

每次我去一個老地方時
它都失去了許多美麗的風景

14
15

HSU YU-JEN, *Every Time I Go to an Old Place/It Has Lost a Lot of Its Beautiful Scenery*, 1996

Time Difference

Jonathan Hay

The four artists represented in the exhibition *Tracing Taiwan* were born in the 1950s and 1960s. They grew up and studied to be artists during the long period of martial law in Taiwan which ended in 1987.¹ The two older artists, Hsu Yu-jen (born 1951) and Yu Peng (born 1955), first attracted attention in the early 1980s, but have only fully come into their own in the wake of the recent liberalization. Hou Chun-ming and Huang Chih-yang, born in 1963 and 1965 respectively, belong to what might superficially be called a post-1987 generation.

The favorable conditions created by the ending of martial law, for all their importance and visible influence on the artworks, on another level simply inflect a more fundamental shared experience of Taiwanese conditions. Despite the existence of long-standing and violent differences over Taiwan's political destiny, an enduring underlying political temporality has dominated life on the island since 1949. It is now an almost half-century old assumption held in all quarters that the present political situation is in one way or another provisional—an open parenthesis. Two contrasting temporalities, two contradictory qualities of political time: the effervescence of a recent liberalization and the uncomfortable paradox of an enduring provisionality. It is this internal time difference, rather than the more obvious external one separating Taiwan from New York, that I want to explore here. My interest is not in a certain historical “context” *per se*, but in the corresponding self-awareness that so deeply marks the artworks in the exhibition.

ONE: FAST FORWARD

To begin with very recent history: the ending of martial law was indissociable from the political and cultural self-affirmation of a long marginalized Taiwanese-speaking population, which in the older generation often also retained (and retains) an emotional and practical attachment to Japanese language and culture. This population often finds itself located between two (Taiwanese/Mandarin), and sometimes three (Taiwanese/Mandarin/Japanese), languages.² Post-1987, this complex cultural position, for which government-led modernization had never been able to find an adequate place, paradoxically emerged as Taiwan's most modern face. By its double attachment to local roots and cosmopolitan connections, it has proved to be more in tune with the post-Cold War conception of modernity as an interpenetration of the local and the global. Within the Taiwanese art world, a certain “fast forward” effect

In the preparation of this essay, I was fortunate to be able to draw on the full transcripts of Alice Yang's interviews with the artists, as well as her written notes on the interviews. My thanks to the Yang family and Gerald Szeto for making this material available. The essay could not have been written without the long-running dialogue on modern Chinese and Taiwanese painting, here prolonged with sadness and pleasure, that was a precious part of my friendship with Alice Yang.



HO CHUN-MING, work from
the "Erotic Paradise Relief" series, 1992

has accompanied this transformation of cultural politics. Among its most important features are the rapid development of a thriving contemporary art market centered on Taipei, the emergence of an art of Taiwanese identity, and the integration of certain Taiwanese artists into the international art circuit.

THE SHUIMO GENRE RECUPERATED

Alice Yang's essay in this catalogue maps out the cultural space of contemporary Taiwanese artmaking corresponding to this transformed situation, a space with roots in developments of the 1970s and early 1980s, though it finally crystallized through the accelerated re-assessment of cultural hierarchies after 1987.³ One central object of re-consideration has been the genre of *shuimo* (literally, "water and ink") painting, where the traditional pointed brush is used to paint in ink (and often water-soluble color) on paper or, more rarely, silk or satin—a traditional Chinese genre which is often termed "national painting" [*guohua*], both in Taiwan and in mainland China. The point of departure of the present exhibition is the contribution made by the four artists to this current re-assessment of the *shuimo* genre and its cultural status in Taiwan.

Hsu Yu-jen, an artist with formal training in the normatively codified territory of the *shuimo* genre, undoes all of that genre's codes. There is no traditional authority for his formats, handling of space, off-kilter compositions, or pictorial vocabulary; nor for his tiny brushstrokes and pen-like "touch"; nor again for his inscriptions, written horizontally and left to right, with their texts in free verse. *Shuimo* survives only residually, as a combination of tools and materials and as an idea, the tools and materials here turned against the idea. To invoke the tired discourse of East-West antimonies would only muddy the issue, since the evident cultural hybridity of Hsu's approach is merely one of his means to a marginality in relation to major established, codified traditions of all kinds. Hsu's paintings inhabit their own island position.

