

A comprehensive exhibit on "outsider artist" Hung Tung is currently on display at the Cultural Affairs Bureau of Taoyuan County Government.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TAOYUAN COUNTY GOVERNMENT CULTURAL AFFAIRS BUREAU

The life of artist Hung Tung (洪通) is rich in anecdotes. One story, perhaps apocryphal, tells of a young dancer who traveled to rural Taiwan to meet the eccentric painter. Hung, though he hated visitors, agreed to admit the dancer if he could explain a poem written on the door of his shack. Knowing that the artist was illiterate, the dancer explained a poem from memory and, delighted, Hung invited him in. When the dancer walked through the door, he found a naked Hung, his penis covered in black ink, working on a scroll.

A comprehensive exhibit of Hung's work, appropriately titled *The Wild Wonders of Hung Tung* (洪通的異想幻境), is currently on view until Sunday at the Taoyuan County Government Cultural Affairs Bureau.

"These are the ones he painted with his special tool," quipped Victoria Lu (陸蓉之), one of the shows two curators, pointing at two smallish-sized works.

Though Hung's eccentricities could give rise to many a joke (Is that a paint brush in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?), the 116 paintings on display — along with interactive displays to attract younger viewers and a section recreating part of the artist's studio — show that this self-taught artist possessed an astonishingly fertile imagination.

Born in Tainan County in 1920, Hung came to painting late in life. Orphaned at the age of

3, he received little education and worked as a fisherman and farmer while frequenting a local Taoist temple where he performed as a spirit medium. At the age of 50, he picked up the brush and began painting.

He hit Taiwan's art scene in 1976 when He Cheng-kuang (何政廣), editor of *Artist* (藝術家) magazine, mounted an exhibition of his work at the American Cultural Center. The show was an immediate success because it did what all great exhibits should do: stir up controversy.

And it wasn't Hung's "special tool" that caused the uproar. At a time when Taiwan's art scene tended towards the celebration of conservative Chinese landscape painting or formal experiments with styles of Western modernism such as Impressionism, Expressionism and Surrealism, Hung's expressively rich, though noticeably flat, folk art pictures (which he didn't name and rarely dated) of spirits and flora, figures and fauna, shocked the literati, who seemed to prefer academic degrees attached to the names of the artists they championed (and often taught).

Today his dreamlike scrolls are usually considered under the rubric "outsider art" — an all-encompassing moniker coined in the early 1970s to cover artists not trained at institutions.

It is a controversy that continues to rage and does much to explain why this exhibit is being shown in a backwater government building,

'Outsider art'

The phantasmagorical scrolls of illiterate and eccentric self-taught painter Hung Tung, though largely forgotten today, reveal an artist with an astonishingly fertile imagination

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER

rather than at Taipei's higher profile art galleries or museums.

In any event, to emphasize that Hung only became an artist at the age of 50 is to miss the point that he had spent much of his life working at temples where he ingested the visual language and Taoist mysticism that would inform his later scrolls.

Central to his unique vision was his role as a spirit medium, or *dangki* as they are known in Hoklo (commonly known as Taiwanese). Though Hung gave up the practice, he probably believed that a deity possessed him while painting — thereby turning his paintings into talismans.

"He believed that his art possessed a kind of supernatural power. It's not just art but building a bridge between the mundane and the otherworld," Lu said.

In one ink-on-paper work, which forms part of a series, vague imitations for the character "month" (月) and "day" (日) appear in vertical rows, each composed with a head at the top. Above this tableau, stick figures, as though scrawled on the wall of a cave, emerge from what appears to be the character for "east" (東). As Hung grew more famous and interacted with people from the West, Roman characters began to appear in his works.

The transformative nature of his pictorial language — Chinese characters becoming

heads; bodies growing out of trees — merged into spiritual figures as well. One scroll, done on red paper and resembling in style auspicious poems hung on doors during holidays, depicts a pastiche of creatures — animal, human, divine — interacting in a cosmic dialogue where the border between the spiritual and temporal worlds are erased. Another shows the tree of life (from which many human faces and figures can be discerned), growing out of a fish that rests on the head of a five-headed figure with a tail, striped in colors of pink and neon green.

