

In a bubble

Wang Te-yu's newest work challenges viewers to think about the walls, floors and ceilings of interior spaces. It's also fun to play with

BY BLAKE CARTER
STAFF REPORTER

The ribs of my 7-Eleven umbrella are 60cm long. If this can be taken as the average radius of an umbrella, Wang Te-yu's (王德瑜) largest work to date required enough nylon "umbrella fabric" (*yusanbu*, 雨傘布) to manufacture more than 700 of them. Her most recent "balloon" piece covers about 10m by 12m of floor space and much of it presses against a ceiling more than 6m overhead.

"When we first inflated it I sat inside with a couple friends and wondered if it was too big," the 39-year-old artist said on Sunday. "I even considered making a large inflatable pillow to offset the size of the space inside."

Wang and an assistant had spent two weeks sewing bolts of translucent white "umbrella cloth" from Taipei's Yongle Market (永樂市場) into a giant balloon that is on display at the Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts (KdMFOA, 關渡美術館) until March 28. Every morning at 10am museum staff plug in three air pumps to inflate *No. 65*. It takes about a half-hour for the work to fill most of the second floor's largest gallery and part of the third, from wall to wall and floor to ceiling.

Visitors can enter the work through two small slots — one each on the upper and lower floors. The upper entrance leads to a balcony from which the large gallery below can be viewed. Imagine an oversized loft apartment designed for the boy in the bubble, but the "bubble" — this time — isn't clear. One of Wang's earliest sketches for the work shows a person viewing the main gallery from what would be the loft.

The lower floor entrance gives viewers access to a much larger gallery, still part of the same "balloon." From below visitors can watch others above and vice versa. There's even a (no longer) secret, chest-high peephole at the far left end of the lower level that can be unzipped to give

viewers outside the bubble a different viewing angle. The opening was originally intended to be an entrance, but when the work was first inflated the slot rose so that it was too high to be used as an entryway.

Like many of her best-known works, Wang invites viewers to explore not only the massive interior of *No. 65*, but also to squeeze around the outside or underneath. In 1997, she filled the second and third floors of Taipei's IT Park Gallery (伊通公園) with *No. 27*, two transparent plastic bubbles that visitors had to squeeze by to arrive at the cafe above.

I asked whether viewers were hesitant to explore her works. "Children are the best," she said. "They just do what they feel like."

But it's not all fun and games. Wang's works challenge viewers to see art spaces in a way that may not be familiar to people raised with the "hands off" policy of many galleries and museums. *No. 65*'s shape, its seams and the lighting — unchanged from the museum's usual setup, except for a spotlight that had to be removed for fear it would burn the nylon — draw attention to the interior of the location in which it's shown. From inside, the area seems even larger than it is; the smoke detectors and texture of the ceiling are emphasized like meat in cling-wrap; the distance between the third floor balcony and the second floor wall, opposite, appears infinite. From the outside, it looks like a sterilized carnival tent.

Wang began a course in sculpture at Taipei National University of the Arts back when it was called National Institute of the Arts and located in Luzhou. Years of carving plaster, polishing wood and grinding stone gave her a taste for "doing something else." She began wrapping stockings around wire frames and later used transparent fishing line to stretch fabric within fixed spaces, creating an "empty sculpture."

Since then Wang's work has often been interpreted as feminist: She's female and she creates works with entrances that can be compared to a womb or vagina. Wang says she's open to any interpretation of her work, but I prefer to think of her as she describes herself — a sculptor.

No. 65 is not necessarily a return to, but a further exploration of the "empty sculpture" concept she began exploring as a university student. Her models for *No. 65* were pillow-like and depicted the work's external shape — difficult to glean now that it's installed.

"Despite the models, I really didn't know how it would look until that first day we inflated it," she says.

She dropped the idea to add a pillow inside the main gallery, leaving the space to speak for itself.

Wang has (once again) called into the question the boundaries of three-dimensional art. Her work isn't really a "balloon" that fills a room. Its essence lies in the viewer's ability to appreciate the air that fills it, the space between the fabric and the building's interior, the absence of any "don't touch" feeling and last, but not least, the elegant glow of the museum's original lighting on and through the "umbrella cloth."

