

Simultaneous interpretation

Below: Brenda Zlamany's photographs of her subjects holding their finished portraits are as important a part of 888: Portraits of Taiwan as the paintings themselves. Right: Brenda Zlamany created 888 portraits of Taiwanese people in 33 towns, villages and cities around the country.



The silent, emotionally charged communication between an artist and her subject is explored in Brenda Zlamany's project 888: Portrait of Taiwan

BY CATHERINE SHU
STAFF REPORTER

Created by American artist Brenda Zlamany, 888: Portrait of Taiwan (八八八計畫:看我—畫我—拍我) explores the loaded relationship between portraitists and their subjects. Over three months, Zlamany traveled to 33 different villages and cities in Taiwan, painting hundreds of subjects including *Seediq Bale* (賽德克巴萊) star Lin Ching-Tai (林慶台) and a 104-year-old female resident of Nan-ao Township (南澳鄉) in Yilan County.

888: Portraits of Taiwan (the number refers to the amount of paintings produced by Zlamany for the project), which opened on Jan. 19 and runs until Feb. 29 at MOCA Studio in the Zhongshan MRT Station (中山捷運站), combines watercolor portraiture and multimedia art in an installation that allows viewers to get a close look at Zlamany's artistic process and her subjects.

Though most portraits were made in 15 minutes or less, Zlamany deftly creates a narrative about each subject with a few brushstrokes. One man who works at a bird sanctuary proudly poses with a feathered friend cradled against his chin, while an elderly woman wearing a cross pendant looks at the viewer with a direct gaze.

"It's a magical process where you don't know someone and you don't speak the

language, but you actually see them go from apprehensive to becoming more comfortable," Zlamany says.

Based in New York City, Zlamany's clients include *The New York Times Magazine*. 888: Portraits of Taiwan was conceptualized after a 2007 visit to Tibet. During her trip, Zlamany photographed people to use as subjects in paintings once she was back in her studio.

Zlamany, who often paints fellow artists, said she noticed "there is a very different gaze in Tibetan people. It's less narcissistic, less look at me."

She adds, "The thing about artists is that we are professional poseurs. We paint each other, we know what we look like, we know we have to give an image." In contrast, her Tibetan subjects struck Zlamany as "more comfortable in the world, less reaching out."

Disappointed that she had not been able to get acquainted with them beyond taking their photographs, Zlamany decided to create a project in which she would be able to get to know her sitters through observation. She picked Taiwan because she had heard about this country's Aboriginal tribes and was intrigued by the possibility of introducing their culture to Americans.

Funded by a Fulbright grant and accompanied by her 10-year-old daughter Oona, who is fluent in Mandarin and served as her mother's interpreter, Zlamany traveled around the country looking for people to paint.

Many subjects were initially unsure of how to pose or where to look while Zlamany sketched their portraits, though she sensed most wanted to observe her as she worked.

"I just started saying, 'Look at me because I know you want to,' and people really liked it," says Zlamany. "I asked one person why he wanted to be painted. And he said, 'It's because

I want to stare at you.'"

In some places, Zlamany had to work fast to accommodate long lines of people who wanted to be painted. Other potential sitters, however, had to be gently coaxed.

"The hardest people to paint are the people who don't think they are attractive and they are worried that the drawing will not be beautiful," says Zlamany. "It's especially true of someone who is older and that was maybe more attractive when they were younger."

Sometimes groups of people would gather to observe subjects in which the portrait "could go either way."

"When you draw someone, you can see both their good and bad sides simultaneously," Zlamany explains. "Where you go with it is a decision that you have to make." One of her sitters was so intoxicated that he took off his shirt and put it back on again. When observers saw that Zlamany strived to be respectful in her portrayals, however, it eased the tension in the crowd.

"I could see it made people happy that I was kind. It was a subtle communication," says Zlamany. "I don't think it's insincere to want to find someone's good side."

Though each portrait session was brief, it could also be very revealing for both Zlamany and her sitter.

