

# FEATURES

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## Eye wide open

Multi-genre artist Mr Eyeball aims to help people answer their everyday existential dilemmas

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... The message is always that no matter how you feel at the moment, happiness and sadness are both part of the same universe and you have to face it.

— Mr Eyeball, artist



Above: Chen Po-wei, the man behind the eyeball, poses in his Xinyi District office.

Right: Mr Eyeball's recent work targets a wider audience than his more surreal and abstract performance art, but continues to explore the same themes.

**Mr** Eyeball casts a steady, unwavering gaze on the human condition — and not just because he has no eyelids.

In the past eight years the prolific artist has worked in multiple arenas — including directing, choreography, writing, singing, acting, illustration and fine art — and performed in England, Japan, the US and China. Mr Eyeball's resume includes a one-man (or one-eye) exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Taipei (台北當代藝術館), crossover projects with Converse and Swatch and a line of T-shirts, tote bags and toys that are available at Red House Theater (紅樓劇場). His published work ranges from art books to an illustrated series called *Xiang Tai Duo* (想太多, or "think too much"), which is regularly excerpted in *Apple Daily*. In his spare time, Mr Eyeball serves as stylist to the stars; pop singers Big S (大S), otherwise known as Barbie Hsu (徐熙媛), and Little S (小S), otherwise known as Dee Hsu (徐熙娣), and Ricky Hsiao (蕭煌奇) have worn his outrageous creations in performances or on the red carpet.

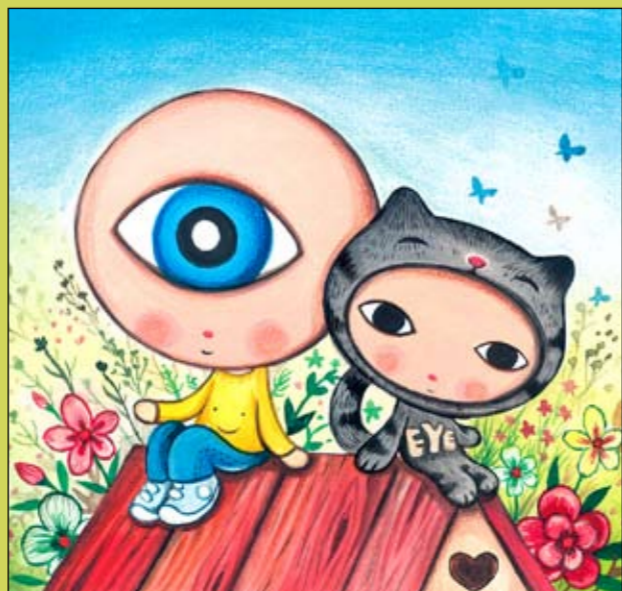
The anthropomorphized organ is the brainchild of Chen Po-wei (陳柏維), a former theater set and costume designer who launched the Mr Eyeball brand in 2002.

Mr Eyeball's art has shifted along with Chen's interests and target audience. In the beginning, Chen says, his approach was much darker and Mr Eyeball worked primarily in performance art, drawing on Chen's theatrical background. His first book, *Eyeball Loves the Globe*, was filled with photographs of dark scenarios that looked like Hieronymus Bosch-Salvador Dali-Cindy Sherman mash-ups.

But Mr Eyeball has since lightened up. The *Xiang Tai Duo* series has brightly colored illustrations of children romping in animal costumes; Mr Eyeball now gears much of his work toward a younger audience, appearing at comic conventions and doing outreach work at elementary schools impacted by Typhoon Morakot.

Mr Eyeball's artistic output, however, continues to explore the same themes. The kids in the *Xiang Tai Duo* series pose questions like "what is the meaning of existence?" to readers. On Mr Eyeball's latest album, *This World* (這個世界), he sings about the transcendence of happiness. In the end, Mr Eyeball just wants people to turn their gaze inwards, says Chen, and contemplate life's little existentialist questions.

**Taipei Times:** Mr Eyeball can come across as a little scary and a lot of your past work has mixed cuteness with dark elements, but ultimately it seems like he has a very idealistic, upbeat approach to life.



