Interview with Michael Lin

January 31, 2024

Interviewer: Chieko Nakagawa (Towada Art Center)

To begin, I want to start with a very basic question: What prompted you to become an artist?

There are two main circumstances that led me to pursue an art education. Both were directly linked to my journey to the west.

The first defining factor was my family's immigration to the United States from Taiwan in 1973 when I was 8 years old. We started our new life in Hawaii, where my brothers and I were enrolled directly in the public school system. My struggles at school with this new culture and language, I believe, impacted the development of my communication skills—whether that be on the playground or in the classrooms. However, what I lacked in English class, I made up for in Art class. It was in painting, where the rules were not as clearly defined, that I was rewarded with a prize and a place on the wall behind the principal's desk. With this early recognition came support and praise from my parents, which was crucial, and also made it easier for them to overlook my poor results in other subjects.

This more casual approach to my formal education took on another dimension when my family moved for a second time, further west. Settling in the mid '70s in Los Angeles, where the process of assimilation as an Asian immigrant was compounded with my struggles as a teenager, I was faced with all the difficulties of a minority, but found myself in a rather forgiving and accessible environment. Many of my friends from school had unconventional single parents, mostly from the hippie generation. Along with these role models came a hedonistic lifestyle with rock 'n' roll, New Wave, and later punk music and all its counter cultural tendencies. I spent most of my early teens going to rock concerts, shirtless in shorts on a skateboard, or hitchhiking up the coast with a surfboard in search of waves. At the same time, I always returned home to my traditional Taiwanese family, which duly adhered to the teachings of Confucianism.

The 'informal' education that I received during my formative years in Southern California, in addition to my cultural background, made me seek out alternate ways of education. While one was critical of education as a whole, my Taiwanese side still valued it strongly, which lead me to pursue an education in art.

You use Taiwanese cloth from daily life, often sourced from manufactured goods, as a motif in your work. Is this unique approach connected to the idea that you were always between cultures?

The use of Taiwanese textiles corresponded directly with my return to Taiwan in the early' 90s after finishing my graduate studies in the United States.

At the time of my return, Taiwan was going through a very important period of political and social reforms. During this period the authoritarian, single-party government, which was in power since 1949, transitioned into a democracy with its first direct presidential election in 1996.

This stage of political and social change had an enormous impact on my formation as an artist. Along with the political reforms came cultural policies which established institutions and large-scale exhibitions that did not exist with the old regime.

The establishment of new institutions such as the National Culture and Arts Foundation, a funding body that supports arts and culture, and the Institute of Contemporary Art, now MOCA, dedicated to the exhibition of contemporary Art, are just two entities out of a long list that I benefited from personally.

Taiwan participated in the Venice Biennale in 1995 and the Taipei Biennial in 2000, two major exhibitions that marked the development of contemporary art in Taiwan.

Taiwan was invited to participate with a national pavilion for the first time in the Venice Biennale in 1995. Imagine the impact it had on the local art community to participate in an international event of this scale for a country in the midst of political and social transformation, especially on someone like myself, who was still struggling to find my place culturally and finding my voice as an artist.

With questions of national representation came introspection and a search for cultural identity. At the same time, none of the above can be separated from the Taiwanese struggle for political representation in the world, which permeated the society as a whole.

Five years after the Venice Biennale, the Taipei Fine Art Museum, the organizer of Taiwan's participation in Venice, hosted its own international Biennial. Although modest in scale, the 2000 Taipei Biennial, *The Sky is the Limit*, would not only announce the arrival of Taipei on the international stage but also secure its position as a main contributor to contemporary art in Asia.

All this is to give you the broader context in which I used 'Taiwanese cloth from daily life' in my work. Both daily life and Taiwanese cloth take on very different meanings under such circumstances. They can refer to the informal and routine, but also culture and geopolitics.

It was under these conditions that I searched for ways to make art and define the role of the

artist.

To come back to the second part of your question about being between cultures, I understand it as a question of perspective. To not completely belong to one culture gave me an added point of view: to simultaneously be looking from the inside and the outside; coming home to the familiar but feeling slightly foreign. It was in this state that I became reacquainted with my home town and began my life as an artist.

Not long after returning to Taiwan, I began to participate in exhibitions at IT Park. IT Park refers both to an alternative exhibition space in Taipei, and the group of artists that operates that space. Half of the artists were in their late twenties and, like myself, had studied overseas. The other half had graduated from the local art schools. IT Park was a popular gathering place, not only for artists, but also for a diverse demographic of the cultural community, from architects to fashion designers.

