

# Everything will fall into ruins

*More than a decade after 'recovering' the mainland, Yao Jui-Chung is exploring what's left of 'the beautiful island'*

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Three years ago when I first saw a photo of Yao Jui-chung, I guessed he was probably in his fifties or early sixties. Yao has published six books on art history, he's exhibited all over the world, he teaches art at the Taipei National University of the Arts and he represented the nation at the 1997 Venice Biennale — no small list of accomplishments, even for an artist of that age. But then I met him Tuesday afternoon at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, where he's installing a solo exhibit called "Everything will Fall Into Ruins" that opens Wednesday, October 4. Yao looks young for his age — 37.

Perhaps I should explain.

When Yao graduated from the National Institute of Art in 1994, he placed an ad in Hsiung Shih Art Monthly magazine announcing his intention to "take back the mainland." According to his ad, after two years of training — Taiwan's mandatory military service, where he spent time washing F-5E aircraft and hosting karaoke nights — Yao would be ready to launch the attack.

The photograph I'd seen was a resultant piece from his 1996 series "Recovering the Mainland," named after a Kuomintang slogan from back in the days when the KMT wasn't so interested in making friends with China's communist government. In the works, Yao is photographed mid-air, in rigid military stance, posed in front of famous historical sites of communist China. The photographs are altered to appear faded like old pictures from the Cultural

Revolution. Hungover on a Sunday morning walk through the museum, I failed to notice the date and assumed they were taken in the seventies.

The Yao I met Tuesday was the same as the man in the pictures: slim, handsome, poised. But without the tinted quality of the "Recover the Mainland" works, Yao — dressed in all black — looked more the contemplative art theoretician than a young soldier.

To those familiar with the Taiwan art world, Yao is "that one who writes books." His seventh, "The Ruined Island," is in the works. Books played a large part in Yao's growth as an artist. After majoring in painting at Fuxing Trade and Arts School, he read a book of interviews with the father of conceptual art, Marcel Duchamp.

"I read a lot of books," he says. "After I started at the National Institute, I quit painting. I realized there was something more important inside art than just making pretty pictures; it was more about ideas. And there are various ways to do that."

His following work focused on photography, found objects, and installations.

"There were no limits. I'd try anything at that time."

Yao first began publishing in 1997. To tell the truth though, to most of us, reading art theory isn't exactly thrilling. I can barely read it in English and wouldn't dream of trying in Chinese. But while a 37-year-old professor of contemporary photography might sound a little boring to some, Yao isn't.

Take his half-painted, half-gold-leafed 2004 series "Cynic" for example. By that

time, Yao had gone back to occasionally painting. Dog-headed female figures, legs spread, give birth to full-grown adults. Yao uses dogs as symbols of the people of Taiwan. Some of the works from this series have Chinese/English plays on words painted across them. He makes poignant, often bitter Chinese phrases that sound like innocuous English words. In one piece a red figure — presumably symbolic of communism — is shown practicing a martial arts kick with the Chinese characters "chuai ni si" ('kick you to death') above the English word "Chinese." In another piece "Taiwanese" is used in a play on words, with Chinese reading "Ta wan ni si" ('He fucks, you die'). The work shows a red male figure having sex with a green female dog-headed figure.

Yao's latest show is noticeably tamer than the works in "Cynic," but I get the feeling he's trying to encourage the viewer to think more. The show consists of six pieces, mostly showing photographs of decaying buildings, sculptures of religious idols, and military structures from Taiwanese islands. A piece called "Nebulous Light" comprises 46 black and white photographs in hexagonal frames — arranged in two groups of 23 — the number of chromosome pairs believed to be in the human genome.

Yao is noncommittal about whether the pictures are meant to show the decay of Kuomintang-built Taiwan structures, or just a reminder of how things have changed. The ideas in these works are more open to interpretation than some of his older works, and con-

sequently, he's a little vague when speaking about them.

"I'm not sure whether I travel around to see the ruins, or to be seen by the ruins," he says.

Hmm.

Later, I tried to sneak in a question about current events in Taiwan.

"Will A-bian step down?" I asked, as we smoked in the courtyard in front of the museum.

Yao was silent for a few moments, thinking about something, but it didn't seem like he was thinking about my question.

"No," he said, laughing to himself, looking a little bored. His hair was clean-cut and his clothes were immaculate, but his front teeth were stained with tobacco. I wasn't sure if he was laughing at my question or the situation in Taiwan.

"No, you don't think he'll step down, or 'no,' as in 'no comment?'" I asked.

He didn't answer. I'd only known him for an hour, and it seemed to me like he was leaving me to decide by myself how he felt. But that's part of the beauty of a lot of conceptual art, I think. Once the artist completes a work, it's up to the viewer to interpret. Look at "Taiwanese" from 2004. In light of current events in Taiwan, doesn't it look different now?

Yao Jui-chung's exhibit runs from Wednesday, October 4 through November 19 at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, No. 181, Zhongshan N. Road Sec. 3, Taipei. Museum hours are 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. from Tuesday to Friday and on Sunday; 9:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. on Saturday; closed Mondays. Admission costs NT\$30.



**Top:** Yao Jui-chung's "The Cynic Series: Taiwanese (2004)"  
**Left:** Yao's self-portrait, "Recovering the Mainland: Tiananmen (2004)"

PHOTOS COURTESY OF YAO JUI-CHUNG