It is a position which coincides, in its marginality and formal daring, with the otherwise starkly contrasting works of Huang Chih-yang. Huang takes the *shuimo* hanging scroll away from the safety of the wall support, drawing the viewer away from the security of the usual spectatorial relationship (see pp. 26-27). Traditional authority is flouted within the paintings, too. Huang's technique of grouping strikingly graphic brushstrokes together to

model forms in space is alien to the *shuimo* painter's craft which is based on brushwork that functions both two- and three-dimensionally. As Huang indicates in the interview published here, his brush technique derives from an ultimately Western mode of drawing, not from Chinese calligraphy. The declaration of independence is redoubled by the primitivist imagery, whose uncertain coordinates situate Huang's practice somewhere between Paris, New York, and the Taiwanese countryside with its giant festival puppets and spirit-mediums' calligraphy.

For Hou Chun-ming, *shuimo* comes into play in a more limited way, simply as a material technique at the preparatory stage of his massive printed images (though these retain many traces of their brushed origins). Hou's images escape easy categorization of genre. On the scale of large paintings they are, however, printed; while taking illustrated book pages as their model they are exhibited on the wall, like posters. They forge an alliance between the contemporary gallery space and a certain form of Taoist-related popular culture, conspicuously ignoring in the process the "high" traditions of painting, both Chinese "national painting" and Western oil painting (despite the fact that Hou was trained as an oil painter). Like the other versions of an island position sketched out above, Hou's cultural Taiwan — for which he uses the term *bentu*, or "native earth" — is of uncertain latitude and longitude.⁴

Finally, much less distance is taken from the *shuimo* status quo by Yu Peng, whose obsession is with a theatrical reworking of the Chinese tradition of lyrical painting, taking his own life experience as subject matter. But even Yu's work undoes certain cultural hierarchies. As Alice Yang points out, the special theatricality of his art, which has its roots in a family involvement with several forms of popular theater, removes his work from the lyrical tradition, closely associated with the literati, which it ostensibly revives. Concurrently, such features as the use of Western drawing for certain figures, the introduction of nudes, the substitution of crammed for empty space, or the use of odd-numbered sets of paintings whereas the traditional norm for sets is even-numbered combinations, all bring a modernist independence into play.⁵ The non-literati recuperation of literati art, it has to be said, has a rich history in our century, when the Chinese literati artist has often simply been the one who dares to claim that status and use its corresponding pictorial rhetoric.⁶ But Yu's specificity can be seen in the fact that his fascination with certain aspects of the literati ideal does not lead him to claim the status of a literati artist,⁷ nor does he allow it to dilute the pungent local flavor of his resolutely contemporary vision.



YU PENG, work from the series "The Moon Shines on the Deserted City/The Clouds Cover the Old Trees," 1996-97



HOU CHUN-MING, street installation of the "Conviction of Hong Kong" series, Hong Kong, 1996

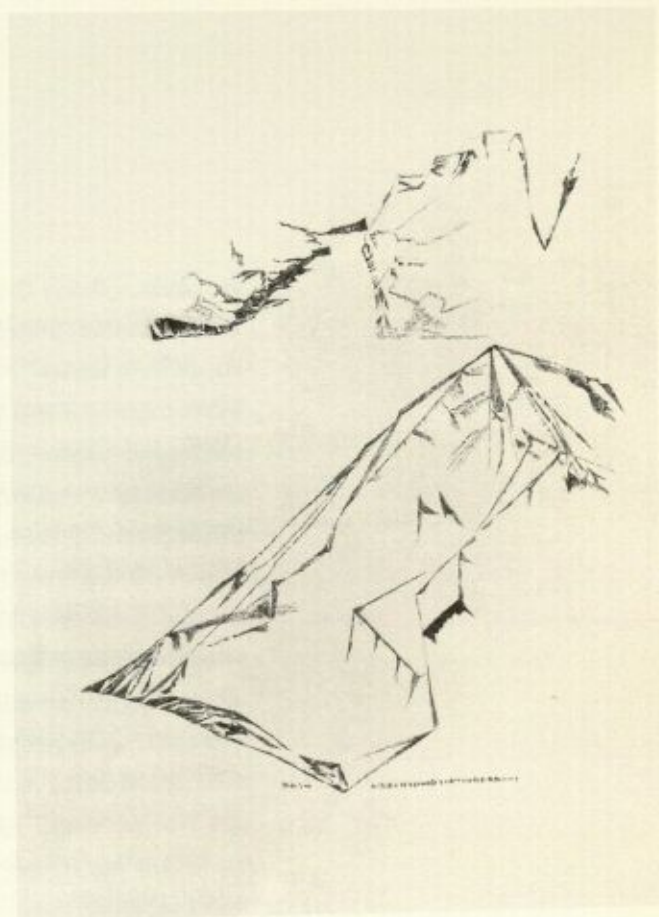
That flavor is especially visible in such details as architecture and furnishings.

