

# Foreign affairs, local concerns

The four Taiwanese artists who participated in last year's Venice Biennale examine stereotypes and national identity in a new exhibit at Taipei Fine Arts Museum

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Right: Chang Chien-chi, *Empire's Borders I*.

Below: Chang Chien-chi, *Chen X. Family, New York City, 1998*, left, and *Chen X. Family, Fuzhou, China, 2007*.

Bottom: Yu Cheng-ta, *Ventriloquists: Introduction*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHANG CHIEN-CHI

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHANG CHIEN-CHI

PHOTO COURTESY OF YU CHENG-TA



When Taiwanese national Lee Chun-hua (李春華) accused Vancouver Airport immigration officials of maltreatment while trying to enter Canada earlier this month, the story stimulated public interest in the barriers Taiwanese sometimes encounter when traveling overseas. Lee's experience is probably something video artist Chen Chieh-jen (陳界仁) could relate to. The American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) refused Chen an entry visa in 2008 under what he later called degrading circumstances.

Taiwan's place on the international stage and how it is manifested at home and abroad forms the major theme of Foreign Affairs (外交), an exhibition by four Taiwanese artists who represented Taiwan at last year's 53rd Venice Biennale. In addition to Chen, the other artists are architect Hsieh Ying-chun (謝英俊), Magnum photographer Chang Chien-chi (張乾琦) and video installation artist Yu Cheng-ta (余政達).

"I personally encountered an interviewer's violent language when applying for a visa at the [AIT]," Chen wrote in his introduction for the show, though in the blurb he does not say what the AIT official allegedly said to him.

Following the AIT incident, Chen set up a blog, The Illegal Immigrant (我懷疑你是要偷渡) (cjonstrike.blogspot.com), to find out if other Taiwanese had faced similar problems.

"Just days after the blog had been launched, there were already several hundred posts and responses. The posts not only reflect numerous experiences of humiliation and failed applications, but also raises issues about Taiwan's need for more self-examination in relation to its global position and politics," he wrote.

In a way, the Venice Biennale symbolizes the kind of humiliating experiences that Chen discusses. From 1995 until 2000, Taiwan exhibited its artists at the "national" pavilion, reserved for participating countries. Under pressure from China, however, biennale organizers shifted the Taiwan Pavilion to the "institutional participants" section, beginning in 2001. It was demoted again to the "collaborative events" section located outside the main exhibition area because of space constraints and China's continued meddling.

(On a side note, this may have been a blessing in disguise, at least for the artists. Accustomed to thinking outside the box internationally, TFAM, the organizers of the Taiwan Pavilion,

chose the Palazzo delle Prigioni, a princely structure located in the heart of Venice's tourist district, thus ensuring that more than just art buffs would view the Taiwan Pavilion.)

After getting his blog up and running, Chen began work on *Empire's Borders I* (帝國邊界—I), a video that examines, "how the [US] government has used control tactics to plant imperial ideology in the consciousness of Taiwanese, and how after long-term internalization this has become the way in which Taiwan controls 'others.'"

Chinese brides make up a significant proportion of the "others" in Chen's video. These women arrive in Taiwan hoping for a better future but face the kind of discrimination Chen experienced at the hands of the AIT customs official.

Chang Chien-chi addresses the sacrifices illegal Chinese immigrants make to raise the living standards of their families back home. He juxtaposes black-and-white photographs of migrants living in cramped and squalid conditions in New York's Chinatown with color snapshots of their families in Fuzhou, China.

*Jiang J. Family, Fuzhou, China, 2004* and *Jiang J. Family, New York City, 2008* sympathetically capture the feelings of despondency and loneliness that result when these families are separated. The color version shows a middle-aged woman glancing down sadly as her husband, shown lying on a bed in the black-and-white photo, looks away from the camera while clenching his fist.

With so many husbands separated from their wives, Fuzhou has been nicknamed "widow village" (寡婦村). "They wait for money, for phone calls from New York and reunions that never take place," Chang wrote.

On a more playful note, Yu Cheng-ta's *Ventriloquists: Introduction* (附身[聲]者:介紹) examines the "cracks" in communication that exists when people from different cultures come together.

Yu scouted out foreigners in Taipei and filmed them responding to questions in Mandarin. Using subtitles, he collocates their responses with his own superficial assumptions about those he interviewed. Thinking back to the Lee incident and Chen's difficulties, one walks away feeling that immigration officials everywhere could gain valuable insight on difference by



watching Yu's videos.

Moving from international to local concerns, Hsieh Ying-chun's community-based approach to architecture has earned him plaudits at home and abroad. The section devoted to his designs features images of his houses in various stages of completion following natural disasters in Taiwan and China, along with other simple and environmentally friendly structures that use local building materials and labor.

His approach was illustrated to great effect back in 2002 when Hsieh gathered together a retinue of volunteers to erect one of his houses in the courtyard of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei, as part of its exhibit Myxomycity. Completed in two weeks, the building provided viewers with a close-up look at what can be done with limited budgets in disaster areas.

