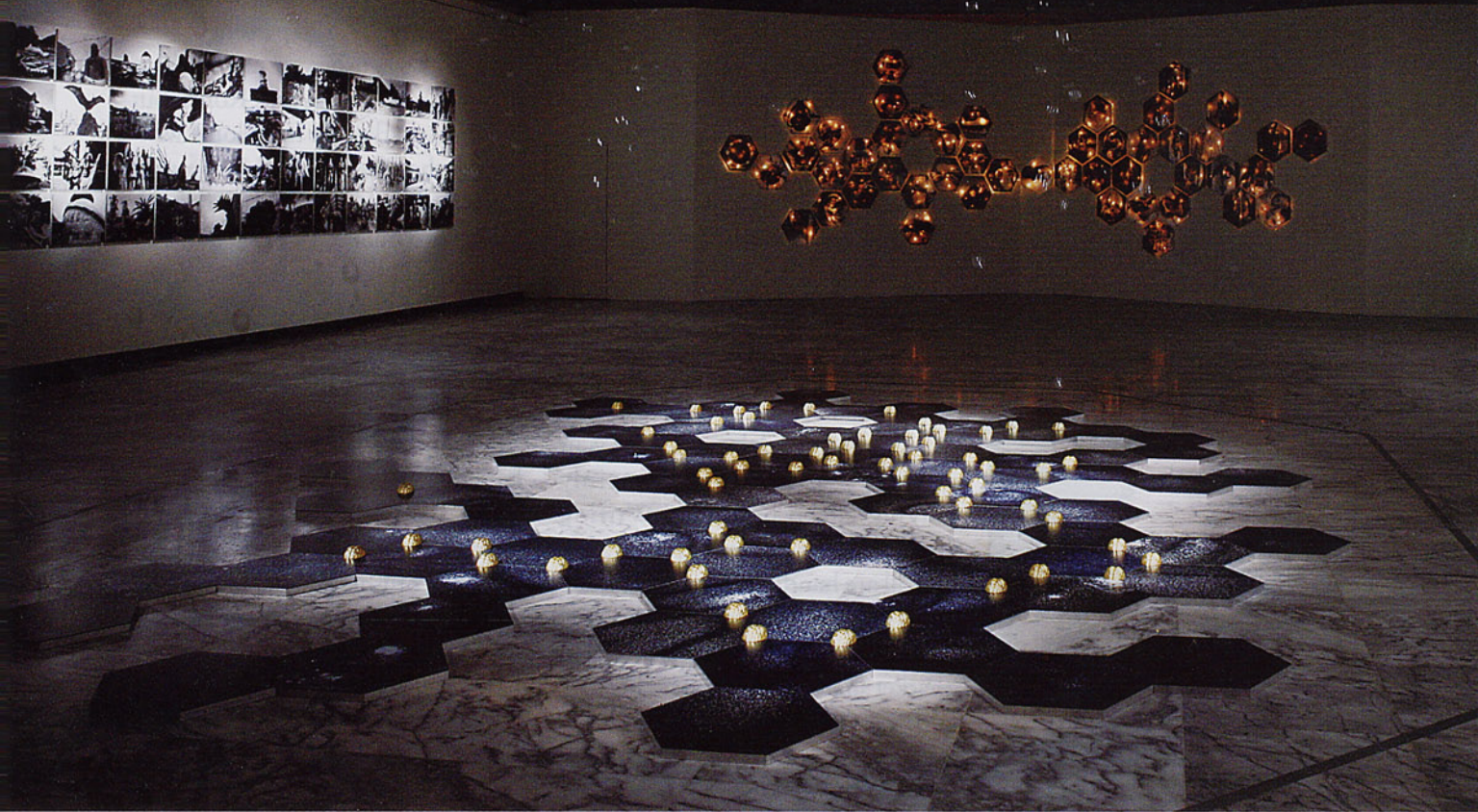


# An Insular Absurdity

*Installation artist Yao Jui-chung catalogues the absurdity of modern Taiwanese life.*

BY ZOE CHENG

PHOTOS COURTESY OF YAO JUI-CHUNG



Art is developed and defined by society according to Yao Jui-chung (姚瑞中). Indeed it is Taiwanese society and history that nurtures his creativity. An artist who has lived through an era of great change on the island, Yao uses photographic installations to illustrate the absurdity of the human condition.

The Taipei-based artist was born in 1969 and graduated from the National Institute of Art with a degree in Art Theory in 1994. Growing up during a time of political transition from authoritarian rule to fledgling democracy, he has witnessed the gradual cultural swing away from a Sinocentric society

forced upon the Taiwanese people by the Kuomintang (KMT) regime to one that reflects more of the reality around it.