Unlike the exhibition spaces I knew in Los Angeles, IT Park was very informal and convivial. It was more of a place to hang out than a gallery. At the time of my first exhibition, in 1994, one of the spaces was renovated into a bar as a way to generate profit. Because of my prior experience of working behind a bar in Los Angeles, I was asked to be the bartender during my exhibition. The bar was such a success that I stayed on to help manage the bar and exhibition spaces.

As I embarked on my mission to formalize the management of the exhibition space, I was faced with conflicting circumstances that challenged my learned preconceptions. For example, it was impossible to have a neutral exhibition space, considering that the walls at IT Park were painted halfheartedly with a brush for so long that they had an impasto effect. The border between exhibition space and bar was impossible to maintain, lively chatter would inevitably spill into the exhibition space, pushing the artworks into the background. The opening hours were changed to accommodate the bar, which became a coveted venue in the nightlife of the city.

My job was all-encompassing; installation and de-installation of artworks, answering phone calls, designing invitations, being the English translator for foreign visitors, and serving drinks. This situation eventually caused me to question my identity as an artist.

All in all, this not only challenged my preconceived ideas about exhibition making and the role of the artist, it also gave me access to new perspectives. As the installer of each exhibition, I was able to follow every decision of the artist, from positioning the works in the space to the inclusion or exclusion of works. I was able to observe the audience and their interaction with the artworks. Not only was I learning the process of exhibition making and gaining insight into the working process of other artists, by making my own exhibition at IT Park, I was able to see the full extent of the process. I came to realize that the artist's role is not only limited

to the confines of his studio but extends well beyond the production of objects and the exhibition. I was not only between cultures but also between different professions.

For my exhibition entitled *Interior*, at IT Park in 1996, I was interested in questioning the distinction between public and private space. The invitation to the exhibition was a postcard with a photo of the doormat at my front door and an assortment of shoes left by my guests upon entering my house, a common sight in Taiwan.

The first room of the exhibition was mostly empty, except for a light box with a color photograph of a large arrangement of flowers in a vase, printed in actual size. The light box was placed on the floor, in front of the main wall, which was painted in a warm shade of green—a color selected from a catalogue at the hardware store, mixed by a machine. The work titled *reception* was a reference to the transitional space that functions to welcome guest before entering the living area of a home, and also the opening event of an exhibition, when flowers are customarily offered to congratulate the artist.

Two large decorative kilims from my home were placed directly on the concrete floor of the main exhibition space. My stereo system and CD player, along with twelve CDs from my collection, were placed on a free-standing shelving unit against the far wall, flanked by one speaker on each side. Along with these furnishings from my house, a short sentence was printed on vinyl and affixed to the wall, similar to standard wall text in museums and galleries, which read: "Please remove your shoes before stepping on the carpet and feel free to choose from the selection of music."

Please remove your shoes before stepping on to the carpet. Feel free to choose from the selection of the music., 1996, installation at IT Park Gallery, Taipei

In the last room hung four small oil paintings on canvas. Each painting faithfully represented a pillow from my living room, its colors, decorative pattern, and size. The canvases were painted with no rendering of light and shadow to emphasize their abstract quality. However, the decorative patterns are delineated by the irregular edges of the pillows they represent to give them form and legibility. Two canvases with the same pattern, entitled *Pillow #1* and *Pillow #2*, are coupled as a pair on one wall, and the other two occupy their own walls, *Pillow #3* and *Pillow #4*. All the paintings were hung at chest height.

Pillow #1 and *Pillow #2,* 1996

During the exhibition, the pair of paintings, *Pillow #1* and *Pillow #2*, received unusual attention. Some visitors to the exhibition seemed to recognize the pattern on the paintings. After two years of observing visitors interact with artworks, it was rare to see someone walk up to an abstract painting with such familiarity. Each reaction was unguarded, direct, and accompanied by nostalgic sentiment. Someone recognized the patterns as something from their grandmother's home, while another person recalled the bed from their wedding night. Even though the audience at IT Park consisted of professional and active members of the cultural community, often there appeared to be an unbreachable barrier between audience and artwork. It was at this point that the traditional Taiwanese textile designs were brought to my attention. I came to see them as a vernacular or a dialect that I shared with my audience and community, which allowed for a more unambiguous correspondence.

Speaking of tradition, I've heard that you were inspired by Nanbu Sakiori, the local technique of creating a woven fabric from multiple different pieces of cloth.

