

# A rose by any other name

Szeto Keung's recent paintings make use of a timeless symbol to represent his longing for home

BY NOAH BUCHAN  
STAFF REPORTER



## EXHIBITION NOTES:

**WHAT:** Szeto Keung Solo Exhibition  
**WHERE:** Eslite Xinyi Bookstore (誠品信義店), 11 Songgao Rd, Taipei City (台北市松高路11號). Tel: (02) 8789-3388 X1588  
**WHEN:** Until Oct. 18. The gallery is located on the 5th floor and is open Tuesdays to Sundays from 11am to 7pm

Below: Szeto Keung, *Melancholy-4* (1999 to 2000).  
Left: Szeto Keung, *Sacred Relics in Pink* (2009). PHOTOS COURTESY OF ESITE



Szeto Keung (司徒強) says distance is necessary to create. A wanderer since youth, the China-born, Taiwan-educated, New York-based artist says remaining in his homeland would have stifled the creative impulse. And yet, as with many exiles, the 51-year-old artist constantly dreams of returning home — an idea he examines in his latest series of paintings currently on display at Eslite Gallery.

"I don't like America, but I'm used to it. I've lived there for a long time. And yet I'm lonely. But I think this is a good way to think about the meaning of life ... Loneliness is necessary to create," said Szeto.

Szeto's 29 paintings continue with the themes and styles he has been developing and refining over the past three decades. His early canvases were rendered in a realist style with abstract undertones and depicted objects found in his immediate physical environment. In this show, he has branched out to include more timeless symbols that represent his homesickness.

Like a handful of other Chinese painters working in mid-1970s New York, Szeto came under the influence of photorealism. China-born and

Taiwan-trained painters such as Han Hsiang-ning (韓湘寧) and Hsia Yan (夏陽) followed this style, portraying New York streets and its people. It's almost as if by painting New York's inhabitants and neighborhoods, these artists were attempting to make the city their own.

Szeto's canvases, however, differed from those of his expat counterparts in two ways. Instead of street scenes, he used *trompe l'oeil* realism to paint mundane objects in his studio, which he would arrange on the canvas in an abstract manner.

In *New York Moma*, for example, a matchbox hangs from a piece of string, itself fastened to a corkboard that serves as the painting's background. A piece of masking tape is painted horizontally across the upper right side of the canvas. Below the tape is a small rectangular zebra-colored bag affixed to the corkboard with a tiny sliver of green tape. Viewed up close, the work is astounding in its realistic and tactile depiction of these objects — it looks as if the viewer could pull a match from the box and light a cigarette.

From a distance, however, the realistic detritus takes on the appearance of an abstract canvas.

Objects painted realistically appear on a background of abstract coloring — often shades of gray that reflect Szeto's feelings of alienation. By playing these visual games, Szeto directs the viewer's attention to the plasticity of painting: what appears real is in fact illusory.

"I wanted to emphasize broken pieces, because life is full of broken pieces and you try to piece them together," Szeto said.

In the current series, Szeto replaces man-made objects with a rose. *Sacred Relics in Pink* (桃紅舍利) shows the flower suspended in front of an abstract background. Like all the phenomenal objects in Szeto's work, the rose is painted with a clinical eye toward realism and detail. The background, with impasto reds that build up and blend with charcoal black and are dotted with flecks of white, offers an abstract motif of tempestuous space and suggests the monumental struggles Szeto undergoes to create his works.

"Every piece is a kind of failure," Szeto said. "It's a kind of a celebration of your failure ... and because you fail you just want to do it again."

As with the earlier "broken pieces," the rose symbolizes an aspect of the artist's state of mind.

It sometimes flowers in creative bursts of energy (*Fire* (火)) while at other times it wilts on the vine (*Sacred Relics 1* (舍利1)). Another painting, (*Black Hole* (黑洞)), features petals floating across the expanse of abstract space, which symbolizes the artist's rootlessness.

ESLITE Gallery's exhibition literature interprets the abstract background literally, as if titles such as *Black Hole* refer to scientific phenomena. I disagree. Szeto's concerns are purely human-oriented (whether love, religion or art) with center stage given to the limitless expanse of the human imagination and its ability to reinvent itself and overcome the endless cycle of doubt that artists encounter in their professional and personal lives.

Whereas Szeto's earlier paintings tried to make sense of space and his experience as an expatriate, the rose is a symbol of a homeland with all the security and predictability that Szeto has left behind. Although he may view his paintings as failures, they must be considered beautiful ones for their sublime execution and the tempestuous frustrations that will certainly speak to any person who has lived abroad for an extended period of time.