It's fitting that a dancer would be attracted to Hung's work because his scrolls offer the viewer a visceral experience drenched in mythology that is similar to dance at its best. Surveying the paintings on display, one hopes that a gallery or museum in Taipei (or Taichung or Kaohsiung) will put aside their ivory-tower prejudices and mount as thorough a show as the one seen here so that a larger audience can observe one of Taiwan's most original artists.

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: *The Wild Wonders of Hung Tung* (洪通的異想幻境)

WHERE: Cultural Affairs Bureau of Taoyuan County Government (桃園縣政府文化局), 21 Sianfu Rd, Taoyuan City (桃園市縣府路21號). Tel: (03) 3322-592 X8510

WHEN: Until Sunday

ON THE NET: www.tycc.gov.tw



Nishizawa Chiharu, *Go for Human's Profit!* (2009).

PHOTO COURTESY OF METAPHYSICAL ART GALLERY

A bird's-eye view of toil and trouble

Japanese contemporary artist Nishizawa Chiharu's paintings challenge viewers to step back and look at the bigger picture

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER

Nishizawa Chiharu's paintings tackle big issues. Rampant materialism, environmental destruction and military conflict all serve as fodder for his satirical canvases with titles such as *Go for Human's Profit!* and *Like Today's "in" Power*, both of which are currently on display at Metaphysical Art Gallery in a show titled *Exodus* — Where Are You From?

But the contemporary Japanese painter confesses that the onset of middle age and the birth of his two children have led him over the past year in a more optimistic direction.

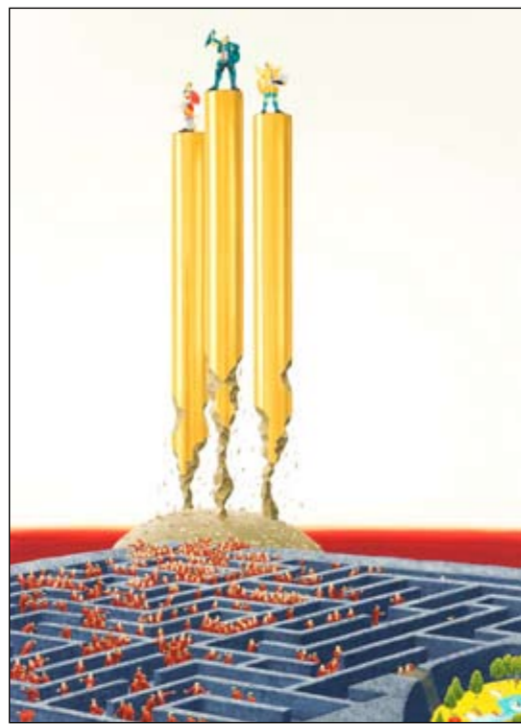
"My recent works express my dreams and hopes for the world's future," he said. "I chose the word 'exodus' to imply that children are heading towards a better place than what we see around us today."

Fortunately for the viewer, the transformation has been minuscule as many of these later canvases retain the irony and black humor that mark all his works.

Two formal aspects of Nishizawa's work are immediately striking: his use of a bird's-eye perspective and the numerous flat figures that populate the barren landscapes of his paintings. Both elements find their origins in *yamato-e*, a traditional Japanese genre of painting that draws the viewer in with its attention to detail and storytelling that features many, often unrelated, plots.

"With *yamato* style painting I can create many stories within the context of a broad theme," he said. Nishizawa employs the form to great effect. And though the themes of his work vary, they demonstrate how humans, because we are caught up in our own individual worlds, fail to grasp a bigger picture — one that Nishizawa presents as perpetuating a current predicament or causing imminent harm.

Survivor, for example, shows numerous figures milling about a maze who are presumably the servants of three heroic-looking masters standing



Nishizawa Chiharu, *Survivor* (2008).

PHOTO COURTESY OF METAPHYSICAL ART GALLERY

on elevated podiums. Dressed in business suits of identical shape and size (all men are depicted as balding), these figures trapped in the labyrinth represent Japan's middle-class salarymen.

And yet each possesses a different facial expression and gesture and is engaged in a different kind of activity (whether brawling or arguing or looking off into the distance) — suggesting the individuality that exists beneath the generalization. Taken as a whole, the painting illustrates how the

masses toil for a privileged few.

Go for Human's Profit! encapsulates the drama of environmental destruction. It depicts numerous workmen clear-cutting the trees from two mountains, while a third stands already denuded, its human inhabitants fighting among themselves.