A large part of my work is driven by the exploration of its relationship to context and ideas of place. For example, would the kilims and music system from my IT Park exhibition *Interior*, when returned to my living room after the exhibition, cease to have meaning as artwork? My work for Towada is more clear, it was painted directly on the floor, thus inseparable from the architecture.

For each project, I try to find ways to engage with the locality. My process usually starts with a site visit for research. Similar to realizing a film, the first important step is location scouting. Typically, this is a discussion with the curator or commissioner to establish and explore all possible locations. Next, depending on each specific place, there are introductory visits to local museums, culturally significant places such as markets and community centers, and architectural sites that reflect my interest.

It was during my initial site visit to Towada that I was introduced to Nanbu Sakiori and immediately found an affinity to this tradition. The craft of reusing old Kimono fabrics to make something new is conceptually similar to my own practice. I too take old Taiwanese textiles and transform them into something new, usually into a painting.

A difference is that in Nanbu Sakiori, the old Kimono fabrics are torn up into different pieces and then woven together. It was this simple idea that inspired me to piece together different textile patterns to create something new, looking very much like a patchwork. I would go on to explore this idea further three years later in my exhibition *Mingling*.

When you were asked to make a work for Towada, was it already decided that you would be making a work for the café? Or were there a few ideas as to where it would go?

By the time I was invited by Towada to make a proposal, the contextualization within the architectural framework was already a crucial characteristic of my work. My focus lay outside the formal exhibition spaces and galleries, such as the Café at Palais de Tokyo in 2002 and MoMA PS1 in 2004, or the hallway in the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa. To return to our earlier conversation, it could be understood as occupying a place in between. These spaces that have a function within the architectural plan of the museum, such as the café or a hallway, are areas that sit between exhibition and daily life. The regulations and etiquette that apply to these spaces are very different.
The circumstances for Towada were very special because the architecture was still in the design stage when the discussion with the artists began. It was an ideal situation where the art and architecture were conceived as one. Too often, artists are only invited to propose works when the building has been completed. There were several possibilities that were discussed between the organizers and myself; at the end, it was narrowed down to two. I made a proposal for the stairwell and the café.

In your project for Towada, you combine multiple types of textiles in the manner of a patchwork. You usually work with traditional and everyday Taiwanese patterns. Could you tell us how you selected the patterns for this particular work?

The selection of the specific patterns was a very intuitive process. For one, they were all textiles that I found in Japan. Starting with my research in 2003 for Kanazawa, I had begun accumulating a collection of popular Japanese textiles. I use the term 'popular' to imply something affordable and accessible to many people. This was an important quality that is consistent with the Taiwanese textiles that I work with. For Kanazawa, I initially visited many Kaga-Yuzen masters and studios, but found that the beautiful kimonos they created did not agree with the qualities I was looking for. Kaga-Yuzen kimonos are unique works of fine art, which are exclusive and inaccessible to common people. Not only was it inappropriate for a work entitled *Peoples Gallery*, it did not align with my interest in art in public spaces.
Fortunately, I was directed by a friend to the textile market in the Nippori area in Tokyo, which I visited as if it was an art gallery.

People's Gallery, 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa

In the late '90s, you created these room-like exhibition spaces, which I am sure is also linked to the idea of relational art. You studied in western countries, but did you feel a need to emphasize your non-western ethnic identity?

I think the emphasis on my non-western ethnic identity can be understood in two stages. The first stage would be during the development of my work in the early '90s. The second would be the period that you mention in the late '90s.

The early '90s was when I returned to Taiwan after finishing my studies. It was a time of searching, both for a place in the world and a voice as an artist. This non-western ethnic identity you mention was not a premeditated approach but something that developed during the process of my search. At a certain point, I realized that unlike at art school where the idea of the audience is an academic exercise, I was making art in Taiwan for a Taiwanese audience. Furthermore, all this was taking place during a period of great change both socially and politically.

It would not be until the late '90s that I began to receive invitations from abroad. I had my first invitation in 1998, to participate in an exhibition in France. Under the title of *You Talk I*

Listen, the exhibition was conceived as a dialogue between ten Taiwanese and ten European artists. Consequently, this non-western ethnic identity was something that was assigned to me once I started to participate in exhibitions outside of Taiwan. Next came the Asian Art

Triennial in 1999 for the inauguration of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Then came the label of the artist from Taiwan.

This identity we speak about is something that is constituted from two sides: from within oneself and also from the exterior. Again, I find myself somewhere in between.

Published on May 25, 2024
Edited and proofread by Ben Cagan (Art Translators Collective)
Photography: Michael Lin