

# WORLD SCULPTURE NEWS

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Buddhist connection—religious or spiritual—in all of Chen's figures, which adds to the appreciation of his work. The roots for Chen's sculpture are an intriguing cross between the religious and the secular, stemming as they do from his early years making traditional Buddhist icons. These works fueled his ambition to make sculpture that was different from the traditional iconographic Buddhist and Western-inspired sculpture that he saw around him. Such art was 'safe,' without any real challenge. Looking over his art of the past decade one sees that Li Chen has forged his own sculptural identity, his own personal Buddhist iconography that has its universal appeal.

Behind Li Chen's smoothly textured, luxuriantly curved, defiantly enigmatic, and carefully cast figures is a thoughtfulness that engages the viewer intellectually and emotionally. One sees that, while it is clearly sculpture with its roots in craft, it is revealed as art of the highest order and integrity, a singular vision from an artist who has thought deeply about his direction.

There are multiple directions within Chen's *oeuvre* that address concerns as different as



**Li Chen, Clear Soul, 2002, bronze, 180 x 229 x 110 cm.**

spirituality and the temptations and sensuality of the secular world. Chen certainly uses a fine sense of humor to touch upon these but he also employs the formality of traditional monumental figuration and the quirkiness of surrealism. *Sakyamuni* (1998), *Avalokitesvara* (1999), and the later *The Pavilion* are evidence of Chen's bringing together his knowledge of crafts and art, religious practice and the spiritual in iconic form to meet the challenge of his new figuration head on. In works such as *Landscape in Heaven* (2001), *Dragon-Riding Buddha* (2001), and *Float to Sukhavati* (2002) one sees surrealistic

elements becoming an integral part of his sculptural vision. While the surreal is present, there is a suggestion in some works that Chen's vision is also animated by a primitive energy, one that finds expression in the rotundity of his subjects. Chen's figures are earthy in reality, for although the artist's work is informed by his spiritual awareness, he is nevertheless the earthbound artist whose vision rises from secular clay. It is Chen's human earthiness and unabashed sense of fun that attracts the eye and fulfills the life of his art.

Li Chen's voice speaks boldly and clearly within the

contemporary Taiwanese art canon. Its unique character is an inspiration for others for whom the voice of their own culture deserves its proper place in the international sculpture world.

**Ian Findlay**

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*In honor of the chaos,  
Urban Regeneration  
Station 27, Taipei  
Extra-Ordinary Living  
Space, Taipei Living  
Space Aesthetics Project*

**R**apid urban change and its subsequent impact on facilities and people has become a key issue for governments in the 21st century. Unprecedented expansion in mainland China is a case in point. Chongqing in the southwest has a population of 32 million, up from 6.2 million in 2000. Highlighted as an economic growth zone, the central government supports massive restructuring of the city. In ten years, the city has assumed a new infrastructure that barely acknowledges its origins. Historically urban renewal has impacted on the demographics of cities worldwide as it has involved the demolition of structures and the relocation of people and businesses.

A bewildering number of government-initiated urban renewal activities are underway in cities as far afield as London, New York, and Sydney in an attempt to improve physical structures or to stimulate social and economic regeneration. These agencies take responsibility for regeneration initiatives, including the revitalization of central business districts and the gentrification of residential neighborhoods. Even while governments increasingly support policies based less on destruction and more on renovation, decisions are often more about political expediency than actual concern for measured change. Urban Regeneration Stations (URS) that link the cultural sector with business and government are emerging as a more localized, grassroots alternative.



**Above left: Li Chen, Lord of Fire, 2008, bronze, 363 x 311 x 156 cm. Above right: Li Chen, Dragon-Riding Buddha, 2001, bronze, 472 x 306 x 376 cm.**





Terms like reconstruction, revitalization, renewal, and regeneration are regularly used to headline such endeavors. The prefix 're' is significant, indicating a tendency to look back and appraise what we 'had,' and what has passed, in order to reconsider what we may value now and in the future.

Critical to these initiatives is the collaborative relationships forged between independent arts agencies and local or national government departments. Collaboration is currently a buzz word in all sectors. Funding bodies and corporations alike support and applaud any project that offers the promise of connections. Networks generally mean advantageous social interaction, equaling in the best sense expansion, a deeper understanding of differences and individual stakeholders' needs, and at worst simplistic, often predictable solutions driven by consensus.

In 2011 Taiwan launched a series of Urban Regeneration Station projects as part of its centennial year events. It seems a timely political gesture that issues of environment, lifestyle, and values are put on the agenda. *In honor of the chaos, Taipei Extra-Ordinary Living Space* was Taiwan's first Urban Regeneration Station project, established as collaboration between the city's Urban Redevelopment Office and a civic group dedicated to urban renewal and art. It was an ambitious project that approached the sensitive relationships between urban development and the daily living needs of local communities and individuals.

