



Industrial decay

Something Taiwan shouldn't forget

PHOTO: AMY CHENG

BY DAVID FRAZIER

YAO JUI-CHONG (姚瑞中) thinks it would be better to leave the decaying Sungshan Cigarette Factory (松山菸廠), a huge and valuable plot of land in rapidly developing east Taipei, as it is. "They're going to build a huge dome," he says, describing the city's plan to raze existing structures and build a stadium on the land. "Obviously we have to recycle these things, but the problem is how to recycle them. It's an attitude: how do we look back on history and memory? The government wants to take our industrial past and convert it for tourism and commerce. In that we're losing a lot."

As part of a preservation push, Yao published a book, *Roaming the Ruins of Taiwan*, earlier this year and is now exhibiting 304 small black and white photos of Taiwan's ruins — including industrial complexes, amusement parks, empty temples, post-war housing, old prisons, and military bunkers — as part of a group show, *Ruins and Civilization*, at the Eslite Gallery.

The show is something of a precursor to this year's Taipei Biennial, which opens in October. It was organized by one of the two women currently working on that bigger show, Amy Cheng (鄭慧華), a Taiwanese who splits her time between Taipei and Vancouver and shares some important ideas

with Yao. In all, there are works by seven artists from Canada and Taiwan.

Though four of seven works in the show focus on architecture, Cheng is trying to extend the concept of ruins farther, pushing it to apply to memory, existential awareness, and society. Ruins, for her, also include personal and national histories and, more importantly, offer clues to our future development.

"Empire Line," an installation by Antonia Hirsch, involves two video projections, a large, static one of a dress made out of tea bags and a very small video of a woman wearing that dress and descending into the water, making a big stain of tea around her. The metaphor is about colonialism, and if it has the drawback that it's better when explained, it's still interesting. And in Cheng's curatorial reckoning, it feeds into her argument. In at least one aspect, the piece is about trying to wash away the past.

As a whole, however, the exhibition seems a little incomplete, the all-encompassing idea of ruins as a little underdeveloped. "The show seems very architectural, so the other pieces are a bit of an odd fit," commented one of the artists at last week's opening. I found that especially true of Chen Jie-ren's digitally created photos, which show grotesque scenes of human carnage. They were hard to connect with Yao's images of real, abandoned spaces. Yao has a definite and poignant social critique in his work. So does Chen. Unfortunately they didn't quite come together here.

Ruins and Civilization runs to August 29. The Eslite Gallery (誠品畫廊) is at B2, 243, Sec 1, Tunhua S Rd, Taipei (北市敦化南路一段243號B2), Ph: (02) 2775-5977.