

## Interview with a Taiwanese artist: The world of Tseng Yu-Chin

---



who is listening

### **Introduction:**

Taiwanese art has accelerated during the last two decades for a variety of reasons. Having recently outgrown the experimental stage in which artists were mostly imitating western art movements, present day Taiwanese artists have begun to develop their own direction with their work. For example, more and more contemporary Taiwanese artists find their interests lie with in installation art and video productions. Tseng Yu-Chin is one of the emerging voices within this movement. Having graduated from Shih Chien University in Communication Design, he is currently a graduate student at Taipei National University of Arts. Several of his works have won outstanding local awards, such as *The 2004 Taipei Art Award* for his video production “Who is listening?”

Tseng Yu-Chin’s video art focuses on the psychological world of everyday people rather than documenting the external world. Most of his works deal with issues such as memory and people’s consciousness. Derived largely from personal experiences, his artwork evokes sentiments such as grief, shame, unhappiness, comfort and love; this

in turn binds the viewers with universal experiences. Undoubtedly, some viewers will find sections of his work shocking, even offensive, upon first glance. However, after several revisits, the viewers will hopefully begin to understand more the reasons behind Tseng's choices of images and his intentions. For example, in "Who is listening?" viewers discover a boy wearing only a pair of shorts and he is playing intimately on top of a woman (I assume that she is his mother). With the background noises of laughter and breathing, the viewers might associate the feeling of this scene with sexual connotations. After watching it for a while, one may realize that this piece is actually depicting something more than eroticism. In a way, Tseng plays with different realizations of conventional sexual concepts between adults and children. Whereas adults generally have more assumptions and rules regarding sexuality, children usually do not have these assumptions and constraints in place. Therefore, children tend to be less inhibited and therefore more open to experiences that are considered "sexual" by adults.

In terms of Tseng's growing reputation as a contemporary artist, his distributional success has allowed his work to become more visible to an international audience, given that his works are displayed on-line at [www.oxy-spot.com](http://www.oxy-spot.com). Most importantly, the web site is available in both English and Chinese, which gives non-Chinese viewers the opportunity to explore and experience his works. Additionally, his poetic and sensual writings about his pieces also provide a second dimension regarding the meaning of his work.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to interview Mr. Tseng Yu-Chin by e-mail. In our email conversations, he reflects on how he discovered video art productions and how he views the video art market in Taiwan in general. Tseng also discussed the

education system in Taiwan and reflected on his objectives for his creative process in art.

His discussions about his art objectives especially helped me understand his work in greater depth.

### **Interview:**

Ying:

Hello Tseng. I am an art student living in Canada; however, I grew up in Mainland China. Once again, I appreciate your willingness to undertake this interview. And I apologize for needing some of your terms of reference in your writing better defined. I would really appreciate if you could talk more about your education, how your work is received and displayed in Taiwan and abroad, and lastly if you could give me an overview of present influential art movements, people or other concepts that are playing a role in your art product?

Tseng:

一開始我在大學是讀生化方面的.之後經過家庭革命.轉系進入了設計學院.讀的是視覺傳達設計學系.主要是以動畫-網頁-平面設計為主\_之後也一些因\_際會的巧合接觸了劇場有一年的時間大約了解到像在空間中呈現 所\_生的氛圍  
而再之後對於是學術方面的了解以及個人創作對於整個大體系的對應  
則是進入研究所之後<科技藝術研究所>才開始漸漸體認以及了解\_\_不過對於影像的直覺訓練或是光感呈現認知 即在我高中時期我自行到外面的攝影協會  
學習靜態影像 有八九年之久 一直到了大學  
才接觸電腦設計以及數位影像\_\_而自身對於歐洲電影的喜好也影響我對於敘述的方法\_生活片段跟影像片段的呼應

Translation by Ying:

I originally studied biochemistry at university. After some deep changes in my family life, I switched to the visual communication design department at Shih Chien University. The studies were mainly about animation, web design, and print design. Afterwards I had access to different props from a local theatre production. Within a year, I learned the fundamentals of how atmosphere is created in space. However, it was after I entered the Graduate School of Technical Art at Taipei National University of the Arts that I began to acknowledge academic theory and the correspondence between individual art works and the entire art system.

Regarding my training in visual intuition and lighting perception, I would trace this back to high school years. I went to an extracurricular photographic association and learned about still life photography for eight or nine years. It was not until I went to university did I begin to understand computer graphic design and digital visual art.

My personal interest in European films is another factor that influenced my narrative techniques. I am more interested in how the passages of life and video echo with each other.

Ying:

I am not really familiar with the art education system in Taiwan and have noticed that many of your works are video installations. Has your inspiration been driven from your education or by the contemporary art scene in Taiwan? I have learned that there has been a great emphasis in Taiwan on installation art and video and am wondering if you feel your work fits in this model or genre?

