

# TAIWAN

BY DAVID FRAZIER



Taiwan has long been the world's freest and most democratic Chinese society, but it has not always been the most international. That is gradually changing. In 2012 and 2013, Taiwan's art institutions made two major decisions towards more open internationalism. In 2012, a foreign curator, Anselm Franke, took the helm of the Taipei Biennial by himself, and this was the first time since the exhibition's international launch in 1998 that the curatorial team did not include a Taiwanese co-curator. Next, Taiwan's 2013 Venice Biennale pavilion exhibited works by non-Taiwanese artists for the first time ever, with the inclusion of Czech Republic's Kateřina Šedá and German-Taiwanese artist Bernd Behr alongside Taiwan's Hsu Chia-wei. Franke's biennial was a bold re-examination of what museums mean and why exhibitions take place, and though this question has global implications, in the local context it was extremely well grounded. The 2013 Taiwan Venice Pavilion, curated by Taiwanese Esther Lu, meanwhile

took the title *This is Not a Taiwan Pavilion* and sought to pose Taiwanese subjectivity as 'a stranger to itself'. Though it was still caught in the headlights of Taiwan's big identity question, it at least managed to look at the issue from the outside.

If Taiwan's art institutions are slowly starting to shed their nativist skin, it is the result of a stable evolution over the last 25 years, since the end of martial law in 1988. Before that, there was little chance to break free of a hermetic attitude dating back to the end of World War II, when Chiang Kai-shek occupied Taiwan and began ruling it as a military base under siege. Martial law undoubtedly stifled the arts at home, but there were a number of expatriate artists achieving great things abroad in the 1960s and 1970s, including Wu Teh-chun, Zao Wou-ki, Walasse Ting and Richard Lin, respectively participants in the movements of Post Impressionism,

Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art and Minimalism in the cultural capitals of the West. All of them were actually born in China and became citizens of France, the US or the UK, but since Chiang's Republic of China (or Taiwan) believed itself to represent the true China (and was in fact was the sole representative of China in the United Nations until 1971), an artist's country of residence was only a small distinction. These artists were still Chinese, and later, in the 2000s, when a Taiwanese generation for the first time became fully confident of its Taiwanese identity, they were already an inextricable part of Taiwanese art history and museum collections. Identity is indeed a sticky knot, and its historical threads run long. Mainland China now also views artists of this generation as its own, and throughout greater China they are regarded as Modernist masters and collected avidly. The bulk of their sales take place in Hong Kong or Singapore auctions, but Art Taipei director Eva Lin estimates that up to a third of their buyers – no matter where they are sold – are Taiwanese. Zao, an Abstract Expressionist who passed away in March 2013, saw USD73.5 million in auction turnover last year, while Chu Teh-chun (b. 1920) totalled around USD60 million and Walasse Ting (1929-2010) recorded USD20 million. Lin (1933-2011) saw a number of lots sold at a 2013 Christies London auction in the USD50,000 range and enjoyed a major Taiwan retrospective at the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts just before his passing.

In the last decade, Taiwan's commercial gallery system has rapidly progressed from modest local ambitions to burgeoning internationalism. Its best barometer is the performance of Art Taipei, the marquee art fair of the Taiwan Art Gallery Association, established in 1992.

Art Taipei just celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2013, and has progressed rapidly over the last decade. In 2005, total sales that year were only USD3.2 million, but by 2008 sales shot up to USD25.5 million and gallery participation broke the 100 mark for the first time. Part of the reason was a piggyback effect from the boom in Chinese contemporary, but Japanese galleries also started to appear in significant numbers, as Taiwan's collectors were gaining a reputation as progressive first-movers on trends in Asian contemporary art – especially compared to collectors in conservative, economically stagnant Japan. Either way, contemporary art was finally established in the minds of Taiwanese collectors as a viable category, and they have not looked back. Last year, Art Taipei sold USD37.4 million and gallery participation hit a new record of 150 galleries. The register of exhibitors included a couple of New York galleries (Robert Miller Gallery and James Cohan Gallery) along with some from Europe. Art Taipei organisers believe these Western incursions result from saturated markets in North America and Europe.

Local Taiwanese galleries are meanwhile beginning to sense that in coming years, they may need to compete with the old-world establishment on their own turf. Cavernous white-cube spaces – the kind you would find in New York's Chelsea district – have begun to appear, as top galleries revamp and upgrade. The charge was led by Eslite Gallery (which relocated in 2009), TKG\* (opened in 2009 as an offshoot of Taipei's old-guard Tina Keng Gallery) and most recently, Art Issues Projects (opened in 2012 as a branch of the Beijing gallery). One might also add Main Trend Gallery. All of these aiming for museum-quality presentation and advanced curatorship.

The last few years has also seen around 50 new galleries launch around Taiwan, though many have only lasted a year or two. The Taiwan Art Gallery Association now records around 150 galleries on the island. Since 2009, there has also been a popular hotel art fair for artists under 45 years old, Young Art Taipei. In 2012, its 61 galleries sold around USD1 million of affordable artworks.

