

exhibition review

DR MING TURNER

Contemporary Taiwanese Women's Art: How Art Can Enrich Lives (non x-rated)

19 September – 2 October 2009, JiLin Gallery, Taipei

How Art Can Enrich Lives (non x-rated) was a members' group exhibition of the Taiwanese Women's Art Association (TWAA), curated by Chen Chun-Chu. The significant means of this project was to recall the power of the 'women's gathering', which politicises and subjectifies women artists' strength through group exhibitions; a strategy often seen since the early feminist movement in the West in the 1970s.

Established on 23 January 2000 at the Hua-Shan Arts District in Taipei, the members of TWAA include some very influential artists, critics and historians in Taiwan, such as Wu Mali, Lai Tsun-Tsun, Elsa Hsiang-Chun Chen and Lin Pey Chwen, amongst others. The first members' group show of the TWAA was *Sweet and Sour Yeast* (curated by Chang Hui-Lan, 2001-02), held at two former warehouses built during Japanese colonisation: the Hua-Shan Arts District, Taipei (formerly known as Hua-Shan Winery) and the Kia-A-Thau Art Village, Kaohsiung (previously named Kia-A-Thau Sugar Factory). The warehouses ceased production in the 1980s, and the project responded to both the winery and the sugar industry at their respective locations.

In 2003, the *First International Women's Art Festival* (curated by Elsa Chen and staged at the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts), was the TWAA's second major group exhibition, which for the first time introduced the concepts of the term 'cyberfeminism in art' to the island. The next major group show, *Happiness Index*, was organised by Xu Shuzhen in 2005, held at the Sinpink Art Gallery, Dog Pig Café, Yentao Studio and Fongshan Station Studio, all of which are located in Kaohsiung. In 2008, with thirty-three artists involved, Wan Yiyi curated another members' group exhibition, *Contemporary Women's Art: Identities/Environments*, held at the Art and Cultural Hall of Shin Kong Mitsukoshi Taichung Store. I see the earlier projects of the TWAA as more theme-specific and strategic than the later ones, which were curated with broader themes. Nevertheless, both served the purpose of exposing women's art in the rapidly-changing field of Taiwanese art.

How Art Can Enrich Lives (non x-rated) included forty-two artists and various media, including painting, digital prints, installation, multi-media, etc. Apart from many key members of the association, some new members and younger artists have been invited to participate in the project. The show was staged at a new gallery opened in 2002, managed by JiLin Primary School in



Tsai Chueh-Lin, *Smile*, animation, 2'26", 2009 (Director/Cinematographer/Scriptwriter/Music: Tsai Chueh-Lin)