For Nishizawa, *Survivor* and *Go for Human's Profit!* fall into his earlier, pessimistic period. In the series for which this show is titled, the appearance of children erases the tension between toil and fighting, work and war.

The purity of children is juxtaposed with the grubby aspirations of adults in *Exodus* — a. A mob of men dressed in military fatigues is in the process of withdrawing (evacuating?) from a smog-filled city at the top of the canvas to greener pastures at the bottom. Their escape, however, is blocked by a row of children, the symbolic guardians of Arcadia.

With all his social criticism and glorification of the innocence of childhood, I asked Nishizawa if he felt that his canvases might bring about any lasting change in society.

"I doubt that my art has much influence on contemporary society. But this doesn't stop me from raising these questions," he said.

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: *Exodus* — Where Are You From?

WHERE: Metaphysical Art Gallery (形而上畫廊), 7F, 219, Dunhua 5 Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市敦化南路一段219號7樓)

WHEN: Until May 30. Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 11am to 6:30pm. Tel: (02) 2711-0055

ON THE NET: www.artmap.com.tw

EXHIBITIONS

Ubiquitous Blessings of Fenghuang — Porcelain and the Phoenix in Culture and Creativity (鳳鳴八方—瓷工藝的文化創意演繹)

brings together porcelain, ceramics, jade, textiles and other artifacts from throughout Chinese history to illustrate the mythological and symbolic importance of the phoenix in art. The exhibit is on the National Museum of History's second floor. On the fourth floor, *The Seal Collection of Shinde-yinhui* (欣得印藏展) displays more than 500 seals dating back to antiquity. Biographies of famous seal engravers — as well as calligraphy and painting done by these artists — from the Ming and Qing dynasties reveal the general development of the medium and place it in its historical context.

■ 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 is NT\$30

■ Ubiquitous Blessings of Fenghuang ends July 4, the Seal Collection ends June 13



Ubiquitous Blessings of Fenghuang runs until July 4 at the National Museum of History.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF HISTORY

(台北市福華路180號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 6pm. Tel: (02) 7736-0708

■ Until Sunday

Lost in the City (城市失格) offers a mystical and nostalgic look at cities across the world through the paintings of three contemporary award-winning artists: Shiao Bei-chen (蕭北辰) Hsu Pei-cheng (許沛誠) and Liao Zen-ping (廖震平).

■ Galerie Grand Siecle (新苑藝術), 17, Alley 51, Ln 12, Bade Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市八德路三段12巷51弄17號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 1pm to 6pm. Tel: (02) 2578-5630

■ Until June 1



Lai Shin-lung, *Red Waterfall* (2009).

PHOTO COURTESY OF LA CHAMBRE ART GALLERY

Contemporary painter and curator **Lai Hsin-lung** (賴新龍) splashes fragments from his unconscious on the canvas in his solo exhibit of oil paintings at La Chambre Art Gallery. Lai's expressionist works of soaring birds and vague landscapes suggest an artist in touch with nature.

■ 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 June 5

Animated Images (動畫藝術展)

presents the recent work of seven artists from Belgium, Switzerland, China, Germany and the US working in photography, animation, film, video installation and the graphic novel. The exhibit explores contemporary uses of various mediums that both comment on and employ animation as a means of examining various aspects of society — often with an activist's bent — such as environmental degradation, excessive consumption and the increased homogenization of culture under the influences of global capitalism.

■ Digital Arts Center (台北數位藝術中心), 180 Fuhua Rd, Taipei City

Yang Po-lin (楊柏林), an emerging sculptor whose work is on public display at the Presidential Office, Hsinchu Science Park and Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, continues his creation of monumental sculptures with **Here I Am** (我在這裏).

Yang's sculptures project a warm sense of earthiness and show a profound concern for the environment and humanity. The sculpture on which the title of this exhibition is based employs an inflatable device in the shape of Taiwan — symbolizing the country's need to stand up and face external pressures.

■ Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei (MOCA, Taipei), 39 Chang'an 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 is NT\$50

■ Until June 6

Contemporary Chinese painter (or "art worker" as he prefers) Ying Yefu (嬰野賦) makes his Taiwan debut with **Appetizer** (頭餚). Employing *gongbi* (工筆), a meticulous and highly detailed Chinese painting, Ying's work explores the pain of others through disturbing images of children in various acts of love and violence.

■ 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

■ Until June 16