

EXHIBITIONS

From emptiness, a quip

Tsong Pu's installation at the National Taiwan Fine Art Museum's Asian Art Biennial might appear abstruse, but it includes a jibe that won't be missed by art world insiders

BY BLAKE CARTER
STAFF REPORTER

In 1973, Tsong Pu's (莊普) parents gave him US\$1,500 and a one-way ticket to Spain. Madrid University is not the first place one would think a young, modern artist would choose to study at the time, but Tsong says he wanted to improve his technique and selected a school where he would be forced to paint realistically. He returned to Taiwan eight years later, and hasn't painted realistically since. Today the 62-year-old is seen as one of the

founding members of the contemporary art scene that developed in Taiwan in the 1980s. At the Asian Art Biennial, now being held at Taichung's National Taiwan Fine Arts Museum, he's filled a large, high-ceilinged gallery with an elegant, rather austere installation titled *One Comes From Emptiness* — just the type of work his university teachers might have thumbed their noses at in the 1970s, perhaps describing it as "pretentious" or "incomprehensible."

Seven-meter lengths of white nylon rope hang from the ceiling on discrete supports. On the ground, the ropes are carefully arranged into coils, each about 1m in diameter. Tsong showed me a model for the work at his studio near National Taiwan Normal University early last month. The forms are reminiscent of cobras rising for a snake charmer, or the rope that magicians might coax up from a table or hat.

The weave of the rope is similar to the patterns in Tsong's best-known works — abstract paintings composed of 1cm-by-1cm squares that are often adorned with a diagonal swath of paint. Tsong says that he has been interested in repetition since he was a student at Fu-Hsin Trade and Arts School four decades ago.

"My classmates still ask me how I can keep doing the same thing without getting bored," he laughs.

Throughout his years as a student at Fu-Hsin, his three-year military service and his time at Madrid University, Tsong lived a double life. Whether he spent his days drawing from plaster replicas of Greek sculpture or building tanks in Taichung, he produced art in his free time, developing a unique aesthetic.

While young, Tsong was ahead of his peers, at

least in Taiwan. In his free time he made collages and learned about Western art from American and Japanese magazines. He remembers reading about — or at least looking at pictures of works by — Jackson Pollock, Joan Miro and Salvador Dali at a time when Taiwanese art magazines didn't exist.

"At home, at school, and in society there was a feeling you couldn't think freely, so when you saw Jackson Pollock and that kind of stuff you felt free, so you wanted to create something with the same kind of feeling," he says.

By Western standards, he was well behind the times. Pollock died when Tsong was nine years old, while Miro and Dali were old hat when he chose to study in their country. But Tsong had already decided what he would do.

The purity of his abstract paintings and his nonjudgmental attitude toward art gained attention when he returned to Taiwan with an art degree and Spanish wife (now divorced) in tow. He was one of the founding members of IT Park Gallery in Taipei, a non-government, non-commercial art space for and by artists that after more than 20 years is still running, though struggling to stay open.

A father figure to many young artists — or perhaps better described as an uncle, as he

displays none of the "holier than thou" attributes that some artists his age do — Tsong has unflinchingly followed his vision.

After seeing his model for the installation last month, I was surprised to find that some of the ropes he installed at the Biennial fall onto a bent metal signpost that reads "Taiwan Contemporary Art Museum." There is no such place. Many artists complain that Taiwan's museums — especially in the capital, and specifically the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM) — don't pay enough attention to the country's artists.

"I wanted a contrast between soft and hard," Tsong said when I asked him about the augmented work last week.

But what about the fact Taiwanese artists are relegated to the museum's smaller galleries downstairs while Chinese artists Fang Lijun (方力鈞), Cai Guo-qiang (蔡國強) and Ai Weiwei (艾未未) get large exhibitions at TFAM? Was his work a comment on that?