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: No. 65: Wang Te-yu Solo Exhibition (王德瑜個展/No. 65)
WHEN: Until March 28. Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 5pm
WHERE: Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts (關渡美術館), 1 Xueyuan Rd, Beitou Dist, Taipei City (台北市北投區學園路1號)
ADMISSION: Free



Top, top right and lower right: Wang Te-yu, *No. 65* (2010).
Above: Wang Te-yu, *No. 27* (1997).

PHOTOS COURTESY OF WANG TE-YU
PHOTO COURTESY OF WANG TE-YU

Carlos Slim speeds ahead with dazzling art palace by son-in-law

The Mexico City-based museum, a stretched, twisted aluminum 'cube,' will house the telecom billionaire's vast collection of art

BY GERI SMITH
BLOOMBERG

For many years, Mexican telecommunications billionaire Carlos Slim lived a deliberately understated lifestyle. He toiled in a windowless, bunker-like office surrounded by leather-bound history books, colonial-era paintings, and baseball paraphernalia. His most personal luxuries in the concrete structure appeared to be Cohiba cigars and monogrammed shirts.

As his telecom empire expanded and his wealth ballooned, Slim spruced up his surroundings and accumulated an art collection that today includes 66,000 pieces, from 15th-century European masters to the second-largest private collection of sculptures by Auguste Rodin outside of France.

Now Slim, whose estimated US\$59 billion net worth makes him one of the world's richest people, is making waves with a boldly designed art museum he is building in Mexico City.

Imagine a gleaming aluminum cube that has been stretched and twisted so that it soars 46m into the sky, its curving upper contours reminiscent of the bow of a ship. The design is at once whimsical and structurally daring.

The 17,000m² Soumaya Museum, with exhibition space on five levels, is rising quickly in a former industrial district where General Motors Corp operated an automobile assembly plant until the 1990s.

Named after Slim's late wife, the museum is part of a 4.9 hectare urban development that will include the corporate headquarters for Slim's business conglomerate, Grupo Carso, and Telcel, the Mexican mobile phone company he controls. There will also be a small shopping mall, two upscale apartment towers and an underground theater.

The entire project was designed by someone very close to Slim: his son-in-law Fernando Romero, 38, who before setting up his own practice in Mexico City worked for four years with



An architectural rendering of the Soumaya Museum is shown in this image released to the press on Monday.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

the Office for Metropolitan Architecture under Pritzker Prize-winning architect and urbanist Rem Koolhaas in Rotterdam.

Romero, who is married to Slim's daughter, also named Soumaya, has won praise in international design competitions. He is well regarded in Mexico's architectural community.

"I don't know if having a famous father-in-law is such a good thing at this early stage of his career, but some of his work is very provocative and fresh," says Bernardo Gomez Pimentel, one of Mexico's leading architects.

Romero's Soumaya Museum is the latest eye-catching showcase for the art collections of wealthy patrons, a global phenomenon that Jose Maria Nava, head of

the undergraduate architecture department at the Iberoamerican University in Mexico City, where Romero studied, calls "buildings as spectacles."

Each of the museum's 28 columns is different. "We curl steel plates into tubes and then we give the right curvature to each of them — each column has different properties, depending on the weight of the building that it will be supporting," Romero says.

(In keeping with Slim's penchant for vertical integration, a company he owns that builds offshore oil rigs is manufacturing the steel columns.)

In June last year, when construction already had begun, Romero brought in Gehry

Technologies, an engineering/design firm founded by architect Frank Gehry. A half-dozen engineers, software whizzes, and architects using 3D aerospace design technology have been working with Romero to design a workable external skin for the unusual structure.

Romero originally wanted to create a facade of Carrara marble, reminiscent of the glimmering surface of the Taj Majal. "Marble is coming back to industrial design. Some of the most influential designers are using marble," he says.

Slim wanted something more modern, so they settled on shiny aluminum. The museum will be covered by more than 16,000 hexagonal aluminum plates

arranged in a complex, computer-designed honeycomb pattern.