DAMAGED LANDSCAPES

Alongside the reconfiguration of the cultural landscape since the 1980s has come the emergence of social critique, in response, notably, to the destructive aspects of economic success, whether on the physical environment or the social fabric. Popularly known as Taiwan's "chaotic disorder" [*luan*], this destructiveness has been the dark side of a more general "fast forward" effect in Taiwanese society in recent years. Yu Peng's often jumbled, "awkward" compositions, for example, can be seen as an attempt to find an aesthetic adequate to these circumstances of "chaotic disorder." While Yu's commentary is oblique, the works of Hsu Yu-jen on the other hand have been widely remarked for the directness of their critique. Since 1976 Hsu has worked concurrently in both oil on canvas and the ink on paper [*shuimo*] represented here, developing different themes in each medium. His oil paintings, with their clotted surfaces and rough textures, excluding all empty space, often engage with the dehumanizing effects of urbanization. Formally, the ink landscapes contrast strikingly with the oils, giving pride of place to empty paper and building up their corroded and skeletal structures with the utmost economy. Thematically, however, there is a clear connection, since the ink landscapes are overtly concerned with custodianship of the countryside and especially with the abrogation of responsibility that has permitted environmental destruction during recent years. The titles of the works repeatedly evoke the loss of a natural beauty that the artist remembers from his earlier life, sometimes as obviously as in *Every Time I Go to an Old Place/It Has Lost a Lot of Its Beautiful Scenery*, and sometimes, as in the case of certain works in the exhibition, in titles with a more elaborate poetic character suggestive of the inalienably personal response at stake. Hsu has explained that all of these landscape images evoke specific places, specific memories. Their function of record is reinforced by a topographic quality which may have its roots partly in the artist's experience as an aerial surveyor for Taiwan's Forestry Department.⁸

If Hsu is the poet, Hou Chun-ming is the story-teller, depicting damage to the social landscape. Hou tackles issues of sexuality that have largely remained taboo for "high" culture (though they find an outlet in popular Taoist-related culture), doing so in large-scale formats that bespeak the desire for a more public forum than the gallery space. The artist has, in some instances, acted on this desire, pasting up certain printed works in the street. In two earlier series, "Erotic Paradise" (1992) and "Collecting Spirits" (1993), Hou mimicked the textual and visual conventions of popular

Taoist books, creating enormously inventive fictional deities of sexuality, where the artist gave his view of sexual aberration and dysfunction free rein, constructing a dystopian vision of contemporary life in which a certain parallel between male impotence and government incapacity can be sensed.⁹ The works in the present exhibition come from a new series of "accounts by Mr. Hou of Liujiao," which illustrate imagined events recounted in the accompanying texts. These events are sometimes linked to contemporary real-life events. *The Divine Stick*, 1996, for example, satirizes the corruption of certain religious leaders who have taken advantage of the recent upsurge of popular religious fervor, which itself, according to the artist, betrays the social insecurity of the Taiwanese population. The power of Hou's art lies partly in the uncompromising way it reflects the ills of contemporary society back at society, at the risk (by no means negligible) of passing for complicit.¹⁰



HSU YU-JEN. *In the Mountains through which the Water Flowed No Trace of Water Is to Be Found/Only Spots of Sand Remain Here and There*, 1996

TWO: TAIWAN'S OPEN PARENTHESIS

Standing back from the most recent events, a second temporality can be discerned. The arrival of the defeated Kuomintang forces in 1949 initiated a new political structure dominated by so-called mainlanders which, from the outset, presented itself as provisional, the merely temporary exile of a displaced Chinese political center.¹¹ In this strange, perhaps unique polity, province and capital, margin and center, have been imagined as coterminous, the glaring contradiction to be dissolved by the events of some undecided future moment. In the mirror of the Taiwan Straits horizon, moreover, the formal structure of this polity continues to be reflected back in a precisely inverted image. And if, in the face of this doubly imposed provisionality, from within this most recent parenthesis opened in 1949, the Taiwanese independence movement has come to imagine a closure of a radically different kind, that possibility is no less deferred. For one and all, the current parenthesis remains open.¹²