Four Taiwanese curators Chiu Wen-Chieh (design director, A+B Design Group), Pan Yi-Ru (design director, Environmental Arts Design), Su Yao-Hua (director, AIR Taipei), and Hsu Tsang-Chieh created a platform to rethink Taiwanese identity and draw attention to what constitutes Taiwanese urban environments. They asked what urban aesthetics are and what kind of cities are most suitable for human habitation in Taiwan.

In the best world, linking cultural groups with government



Chiu Wen-Chieh, *Taipei Extra-Ordinary Living Space URS project*, 2011 exterior view, recycled security screens.

planning authorities marries function, aesthetics, and egos with a broader sense of social purpose. A project may make the appropriate sounds—green-friendly, user-friendly, age-aware, ability-sensitive, water-conscious, solar-inspired, recycled, reformed, and remade. Political boxes are ticked but the solution may be dry, predictable, or skewed, overlooking the inherent possibilities and visions that the arts can offer. *Urban Regeneration Station 27* ticked all the boxes while embracing a rare poetic vision.

The curatorial team's brief to 're-vision' Taipei and to bring a new focus to the vitality and spirit of communities started with identifying what has been (and is) central to the daily lives of Taiwanese people. The local alley, a narrow thoroughfare located between residential and

commercial buildings is still used but gradually, inevitably disappearing with increasing high-rise development. These are not the *hutong* laneways of Beijing or the narrow vintage streets of Shanghai but simple walkways, called *Joudoori* (alley) originating from the Japanese colonial period. The alleys are lively, noisy, and at times chaotic; people sit, talk, eat, mend, wash, and store bric-a-brac. Residential and commercial activities are interspersed; street stalls, 24-hour stores, night markets mingle with low-rise apartments. Traditional community customs, alliances, and networks are vital and thriving.

The location was instrumental for the success of the project—the 'Grand Green,' a disused tract of land in downtown Taipei that had originally

been an underground railway station and is planned to become the Central Government Service Center.

Fourteen artists, designers, architects, and cultural groups helped realize *Urban Regeneration Station 27*, informed by architect Chiu Wen-Chieh's vision. Chiu, whose initial drawings focused on the site axis, conceived a structure with a sight-line to the iconic Taipei 101, Taiwan's tallest building. For Chiu 101 represents one of the major problems in urban development—its scale equals immense consumptions of fuel to heat, cool, light, and traverse. Chiu's structure was humble in scale but grand in its intention and scope—three stories high, with walls and roof constructed from discarded steel security screens found in low-rise buildings throughout Taiwan. Chiu's team scoured the countryside locating screens in farm paddocks and metal scrap yards. Screens and rods were painted white and piled up, creating a sense of what Chiu describes as "chaos with order." What emerged was a temporary scaffold, weightless and extraordinary in appearance yet made from ordinary building material. Chiu's transparent structure of vertical movement and suspension evokes Australian author Peter Carey's description of a crystal cathedral in his novel *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988)—inspirational and transformative. It symbolized shelter and



City Yeast, *The Mountain* at Taipei Extra-Ordinary, 2011, recycled plastic.



protection, delineating yet attaining a porous relationship between private space and public space: the antithesis of 101.

Chiu's central focus, the alleyway, was carved through the structure's east/west axis to line up with 101. Small stores such as the Joy Coffee Shop, Joy Ice Dessert Shop, Joy Organic Kitchen occurred at intersections along the alley. The word 'joy' referenced Haruki Murakami (*Ways to Find the Spiral Cat – Uzumaki Neko No Mitsuke Kata*): "For example, when you take a sip of icy-cold beer after strenuous exercise, you close your eyes and murmur to yourself, 'This is it.' That exhilarating moment is exactly the feel of a 'tiny joy.' Without such moments of 'tiny joy,' I think life would be just as dry as the desert."

This subtle gesture reminds us that the constituents of a city are not simply definitions of nationality, location, gender, and age, but also those ephemeral qualities found in everyday habits, protocols, and rituals.

Landscape architect Pan Yi-Ru's long-term commitment to environmental art was apparent in *Vital Greenway*, a green belt of low maintenance grass that sliced the Grand Green in half, and *The Tree Park* planted with life-sustaining Persea, Camphor, Flame Tree, and West Indian Jasmin. Her *Sky Farm* was an amazing initiative, incorporating a vertical hydroponics garden with a water tower installed in Chiu's structure that irrigated vegetables to supply the Joy Organic Kitchen. For the duration of the project (September 3 to November 23, 2011) visitors feasted on handpicked Chinese cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, Ceylon spinach, mustard, cloud ear fungus, *pak choy* and garlic.