# Haitian artist paints boat migrants as Voodoo gods

Normally deprived of dignity, Edouard Duval-Carrie lauds the immigrants' courage in graphic form

BY JENNIFER KAY  
AP, MIAMI

The officers on deck confront the Voodoo love goddess with broad shoulders and stoic faces, eyes darkened by sunglasses. She pauses on the gangplank, barefoot but resplendent in a gold crown and ruffled pink dress.

The goddess in Haitian artist Edouard Duval-Carrie's 1996 painting, *Ezili Intercepted*, is bewildered, bemused maybe, but not desperate. She seems to smooth her hair with bejeweled fingers.

Ezili is notorious for charming the men in her path.

Duval-Carrie's migrant deity is so different from the Haitian migrants photographed with US or Caribbean authorities when their overcrowded vessels founder. Lying prone on boat decks or stretchers, they have no names, no power.

Thousands of Haitians attempt to flee their Caribbean homeland of more than 9 million by boat each year. Detained at sea or on US and Caribbean beaches, they appear as blurry masses of refugees.

In painting after painting and a flotilla of sculptures, Duval-Carrie has depicted these migrants as vibrant Voodoo gods.

He has had many opportunities to reflect on their journeys — the US Coast Guard has interdicted an annual average of 1,524 Haitian migrants for each of the past 15 fiscal years. The lucky ones who reach "the other side of the water" without notice find protection in an underground economy. The ocean swallows countless dead.

"The news is so dramatic that I'm pulled right back. When will there be a respite?" Duval-Carrie said recently in his studio in Miami's Little Haiti neighborhood. "I wish it would go away and I could concentrate on something else."

But the migrants keep coming, and there are always victims to grieve. The bodies of three women who perished when their overloaded sailboat capsized off South Florida in May were buried recently in a Miami-area cemetery beneath

plaques reading "Unknown." None of the 16 survivors professed to knowing them, and no relatives came forward to identify them.

"It's one way I can give them importance and respect," Duval-Carrie said. "There's a total disrespect here for them."

He strands the same cast of colorful gods in wooden boats or on rocky shores: the lord of the cemetery in his signature black top hat; the gatekeeper to the spiritual world; the god of healing; the love goddess who resembles Carmen Miranda; the coiled serpent god; temperamental twins; and the skeletal spirit of the dead.

Their faces — sometimes serene, sometimes leering — comprise a dual warning. Authorities outside Haiti should respect the migrants' courage, Duval-Carrie said. Meanwhile, Haiti is losing its identity through constant migration.

In two panels of a recently completed, silver-toned installation titled *Memory Without History*, finely dressed skeletons join the gods' voyage.

"They're all dead already," Duval-Carrie said. He paints migrants as an expatriate himself.

He was born in Port-au-Prince in 1954. His family fled the Duvalier regime for Puerto Rico when he was boy and did not return to Haiti until he was a teenager. The homecoming lasted a year before Duval-Carrie moved to New York to finish high school. He studied art in Montreal and Paris, then settled about 15 years ago in Miami, where he was delighted to find a part of the city called Little Haiti.

"He's both within and without this profound Voodoo culture," said Donald Cosentino, professor of world arts and cultures at UCLA.

The university's Fowler Museum of Cultural History is one of three museums in the past decade to showcase Duval-Carrie's ongoing exploration of migration and Haitian Voodoo, a blend of Christian tenets and African religions.

"He knows profoundly the plight of his own



Edouard Duval-Carrie's *Retable 9 Slaves* hangs in his studio in the Little Haiti neighborhood of Miami. PHOTO: AP

people, but he also knows how that fits into American society," Cosentino said.

Duval-Carrie first took up migration as a theme in 1989 for a Paris exhibition. *Altar of the Nine Slaves* shows nine green-headed men chained in Africa, crowded into a boat and then at work in sugar cane fields in Haiti.

The slaves' Middle Passage never ends, as they mingle with the gods throughout Duval-Carrie's subsequent work. The boats mostly drift, sometimes aided by the serpent god bridging the distance between the palm-lined shores of Haiti and menacing Coast Guard vessels guarding the glittering lights of Miami. Mystical "power points" bind land, sea and sky in webs of sparkling dots.

The boat gods' few landfalls appear traumatic. They shipwreck on tiny reefs jutting out of the water, and when they do reach Miami, the city seems to blind them. Searchlights block the entrance of a lone migrant in *Vigilante City*, while the gods stand stunned under a Miami Beach causeway in *The Landing*.

Duval-Carrie calls his work reflective, not political, though Haitian migrants represent the effects of political and economic policies throughout the region.

"These are people, they're real people. There

should be a basic minimum of respect and understanding," he said. "You cannot just treat them because they're black or they're poor any differently than your poor people here. And it's a reflection on the US, how they behave."