While it seems to this writer, an outsider, that the psychic pressures of such provisionality (such as the social insecurity expressed as religious fervor, cited by Hou Chun-ming)

are rarely explicitly thematized in contemporary Taiwanese art, this does not mean that they are not intensely present.¹³

MEMORY'S HOME

In the fragility of Hsu Yu-jen's ink landscapes can be seen the embodiment of an anxious relationship to place, conditioned by private loss and articulated through memory. These are landscapes whose visual emergence on the paper is shadowed in viewing by its opposite, a disappearance. The landscape itself is provisional, betraying the personal angst behind the activist critique evoked earlier—for these are unambiguously self-referential works, both in the inescapability of their idiosyncratic molecular "touch" and the uncomfortable somatic posture of their images. In the hands of this self-declared nomad, the Taiwanese landscape takes on the provisionality of places passed through, remembered, and re-encountered only as loss. The paintings advertise the personal unwillingness of the artist to attach himself to the material reality of any of the particular places important to him. His baggage is packed, and is no more than a few spatial relationships, a few building blocks of memory, which can survive any trauma of personal displacement or political transformation to provide a portable psychic home.¹⁴

In contrast, Yu Peng's relationship to memory is the very different one of a diarist, engaged in the obsessive ongoing creation of memories from the fragments of personal experience. His world substitutes a contemporary bohemia for the faded charms of the literati. And a ramshackle urban (Taipei?) logic of overcrowding and improvised making-do characterizes the compositions, which by nostalgic convention take the form of landscapes.¹⁵ They are inhabited by figures who tend to be juxtaposed without interacting, and whose "here" seemingly lacks implications of rootedness. Equally, their romanticized "now" has a poignant, already nostalgic perfume, like a wooden teahouse trapped between new office buildings. Despite their many motifs signifying a traditional lifestyle, these images do not commemorate a lost way of life; rather, they take an ordinary ongoing cultural loss for granted, and use nostalgia as their weapon, their psychic defense against an uncertain future.

CERTAINTIES OF THE BODY

Something far more uncompromising—we might call it a pathology of provisionality—can be seen in the violent attachment to the immediacy of desire that marks the work of Hou Chun-ming. Uncontrollable demands of lust, infantilism, and violence traverse the actors in Hou's fantastic narratives, even at the price of their lives. A man and woman give in to lust and copulate like/as dogs in the street (they will be beaten to death). A boy, overcome by need for his mother, crawls back up into her womb; his father returns suddenly, however, and the penetration of his penis will batter the son to death. The evangelist's claim to be in several places at once becomes, in Hou's imagination, an orgy in which the man is cannibalized by his female lovers and dies feeling no pain. An agitated energy courses through the images, more anarchically in this series than in the preceding "Erotic Paradise" and "Collecting Spirits," where the formal model of the traditional iconic image of the deity held it in check. There, an attempt was clearly made to establish something stable (Hou has written that his ultimate objective was to found a "temple"), whereas the recent series confronts the question: "How does desire become a source of difficulty?"¹⁶ But the violence with which the artist pursues his project proves so disturbing that it betrays the artist's anxiety; ultimately, the immediacy of the present is unable to shut out the uncertainty of the future.

Huang Chih-yang, meanwhile, pitches desire into the dimension of history, with images that purport to strip away the layers of civilization to which contemporary Taiwanese society lays claim. A sudden, utopian leap is made across a secret genealogical frontier lying somewhere within the body; we are afforded a glimpse of a forgotten animal state, an origin but also a bodily condition. Huang has written of the debt his art owes to his Taipei environment, "this heavy, absurd, complex society bathed with electric light," "this space which womb-like has nurtured and harbored us during our frenzied rhapsody on the edge of death."¹⁷ Although the invocation of the primitive is a modern cliché, here it becomes vital again through the palpable need for certainty, for a nameable origin, for a certainty of difference. Without underestimating the importance of Taiwanese identity for the artist, one may also suspect that in this need, beyond (or beneath) the identity issue, the pressure of the provisional is also making itself felt.