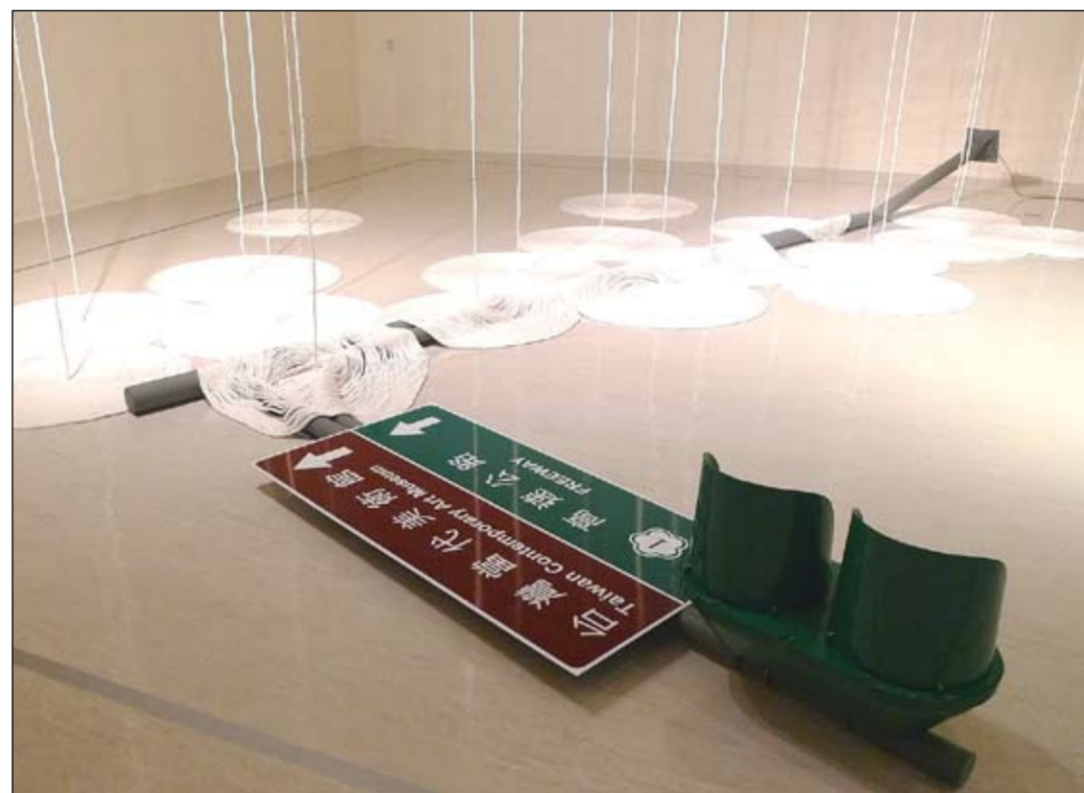
I expected he'd avoid the question as the powerful TFAM defines who's who in Taiwan's art world and has several of Tsong's paintings in its collection. But he didn't hesitate.

"Yes," he said.



Right: Tsong Pu, *One Comes From Emptiness* (2009).
Below: Tsong Pu, *The Color of Frost* (1999).

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TSONG PU



Highlights of the Asian Art Biennial

BY BLAKE CARTER
STAFF REPORTER

The second Asian Art Biennial at the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts in Taichung takes on grand themes, but unlike much of last year's Taipei Biennial, it doesn't shove any particular ideology down visitors' throats. Curator Tsai Chao-yi (蔡昭儀), head of the museum's exhibition department, chose the title Viewpoints and Viewing Points well. The show challenges visitors to ponder Asian art's place in the world through the work of 56 artists/artist groups, 18 of which are Taiwanese, including several of the country's best-known.

For viewers interested in Taiwanese art, the simpler, broader issue is how Taiwan's artists compare with their international counterparts. More interesting is how the country's artists address its ambiguous international status.

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: 2009 Asian Art Biennial (亞洲藝術雙年展)
WHEN: Through Feb. 28, Tuesdays to Fridays 9am to 5pm, Saturdays and Sundays 9am to 6pm
WHERE: National Taiwan Museum of the Arts (國立台灣美術館), 2, Wuchuan W Rd Sec 1, Taichung City (台中市五權西路一段2號)
ADMISSION: Free

By displaying stodgy old Sinophile Lee Shi-chi's (李錫奇) new mixed media work just around the corner from pieces by Tsong Pu (莊普) and several Taiwanese 20-somethings, the show addresses the refrain so often repeated by artists in this country: "Who am I?" To Lee's credit, he pointed out in a rousing Artists Forum presentation on the show's opening day that he had "been there/done everything" before arriving at his current style of Taiwanese art with Chinese characteristics.



