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'Actionless. Stillness. Silence'

Richard Lin began exhibiting 'minimalist' paintings in London galleries five years before the term was coined, and his studies in white were admired by no less than Joan Miro. An ongoing exhibit at the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts chronicles his extraordinary career

BY DAVID FRAZIER
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Seeing how Taiwan's cultural institutions tend to recognize artistic success as something that happens abroad rather than at home, it's strange to see how little fanfare has been generated by a new retrospective on Richard Lin (林壽宇), who is quite probably Taiwan's most accomplished living modern artist.

Lin, now 78, began exhibiting spare minimalist canvases in elite London galleries during the late-1950s, several years before the term "minimalism" was even coined. In 1964, he became the first artist from Taiwan to exhibit in Germany's Documenta exhibition, one of the world's most important periodic surveys of contemporary art. And a year later, he represented Great Britain at the Pittsburgh Biennial, an important exhibition at the time, along with Francis Bacon, a painter now firmly entrenched in the canon of late modernism. Lin's works can now be found in top museum collections, including London's Tate Modern, Rome's National Gallery of Modern Art and dozens of others.

In the late 1960s, the Spanish surrealist Joan Miro himself was tremendously impressed by Lin's paintings, which were composed of rectangular blocks that offered delicate studies in shades and textures of the color white.

"Miro came to my studio in London," remembers Lin, speaking on the telephone from his home in the industrial seaside town of Dali in Taichung County. "He went to the Marlborough Gallery and asked to see some young British artists' work, and they showed him several artists that Marlborough represented, and he chose to come to my studio only."

One of the first books on art Lin had bought after arriving in London in 1952 was on Miro's art. Lin recounts, "So I showed him, 'Miro, I bought a book on you by [the famous critic] Clement Greenberg.' And he said, 'Do you have any crayon.' He took my daughter's crayon and made a drawing on the cover of that book. And then he said, 'In the world of white, no one can exceed you.'"

One is Everything: 50 Years of Work by Richard Lin fills the major galleries of the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts with the artist's grand canvases of stark blacks and whites that are composed according to the basic geometries of rectangles, triangles and circles. It begins with Lin's early contemplative canvases of blurry forms that were inspired by the abstract expressionists — especially Mark Rothko. The show then moves into his purification of geometry around 1960, his

white period that followed, his 1984 declaration of the death of painting and his later move into minimal sculpture and sculptural installation.

Lin is descended from the Lin family of Wufeng, an historically important clan in Taiwan since the mid-18th century. He was sent to Hong Kong for schooling in 1949 and three years later to London, though not, he claims, to escape the political turmoil of the era.

"The first year I was living in Hong Kong, Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) lost Shanghai," he laughs. "It was just a coincidence. I was seeking an education."

Lin studied architecture at Regent Street Polytechnic (now the University of Westminster), and soon after graduation turned to painting and found himself represented by one of London's top art galleries, Gimpel Fils. The gallery was pushing a new wave of modernism in its main showrooms while continuing to deal in impressionists and even Rembrandts out of its private rooms.

When Lin painted his *Two White Squares* in 1960 — a tall canvas with two identical white squares painted side by side — it was still five years before the first mention of the term "minimalism" by an art critic.

Lin himself considers the work to be a key to his development and one of his favorites because with it painting becomes "completely formless."

In contrast to the emotionalism of the abstract expressionists, Lin says, "The personal emotion side must be suppressed in my art," adding that in this particular piece, "The intellect has found a victory."

"Actionless. Stillness. Silence," he continues, listing the Taoist ideals that offered him inspiration. "Stillness is very important to me. Painting to me is my religious expression. I still think so. Painting to me must be just there. It's my altarpiece, something untouched by human hands. Therefore all the gestures disappeared."

Despite his position near the epicenter of London's version of the wild, avant-garde art scene of the 1960s, Lin says he "lived like a hermit," moving to the coast of Wales, growing vegetables in the garden and painting his nearly all-white canvases.

In 1975, Lin had a disagreement with his dealers — by this time the Marlborough Gallery — who asked him to change his style.

"You know what they actually told me?" says Lin. "All artists are whores! Prostitutes! So why can't you give up what you've been doing and enter photorealism, because that's how

you become fashionable in New York."

Lin ended his contract, returned to Taiwan four years later, and stayed for most of the next decade. Though commercial success at home came slowly, in 1983 he became the first living artist to have a work enter the collection of the National Palace Museum, and in 1985 he had a sculpture purchased by the newly established Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

In 1984, he also declared the "death of painting." True to his word, he hasn't painted since, though he has created shaped canvases and assemblages of canvases.

Lin's refusal to paint is consistent with the end of minimalism elsewhere. Instead of putting forms on canvas, the canvas became the form, and then forms came off the gallery walls and were installed in three-dimensional space. This is generally believed to be how installation art came about.

In the current retrospective in Kaohsiung, Lin's recent works — both assemblages of flat shapes on the wall and assemblages of metal parts laid out on the floor — are in fact some of his most handsome. He has also taken to using ready-mades, including stacking objects purchased from Ikea, into simple shapes. There's a neat irony to these last pieces — a pioneer of minimalism re-appropriating mass-produced goods that are essentially copying his own ideas about design.

But it's not always best to mention "minimalism" to Lin, who finds the label vexing.

"Minimalism did not exist when I was doing it," he exclaims. After that, it takes some coddling before I get him to admit, "Certainly, I did not come under the influence of minimalism as such, though perhaps I assisted in forming that philosophy."

EXHIBITION NOTES

WHAT: One is Everything: 50 Years of Work by Richard Lin (一即一切: 林壽宇50年創作展)

WHEN: Until Sept. 26

WHERE: Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, 80 Meishuguan Rd, Kaohsiung City (高雄市美術館路80號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 9am to 5pm. Tel: (07) 555-0331

ADMISSION: Free

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