The dark sense of humor evident in his work bubbles up as Duval-Carrie considers what he could paint if the boats ceased coming. "Something lofty or something banal. I would like to paint flowers," he said, chuckling.

He probably won't have that opportunity soon. About 40 Haitian migrants were detained earlier this month after their boat came ashore in a storm in Providenciales, Turks and Caicos; 15 people died and dozens were missing after a sailboat packed with Haitians struck a reef near the same island in July. Eleven Haitians were detained as they landed at a South Florida beach in July. Earlier this month, the Coast Guard repatriated 164 Haitians found in a freighter in the Bahamas.

"The problem hasn't come to an end yet," said Peter Boswell, senior curator at the Miami Art Museum. "He feels the need to continue to address it and not let it be a period in his art. The situation in Haiti hasn't really changed enough for him to take on a new subject."

On the Net: www.edouard-duval-carrie.com

## EXHIBITIONS



Hideaki Kawashima, *Stray*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL KU GALLERY

Atsushi Fukui and Hideaki Kawashima belong to the generation of Japanese artists following Yoshitomo Nara, whose paintings liberated Japan's contemporary scene from Eurocentric styles and provided a renewed recognition of childhood sensibility — one that is revealed in their joint exhibit *Convolutus*. Kawashima updates the Japanese tradition of *bijinga* (pictures of beautiful women) but with a manga-infused style all his own that infantilizes the women he depicts. Large almond-shaped eyes that glare at the viewer with a distant yet confrontational expression are set amid a ghost-white face with barely apparent eyebrows and nostrils above thick lips. By contrast, Fukui's landscapes possess as much life as Kawashima's women seem to lack. Fukui's daydream-like paintings are influenced by his love of psychedelic culture and science fiction. Subjects include planets, animals and forests that refract light in a meditative and colorful glow.

■ Michael Ku Gallery (谷公館), 4F-2, Dunhua 5 Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市敦化南路一段21號4樓之2). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 11am to 8pm. Tel: (02) 2577-5601  
■ From Saturday until Nov. 22

Taiwan-born, New York-based artist **Vivian Tsao** (曹志濤) employs various approaches to light and space and a palette of middle tones in a series of realistic paintings in her solo exhibit on the fourth floor of the National Museum of History. The show also features pastel drawings and manuscripts by the prolific artist.

■ 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. Admission: NT\$30  
■ From Friday until Nov. 13

**Illusional Distance** (虛擬的距離) displays 17 oil paintings by Chinese artist Jiang Zhongli (姜中立). Jiang's figurative works endow ordinary people with heroic qualities drawn from classical sculpture. Employing an impasto style, the artist builds up his characters using rich earth tones that he then highlights with whites and yellows to create canvases that exist somewhere between the present and the past.

■ Elsa Art Gallery (雲濤藝術中心), 3F, 1-1 Tianmu E Rd, Taipei City (台北市天母東路1-1號3樓). Open Wednesdays to Sundays from 1pm to 7pm. Tel: (02) 2876-0386  
■ Until Oct. 25

Taiwanese artist **Tsai I-ju's** (蔡宜儒) solo exhibition combines contemporary ink painting techniques with other media to create abstract works that examine nature in all its fury.  
■ Piao Piao Art Space (一票票藝術空間), 44 Yongkang St, Taipei City (台北市永康街44號). Open Tuesdays to Saturdays from 2pm to 10pm and Sundays from 2pm to 9pm. Tel: (02) 2393-7505  
■ Until Oct. 4

Sculptures of confused porky pandas, surrealist ink paintings of the human anatomy and sketches of vacant-eyed men in business suits are among the works on display in **Cardinal Number**, a group exhibition by Taiwanese artists Liu Je-rong (劉哲榮), Huang Yao-hsin (黃耀鑫) and Wang Ting-chao (王鼎超).  
■ BF Gallery (北風藝廊), 2F, 120, Minsheng E Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市民生東路二段120號2樓). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 1pm to 7pm. Tel: (02) 2561-6516  
■ Until Oct. 18

The title of Chu Ko's (楚戈) solo exhibit **Artistic Creation Must Have Fun** (創作就是要好玩) aptly expresses the artistic philosophy of the China-born, Taiwan-based multimedia artist. Chu's watercolors and oil paintings infuse traditional Chinese landscape ink painting with vibrant colors. This exhibit also features some of his sculptures.  
■ National Chiao Tung University Art Space (交大藝文空間), 1001 Dasyue Rd, Hsinchu City (新竹市大學路1001號). Open daily from 10am to 7pm, closes at 5pm on Saturday and Sunday. Tel: (03) 571-2121  
■ Until Oct. 21