Lee Shi-chi, *Orientation Sprouting From the Root* — 14 (2005).
PHOTO COURTESY OF NTFMA

The 20-somethings hint at the diversity that makes the younger generation of Taiwanese artists so difficult to pin down. Mia Liu's (Liu Wen-hsuan, 劉文娟) work was inspired by a job she had at the Guggenheim in New York for about a year, selling tickets to hundreds of visitors a day. As any young artist might do, she dreamt of one day showing her work there. "It started as a joke," she says. Liu had Guggenheim tickets printed with her name on them and handed them out to friends. Later she ordered thousands and arranged them into the decorative patterns displayed in the exhibition.



Liu Wen-hsuan, *I Am Mia Liu* (2008).
PHOTO COURTESY OF NTFMA

Hsu Yin-ling (許尹齡), 22, is a first-year graduate student at Taipei National University of the Arts. If her acrylic paintings look familiar, you may have seen the one hanging at Salt Peanuts Cafe near Taipei's Shida night market. Hsu said by e-mail that she "started scribbling pictures at about five years old and never stopped; every day it's the same as eating or sleeping." The paintings don't look like they were done by the kind of person who ends messages with an electronic happy face.



Hsu Yin-ling, *Megascopic Gap* (2008).
PHOTO COURTESY OF NTFMA

After Lulu Hou's (侯淑姿) show on foreign brides in Taipei last month, Chang Chien-chi's (張乾琦) *Double Happiness* series on the same subject didn't sound too exciting. But I found his documentary photographs of Vietnamese women and Taiwanese men who traveled to Vietnam to find wives the most powerful exhibit at the show. The 48-year-old, currently one of four artists representing Taiwan at the Venice Biennale, shows an extraordinary ability to capture desperation in its many forms: loneliness, resignation, frustration. Positive aspects are also explored: practicality, courage and hope.



Chang Chien-chi, from *Double Happiness* series (2003-2009).
PHOTO COURTESY OF NTFMA

The weightiness of Chang's photographs juxtaposed nicely with the first work viewers see after passing through the lobby into the exhibition area of the museum: the Guinness Book of World Records largest-ever photo book, made by Japanese artist Hitomi Toyama. She proudly says the 3m-by-4m, 26-page monstrosity *Women of Vietnam* weighs in at 200kg. My request to turn a page was curtly dismissed by museum staff.



Hitomi Toyama, *Women of Vietnam* (2008).
PHOTO COURTESY OF NTFMA

Also Japanese, two-boy group (or two-man group — Yusuke Nakano is 33 and Yasuhiko Hayashi 38 years old) Paramodel filled a 58 ping (193m²) gallery floor, walls and ceiling with toy car tracks, toy cranes and Styrofoam mountains in an installation they said they'd shown, with little variation, in six countries. It was hard to get a word out of the Osaka-based pair through the museum's inept Japanese-to-Chinese translator. "We like toys," is about as deep as the 20-minute interview got. Nonetheless, the room is fun to walk through. Once. Then you feel like a gump and never want to see it again.



Paramodel, *Paramodelic Graffiti* (2009).
PHOTO COURTESY OF NTFMA

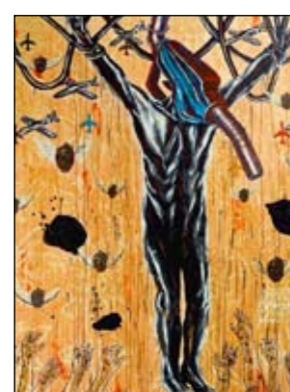
Pakistani artist Rashid Rana had no such trouble describing his *Desperately Seeking Paradise*, a 3m cube that from one angle looks like a block of mirrors. Walk around the piece and a cityscape comes into view. Then look closer and discover the image



Above: Rashid Rana, *Desperately Seeking Paradise*, (2007-2008).
Left: Rashid Rana, *Desperately Seeking Paradise* (detail), (2007-2008).
PHOTOS COURTESY OF RASHID RANA

is composed of tiny pictures of his hometown, Lahore. The artist doesn't claim to have invented the technique, which is perhaps most popular from advertisements for the 1998 movie *The Truman Show*. Rana said he had no idea how many images went into making the work, but that he started with about 100,000 digital photographs and worked from there. He wants "geometric abstraction and representation to coexist, something often thought impossible."

