHEN:** Comedies and *The Book Project* are on display until Dec. 31; Chang Tzu-lung's sculptures are on display until Aug. 31, 2010  
**ON THE NET:** kdmofa.tnua.edu.tw

Below left: Jayne Dyer, *The Book Project*.  
 Below right: Chang Tzu-lung, *Fluids*.  
 Bottom: Ma Chun-fu, *Unblessed Love*.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KUANDU ARTS FESTIVAL.

## The good, the bad and the baffling

*The Kuandu Arts Festival features one group exhibit and solo exhibits by artists from Taiwan and abroad*

BY NOAH BUCHAN  
 STAFF REPORTER



dressed in costumes right out of an American Western movie and posing in what appears to be a New York diner. How it "represents Taiwan at its foundation," as the exhibition literature says, is beyond this reviewer — unless the point is to show that Taiwan is made up of posses of cowboys hanging out in greasy spoons. Had it been placed in the Innovative Hybrid section, Cheng's point that Taiwan is a mixture of cultural identities and styles might have been more apparent.

Some of the works, however, successfully illustrate their section's theme. Chung Kun-i's (張維逸) documentary, set in South Africa, intimately charts a social movement's struggle to turn tragedy into comedy. Ji Hyun Ahn's animated shorts, which picture a group of relatives gorging themselves on food, comically reflect on the human desire to consume. Both are displayed in the Real Comedy section.

For the most part, Comedies is baffling because it isn't thematically cohesive and doesn't construct an incisive Balzac-esque panorama.

Australian-born, Beijing-based artist Jayne Dyer, on the other hand, is in full control of her medium and the themes she wants to convey. Her installation, *The Book Project*, examines our changing relationship with knowledge and information as illustrated through the written word.

Dyer instructed the museum to collect discarded books over the past year for her installation. She then pieced the work together and suspended it from the museum's ceiling.

I asked Dyer if the installation was meant to evoke the tree of knowledge. "Pillars of knowledge, actually," she said. "The nature of a pillar of knowledge is that it is valued at a certain place and certain time and in another place and another time it might not have meaning. So there is that shifting notion of what is fact and what is fiction."

Novels, works of philosophy, music texts and scores and children's books are among the 2,500 volumes that went into constructing the 8m-tall structure. Dyer said that she was fascinated by the fact that the majority of the discarded books were computer manuals — a sign perhaps of local preoccupations.

"This is Taiwan's history," Dyer said. "But it could be another history in another place."

Like Dyer, Taiwanese sculptor Chang Tzu-lung uses recycled material to fashion monumental and abstract works, eight of which are on display at Aigrette Down.

*The Spirit of Organicism* (有機之靈) is indicative of what Chang is trying to accomplish. The 3m-high structure resembles an aviary. The door, however, is open and formed to look like a bird's wing — it's as though the whole sculpture could take flight at any moment.

By slightly altering the appearance of the "birdcage," Chang completely changes our expectations of what its function could be. No longer a receptacle for animals, the cage itself becomes a metaphor for freedom.

## EXHIBITIONS



Kuo Wei-kuo, *Inescapable Jumbo Tower* (2009).  
 PHOTO COURTESY OF LIN & LIN GALLERY

Kuo Wei-kuo (郭維國) is one of a handful of contemporary Taiwanese artists who have been willing to reveal their darkest secrets in art — a theme that he continues in his solo exhibition at Lin & Lin Gallery (大未來林舍畫廊). Kuo's fantastical self-portraits resemble halls of mirrors that reflect the artist's psychologically complex world. They narrate the life of a middle-aged man who embellishes his fears and aspirations with mythological motifs. The paintings often feature the artist — sometimes nude, other times partially clothed — wandering through a desolate landscape surrounded by tempestuous storms that are created using a somber palette of browns, grays and purples. ■ Lin & Lin Gallery (大未來林舍畫廊), 13, Ln 252, Dunhua S Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市敦化南路一段252巷13號). For a viewing, call (02) 2721-8488 ■ Begins Saturday, until Nov. 1