**Chen Po-wei:** When I first started out, my style was a lot more direct, but the message was the same, that life can be happy and colorful, but at the same time is often difficult and filled with sorrow. On my first album cover there was a drawing of Mr Eyeball looking cheerful and happy, but in the back illustration he's chopped his arms off. The songs on that record were like that: half were happy and half were darker. The message was that sadness doesn't mean that good times won't come again and happiness doesn't mean everything will always work out.

The new album, *This World*, is different in tone but it covers the same themes. There is a photo of Mr Eyeball on the front and of me without the mask on the back, but most people don't know it's me, because I don't go out in public often as myself. But this picture of me looks a little blue, both literally in the color and in the feeling it portrays. I think that's more like how I am in private, because I'm more introverted. The front cover, however, is when I wear the Mr Eyeball mask and become this character. I'm livelier and more energetic. *This World* is subtler than my earlier work, but the message is always that no matter how you feel at the moment, happiness and sadness are both part of the same universe and you have to face it.

**TT:** What inspired you to make an eyeball into a character?

**CP:** I've always liked the art of the Surrealists, especially Dali. A lot of their art used body parts like eyes or lips to symbolize different concepts. I really liked that element of fantasy and as someone who was a little shy and quiet, I felt attracted to art that could express multiple meanings.

When I created my brand, I had to think of a logo that would express what I was trying to do with it. I thought, I already use a lot of eyeballs in my art and they are very flexible artistically. They connote many different things and that was useful in the beginning, when my work was more abstract.

There's a Chinese saying that if you close one eye, you will see things more clearly. I thought this saying is a bit narrow because I think most people are actually too focused on one thing and they don't want to see things in context. We have tunnel vision, because we have goals like wanting to own a home in 10 years or attracting someone we like. But even if you work really hard on something you aren't guaranteed to get it. So I think the message of the saying should be that people have to keep one eye on the world and close one eye to look inwards if they want to be truly fulfilled.

**TT:** Your series, *Xiang Tai Duo*, is a lot warmer and gentler in feel than your earlier books and performance art, but it continues to cover the same themes.

**CP:** The illustrations are sweet, but I write the books for adults, too, not just kids. When you look at the text, it's not as simple as you'd assume. I think people who have had



Above: Mr Eyeball has performed in England, the US, Japan and China.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF EYEBALL LOVES THE GLOBE

more life experience will get more out of the books. It's like when a cartoon character has an angel and a devil on his shoulders, prompting him and pulling him in two directions. The books are meant to be kind of like that. We all have voices inside of us, one telling us we should be happier and the other asking, if I'm not happy, then what do I need to do to be more content?

The books also try to get the point across that everyone thinks about these things. [Entrepreneur and billionaire] Terry Guo (郭台銘) and Jay Chou (周杰倫) also deal with these issues. Sometimes people wonder, "Am I the only one who feels this way? Where is the meaning in my life? What are my passions?"

**TT:** I see this phrase a lot in your work: "I am a human being, I am also an alien" (我是地球人，也是外星人). What does that mean?

**CP:** When people talk about aliens, no one is sure what they look like and we make up our own fantasies of what they are. A lot of times aliens are pictured as being spooky, like ghosts — but of course we also don't know what ghosts look like.

So the meaning of that sentence is that "there are times when I'm like you and there are also times when I am also completely unlike you." Sometimes people feel a deep sense of kinship because they have a few things in common, but as soon as they discover a difference, they suddenly feel completely alienated from one another. That's why there are so many religious conflicts, because it's hard to reconcile spiritual differences. Or you're black, I'm white; you're from the West, I'm from Asia; we work for competing companies ... all these differences can make people feel like they come from different planets.

The point I'm trying to make is that ultimately we're all the same. We're all human beings. You don't have to split people up into groups. Sometimes people in Taiwan say Aboriginal people are lazy. Or when Asian people travel abroad, sometimes they feel threatened when they see black people. People like slapping labels on one another. But the point is that we have more in common than not. Just because we have differences doesn't mean that we can't communicate — and just because we have things in common doesn't mean we'll get along.