

Francois Place's watercolor illustrations are known for their lively detail.

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On moral grounds

French author Francois Place's books are written for children, but they explore complex themes like personal culpability and the negative impact of globalization

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Like many of French author Francois Place's books, *The Last Giant* is about voyages, discoveries — and their unexpected consequences.

The book, which first came out more than 15 years ago, has had a journey of its own. It was published in France in 1992 to immediate acclaim, winning that year's Grand Prize for Children's Literature and translated into English, Korean and Japanese, among other languages, but it only made its Chinese-language debut (as “最後的巨人”) last year.

The book takes place in the mid-19th century, but its themes — the negative impact of globalization on the environment and local culture — resonate today.

In Place's illustrations, human characters are drawn as tiny and indistinct against lush, carefully detailed landscapes. The protagonist of *The Last Giant*, an English explorer named Archibald Leopold Ruthmore, is identifiable only by his ever-present top hat. Place hopes this will allow readers to step into

the story — and examine their own culpability in the issues the book explores.

“You are just able to put yourself in the place of the little man and the landscape seems larger than it is. It is for readers to come to this place, to wear the hat of Archibald,” said Place at last week's Taipei International Book Exhibition (台北國際書展).

The Last Giant begins when Archibald buys an enormous tooth with intricate carvings from a sailor. Convinced that the designs are a map leading to the mythical land of giants, Archibald sets out with a large entourage. But a hostile tribe soon massacres his crew and Ruthmore is stranded in a jungle with only his top hat for company — until the very giants he is seeking discover him. The tribe of nine quickly adopts Archibald as one of their own, carrying him on their shoulders as they hunt, cook and participate in singing rituals. After 10 months, Archibald returns to England, where his attempts to tell other scientists about his adventures are met with derision. Determined to salvage his professional



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— Francois Place, author

reputation, Archibald musters up an even larger expedition — but his efforts end in tragedy for his friends.

Many of Place's books deal with the theme of exploration in different ways, either directly, as with *The Last Giants* and *The Land of Amazons*, a fantasy atlas, or obliquely, as with his recently published first full-length novel, *La Douane Volante*, (“The Flying Customs”), about a little boy who accidentally wanders into the land of death.

Place is inspired by travel books from different eras, which he began reading as a young boy. “I was interested by civilizations everywhere. I picked up books in the library about [Native Americans], about Africa, about Tibet, about Chinese and Japanese people. I was always interested in different ways of life,” said Place.

The tattoos of cultures like the Maori in New Zealand, in which each design has a social or spiritual meaning, inspired the “talking skin” of the giants in Place's book. Intricate drawings

appear spontaneously on the giant's bodies whenever they feel deep emotion, just as people flush red in embarrassment or pale in disgust. Archibald knows that he has been accepted into the clan when he discovers a tiny portrait of himself on the back of Antala, the tribe's leader, a detail that makes the story's conclusion all the more poignant and troubling.

“It was a true friendship and the story is about the betraying of friendship,” said Place. But he doesn't place all the blame for the outcome on Archibald's shoulders. Place set the story in the mid-19th century because it was an era when “people thought that science was only goodness and it could only bring happiness and health. Archibald is only a scientist who thinks he has to tell others what he has discovered. He does his work and he doesn't think so much.”

“But now we know science has two faces,” Place added. “One is good and the other gives anxiety, for instance, the atomic bombs. So we know that science can also destroy the world.”

EXHIBITIONS



Liu Shih-tung, *Monkeys Love to Paint*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LIN & LIN GALLERY

Beyond the Visible (在可見之後) is a duo exhibition by Taiwanese contemporary artists Liu Shih-tung (劉時燾) and Lai Chiu-chen (賴九岑). Liu's paintings update the centuries-old folk custom of paper cutting. After assembling images from fashion magazines, Liu cuts them into birds, flowers and plants, which he then layers onto his canvases in vibrant pastiches. Lai's canvases contain characters that wouldn't look out of place in an episode of *South Park*. And like many of that show's themes, Lai's portraits of soldiers in night vision goggles or gas masks carry a political message, though without the vulgarity.

■ 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). Open Tuesdays to Fridays from 10am to 7pm and Saturdays and Sundays from 11am to 7pm. Tel: (02) 2721-8488 ■ Until March 7

Figures and Genre in the Art and Aesthetics of Form: Selections From the History of Chinese Painting (造型與美感——人民民俗篇) examines the human figure as a subject in Chinese painting. The show covers the Yuan (1279-1368), Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties and provides a comprehensive look at the subject and brushwork of artists, revealing their stylistic features and technical achievements.

■ National Palace Museum (國立故宮博物院), 221 Zhishan Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市至善路二段221號). Open daily from 9am to 5pm. Tel: (02) 2881-2021. Admission: NT\$160 ■ Until March 25

Chinese festival couplets form the central motif in **New Year — Color Taiwan (新春聯·新藝象·色彩台灣)**, a new series of paintings by Ariel Kuo (郭瓦若). Reveling in the joyous atmosphere of this important holiday, Kuo infuses her couplets with vibrant peonies, chrysanthemums and lilies. The show also features a few works from her past shows, Places — Tainan, and Paint Our Color, in which she reflects on Taiwan's architecture.

■ Mei's Tea Bar, 16, Ln 37, Yongkang St, Taipei City (台北市永康街37巷16號). Open daily from 3pm to 1am. Tel: (02) 2394-2425 ■ Until March 1

Three architectural concepts and six sculptural installations make up Taiwanese architect E. Chen's (陳逸堅) **Wunderkammer (藥)**. The anti-consumerist works

attempt to reinterpret the meaning of artificial space and question the functionality of man-made objects.

■ 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). Tel: (02) 2595-7656. Open daily from 9:30am to 5:30pm, closes at 8:30pm on Saturdays ■ Until March 14

Super Massive is a new series of hand-weaving on canvas “paintings” by Taiwanese embroidery artist Chang En-tzu (張恩慈).

■ 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 March 28

The diversity of human creativity forms the underlying concept behind **C'est la Vie (人間——浮遊)**, a group exhibition of paintings, installation art and photography by some of Taiwan's hottest emerging artists. The five exhibitors are Tung Hsin-ru (董心如), Chen Shun-chu (陳順欒), Wu Tung-lung (吳東龍), Lin Yi-shu (林羿束) and Tian Bao-chang (田葆昌).

■ La Chambre Art Gallery (小室藝廊), 31, Ln 52, Siwei Rd, Taipei City (台北市四維路52巷31號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from noon to 9pm. Tel: (02) 2700-3689 ■ From Saturday until March 12



Tsai Wen-hsiang, *Amass Fortune*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TFAM

Six contemporary Taiwanese photographers take the medium in new directions with the help of digital technology in **Beyond Reality (超現實·攝影展)**. The exhibition consists of 44 large-scale prints by Wu Chung-wei (吳忠維), Liu Cheng-hsiang (劉振祥), Tsai Wen-hsiang (蔡文祥), Hung Shih-tung (洪世聰), Wu Cheng-chang (吳政璋) and Chen Pin-hua (陳斌華). Clearly inspired by more traditional artistic mediums such as drawing, painting, theater and architecture, the photographers offer an unconventional look at Taiwan's various cultural and geographical environments.

■ Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM), 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 March 14