The National Museum of History is holding a retrospective exhibition of gifted musician, poet and calligrapher Lu Fo-ting's (呂佛庭) work. The show, displayed on the museum's fourth floor, consists of scrolls of Lu's calligraphy, which expresses his deep reverence for and understanding of Zen Buddhism. Lu's landscape paintings, inspired by ancient Chinese ideograms, are also on display. ■ National Museum of History (國立歷史博物館), 49 Nanhai Rd, Taipei City (台北市南海路49號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 6pm. Tel: (02) 2361-0270. Admission: NT\$30 ■ Ongoing

**Crystal City (水晶城市)** is a series of installations by Taiwanese artist and Taipei Art Award-winner Wu Chi-tsung (吳季瑤). Using a projector, LED lighting and plastic, Wu creates an urban environment of geometrical transparency that questions the viewer's place in the city. ■ 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). Open Tuesdays to Saturdays from 1pm to 10pm. Tel: (02) 2507-7243 ■ Until Oct. 31

In **The Color — Ink Paintings of Pan Hsin-hua (彩墨—潘信華個展)**, the Taiwanese artist creates a surrealistic world using a style that is rooted in Chinese traditional ink painting. Pan juxtaposes past and present in his paintings, which examine the relevance of tradition in contemporary culture. His irreverent visual language incorporates unconventional pictorial elements that are often of an explicitly contemporary and playful nature. ■ VT Art Salon (非常廟藝文空間), B1, 47 Yitong St, Taipei City (台北市伊通街47號地B1). Open Tuesday to Thursday 2pm to 11pm, Friday and Saturday from 2pm to 1am ■ Until Oct. 31

Those who are enamored with Taiwan's raucous party politics could do no worse than check out **You Are a Horse That I Would Never Ride (你是匹我不想騎的馬)**, a project by Taiwanese artist Jao Chia-en (饒加恩), who just completed a residency at Taipei Artist Village. The exhibit investigates the experience of being "infected by local political fever." Jao will give a two-hour workshop on Sunday beginning at 10am titled *Fever District*. Participants are invited to create their own coat of arms based on their personality. To register for the workshop, call (02) 3393-7377 X220. ■ Barry Room, Taipei Artist Village (台北國際藝術村百里驛), 7 Beiping E Rd, Taipei City (台北市北平東路7號). Open Tuesdays to Fridays from 10am to 6pm. Tel: (02) 3393-7377 ■ Begins Saturday, until Oct. 25

In his solo exhibition at Main Trend Gallery, Taiwanese painter Lee Ming-tse (李明則) employs multiple viewpoints to depict village life and religious practices. "I paint where I live, things that happened before and things that are happening now," he says. His sources of inspiration include temple festivals, local theaters, newspaper stands and traditional markets. ■ 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). Open Tuesdays through Saturdays from 11am to 7pm. Tel: (02) 2587-3412 ■ Begins Saturday, until Nov. 7



*The Tate Modern tells the story of pop art as pure, fast commodity. From Warhol to Hirst via Koons and Haring, it's flash, brash and hugely entertaining*

BY LAURA CUMMING  
 THE OBSERVER, LONDON

Pop Life is the most cunning show imaginable. I am tempted to call it artful. On the one hand it concerns itself with fame, fortune and the links between them from Warhol to Hirst, centering on artists who have used the mass media to create their own brand and persona. On the other, it is destined to be a surefire winner for Tate Modern, not to mention all the many collectors, artists and dealers involved, spinning money-minded art smoothly back into money under cover of historical scholarship.

Pop Life deserves to be a hit, though, because it tries so hard to get the genie

back into the bottle — to distil, as far as possible, a whole chapter of modern times in which a particular kind of art turned itself into pure commodity.

So this is Andy Warhol selling two portraits for the price of one, his face to Vidal Sassoon and his reputation to Drexel Burnham Lambert. It is Jeff Koons turning his most famous steel sculpture — of a balloon — back into real balloon, 15m high and leasing it for PR purposes to Macy's.

