

South China Morning Post, New York art show tackles what it means to be Chinese in the modern age, text/ Richard James Havis, December 8th, 2013

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New York art show tackles what it means to be Chinese in the modern age

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Michael Lin's diptych of a multiple-entry travel permit for travellers between Taiwan and the mainland is part of the "Cross-Strait Relations" exhibition.

What does it mean to be Chinese? This is a question that has received much attention over the centuries, and the question arises again in "Cross-Strait Relations", an art exhibition at Parsons The New School For Design in New York City. Curated by Taiwan-born Arthur Ou, an assistant professor of photography at Parsons, the show examines the perception of what it means to be Chinese in relation to the rise of the mainland in the 21st century.

"The idea is to explore the many different notions of what Chinese identity is. With the rise of the mainland as a political and economic power, the identity of a Chinese individual is becoming seen as a monolithic thing," says Ou at the Sheila C. Johnson Design Centre in which the exhibition is housed.

The show, Ou says, also addresses the new ways that the Chinese diaspora is manifesting itself. "In this exhibition, I am interested in bringing together artists who are from the main Chinese regions, but are often moving between them, and responding to what they see," he says. "We have an artist from Taiwan who is based in Shanghai, and an artist from Singapore who is based in Berlin. I wanted that very itinerant spirit to be part of the show."

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"Cross-Strait Relations" tries to reflect some of the geographical diversity of Greater China. The show features 10 artists: four from the mainland, and two each from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. Works include Michael Lin's diptych painting *123-9211-8072* and *135-8217-9633*, which are two giant depictions of a *tai bao zheng*, a multiple entry travel permit for travellers between Taiwan and the mainland; Chien Chieh-jen's video installation *Empire's Borders I*; and Cao Fei's *PostGarden*, which removes BBC television's CBeebies from their usual environment.

"There needs to be a new understanding of what China is, not one that is based on how modern China took shape in the 20th century," Ou says. "In film, literature, and the arts, there are very different trajectories that I think would need to be considered. The mass movement of people is certainly important."

The exhibition is primarily meant to raise more questions and provoke a debate, rather than provide answers. The title "Cross-Strait Relations", a term that brings historical tensions between the mainland and Taiwan to mind, is intended to be provocative. "The show does not reach a conclusion; it is more of a proposal about finding a new understanding," says Ou.

Ou was born in Taiwan, and his own experience has informed the theme of the exhibition. Artists and filmmakers in modern Taiwan have been exploring identity issues since the 1980s. With a history that encompasses a Dutch presence, the Japanese occupation, and the massed Kuomintang arrival on the island after its defeat on the mainland in 1949, Taiwanese identity is complex.

"There is a very personal context to it," says Ou. "Taiwan is a very hybridised place, as many different histories have become intertwined there. If you grow up in Taiwan, do you identify with what came before, or with the mainland, or with your ancestors who moved from the mainland to Taiwan? What about the indigenous people, and what about the Japanese occupation? So there are a lot of different kinds of definitions of 'Taiwanese'."

Artist Jun Yang's video installation *Phantom Island* takes a more literal approach to the idea of nationhood and movement. It features a model of an island, representing Taiwan, being transported through the streets of Taipei on the back of a truck. It's then released into the East China Sea, into a no man's land between the mainland, Japan and Taiwan, near the area that provoked the recent stand-off between China, Japan, and the US.

"It's a model island, painted green which is supposed to be a stand-in for Taiwan," says Ou. "It's not an accurate model, but it symbolises the island. At first, you see various shots of it crossing the city. Then it is towed out into the sea, to a netherland between Taiwan, the mainland and Japan. I feel there is something very personal about this piece."

This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as New York show asks what it means to be Chinese