Tseng:

在台灣的藝術學習體系 其實是滿制式的\_態 在我認知以及所獲的的過程當中 再台灣幾乎都跳\_不掉那學習體系 \_而有很多的論述文字以及作品也是在這體系之中\_生的 \_而我所謂的學習體系即是學院 \_曾經也有一位法國的策展人問過我 為什麼不離開學院 而獨立創作\_而我\_了 其實在台灣最好的處做環境還是在學院當中 他像是一個巨大的保護網 雖然不是那麼的完善\_但 也很多很好的創作者離開了學院 身分就不再純粹了 而台灣對於獨立的創作者也是很現實的 但我想在很多國家都是如此\_

Translation by Ying:

In my experience, the art educational system in Taiwan is rigid and heavily research-based. There is a lot of written discourse and artwork produced under such system. What I meant by this educational system is the so-called academy or institution. There was once a French curator who asked me why don't I leave the academy and work on my own. My answer was that the best working environment is still within the academy. It is a huge protective net, although imperfect. There are many excellent artists that have left the academy, but their identities become vague and impure. In Taiwan, the reality is ruthless to independent artists. I think this is true for other countries too.

Ying: (my afterwards thought on incoming response)

I agree. Artists could work individually, but in most cases, especially now, more artists are relying more on cross disciplinary collaboration instead. The best environment for such collaborations is still within the academic domain, where they are more informed and connected to various cultural and artistic resources. As Tseng mentioned, the same is true for individual artists who are engaged in artistic productions and activities.

Tseng:

對於路像裝置的認知 最完全的時期

也是在我進入研究所之後\_而我之前主要是以拍攝實驗電影為主<現在還是有再拍攝>\_但實驗電影在台灣的\_態 我只能\_非常的糟\_ \_台灣電影的體系其實是更不完善的\_態

很多臨時成軍以及獨大的獨裁\_態居多 \_而且台灣注重的是記\_片以及動畫片 \_對於貼近創作心象的 影像作品接受度以及認知 往往讓人更加受挫\_\_而介在當時因為老師乙級同學的互相學習\_漸漸的接觸\_像作品

而我也了解到影像的拆解\_而現有\_像作品的\_態也讓我懷義以及不滿足 \_\_像裝置在台灣近期非常的大量出現\_可能是在於器材的好取得<對應於電影>以及快速呈現的\_態 <少了繪畫的長時的因素>\_漸漸的

大量影像被製造出來\_\_但可能是因為過度的大量製造 往往有很多的作品大多呈現對外的交代性質居多而少了對\_

對作者本身體認以及心象的部\_\_而我在於這 我非常執著

尤其心像的的部\_\_而在創作上我也相信直覺的創作過程

對於大腦影像直覺性的呈現在螢幕上的過程\_是我最在乎的部\_\_

Translation by Ying:

My understanding of video art matured after I went to graduate school; whereas before I was mainly making experimental films (i.e. I am still doing that now.) However, I have to say that the experimental film situation in Taiwan is presently in a terrible state. The system of Taiwanese film is by no means perfect

or complete. Many film crews are set up at the last minute (within very short notice.) Additionally, certain film companies or organizations have monopolization power over the film market. Further to this situation, the Taiwanese market also favors animation and documentary films. As a result, artistic films usually suffer from low acceptance and reorganization. That is really frustrating.

Ying: (my retrospective thoughts on Tseng's incoming response)

I think this is a universal phenomenon with artistic film productions. The main reason could be that the characteristics of artistic films are very conceptual and lack the conventional narrative or action appeals, which make the films harder to understand unless one has the background knowledge and training. As a result, such films receive poorer reception from the general public due to a lack of interest. Another reason could be due to the fact that formal films, such as the Hollywood or blockbuster films, are well-developed for entertainment. This means the public is accustomed and spoiled by commercial visual and audio effects. This reliance on the commercial amusing appeal in turn makes the public viewers less interested in the experimental films that are still under development.

Translation by Ying:

At that time (in graduate school), students learned a lot from each other as well as from instructors. I had more access to the video works and began to

further understand how they function. In addition, I learned the techniques on how to deconstruct images.

Even though there is a large amount of videos on the market now, I am not satisfied with the current state of video productions in Taiwan because few of these works deal with issues of the artists' introspective world.

I see two reasons that explain why videos are produced in such huge volumes. Video equipment is much easier and cheaper to acquire in Taiwan than professional film equipment. On the other hand, videos can be produced much faster than other media, such as painting which takes a long time. In part, this is why video art has been over-produced recently.

However, perhaps because of the sheer over-production, many works only fulfill general expectations of and demand for video art, yet fail to explore the artist's self-realization and unique perception. I am almost stubborn with my perception. To be more precise, I believe in bringing intuition in my creative process, the transfer from a cognitive intuition to imageries on a screen --this is the most important part in my practice. I insist on this.

Ying:

In addition to your creative process, I would like to know why you have selected to show your works on-line. Is this the main distribution method for your work and the platform in which you want the work to be seen or am I seeing a small fragment of something that would be displayed in a gallery?