NOTES

1. Martial law was first introduced in 1947, year of Kuomintang authorities' brutal suppression of local Taiwanese opposition.
2. Mandarin Chinese is the official language of Taiwan. Taiwanese is itself a regional Chinese dialect.
3. This section necessarily covers some of the same ground as in A.Y.'s catalogue essay, since that essay, having originally been written for a different context, does not speak as directly to the exhibition as she would undoubtedly have wanted.
4. Certain claims can be made, perhaps, for the island position as the paradigm of a contemporary modernity too glibly denoted as post-colonial (as if there were not a hundred varieties of continuing colonialisms, and other colonialisms still waiting in the wings). The uncertain coordinates of the cultural site that, in the end, occupies an impossible position — impossible, that is, in the sense of unchartable, or paradoxical — are repeated all over the world, and do not in any sense require a physical island setting or geographic marginality. On the contrary, the island position can be found even at the heart of the cultural centers of the contemporary world, in New York as easily as in Taipei. Far from being exotic, it may be one of the few relative certainties of our own uncertain future.
5. Or, elsewhere, the use of brightly colored backgrounds and mountings.
6. This description applies to most of the great names of "national painting" in the twentieth century, including Qi Baishi, Wang Zhen, Zhang Daqian, Fu Baoshi, Pan Tianshou, and Shi Lu, to cite some of the canonical figures. The major exceptions would include Wu Changshi and an artist particularly important to Yu Peng, Huang Binhong.
7. See his interview, published here. This contrasts, notably, with Zhang Daqian, an equally theatrical and self-mythologizing precursor who has been particularly influential in Taiwan.
8. See Hsu's interview, published here. Hsu is not the only landscape artist whose work involves social critique. Li An-chung, for example, has affirmed that his personal turn away from the pursuit of beauty characteristic of "national painting" is an attempt to find an aesthetic corresponding to Taiwan's "chaotic disorder" (interview with Alice Yang, January 1997).
9. See the interview published here for the artist's comments on the criticisms of misogyny at the time of the exhibition of these works.
10. This contrasts with Yu Peng's more pleurably indulgent treatment of contemporary desire and greed (Yu's own terms: see his interview), especially in his series of paintings focused on nude figures, though the psychological isolation of the figures introduces an important ambiguity. In their interviews, both Hou Chun-ming and Yu Peng suggest that the recent visibility of sexuality in Taiwanese society is a reaction against the earlier repression of desires during the period of martial law.
11. A. Y. had originally planned two essays, one closely related to her essay published here and a second on what she perceived as certain anxieties visible in the works, anxieties related, as I understand it, to the artists' cultural and political situation. The remainder of my own text takes its cue from this idea of anxiety, developing it, however, in directions for which I alone am responsible.
12. Standing back, is there not a sense in which the entire modern history of Taiwan can be said to have been a succession of political parentheses? Has there ever, in fact, been a stage of its modern history in which the weight of future alternatives has not compromised the possibility of

any straightforward confidence in the long-term prospects of the political structure of the day? After Taiwan was secretly ceded to Japan by the Qing dynasty government in 1895, following China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War, all the formidable apparatus of the Japanese colonial administration over fifty years was not enough to efface the cultural gravitational pull of a Chinese coast that lay all too close by, and was pulled even closer in the imagination by commonalities of regional dialect and culture. To this first parenthesis, closed in 1945 by Japan's defeat in the Asian Pacific War, succeeded another that was to prove very brief, yet retains today an emotional importance out of all proportion (or perhaps simply in inverse proportion) to its brevity. In 1945, juridically re-integrated into a Chinese polity that had become a republic, but a republic in the throes of civil war, Taiwan was put under the control of a Republican governor from the mainland. For four years (during which period violent political tensions on the island between mainlanders and local Taiwanese led to the initial imposition of martial law, in 1947), the war on the mainland imposed its particular question mark on the island's future. That "question" was answered, as it turned out, by another.

13. One exception is the work of Lien Te-cheng. See Lee Chang-juinn, "Information, Symbolism, Suspicion: The Art of Lien Te-cheng," in *Arttaiwan* (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 1995), pp. 16-17.

14. On Hsu's nomadism, and his interest in specific spatial relationships, see Chang Tsong-tzung (Johnson Chang), "To Build upon the Dotted Line of the Horizon," catalogue essay for a 1991 exhibition of Hsu Yu-jen's work at Hanart (Taipei) Gallery.

15. Traditionally, the representation of urban experience in *shuimo* painting has involved the editing-out of the

material reality of the urban environment, replaced by a natural environment which is often based on the enclaves of nature within the city (parks, gardens, etc.). The psychological dimension of urban experience, however, survives intact.

16. For the objective of founding a "temple," see the artist's comments in *Arttaiwan*, p. 25. For the question cited, see the interview with the artist published here.

17. See *Arttaiwan*, p. 39.