

With daggers drawn

From galleries and museums to art magazines and collectors, Taiwan's art industry comes in for a drubbing in *A Trilogy of Contemporary Art Alchemy*, an astonishingly risky exhibit by Shi Jin-hua

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER

This year could prove to be a watershed for Taiwan's art scene, with established artists using exhibitions as platforms to publicly criticize the art industry's practices.

Installation artist and painter Tsong Pu (莊普) fired the first salvo in May with *Art From Underground* (地下藝術), an exhibit that drew attention to the Taipei Fine Arts Museum's (TFAM) practice of relegating contemporary Taiwanese artists to its basement space. A few weeks ago, Chen Chieh-jen (陳界仁), a video artist who is currently showing a retrospective, *On the Empire's Borders* (在帝國的邊界上), in the same space, said that he would never again exhibit at TFAM for similar reasons.

Now, Shi Jin-hua (石晉華) is taking aim at the commercialism of the art industry with *A Trilogy of Contemporary Art Alchemy* (當代藝術煉金術三部曲), an astonishingly risky exhibit at Nou Gallery (新畫廊) presented in three parts: Episode One: Cost of Concept (首部曲:觀念的代價), Episode Two: Art Earning (二部曲:藝術所得) and Episode Three: Cover Project (三部曲:封面計畫).

The three sections are being sold together as one work of art, and Shi produced five editions of *A Trilogy of Contemporary Art Alchemy*.

Each segment of *A Trilogy* serves as a kind of unfolding conceptual drama with the artist playing David to the art industry's Goliath. The exhibit calls into question the professionalism of art magazines, the gallery system and by extension the art industry itself.

Shi made a deal with collector and *ArtCo* (今藝術) publisher Chien Hsiu-chih (簡秀枝) to trade the first edition of *A Trilogy* for a cover story, which appeared in July. It is the kind of exchange that might raise eyebrows in London or New York, but seems par for the course in Taipei.

"It's sort of an open secret, an unofficial rule in the arts industry, that all the covers, all the articles you read — everything in the magazines — can be bought. This includes *Artists Magazine* (藝術家雜誌), *Cans [Arts Magazine]* and *Contemporary Art News Magazine* (當代藝術新聞)," said Nou Gallery's (新畫廊) Sophie Huang (黃銓心).

"Many of these magazines don't have any editors on their staff, they only have sales people," Huang added.

Those who read the *ArtCo* story, however, would have learned that Shi collaborated with Chien to draw attention to such ethically questionable practices. The 14-page spread — including a cover story, feature and editorial — sits behind framed glass and forms part of Episode Three: Cover Project.

Huang said that although *ArtCo*'s "covers could be bought" in the past, Shi's cover story was published to draw attention to the practice, and to "cleanse the magazine" — a kind of baptism absolving it of its former publishing sins.

At the exhibition, I wandered over to Episode One. The photograph on display shows a painting sold at a group exhibition in Kaohsiung in December 2008, held in response to the global financial meltdown. The gallery invited 116 artists to exhibit work with a price tag of under NT\$30,000. As Shi didn't have anything in that price range, he submitted a one-quarter section of *Walking Pencil#24* (走筆#24), a painting originally valued at NT\$120,000.

The photograph's context illustrates the effect market forces have on the value of art and the role perception plays in that process. It also shows that high prices can become a Faustian pact for artists, who are inevitably pressured by galleries and collectors who have already bought their work into producing works of ever-higher value.

It's easy, then, to imagine the annoyance that collectors of Shi's art must have felt when they found out that he sold another work, *50 Cents* (伍毛 — a NT\$1 coin cut in half and mounted on a board), for NT\$0.50. This topic is examined in Episode Two.

As there are no NT\$0.50 coins in circulation in Taiwan, Shi and InArt Gallery (加力畫廊), the gallery that sold the work, had to find an alternative method of payment.

They settled on bread. A video shows a hilarious verbal exchange (Huang said

► Shi Jin-hua, *Episode One: Cost of Concept — One Quarter Plus Three Quarters* (2010).

▼ Shi Jin-hua, *Episode Two: Art Earning — Breadcrumbs* (2010).

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NOU GALLERY



it was scripted) between the artist and the owner of InArt — the complicated and absurd set of calculations becomes an emblem of the hidden costs of dealing with galleries. In the end, the video suggests, artists are left with only a few crumbs, as is shown in *Breadcrumbs* (麵包屑), a photo of the tiny morsels of bread that Shi received for his efforts.