Cerita Chen (陳秋吟) invited Zlamany to her home in Taoyuan after sitting for her. "I felt my portrait was different from what I see in a photo or the mirror. I felt she had captured my spirit and what I was feeling," says Chen.

"It was a new experience to have someone from abroad in our house, drawing us," she adds.

Just as Zlamany's subjects warmed up to her, Zlamany also found herself viewing some people in a new light after painting them, including a group of five women who stayed in the same hostel in Chingchuan (清泉), an Atayal

village in Hsinchu County. At first, Zlamany was disinterested in painting the group because they seemed like average tourists. During some free time, however, Zlamany asked the women to sit for her. As the group observed one another as each was painted, the depth of their relationship revealed itself.

"There was just something about their friendship that made them come alive as people and seem more special," Zlamany says. "It had a layer of richness that I hadn't noticed."

"I don't know if they were wondering who I was or if they were suspicious of me," she adds. "But afterward I felt that we were close and that some boundaries or barriers had been broken."

Now back in New York City, Zlamany plans to turn 24 of her favorite watercolor portraits into oil paintings. She hopes to repeat the project in Laos and Cambodia, and eventually bring it to Israel and Palestine.

"It's brought so much goodwill and I'm really happy with that," says Zlamany, who keeps in contact with many of her 888: Portraits of Taiwan sitters.

EXHIBITION NOTES

WHAT: 888: Portrait of Taiwan (八八八計畫:看我—畫我—拍我)

WHEN: Open every day from 11am to 8pm. Until Feb. 29

WHERE: MOCA Studio — Underground (地下實驗·創意秀場), Zhongshan MRT Station (中山捷運站) near Exit R9.

ADMISSION: Free

ON THE NET: www.mocatapei.org.tw, www.brendazlamany.com

EXHIBITIONS

BY NOAH BUCHAN



Kuo Hui-chan, *Points of Light* (2011).

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SPLENDOR HOTEL TAICHUNG

Find Green Light (遇見綠光) is an exhibit of new media art that examines environmental themes related to cities, such as green spaces and urban planning. The seven works by five artists include interactive displays, LED installations, animation and video.

■ The Splendor Hotel Taichung (台中金典酒店), 2F, 1049 Jianxing Rd, Greater Taichung City (台中市健行路1049號2F), tel: (04) 2328-1000 X8815. Open daily from 11am to 10pm

■ Until April 1

2011 Taipei Arts Awards shortlisted artist Liao Chi-yu (廖新羽) uses role-play and open-ended narrative to create videos that subtly examine the complicated feelings relating to bodily experiences, memory and love. **Miss Farewell** presents these ideas in a solo show in two parts. Twinkle Series depicts the "imagination and experience about cultures and foods" through kitchen settings with "particular food elements and characters," according to the gallery's press release. The second series, untitled, portrays the "unexpected sadness and the sense of loss" people usually experience sometime during their life.

■ VT Art Salon (非常藝術空間), B1, 47 Yitong St, Taipei City (台北市伊通街47號B1), tel: (02) 2516-1060. Open Tuesdays through Thursdays from 1:30pm to 9pm, and Fridays and Saturdays from 1:30pm to 10pm

■ Until March 10



Hsia Ai-hua, *Between Dream & Darkness*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MOT ARTS

Hsia Ai-hua (夏愛華) explores her dreams and the archetypes embedded in the collective unconscious to create a new series of vibrant and surreal sculptures and drawings in **In Between the Dormant & Subliminal (夢與間的游離間)**.

■ MOT Arts, 3F, 22, Fuxing S Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市復興南路一段22號3樓), tel: (02) 2751-8088. Open daily from 11:30am to 8pm

■ Until March 18

First Shot (新影) brings together the photography of 14 emerging artists working in documentary and travel photography. Though no overt theme links the individual artists, the exhibition does offer viewers a glimpse at the subject matter preoccupying the younger generation of Taiwanese photographers.