## A Dialogue with Identity

In his university years, Yao started climbing mountains and discov-



Everything Will Fall into Ruins at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum

Courtesy of Taipei Fine Arts Museum



Chang Su-ching

Yao Jui-chung describes his drawing in ballpoint pen as "a cynic giving birth to a devil."

ered a beautiful natural Taiwan beyond the city limits. The great divide between what he experienced and the education he received showed him the lengths to which the regime had gone to legitimize its colonization of Taiwan. This realization inspired his interest in the tensions between individual and national

identities and the realities of life in Taiwan.

Yao's photographic installations focus on what people do in physical or virtual space. He roams around Taiwan taking photos of anything that takes his fancy rather than synthesizing digital images at home. Through his physical presence, Yao strives to create a dialogue with his subject that separates the wheat from the chaff—particularly in the received interpretations of history that are so detached from reality. His art is inevitably charged with political implications.

In 1997, the then-28-year-old Yao represented Taiwan with *Territory Takeover* at the Venice Biennale. "I had just finished military service and had no money and hardly anything except a table and a bed," he recalls, "and felt kind of at a loss

about what lay ahead." The precious opportunity to participate in the biennale was undoubtedly very encouraging for him. It also showed him the way to establish links with the international art world.

In *Territory Takeover* from 1994, he took pictures of himself urinating in the nude at six historic sites symbolic of the colonial powers that have ruled Taiwan, and mounted a small gold toilet in front of each gilt-framed photograph. This monumental urination was an attempt, like an animal marking out its territory, to stake his claim to the Taiwan he inhabits, rather than that of the notional nation.

In the second part of this series on Taiwanese identity, *Recover Mainland China—Action* from 1997, Yao's elevated, at-attention body appears at historic sites around China. Posing as an upright tourist taking de rigueur photo opportunities, he sought to satirize the absurdity of the KMT's propaganda about taking back China and to challenge the myth of national identity.

In the third part of this series entitled *The World Is for All—China, Beyond China* (1997–2000), one sees Yao standing under the ceremonial gates to Chinatowns around the world with his arms raised above his head. On a sign at the entrance to the exhibition is written in red letters, "You have the right to remain silent. Everything you say may be held against you in a court of law." The American cop show reading of rights takes a swipe at the subjugation of the individual by Chinese immigrant culture abroad.

"Human history is destined to be absurd," says Yao. "And this history is irreversible." This idea is evident in *Long March—Shifting the Universe* (2002), a series of images of the artist doing handstands at locations where the KMT armies "routed" the communist "bandits" during the Chinese Civil War: all the photos are shown upside down so that Yao appears upright, while the empty battle scenes are inverted. The gravitational inversion subverts the pantheon of KMT-created history.

Sean Hu (胡朝聖), an independent curator, thinks that Yao's work is important because he identifies so strongly with the individual while incorporating a broader socio-historical context. He says that foreign curators see that his work does not

***Territory Takeover at the 1997 Venice Biennale.*** The golden aircraft carrier stands in for the usual larger boat due to limited space.

***Recover Mainland China—Action, 1997,*** black and white photo, 100 x 150 cm



reflect popular consumerist culture, but has a strong local flavor.

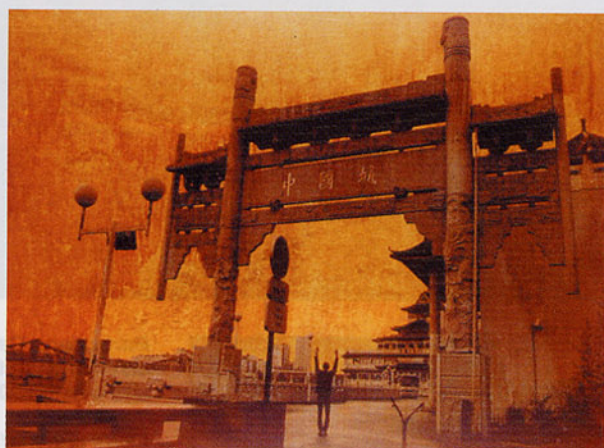
"Yao is something of an old spirit in terms of the generation he belongs to," says cultural critic Kuo Li-hsing (郭力昕). "They're from the point of transition between old and new, modern and postmodern. He's still concerned about the past—about history and memory—but he also deconstructs the absurdity of history."

Yao's work is not hastily dashed off, but thought-out and incubated over time. Hu believes that Yao strikes a balance between sensibility and



rationality, but that his work seems to lack romance. In his self-portrait *There Is Nothing But Loneliness*, Yao has depicted himself as a squatting, thunder-thigh demon with curling toenails swallowing a sword that penetrates his body and protrudes from his anus. He describes the subject as a clown trying to please his audience, who is fatally unaware of the barbs on the blade that render him otherwise immobile.

Yao feels that he has a restless and anxious soul which has drawn him to travel. He has been an artist in residence in San Francisco, New York,



***There Is Nothing But Loneliness*, 1997, ballpoint pen and gold foil on paper, 300 x 330 cm**

***The World Is for All—China Beyond China*, 1997-2000, black and white photo**

and London, where he mainly created drawings. He also writes discourses on contemporary Taiwanese art and has published four books thus far.