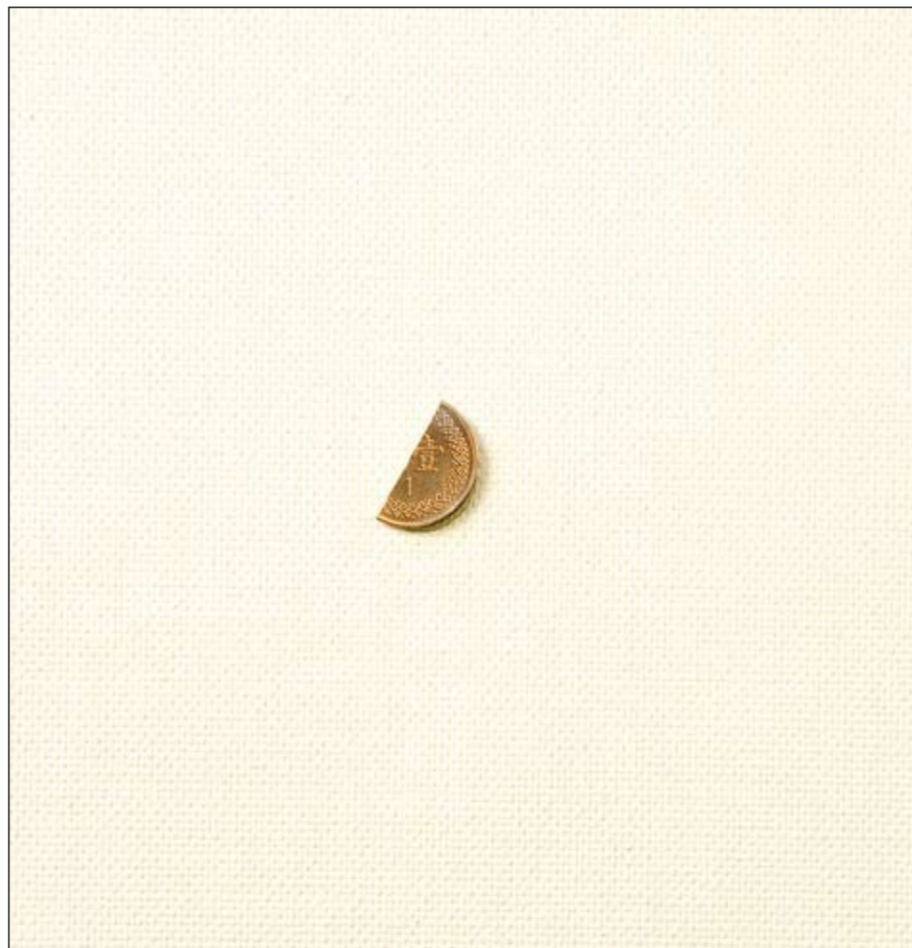
There is much else in this exhibit worth pondering and Nou Gallery deserves credit for its willingness to display works that so obviously criticize the system it is apart of. Of course, the gallery might benefit from the exhibit's sale because curator Paul Chen (陳宏星) doubled *A Trilogy*'s original asking price — an intentional jab at the speculative nature of the art market.

"Collectors aren't that comfortable [with the exhibit] ... They think the market will not accept it and it might collapse the value of his [other] work," Chen said.

I asked Chen if he thought that the gathering storm of public criticism exemplified by Shi, Tsong Pu and Chen Chieh-jen would spur changes in Taiwan's art scene.

"No way. Artists exert very little influence over the art market — especially compared to galleries, or auction houses, or collectors," he said.

Shi will deliver a lecture entitled *Missing Masters* (消失的大師) as part of Taipei Biennial on Sept. 18 from 2pm to 4pm. For more details visit www.taipeibiennial.org.



Shi Jin-hua, *Episode Two: Art Earning — 50 Cents* (2010).

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NOU GALLERY

EXHIBITION NOTES

WHAT: *A Trilogy of Contemporary Art Alchemy* (當代藝術煉金術三部曲)

WHERE: Nou Gallery (新畫廊), 232, Renai Rd Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市仁愛路四段232號)

WHEN: Until Oct. 7. Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 11am to 7pm, closed Mondays. Tel: (02) 2700-0239

EXHIBITIONS



Shiao Bei-chen, *Landscape* (2010).

