



Tao Ya-lun employs lasers and smoke machines to create ethereal installations that probe the relationship between humankind and technology

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

▶ Clockwise from the left: *Branding 1*, *Light Film 2*, *Light Film 3* and *Light Wall Around 2*. PHOTOS COURTESY OF GALLERY 100



The tunnel at the end of the light

TAO Ya-lun (陶亞倫) was formerly known as a kinetic artist whose contraptions used motion to explore primitive desires in the information age.

Then he saw the light.

Since 2003 Tao has been playing with lasers, using them both as a medium to create otherworldly realms of fog and light and as a metaphor for technology and its quasi-religious role in modern life.

"Most new media artists talk about images, information and their impact on human beings. But I am more interested in the medium of light itself," said Tao, an assistant professor at the School of Film and New Media of the Taipei National University of the Arts (國立台北藝術大學) whose solo show is currently on display in several rooms on the second floor of Gallery 100 (百藝畫廊).

"[I see] light as a bedrock of our technology-driven civilization because practically everything is now conducted through optical transmission."

During an experiment at home, Tao discovered that when a laser beam hits a piece of glow-in-the-dark paper, it creates a dark spot, as if the paper were, in his words, "branded" by the laser.

Tao uses this technique for his installations *Branding 1* and *Branding 2*. In both works, viewers watch as a laser mounted on a mechanical arm "paints" on Tao's custom-made light-sensitive paper. The finished image in *Branding 1* depicts a man in a cage. In *Branding 2*, the same man sits inside a church.

Tao means for viewers to compare the two images. "Man strives to satisfy all his desires through technology, but he is keenly aware of his inability to transcend the limits of physicality," he said. "At the same time, technology creates a new myth, a new religion and an infinite imagination despite [the limits of the physical world]."

Light Film 2 generates an even more mesmerizing effect by using a laser and a smoke machine to create a tunnel of light. The green laser illuminates particles of dust that surround the tunnel like nebulous clouds, making the tunnel look like a black hole.

Tao says his installations trigger a variety of reactions. Art critics who approach his work through the lens of postmodernism think he's exploring fragmented power centers and pluralistic identities, though Tao says he's more interested in the idea of what he calls a "collective subconscious" that is at war with the limits of the physical world. One critique that particularly stands out in the artist's mind, though, was offered by a former Air Force officer who used to fly spy planes over China and saw Tao's Light Film series at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (台北市立美術館) several years ago.

"He told me that my work looked exactly like the clouds he saw at dawn when flying at very high altitudes," Tao said.



EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: Tao Ya-lun Solo Exhibition — Impenetrable Superficiality (陶亞倫個展—一切不開的表面)

WHERE: Gallery 100 (百藝畫廊), 6, Ln 30, Changan E Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市長安東路一段30巷6號)

WHEN: Until March 28. Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 11am to 7pm. Tel: (02) 2536-2120

ON THE NET: www.gallery100.com.tw



Eye

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TT: You've done more performances for younger audiences recently. How do kids react to Mr Eyeball? Are some of them freaked out?

CP: No, actually, and that's partly because the eyeball mask has changed. At first it was designed to look like a real eyeball, with blood vessels, so it was a lot scarier. Now it's like a cartoon, it even has rosy cheeks. Mr Eyeball's movements have also changed. At first when I wore the Mr Eyeball mask, I wasn't really into accompanying it with cute movements. I wore things like business suits to go along with it. But last year we were at a comic convention, and there I wore a suit made out of children's fabric, with cartoon characters all over it. So we've definitely changed and we've started to reach out to kids and teenagers.

Also, it has to do with a change in my own interests. At first I wanted Mr Eyeball to be a cool character, but when you work with children and you leap



into a room and say, "hi kids, how are you?" you instantly feel younger, too. I wanted to be different and cool, but now because of this change in direction I think it's easier for a general audience to accept Mr Eyeball and also for kids not to be scared. Maybe they think, "you look weird, but you can still play with us and make us laugh."

A few years ago I went to England to perform at an event and a little boy asked to take his photo with me. Afterward, his mom told me that this was probably only the third time he'd ever asked to take a photo with someone, because he's very shy, so she was very surprised. And I thought, I have no idea what's going on in that kid's head, but I can see that taking a photo with me is something he wants to do. There's a Chinese saying that your outer appearance is an extension of how you feel on the inside. It wasn't my intention at first, but now that we work with kids more, I've started to do things that I think they will find interesting and fun, so even if they don't know who Mr Eyeball is, they'll still think he's cute. I've never met a child who is scared of Mr Eyeball.

ON THE NET: www.eyeball.com.tw