Building-cost estimates of US\$34 million have floated through the architecture community, a number Romero would not confirm or deny. The museum is expected to open to the public by the end of this year, after only a year of actual construction.

Romero hasn't made a public presentation, and most of the drawings circulating on the Web don't reflect the final design. Slim, a lightning rod of criticism for his immense fortune and domination of Mexico's phone industry, may well be pleased to let the building twist mysteriously out of the ground in the final form that he and Romero have so meticulously planned.

EXHIBITIONS

Balgo Hills, in Western Australia, is a melting pot of Aboriginal cultures and is one of the most important centers for Aboriginal art in the country. A sampling of the work of 26 Aboriginal artists from the region titled **Balgo Contemporary Australian Art From the Balgo Hills** is currently on view at Taipei Fine Arts Museum. The Aboriginal artists from Balgo Hills create art that resembles experimental techniques of Western abstractionism and expressionism, yet employ a unique visual language imbued with strong totemic imagery.

■ Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM — 台北市立美術館), 181, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市中山北路三段181號). Open daily from 9:30am to 5:30pm, closes at 8:30pm on Saturdays. Tel: (02) 2595-7656
■ Until Feb. 21

The Classics (經典大展) presents a who's who selection of works by Taiwanese artists, both living and deceased. The paintings range from Modern works by Chu Teh-chun (朱德群) and Yang San-lang (楊三郎) to contemporary canvases by Lee Ming-tse (李明則) and Lien Chien-hsing (連建興). Sculptures by Ju Ming (朱銘) are also on display.

■ Impressions Art Gallery (印象畫廊), 40, Renai Rd Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市仁愛路四段40號). Open Tuesdays to Fridays from 10:30am to 7pm and Saturdays and Sundays from 11am to 7pm. Tel: (02) 2705-9966
■ Until Feb. 5

Celestial Realm (天界) is a solo exhibit by Taiwanese artist Chiu Hsien-te (邱顯德). Chiu's finely detailed watercolor landscape paintings are flourished with rugged expressionist brushstrokes.

■ 99 Degrees Art Center (99 藝術中心) 5F, 259, Dunhua S Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市敦化南路一段259號5F). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 11am to 6pm. Tel: (02) 2700-3099
■ Until Feb. 28



Susie Bootja Bootja, *Kaningarra, Near the Canning Stock Route*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TFAM

The fine line separating fantasy and reality is the central theme of **Low Floating Palace — Remix Version (浮宮 - 瑞米克斯版)**, a solo exhibit by Taiwanese multimedia artist Lin Ching-fong (林慶芳). Lin employs neon lighting, paint and sculpture to create works that examine Taiwan's iconic betel nut girls, and in which he ponders the dichotomy between their attractive exteriors and the often torturous

emotional lives they lead.

■ Gallery J. Chen, 3F, 40, Ln 161, Dunhua S Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市敦化南路一段161巷40號3F). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from noon to 9pm. Tel: (02) 2781-0959
■ Until Feb. 21

From Gatchaman to Deva Loka — The Legend Continues is a solo exhibition by Japanese contemporary artist Yoshitaka Amano. The show features Amano's latest fine art paintings rendered in a manga and anime style.

■ Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei (MOCA, Taipei), 39 Changan W Rd, Taipei City (台北市長安西路39號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 6pm. Tel: (02) 2552-3720
■ Until March 7

The Yingge Ceramics Museum's Ceramics Park Gallery has been taken over by an ambush of tigers — ceramic tigers that is. The museum chose 120 sculptures as part of its contest for the Year of the Tiger. A brief overview of the tiger's place in Chinese history and folk religion accompanies the exhibit, revealing that although extinct in many parts of the world, the large feline retains considerable mythological resonance for Taiwanese.

■ Yingge Ceramics Museum (鶯歌陶器博物館), 200 Wenhua Rd, Yingge Township, Taipei County (台北縣鶯歌鎮文化路200號). Open daily from 9:30am to 5pm, closes at 6pm on Saturdays and Sundays. Tel: (02) 8677-2727
■ Until Feb. 28