■ Taiwan International Visual Arts Center (TIWAC — 台灣國際視覺藝術中心), 29, Ln 45, Liaoning St, Taipei City (台北市遼寧街45巷29號), tel: (02) 2773-3347. Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 11:30am to 7pm

■ Until March 4

Lin Guan-ming (林冠名) delves into his family's history with **Star**, a new series of single and double channel videos. Based on photographs of his family taken 30 years ago, the exhibition is a highly personal statement about growing up and what it means to be a parent in a society that has changed rapidly over the same period of time.

■ IT Park Gallery (伊通公園), 41 Yitong St, Taipei City (台北市伊通街41號), tel: (02) 2507-7243. Open Tuesdays to Saturdays from 1pm to 10pm

■ Until March 10

The Mystic Tenmoku (秘色天目) presents several ceramic bowls by master ceramist Kuo Ming-cheng (郭明慶). The exhibit takes its name from *tenmoku*, a glaze and firing technique that creates stunning spotted patterns in gold, silver, purple, orange, red, blue and green. Though functional, in Kuo's capable hands the bowls are transformed into objects of considerable beauty.

■ Yingge Ceramics Museum (鶯歌陶瓷博物館), 200 Wenhua Rd, Yingge Dist, New Taipei City (新北市鶯歌區文化路200號), tel: (02) 8677-2727. Open daily from 9:30am to 5pm. Closes at 6pm on Saturdays and Sunday. Admission: Free

■ Until March 18

Space and Glaze (空間·釉彩) is an exhibit of ceramic sculpture by Lin Chen-long (林振龍). Lin's use of simple geometric lines and solid coloring suggests the influence of geometric abstraction.

■ National Museum of History (國立歷史博物館), 49 Nanhai Rd, Taipei City (台北市南海路49號), tel: (02) 2361-0270. Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 6pm. General admission is NT\$30

■ Until March 4

Book From the Sky to Book From the Ground (從天書到地書) is many things: It's a book launch and a contest that anyone from anywhere in the world can enter. It presents a narrative thread that shows how technology can be used to manipulate our ideas about language. More than anything else, though, the retrospective of works by Xu Bing (徐冰), a renowned Chinese avant-garde and conceptual artist, impressively contextualizes the evolution of his ideas about language and culture.

The exhibition, currently on display at EsLite Gallery (誠品畫廊), brings together two earlier installations, *Book From the Sky* (天書) and *Square Word Calligraphy* (新英文書法), as well as his recent *Book From the Ground* (地書), a novel and interactive computer installation.

Born in 1955 into a family of intellectuals — his mother was a library administrator and his father chaired the history department at Beijing University — Xu's early ideas about the uses (and abuses) of language and its relation to experience were informed by the volatile period leading up to and during the Cultural Revolution. It was a time when his parents were persecuted and Xu, who demonstrated an early facility with writing, was forced to use his literary talents to make propaganda posters similar to those that had condemned his father.

"At that time you really felt the power of words," he told Claire Liu in a profile of the artist for *Print*, a US magazine about contemporary visual culture. "If you wanted to kill somebody, you did it not by gun but by brush."

Yet the genesis of *Book From the Sky* is not only to be found in this destructive cultural milieu. As art critic Alice Yang wrote in *Xu Bing: Rewriting Culture*, he also looks to the past to address "the tangled legacy of his cultural heritage," while reflecting on the critical introspection and cultural fever that infected Chinese literary and artistic society in the decade following the Cultural Revolution.

The installation is patterned after Song Dynasty calligraphy. Xu spent four years hand-carving some 4,000 faux-Chinese characters (the number of characters in frequent use) from wooden blocks, which he then typeset and printed onto large sheets of paper that were mounted into books or onto scrolls. We are presented with pictograms that are familiar, yet strange, apparently Chinese, yet rendered in a meaningless language that is meant to break the "cognitive structures of the mind," as Xu calls the habitual ways of thinking that have resulted in so much bloodshed in his homeland.

