

## The Amorphous Taipei Biennial Tackles Nostalgia and Environmental Despair

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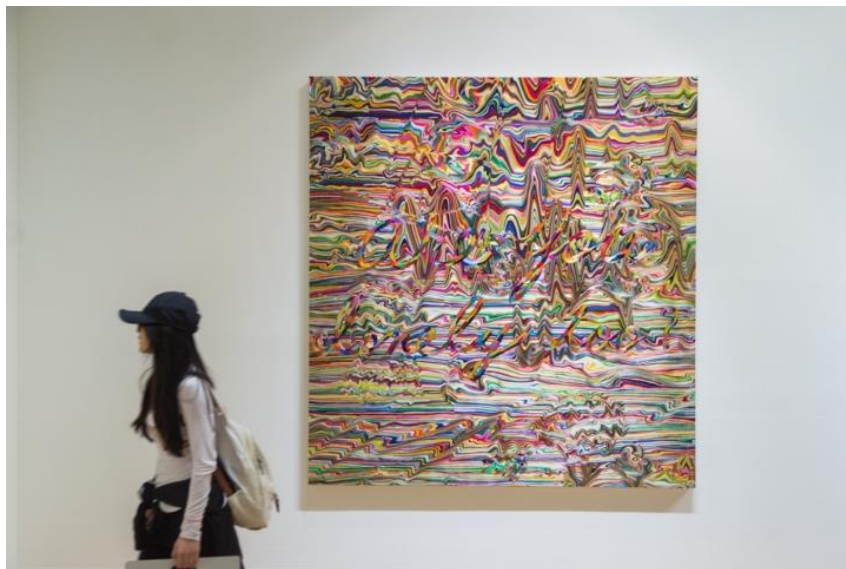
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TAIPEI, Republic of China — In her short introduction to the current edition of the Taipei Biennial held on two floors of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, French curator Corinne Discerens describes her intention of “performing the archives, performing the architecture, performing the retrospective,” in order to explain the show’s theme and title, *Gestures and archives of the present*, genealogies of the future. Featuring work by an array of more than 70 artists, of which at least half are Taiwanese, this is a broad, amorphous exhibition that veers mostly between nostalgia, postcolonial iterations of history, and current environmental concerns that present a bleak perspective of both the present and the future.

From the very get-go, Discerens’s exhibition runs into difficulty. Many individual works that have merit on their own fail to engage with each other. For instance, on the first floor, Truong Cong Tung’s abstract series “Land of Dreams” (2012–present) — ceramic paintings on glazed tile that blur the line between abstract and figurative forms and evoke the Buddhist philosophy of life as an illusion or *maya* — shed little perspective on Peter Friedl’s “Rehousing” project (2012–14). And Friedl’s intricately scaled models of homes built in the ‘60s in Cambodia, Vietnam, and the United States as a map of “modes of modernity” is an engaging project with little relation to Chen Chieh-jen’s four-channel black-and-white video installation “Realm of Reverberations” (2014), which is shown in the adjacent room. Chieh-jen’s profoundly moving perspective on the demolition of the Losheng Sanatorium, which was built during the Japanese occupation of Taiwan to house patients with Hansen’s disease (leprosy), is an activist-driven work that conjures a deep sense of empathy for a forgotten community of elderly disabled people whose only form of shelter since childhood is being claimed by the Taiwanese Rapid Transit Department.

On the same floor, Chia-Wei Hsu’s video installation “Spirit Writing” (2016) tracks a conversation between the artist and the frog god Marshal Tie Jia, whose temple in the Wuyi Mountains was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Through what the wall text describes as a “unique chair divination ritual,” the frog god’s descriptions of his temple are transcribed into fast-moving 3D renderings on a screen. In this process, Hsu seamlessly combines superstition and belief, and science and imagination, in a highly convincing and enticing work. Yet while the videos Discerens has chosen are some of the strongest works in the exhibition, the past, be it in the form of architecture, painful memories, or scientific renditions of mythology, is presented as an unrelated collection of archives of the present. Such a methodology, in which the works neither shed light on one another nor enable a coherent dialogue, dilutes the cohesive power of the exhibition.



Kyungah Ham, "Whisper, Needle Country/SMS Series in Camouflage/Are you lonely too" (2014–15)

As one parses the biennial, nostalgia is an important lens through which the past is evoked. Im Hueng-soon's deeply elegiac video, "Bukhansan/Bukhangang" (2015–16), of a North Korean singer who escapes to the South and longs for reunification with her northern homeland, is a case in point. Similarly, the South Korean artist Kyungah Ham's beautifully embroidered abstract canvases, which are surreptitiously made in the North, refer to the treacherous contact maintained between both sides. Words and phrases such as "big smile," "imagine," and "are you lonely too" are embroidered on the colorful surfaces, conveying the pain of separation. Even South African photographer Santu Mofokeng's black-and-white series "Chasing Shadows," taken in 1989, of local religious rituals practiced during Apartheid, are deeply nostalgic for suppressed, unacknowledged traditions.

History and the disenfranchised Other appear to be fortified through South African photographer Jo Ractliffe's images of the war-torn Angolan landscape, as well as Portuguese video artist Angela Ferreira's postcolonial reversal of the de facto representation of a tribe in Mozambique (which was a Portuguese colony) in her video "A Tendency to Forget" (2015). But even more curious is the selection of Belgian painter Francis Alys' small landscape paintings made during his travels to Baqua, Shanghai, Coyuca, and Kabul, which make these places seem exotic.

Through this disparate selection of works, the viewer must discern the curator's idea of "performing the retrospective," which attempts to showcase different perspectives of the past with a strong emphasis on the atrocities of subjugation and repression in Taiwan and Korea, and Western representations of historical events in Africa.

Even the environmental situation in Taiwan appears to be quite bleak. Yi-Chih Lai's paintings, "The Concealed Landscapes" (2016), of growing petrochemical industrial zones in rural Taiwanese landscapes, and the Taiwanese lack of concern after the 2009 typhoon in Taiwan destroyed the landscape as seen in Hsu-Pin Lee's photographs, "Disastrous Landscapes" (2013), don't bode well. One wonders, then, if Discerens's vision of the future, especially in non-Western countries, is like Korean artist Park Chan-Kyong's slow-moving dirge to death in his video "Citizens Forest" (2016), which references all the major events of trauma in Korean history.

Gestures and archives of the present, genealogies of the future *continues at Taipei Fine Arts Museum (No.181, Sec. 3, Zhongshan N. Rd., Zhongshan Dist., Taipei City 10461, Taiwan, R.O.C) through February 5, 2017.*