PHOTO COURTESY OF CATHAY UNITED ART CENTER

Passing Scenes: New Landscape Painting From Four Viewpoints (掠影 — 新風景四人展) presents 50 Western-style landscape paintings informed by an Asian sensibility from four contemporary artists: Shiao Bei-chen (蕭北辰), Ke Wei-kuo (柯偉國), Lin Chi-yu (林芝宇) and Cheng An-chi (鄭安齊).

■ Cathay United Art Center (國泰世華藝術中心), 7F, 236 Dunhua N Rd, Taipei City (台北市敦化北路236號7樓). Open Mondays to Saturdays from 10am to 6pm. Tel: (02) 2717-0988

■ Opening reception on Saturday at 3pm. Until Oct. 30



Teerawat Mulvilai, *Tropical Plant* (2010).

PHOTO COURTESY OF TAV

Teerawat Mulvilai's first residency project four years ago at Taipei Artist Village explored the lives of Thai migrant workers living in Taiwan. With **Tropical Plant**, his current project, the Thai performance artist and documentary filmmaker seeks out the subjects he interviewed four years ago to see how they have managed to retain their own identities while making a life for themselves in Taiwan.

■ Grass Mountain Artist Village (草山國際藝術村), 92 Hudi Rd, Taipei City (台北市湖底路92號). Open Wednesdays to Sundays from 10am to 4pm. Tel: (02) 2862-2404

■ Opening reception on Saturday at 11am. Until Oct. 24

Ten emerging Taiwanese artists offer different perspectives of life in the city through painting, photography and installation in **Crowded Paradise** (擁擠的樂園).

■ Shin Leh Yuan (SLY) Art Space (新樂園藝術空間), 15-2, Ln 11, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 2, Taipei (台北市中山北路二段11巷15-2號). Open Wednesdays to Sundays from 1pm to 8pm. Tel: (02) 2561-1548

■ Reception on Saturday at 5pm. Until Oct. 17

Watch Time Watching (看時間看) is a solo exhibit by Kao Chung-li (高重黎). Kao employs different techniques derived from film and animation to explore the nature of the moving image and its influence on our perceptions of time.

■ Tina Keng Gallery (大未來歌畫廊), 1F, 15, Ln 548, Ruiguang Rd, Taipei City (台北市瑞光路548巷15號一樓). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 7pm. Tel: (02) 2659-0798

■ Until Sept. 26

After several years of silence, installation artist Shy Gong (施工忠吳) returns with **Taiko Fantasy** (台灣幻想曲). The work consists of nine two-dimensional images and uses a "comical and satirical approach to portray the bitter-sweetness in Taiwanese society," aspects that are meant to exemplify *taiko* (台灣), a once pejorative term now employed to celebrate Taiwanese culture. The reality, however, is that these "digital paintings," with their geometrical structures resembling microscopic organisms, adds little to our understanding of the genre, the "Taiko" in the title seemingly little more than a sobriquet to attract people to the exhibit.

■ 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. General admission is NT\$50

■ Until Oct. 31

Her Story — Photographic Works From the Museum's Collection (她們的故事 — 館藏女性圖像攝影展) examines the "progress of a woman's life cycle," in an exhibit that attempts to capture the "collective memory of countless ordinary women." According to the National Museum of History's press blurb, this includes women "in many different roles: working women, mothers, models, etc." Let's hope the "etc" means more than simple patriarchal assumptions about the role women should play in society.

■ National Museum of History (國立歷史博物館), 49 Nanhai Rd, Taipei City (台北市南海路49號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 6pm. Tel: (02) 2361-0270. General admission is NT\$30

■ Until Oct. 24

With subject headings such as "Straight Talk," "Don't mention politics, religion or sex!" and "Subversive Arguments," the **Yingge Ceramics Biennial** seems intent on contemporizing this often-staid medium. The biennial, entitled *Korero* — a Maori term that suggests an exchange of information or dialogue — brings together 43 artists from 17 countries and offers an interesting look at different approaches to ceramics, including contemporary manifestations along with more traditional forms.

■ Yingge Ceramics Museum (鶯歌陶瓷博物館), 200 Wenhua Rd, Yingge Township, Taipei County (台北縣鶯歌鎮文化路200號). Open daily from 9:30am to 5pm, closes at 6pm on Saturdays and Sundays. Tel: (02) 8677-2727. General admission is NT\$99

■ Until Oct. 31