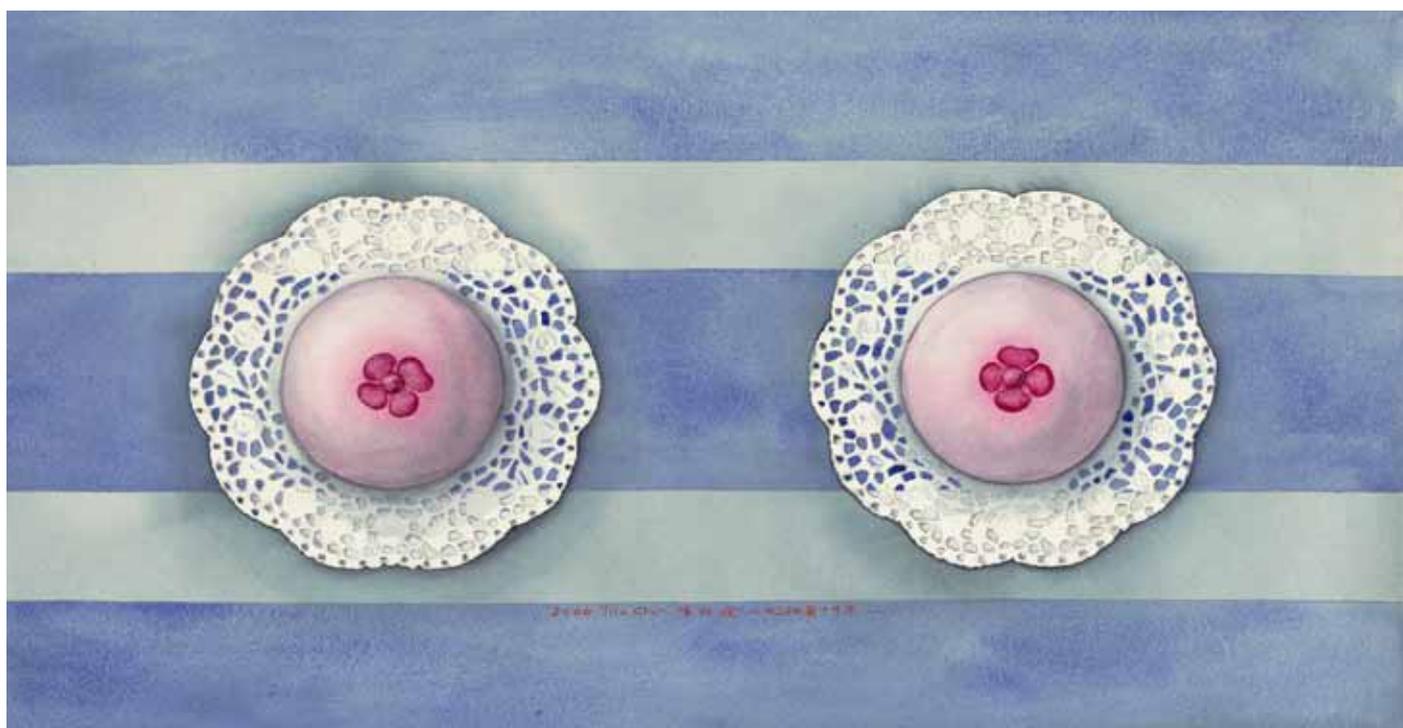
Tsai Hai-Ru, *Two or One?*, digital print, 80x38.8cm, 2007



Lin Pey Chwen, *EVE clone#2*, interactive installation, size varied, 2009

Taipei city centre, and covering around 300 square metres. With limited support from JiLin Primary School and the TWAA, the project is virtually self-funded by the participating artists themselves. The main theme of the show centered on the role of women in modern society and on concern for our living environments. However, in order to include as many diverse forms and concepts of practice as possible, the themes of the show were general and there was a lack of cohesion. The show was like a project of the early 1970s feminist movement, and was also very similar to some women artists group shows in Taiwan in the early 1990s, staged after martial law was lifted on the island in 1987. Nonetheless, this project does contribute to the history-writing of Taiwanese women's art, by archiving and displaying the most-up-to date women's art in Taiwan.

There are several interesting and inspiring works exhibited in the show. Tsai Chueh-Lin's animation uses the skill of collage, comprised of various images of people's bodies, through which she explores the complexity of human characteristics. Tsai Hai-Ru's digital print adopts a pregnant woman's body as the main subject and examines women's various roles in society. *Artificial Nature* (2006), a multi-media creation by Lin Pey Chwen, criticises the abuse of technology in our everyday life, which has led to an artificial way of living and has brought about an unreal and damaged natural environment. Chen Chiu-Jhin's watercolour painting, *Two Rice Cakes for Tea Time* (2006), show two rice cakes, symbolising women's breasts. Chen intends to address the concept that the desires of sexuality and food are equally essential for both men and women. Young artist Ariel Kuo exhibited her multi-media piece, *Singular Bar* (2008), through which she explores the ideas of individualism and one's existence in society.



Chen Chiu-Jhin. *Two Rice Cakes for Tea Time*,
watercolour on paper,
41x76cm, 2006

Finally, it is interesting to note that *C-Arts Mag: Asian Contemporary Art and Culture* (based in Singapore) recently published a *Special Report Asian Women Artists* (vol 09, August 2009), and in Korea, the 2nd International Women Artists Biennale was staged in Incheon throughout August 2009. This TWAA exhibition responds coincidentally to what East/South East Asia is now keen to discuss – women’s art. However, apart from the power of ‘women’s gatherings’, I am keen to see women’s exhibitions in Taiwan (or Asia) with more explicit and theme-focused topics, which not only praise the strength of women’s art but also highlight their own unique cultural heritage, through which they can differentiate their art from Western feminist styles.

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