## ESTABLISHED ARTISTS

Unlike this earlier generation, Taiwan's mid-career artists – those now in their 40s and 50s – have a unique sense of Taiwanese identity. Postcolonial identity politics has been one of their major themes, yet many have, like their predecessors, chosen to live abroad, believing the West (or in some cases China) to afford greater career opportunity. A solid core also remains in Taiwan. Here are some of the key figures:

Chen Chieh-jen (b. 1960) studied art at a vocational high school for the arts in Taiwan and has spent his entire career in Taiwan. He currently lives and works in Taipei. After creating underground art in the 1980s, he developed an oeuvre of digital images and videos that offer a sort of peoples history that stands in opposition to the grand, official histories of big-picture politics. Chen's first series of digitally manipulated images begun in 1996 is a sort of horrors of war, depicting the atrocities of 20th century Chinese history. He is however best known for the video artworks he began producing from 2002, works of immaculate, brooding cinematography that present broken narratives of common people living through the plagues of contemporary geopolitics: political prisoners during Taiwan's martial law period, factory workers whose jobs have been outsourced and migrant workers trapped in visaless limbo. Frequently, he builds his narratives from documentary research.

Yao Jui-chung (b. 1969) studied art theory at Taiwan's National Institute of the Arts and has produced a body of politically edged photography, performance, installation and critical writing. Though his work is inspired by politics, he presents politics of the absurd. For his early *Territory Takeover Series* (1994), Yao photographed himself nude and urinating on military monuments in both Taiwan and China, a parody of marking territory. Lately, he has documented disused construction projects through photographs and archival research into the government funded construction costs. In a more personal vein, he produces quirky variations on Chinese landscape painting using gold leaf and ballpoint pen.

**FAR LEFT** Yao Jui-chung, *Long Long Live*, 2013, Digital print, 50 x 70 cm. Courtesy of TKG\*.



Michael Ming-hong Lin (b. 1964) was born in Tokyo and raised in Taiwan before going on to get an MFA in California. He returned to Taiwan in the 1990s, but now lives mainly between Shanghai and Belgium. Lin is

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famous for appropriating textile patterns — from around 2000 he started with traditional Taiwanese textiles, but now occasionally borrows from

other cultures — and enlarging them to architectural scale. His florals covered the exterior of an entire museum during the 2009 Lyon Biennial, as well as skateboard ramps at PS1 in New York and massive floors and walls all over Europe, the US and Taiwan.

Lee Mingwei (b. 1964) was born in Taiwan and moved to the US as a teenager, eventually obtaining an MFA from Yale in 1997. He lives and works in New York and has had solo exhibitions at a number of major museums, including the Museum of Modern Art and The Whitney Museum. His major theme is interpersonal experience, and his installations are generally interactive and change over time. Often, as in *The Letter Writing Project* (1998), the point is to facilitate direct sharing among gallery visitors or project participants, or else to have people act in a way that will later influence the actions of others.

Ju Ming (b. 1938) was born in Miaoli, Taiwan and currently lives and works on a mountainside estate on Taiwan’s northeast coast, not far from Taipei. He is an expressionist sculptor, who uses a

chainsaw to carve rough, solitary figures from massive tree trunks. Often these are later cast in bronze or other metals. In the 1970s, Ju became internationally famous for the monumental figures of his *Taichi* series. In recent years, he worked on a smaller scale and added color, developing his *Living World Series*, a colorful collection of modern city dwellers. The market for his work is very active. In 2012, his auction sales saw a total turnover of over USD16 million.

Other names worth knowing include Hsieh Teh-ching, Peng Hong-chih, Wu Tien-chang, Yang Maolin, Mei Dean-I, Wu Mali, Chang Chien-chi, Yuan Goang-ming and Tsung Pu.

#### EMERGING ARTISTS

Artists under 45 years old are less interested in identity politics and more with staying in step with the latest trends of an internet driven world. Since 2008, Taiwan’s government has set development of the cultural industries



as a national priority, earmarking major budget expenditure and ramping up the number of graduates in film, digital content, design, fashion and art.

Charwei Tsai (b. 1980) grew up in Taiwan, but studied art first in the US at the Rhode Island School of Design and later at the graduate level at L’École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. She is best known for her calligraphy on perishable foods like tofu, living mushrooms, bonsai trees and other natural objects (or else on photographs or lithographs of them). The inscriptions are tiny, and the contents range from prosaic (pop song lyrics) to religious (Buddhist mantras). The effect is to endow everyday natural objects with ephemeral or spiritual qualities.

Huang Shih-chieh (b. 1975) grew up in Taiwan before going on to university in the US, where he received an MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York. He creates mechanical sculptures from computer parts, plastics and cheap electronics, yet manages to endow them with an organic quality. In 2011, America’s top science museum, the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC, invited him to create an installation inspired on deep sea creatures.

Candy Bird (b. 1982) worked as a Japanese restaurant chef in Taipei before devoting himself full-time to graffiti. He paints with brushes, not spray cans, and depicts turnip-headed salarymen, the proles of neo-liberal economics, in murals that keep pace with Taiwan’s social movements. His illegal graffiti is fairly ubiquitous in Taiwan, but he has only recently entered the legal domain with a 2012 book release, a mural at the National Museum of Fine Arts and gallery representation.

James T. Hong (b. 1970) and Ying-Ju Chen (b. 1977) work as a team and individually. Hong is Taiwanese-American and Chen is Taiwanese. Both studied film in San Francisco and now live in Taipei. Their work consists of video art, documentary and installations, and their themes frequently address the function of ‘power’ (especially nationalism, racism and totalitarianism) in human society. A series of films have stirringly documented Japanese biological weapons programs during World War II and the life-long suffering of survivors of these attacks in China.

**FAR LEFT** Shih Chieh Huang, *Organic Concept*, 2006, Mixed media, 2133 x 2133 x 609 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

**ABOVE** Charwei Tsai, *Incense Mantra II*, 2013, 66 x 150 cm. Courtesy of TKG.