Malaysian artist Justin Lim said he thought his paintings were going to be shown in Taipei, but happened to be in Taichung with his 11-man percussion band Aseana — no relation to the airline — for the Taichung Jazz Festival just down the street from the museum last month. Lim's paintings explore Malay ghosts from folk legend. "I use the ghosts and apply them to current political situations," he said. In *Oil We Trust* is based on the story of a serial rapist called Orang Minyak who covers himself in black oil to sneak around undetected.



Justin Lim, *Oil We Trust* (2008).
PHOTO COURTESY OF NTFMA



Augmented Sculpture Series is an installation by Spanish new media artist Pablo Valbuena.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE DIGITAL ARTS CENTER

Artists from Taiwan, Germany, Japan, Sweden and Spain working in interactive installation, sound and video art will show off their work as part of the **Fourth Digital Arts Festival**. This year's theme, "Funky Light" (光怪), probes the nature of technology and its effect on civilization. The festival, which takes place at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei (MOCA, Taipei) and the Digital Arts Center (台北數位藝術中心), is accompanied by a series of performances and an artist forum.

■ Digital Arts Center (台北數位藝術中心), 180 Fuhua Rd, Taipei City (台北市福華路180號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 6pm. Tel: (02) 7736-0708; and 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) 2552-3721. On the Net: daact.tw/dafo9
■ Begins Friday. Until Nov. 15

Taiwanese contemporary artist Chang Chih-Cheng (張志誠) presents a new series of portraits and dream-inspired works in his solo exhibition **Beyond Words** (意外).

Chang's oil paintings of human figures on a featureless landscape are rendered in subdued hues that depict a lonely and desolate picture of human existence.

■ Chen Ling Hui Contemporary Space (陳綾惠當代空間) 2, Alley 24, Ln 300, Renai Rd Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市仁愛路四段300巷2弄2號). Open Tuesdays to Fridays from 11am to 7pm. Tel: (02) 2703-2277
■ Until Nov. 29

Norwegian ceramicist Ole Liserud examines consumerism in **Metaphorical Signs**.

Employing visual references to the marketplace and stock exchange, Liserud's series of ceramic tiles, porcelain panels and plaques employs markings, signs, calligraphy, photos and graffiti that are meant to symbolize the pressures of advertising and the assumption that the meaning of life is attained through the acquisition of cash and commodities.

■ Yingge Ceramics Museum (鶯歌陶器博物館), 200 Wenhua Rd, Yingge Township, Taipei County (台北縣鶯歌鎮文化路200號). Open Tuesdays to Fridays from 9:30am to 5pm, closes at 6pm on Saturdays and Sundays. Tel: (02) 8677-2727
■ Until Dec. 6

Taiwanese contemporary artist Chang Pei-chun (張培均) exposes his internal world in **Inner Heart Memories** (心象追憶). The series of abstract and expressionist oil paintings is a mixed bag of colorful shapes built up on the canvas, as though an array of disparate emotions and memories are competing for the viewer's attention.

■ Dynasty Art Gallery (朝代藝術), 41 Leli Rd, Taipei City (台北市樂利路41號). For a viewing, call (02) 2377-0838
■ Until Nov. 17

Brushing aside realism as an artistic trope, Taiwanese artist **Hung Yi-chen** (洪藝真) offers an unconventional approach to painting in her solo exhibition at IT Park Gallery (伊通公園).

Chen draws on the ideas of theorists such as Roland Barthes to focus the viewer's attention on the process of creating a painting rather than the painting itself.
■ IT Park Gallery (伊通公園), 2F-3F, 41 Yitong St, Taipei City (台北市伊通街41號2-3樓). Open Tuesdays to Saturdays from 1pm to 10pm. Tel: (02) 2507-7243
■ Until Dec. 5