It is Takashi Murakami spreading his super-flat pop art all across the globe from art fairs and glossy magazines to

actual shops. And not just art shops but branches of Louis Vuitton — where his bright logos sell the exorbitant handbags — and Tokyo 7-Elevens, where customers get a tiny plastic Murakami figure with their gum.

It is most certainly the gavel coming down on a Koons' love heart for approximately 80 million times the price of similar gewgaws at an accessory store. The tales are legion, the headlines ubiquitous: what a pageant of greed, what an allegory of supply, demand, ingenuity, inflation, excess. The only problem is how to convey it in objects.

Japanese artist Takashi Murakami poses with his artwork *Hirapon* at the launch of the **Pop Life: Art in a Modern World** at the Tate Modern in London on Sept. 29.

PHOTO: REUTERS

The first room at Tate Modern is a knock-out: Koons' *Rabbit* (1986), that gleaming cast of an inflatable bunny that turns a balloon into a voodoo doll, horrifying yet inane reflective; Andy Warhol's terrific late self-portrait, a skull in a scarlet fright-wig bowing out into the darkness; Murakami's appalling monument of a manga fantasy woman, teensy waist, colossal breasts spouting skipping ropes of milk as she sweetly smiles: the frightening potency of graphics emerging in three dimensions.

Each of these artists has a subsequent gallery — or three, in the case of Warhol, who surely deserves the space as patron saint of almost everything that follows.

The curators have aimed for period authenticity by reconstructing some eventful shows. Keith Haring's *Pop Shop*, with its trademark wall drawings and its chiming till, has been recreated complete with fully operational shop. Nothing like the zip and register of the graphics, incidentally: insistently recognizable and undimmed by the years through the commercial ruse of timeless black and white.

Less arduous, at least in practical terms, is the exact facsimile of Richard Prince's *Spiritual America*. This involved the rephotographing of Garry Gross' infamous 1976 photograph for Playboy Press of a 10-year-old Brooke Shields wearing nothing but mascara. The frame is ornamental, the lighting low, the walls are red. These are the "quotation marks" in which Prince supposedly offers his state of the nation address.

Koons' 1989 *Made in Heaven* show — soaringly, eye-poppingly gross — hasn't been recreated in quite a while. That may have something to do with the anal sex, or the gigantically impractical sculpture of Koons straddling the porn star Ilona Staller on a rock; or perhaps it has something to do with the bitter end of their marriage.

That show — from the colorful

billboard for a non-existent movie starring the lovers, to the unambiguous *Ilana's Asshole* — was rejected by the art world, which felt Koons had taken exploitation too far. But it is instructive to read the reviews, which fastidiously avoid the noticeably hardcore porn.

Perhaps the art of those bad aesthetic times was prophylactically sealed against reality. Better to talk about provocation, institutional critique, the raising of consciousness, the way in which Koons always referred to high art — bling, but with added rococo — than the content. For what is the content, if not a poke in the eye?

Bright yet dark, shrewd yet vacuous: Koons' art remains poised in equal tension. And when you get to Damien Hirst's gallery full of gold calves in formaldehyde, gold spot paintings, gold vitrines dazzling with diamonds, it is no longer so obvious to whom he owes the greater debt: the production line of Koons or Warhol?

The British galleries of Pop Life give Tate Modern its first chance to show Hirst, Emin, Lucas, Gavin Turk et al as international history, which has the effect of deactivating their art. What were slick, rude, crude, epigrammatic, hilarious or willfully dumb now look like the artifacts of air-conditioned archives.

Not everyone will lament this, of course, but the Americans do generally get a better presentation. Warhol's silkscreened gemstones are shown in ultra-violet light, Haring has a great rap sound track, Koons gets all the floodlight he could want. The show is buzzy, theatrical, densely jammed and much more of a blast than expected.

It is of course composed of fast art: nothing to detain you for long, though plenty to prime the post-show conversation. How quickly repetition set in as modus operandi: the series, the reiteration, the flogged horse, the running gag, the market-servicing multiple and edition. How often sex sold art, how often artists sold their looks, how indivisible art frequently seemed from prostitution, promotion and pornography.

And how empty the provocations often were — and still are.