Those who read Chinese uniformly perceive a meaningless text, while those unable to read

Beyond culture

Book From the Sky to Book From the Ground impressively contextualizes Chinese artist Xu Bing's ideas about language, culture and human nature

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER



Xu Bing, *Square Word Calligraphy: A Poem by Du Fu* (2012).

PHOTO: NOAH BUCHAN, TAIPEI TIMES

Chinese see it as a cultural document not dissimilar from what we might find exhibited at the National Palace Museum. Readers and non-readers of Chinese equally share in the experience of being able to perceive a language — though one whose meaning they are estranged from. In so doing, *Book From the Sky* compels the viewer to reconsider cherished assumptions about language and unquestioned traditions.

Similar to *Book From the Sky*, *Square Word Calligraphy* takes the form of traditional texts and mounted scrolls. It was created after Xu moved to the US in 1991, and presents English with Chinese pictorial elements.

For Xu, *Book From the Sky* and *Square Word Calligraphy* are the same because they "have different effects on people from different cultures, but the entry point is essentially the same. In both, the invented characters have a sort of equalizing effect: they are playing a joke on everybody, but at the same time they do not condescend to anybody," he said in an interview with *Sculpture* magazine.

In the same interview, Xu said that the philosophy of paradox expressed in Zen and Chan Buddhism and "studies in cognitive

sciences" influenced his thinking for *Book From the Sky*. For this reviewer, it's the "cognitive sciences" bit that gives pause because it suggests that Xu has always borne in mind that there is an innate mechanism underlying the human ability to communicate using language.

Book From the Ground fully articulates these ideas and brings Xu's work beyond the cultural constructs of Chinese and English. It is based on his extensive travels throughout the world and takes the form of an interactive computer installation and novel that follows the life of a person over 24 hours. Both the book and computer program express meaning based on a "language of icons" — pictorial symbols that Xu began collecting in 1999 from airplane safety manuals, which rely on image recognition to be understood. Today he has amassed a collection of more than 25,000 icons obtained from mathematics, physics, chemistry, musical composition and choreography — to name a few of the many fields of human knowledge that he draws upon.

"Our existing languages are based on geography, ethnicity, and culture (including all-powerful English), and all fall short. Written

languages now face an entirely unprecedented challenge. Today, the age-old human desire for a 'single script' has become a tangible need. This predicament requires a new form of communication better adapted to the circumstances of globalization," Xu writes in his artist statement.

It takes a few moments to get the hang of deciphering the 112-page novel. But once you get into it, the narrative, though simple, is easy enough to unravel. And from now until March 6, EsLite is holding a contest calling on participants to "translate" a chapter of the novel into a different language and send it to the gallery. Winners will be given an autographed copy of Xu's novel (complete details and sample chapters can be found on the gallery's Facebook page).

The interactive installation consists of two computers, one facing the other and separated by large monitors so that the interlocutor is hidden. Typing an English word, phrase or sentence into one computer produces icons of meaning on both screens. "Taiwan is not China," for example, produces an icon of the ROC flag, the equals (=) sign, and the Chinese flag with an "X" through it. Though currently limited to English, Xu plans to eventually include Chinese as well as all the world's major languages in the computer program.

Whereas *Book From the Sky* and *Square Word Calligraphy* use language in ways that intentionally make the construction of meaning difficult, *Book From the Ground* is an inclusive system that the average person can decode. Interestingly, the language of icons found in *Book From the Ground* bear a similarity to the lexigrams created for and used by Kanzi the bonobo (a chimpanzee) to communicate with humans. Is Xu echoing research in cognitive science that shows that the Tower of Babel's foundation is in fact a biological mechanism that evolved over time? Xu's studies in cognition suggest this might be the case.

EXHIBITION NOTES

WHAT: Book From the Sky to Book From the Ground (從天書到地書)

WHERE: EsLite Gallery (誠品畫廊), 5F, 11 Songgao Rd, Taipei City (台北市松高路11號5樓), tel: (02) 8789-3388 X1588

WHEN: Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 11am to 7pm. Until April 1

ON THE NET: www.eslitegallery.com