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REVIEWS DEC. 26, 2014

Taipei Biennial 2014

TAIPEI,
at Taipei Fine Arts Museum

by Kevin McGarry



Po-Chih Huang:
*Production Line—
Made in China & Made
in Taiwan* (detail),
2014, mixed-medium
installation; in the
Taipei Biennial 2014 at
the Taipei Fine Arts
Museum.

The title of the 2014 Taipei Biennial, "The Great Acceleration: Art in the Anthropocene," translates into the cultural arena an idea that has become increasingly accepted among scientists. What has been speeding up for the past half-century is the march of global industry, a force that has transformed the natural world to such an extent that humans now effectively define our geological epoch: the Anthropocene. Organized by French curator Nicolas Bourriaud, this exhibition offers a focused reflection on the pressures of a sped-up environment, positing that art has an important role to play as mankind races toward an uncertain—and potentially catastrophic—future of our making.

The conceit is a timely one. Maybe too timely? The show could be written off as one that has its finger a bit too squarely on the pulse, overtly topical in theme and full of clusters of tightly knit artists who reinforce one another's thinking, having collaborated or shown together previously. Still, "The Great Acceleration" can be admired as an earnest expression of the zeitgeist, and a biennial ought to take stock of its time and its place.

As for locality, there are 10 Taiwanese artists in the show along with a handful from other East Asian countries. One of the most prominently installed works, positioned just outside the ground floor galleries, explicitly connects "The Great Acceleration" to Taiwan. Po-Chih Huang's *Production—Made in China & Made in Taiwan* (2014) engages what are the two most significant aspects of the island nation's geopolitical situation: its 20th-century role as the Western world's factory and its fraught relationship to mainland China. The piece comprises a long rack of crisp blue shirts, codesigned by the artist and a manufacturer. Unlike the clothing



churned out of Taiwan's and China's mega-factories, Huang's generic-looking garments were produced in a highly inefficient manner, having been sewn piece-by-piece in three stages at two locations, beginning and ending at the Taipei Biennial, with a stop in between at a sculpture exhibition in Shenzhen, a Chinese city that is today synonymous with mass production.

One hazard of asserting a strong curatorial framework for a diverse collection of artworks is that individual pieces can be stripped of nuance. Huang's piece, for example, risks being viewed as a simple allegory for how the interests of capitalism transcend traditional geographic (and political) divisions. Similarly, *Yucca Invest Trading Plant* (1999), an installation by the late artist Ola Pehrson, verges on the ham-fisted in its depiction of how the supposedly immaterial flows of capital can affect the natural world. The work consists of a small potted palm tree set on a table and hooked up to a desktop computer. Six months of stock market data were streamed into the plant via electrical signals from the computer, which also rationed the beleaguered plant's water and sunlight according to market fluctuations.

Though both works are perhaps overly didactic, each is consistent with the biennial's overall mise-en-scène. What's pointedly missing from an exhibition about a world dominated by human activity is any humanistic sensibility. The museum is stocked with scenery that evokes fatalism and entropy; human activity is often represented with trash and evidence of empty consumption. Memorable works in this vein include: Marlie Mul's trompe l'oeil resin sculptures that resemble rain puddles speckled with cigarette butts and other generic litter; Peter Stämpfli's pop canvases of jumbo tire treads from 1970; Kuo-Wei Lin's checkerboard grids drawn from complementary shades of eye shadow and lipstick on paper; and Anicka Yi's *Le Pain Symbiotique* (2014), a cavernous clear plastic bubble that visitors enter to view videos of kneaded dough projected on acrylic panels arranged throughout the enclosed space.

If the show sounds superficial described this way, there's some truth to that. Individual works are easily subsumed into a homogenous look characterized by the slightly toxic veneer of artificial materials. The pieces that stand out are almost all videos that present coherent visions of man-made worlds and, in some cases, strong moral visions. The most moving work in the biennial is Ian Cheng's *Droning Like an Ur* (2014), an endless 3-D simulation that resembles a video game in which characters interact within an algorithmically determined plot. The visuals are ritualized and surreal. Figures ensnared by aquatic vegetation flail as they are incongruously drowned in the desert sky; random fragments of everyday life—wooden beams, cinder blocks—appear and disappear; day turns into night and back again at a rapid clip. The soundscape is immersive. Groaning and suction tones, punctuated by punches and other effects likely lifted from games, unfold at a familiarly unpredictable pace, with sounds swelling, slowing and accelerating. Rachel Rose's *Sitting, Feeding, Sleeping* (2013), which begins with found footage

of a helicopter spinning out of control and into its own destruction, is an essay film exploring what the artist calls "deathfulness." The work explores links between primates, sophisticated robots and other beings that might be called semi-human, casting doubt in the process on the special nature of our existence. "All you are is means to mutate material" is an utterance from Rose's film that could haunt the entire building.

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