## Reflective Ruins

This year in October and November Yao had a solo exhibition at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum based

on ruins. His fascination for the discarded and desolate stems in part from his sympathy for the detritus of economic development and the onward march of civilization, and partly from his desire to warn people of their destructive ways. "I don't want to hex Taiwan," he says. "I want people to reflect on how we ruin ourselves." He has spent 15 years doing so.

There are four types of ruin in Yao's work: industrial plants; deserted residences; abandoned recreation parks and statuary; and military ruins. The industrial sites witnessed the rise and fall of once-viable products but have now fallen victim to rapid change. Declining profits and resources have forced the closing-down or relocation of businesses such as wineries and cement plants.

Poor design in mountainous areas produced another type of ruin—residential wrecks, stricken by floods or landslides caused by typhoons. Lincoln Mansions, a community in Taipei County's Sijhih, is an infamous case in this category. The complex of apartment towers was knocked over by a landslide, and Yao's photographs reveal the sad furniture of caverns that once were homes.

Tumble-down theme parks and statuary have an air of decayed surreality through Yao's lens: favorite dinosaurs apparently scattered by children who tired of them but whose laughter can still be heard; or mythical figures whose moral authority is betrayed by the molds that created them and the state of disrepair they have fallen

into. The crowds have moved on for brighter, faster thrills.

Military ruins on the west coast of Taiwan and political prisons on the east tell the history of Taiwan under the oppression of the KMT regime. Once martial law was lifted in 1987, however, the halls of incarceration were laid bare and left for nature to reclaim.

At the *Everything Will Fall into Ruins* exhibition at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum earlier this year, viewers saw little stars twinkling at the far end of the gallery. As one moved closer to determine what was twinkling, soap bubbles drifted down from above onto hexagonal photos of black, sand-like dots on a panel in the foreground, on a few of which were fixed gold skulls.

"These photos were processed with a spray made from the ashes of



**Barbarians Celestine, 2000,**  
black and white photos, gold foil  
and plastic, 900 x 400 x 400 cm

**Gods and Idols Surround the  
Border photo series, 1998**



a dog that was killed in an accident," says Yao, moving toward the twinkling light coming from behind the photos. "Isn't earthly dust just like stars in the sky? Everything will turn to dust in its life cycle."

As one stepped closer to see the next glimmering panel, the hexagonally-shaped photos were spread out horizontally. "This arrangement illustrates cell division—there are 23 images each on the right and the left, just the same as the number of human chromosomes," says Yao. More photos of ruins hang in rows on two



facing walls. "Isn't life as illusory as bubbles?"

## A Distance from Worldly Concerns

In the process of photographing ruins, Yao has realized that humans are not destined to die some day, rather that they are dying all the time. He believes that all things have a life cycle and that after physical bodies decay, they reappear in another form and preserve the aura of the original being. "If the image is a mirror, I'm probably trying to escape from the 'self' in it," Yao states. "By going in search of ruins, I contemplate the half-withered and lonely soul deep inside me and enter into a dialogue for self-cure."



**Very Temple Art Salon holds exhibitions of all kinds.**

Art critic Cheng Hui-hwa (鄭慧華) thinks that Yao's artistic vocabulary matured in his work 'Barbarians Celestine' completed in 2000. In this work he used lots of gold foil, typically seen in Taiwan when burning joss money or in temples, in the skies of his ruin photos. The gold seems to suggest that Yao hopes to sanctify the spaces, while it also sends up the kitsch and grotesque nature of popular Taiwanese aesthetics.

"Yao works in many media: photo, ballpoint pen, gold foil, etc.," says Sean Hu. "He uses these to clearly express his core concept."

Apart from his own work, Yao has opened an art space called "Very Temple Arts Salon" with seven fellow artists. "We feel that the Taiwanese art world has not changed much for years and that audience participation has gone nowhere," says Yao. "So we wanted to set up a place where we can hold exhibitions

and performances of all kinds." The "Temple" is something between an art gallery and a lounge bar full of contemporary art. Its interior design is a stylish mixture of exposed concrete, ducting and metal and exudes a modern rusticity.

Yao hopes that the Temple can serve as an alternative space where artists can be financially independent so their creativity can flourish. "It's better to keep a distance from worldly concerns," Yao says.

Sean Hu thinks that Yao has extraordinary dexterity and perseverance. "He teaches, he exhibits and he writes—he's totally devoted, and his resilience is amazing." Kuo Li-hsing thinks that single-mindedness is his strongest feature and that this requires great courage. "He consciously stays in a solitary state of mind," Kuo says.

Indeed, surviving such a tumultuous period of social change on the island and holding fast to his sense of purpose has clearly formed Yao's sense of insular absurdity. ■