Su Yao-Hua has been seminal in promoting and raising the profile of the arts in Taiwan (notably Taipei and Treasure Hill international residency, exhibition, and exchange programs.) She invited artists including Lin Yen-Li, Ji Eun Kim, Fu Ching-Han, Liu Yao-Chung, Tsai Chi-Hsian, and myself to respond to the *Urban Regeneration Station 27*

brief; resulting in installations and object-based artworks located throughout the Grand Green that referenced memory, local customs, and change. *The Mountain at Taipei Extra-Ordinary* by Taiwanese designers, City Yeast, was particularly relevant. A mountain of plastic refuse signaled the importance of recycling and reuse, and our responsibility to reduce our daily consumption.

*Urban Regeneration Station 27* penetrated our assumptions about urban renewal initiatives. It alerted us to our own ephemerality, our social and environmental legacy, and what we value. The project's dual worldliness and other-worldliness reflected on urban fragility while offering scope for contemporary architecture and urban planning, revealing infinite possibilities for future development.

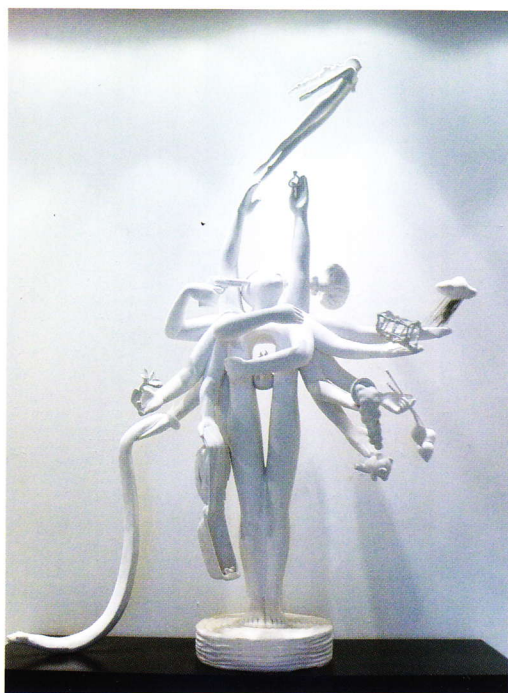
Jayne Dyer

## THAILAND

### Bangkok

#### Thudong Sukgasem at Silpakorn University Gallery

For his first solo exhibition, *Emptiness* at Silpakorn University Gallery,



Thudong Sukgasem, *Broken Dreams*, 2011, plaster. 240 x 98 x 326 cm.

41-year-old sculptor Thudong Sukgasem unfurls personal torment over love lost. Layered with potent theological imagery, the six works (all 2011) on view appear to be a self-affirming therapeutic exercise after prolonged depression.

The works have related strongly to the themes and symbols of existing Buddhist sculpture by more senior artists. The strongest relationship is to Manop Suwanpinta's floating human forms with their metaphors to greed and suffering, but there are also references to the cloud-laden imagery of Noppadon Viroonchatapun and Haritorn Akarapat's melting faces, comments to impermanence.

The two plaster figures, *Emptiness* and *Broken Dreams*, are closest to Suwanpinta's distinct styling, with the latter standing male displaying the characteristic open void through the torso and the Buddhist flame. Resembling the Kali, the hands juggle literal analogies to human fallibility. The most dramatic of these images is a gun blowing out the subject's brains with a nuclear plume emerging from the opposite side. The hands hold other symbols of death, temptation, materiality, and faith.

In one of two alcoves is the large white plaster head *States of Mind*. With eyes closed and a furrowed brow, streams

of plaster drip from the top of the head, creating a pool at the base. Positioned at the end of the alcove, it is as if we are peering deep inside a tortured mind. The melting faces are repeated as life-size multiples, spiked atop lofty wooden poles as macabre trophies in the dominant installation *Execution*.

A tandem work to the large head, in the opposite alcove, is the exhibition's only minimal piece, *Journey of the Mind*, which fills the floor space with a thick swirl of plaster that oozes over the entry step. A tiny insignificant head, another reference to emptiness and the void, pokes out from the spill in the middle of the floor.

The exhibition's most awkward piece is the installation *Home*. Centering upon a kilted wooden frame that is reminiscent of Tawatchai Puntsawasdi's lopsided furniture sculptures, the fractured and sunken remnants of domesticity spill out across the floor. The overloaded wooden frame also supports a rather obvious pair of snuggling plaster owls and a clunky wire-supported floating cloud.

While the head-focused works convey an intimacy with pain and suffering, the university's largely domestic viewers will find the iconography of the other sculptures familiar within the context of Thai contemporary sculpture.

Steven Pettifor

## THE UNITED STATES

### Atlanta, Georgia

#### Michele Schuff at Whitespace Gallery

Before a meeting of physicists in 1908, Albert Einstein's teacher, Hermann Minkowski, announced, "henceforth space by itself, and time by itself, are doomed to fade away into mere shadows, and only a kind of union of the two will preserve an independent reality."<sup>1</sup> That revolutionary pronouncement has proved to be prophetic not only in science but also in