That TFAM didn't do something similar with Hsieh's work points to a more general problem with Foreign Affairs. Not only does the exhibition space feel cramped — I was jostled a number of times while watching Yu's videos — but the museum placed the show in its basement, a space typically reserved for emerging artists. With all the talk of increasing Taiwan's international profile, one might have expected the curators to display the works front and center on TFAM's first floor. By not doing so, it is hard to avoid the impression that the exhibit was an afterthought.

## EXHIBITION NOTES:

**WHAT:** Foreign Affairs (外交)  
**WHERE:** Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 181, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市中山北路三段181號)  
**WHEN:** Until May 2. Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 9:30am to 5:30pm, closes at 8:30pm on Saturdays. Tel: (02) 2595-7656.  
**ADMISSION:** NT\$30  
**ON THE NET:** www.tfam.museum

## EXHIBITIONS



Chang Tsai, *Girls at the Beach*. PHOTO COURTESY OF TFAM

**Image Map: Chang Tsai Retrospective Photography Exhibition (意象地圖—張才攝影紀念展)** offers a solid overview of the artist's documentary photography through 200 black-and-white photographs snapped from the 1940s up to the 1980s. Under eight separate themes — including Portraits of the Aborigines (原住民族肖像), Sacrificial Pig Festival, Sansia (三峽豬公), Festival of Lord Dazhong, Sinjhuang (新莊大眾爺神明遶境) and Behind the Scenes of Taiwanese Opera (歌仔戲的後台人生) — Chang's photographs document different aspects of Taiwan's unique culture with a humanistic and sympathetic eye.

The exhibition includes Chang's Leica camera, a tea leaf can in which he stored his film, photos from his life, a collection of original prints and his prized phonograph and vinyl records. Taken together, the exhibit offers an in-depth view of this pioneer of Taiwanese documentary photography.

■ 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. Admission: NT\$30  
■ Until June 6

An exhibit by Taiwanese painter **Tsong Pu (莊普)** is currently on display at Main Trend Gallery. Tsong's colorful geometric abstract paintings are meticulously composed of 1cm-by-1cm squares interspersed with swaths of paint that suggest rupture within an orderly world.

■ 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  
■ Until April 24

Japanese artist Takafumi Hara collects the memories of ordinary people and distills them into paintings in **Signs of Memory**. After interviewing his subjects, Hara collates certain words and phrases that stand out in his mind and employs them as the starting point for his paintings, a whimsical cross between manga and surrealism. He then installs the paintings in the windows of the houses he has visited (here in the windows of MOCA). In this way, he develops a narrative of the individuals living in a region and a collective memory of the region itself.

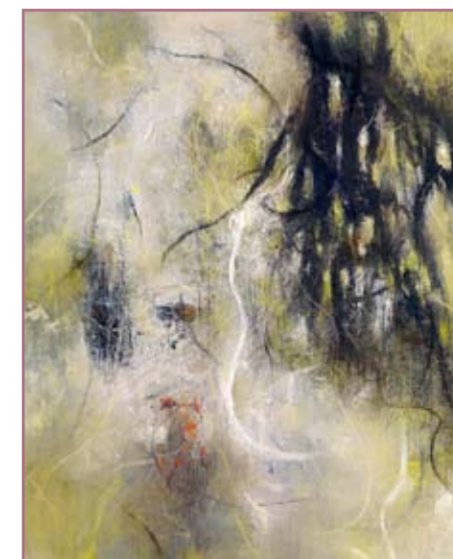
■ Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei (MOCA, Taipei), 39 Changan W Rd, Taipei City (台北市長安西路39號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 6pm. Tel: (02) 2552-3720. Admission: NT\$50  
■ Until May 5

Billed as a "dialogue between sound and painting," **Whispering in Chiang Mai Forest (清邁森林)** brings Taiwanese sound artist Wang Fu-jui (王福瑞) together with Thai painter Natthawut Singthong in a joint exhibition that attempts to capture the aural and visual beauty of northern Thailand.

■ Sakshi Gallery (曼可喜當代藝術), 33 Yitong Street, Taipei City (台北市伊通街33號). Open Tuesdays to Saturdays from 1:30pm to 9:30pm, Sundays from 1:30pm to 7:30pm. Tel: (02) 2516-5386  
■ Until April 24

**Realm of Infinity (無限領域)** is a new series of oil paintings by Taiwanese artist Tung Hsin-ru (董心如). Tung's paintings examine the heterogeneous co-existence of disparate natural and artificial forms through expressionist works rendered in earthy tones and infused with calligraphic and ink painting brush strokes that hark back to her training in traditional Chinese painting.

■ La Chambre Art Gallery (小室藝術), 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  
■ Until April 9



Tung Hsin-ru, *Realm of Infinity*. PHOTO COURTESY OF LA CHAMBRE ART GALLERY

**Call for Submissions**  
The Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts (KDMOFA — 關渡美術館) is accepting applications from artists working in any media to exhibit their works in the forthcoming **Power Show**, to be held on the museum's first-floor gallery space. Works using innovative materials and demonstrating original ideas will take precedence during the selection process. Eligibility is open to all artists except students working on graduation exhibits. The finalist will be chosen by the end of June.  
■ Contact Ho Ming-kuei (何明桂) at (02) 2896-1000 X2412 for further details or download application information from the KDMOFA Web site at kdmofa.tnua.edu.tw  
■ Application deadline is May 15