Tseng:

網路呈現的方法 因該算是我的小興趣\_ 也感知現在很多人 是屬於\_居\_態的  
\_他們是不會常出居處以外的場所\_而我很清楚 我的作品亦或是文字  
最能備好好\_讀或是觀賞  
是在安靜或是獨自的\_態是最佳的 \_而網路及能供給很多獨居或是獨自觀賞網頁者  
感受的平台\_當然 我還是希望能在空間中呈現 被投影出來\_那影像式備好好對待的  
聲音的迴盪 都是我最呈現的東西\_\_畢竟  
網路的畫質或是聲響都無法達到最佳的\_態 \_\_但他是最快去粗略對話的平台以及工  
具

Translation by Ying:

I chose to distribute my works on the internet because I am personally interested in the internet and website presentations. In addition, I know that many people live in their nests and do not travel. They seldom go out of their living residences. I understand that my works or writings are best read, received or enjoyed in a quiet and isolated atmosphere. Thus, the internet is the best platform for my works to be displayed to those who live in solitude or to those who like to read and enjoy web pages alone.

Of course, if given the choice, I would like my piece to be presented in a space where it is better equipped with sound effects. What I really want to show is the best possible effects that could be achieved with the projected images along with the echo of voices. After all, I know that the visual and sound effects on the internet cannot bring out the best quality of my works. However, it is the

fastest way to distribute my works and in such ways I could initiate the primary communications with my audiences.

Still, I would prefer not to show my works in a gallery. I think galleries have their own frameworks and objectives. For me, showing my work in a gallery will reduce the flexibility or breathability of my work. Nevertheless, although the internet may not be my first choice to display my work, it is preferable given my present available options so far.

Ying:

Your distribution method online accommodates both English and Chinese audiences. Can you tell me more about your interests in engaging a Western English speaking community? For example, as a Chinese-Canadian artist, curators are always looking to Taiwan and Asia. However, there is a tendency to overlook the new generation of artists who have migrated to the West from elsewhere. In a way, one might say that curators are neglecting immigrant artists.

Tseng:

這某部\_算是一個迷思\_ 在台灣 反而他們會注重的藝術家  
是在國外展覽過或是讀過書的藝術家\_對於台灣本身的創作者  
反而興趣缺缺\_而我會做英文翻譯 是因為 一種禮貌性的  
對外\_當然我也希望讓中文以外的人群能讀到我的作品\_但也是讓一些非中文語系的人  
能因為讀到英文 而能更加瞭解我的作品

Translation by Ying:

It is a confusing part for me as well. In Taiwan, curators pay more attention to the artists who have held exhibitions abroad or who have been educated abroad. Therefore, they do not seem to care much about local Taiwanese artists.

I decided to develop the English version of my web site because of respect and politeness. Of course, I want my pieces to be read and understood not only by Chinese readers but also by non-Chinese viewers. By translating the writings into English, it is my wish that the non-Chinese audience can have a better understanding of my work.

Ying (my afterward thought on the incoming response)

By featuring his work online, Tseng is expanding the scope of his audience and in turn, reaching an international audience. As a result, he can distinguish himself from the local Taiwanese artists, and possibly gain more attention from local curators.

### **Closing Reflections**

There are quite a few of Tseng's works that I am fascinated with. "Who Is Listening?" is my favorite, a video production with five individual scenes. The first scene depicts individual children with milky liquid poured on their faces or heads, with various expressive feelings from the children. The second scene shows a boy lying on a platform in front of a school building. The third scene depicts a boy playing with a mother on a bed. The fourth scene shows a three or four year old boy running towards a

man (I assume he is the father of the boy) and bumping his face between the father's thighs. The fifth scene involves posting labels on a child's face and his/her body.

As I briefly described, the first scene depicts individual children being splashed by milky liquid on their faces or heads. The color and consistency milk-like substance strongly suggest semen, yet the children's reactions toward the sudden attack of the milky liquid are childish and innocent. For an adult, to be splashed by any form of liquid is not very pleasant and could even be insulting. This insult becomes even more severe when the liquid is a form of sexual excretion. However, Tseng chooses to depict the children giggling or showing a funny facial expression rather than annoyance or anger. I think Tseng is making a social commentary on how adults always impose moral interpretations regarding sexuality upon children, which is symbolized by these overt sexual connotations. While these children are ignorant about the adult acceptance of sexual expressions, it seems that Tseng is suggesting that the children are largely naïve about this adult world. Through their funny facial expressions and the way they look straight into the camera without flinching, I think he is also suggesting that kids often take insults as jokes or simply take it without questions because they do not know any other better way to deal with them.

In the third scene as I described in the introduction, there is a boy playing with a woman (I assume she is his mother) on a bed. A bed has a strong sexual connotation, but can equally represent relaxation (i.e. depending on the context). Even though it is common to find mothers and their children playing on the bed, the way this scene is depicted is quite sexual. One could make sexual associations from this scene because of a) the facial expression of the mother, b) the way the boy is positioned on top of her in a

dominant way and c) their mutual laughter. In section 4 of Tseng's writing about this piece, he mentioned that "the true form of love, according to Freud, is the form in our parents, or the form of our basic instincts."--for a boy, his first love is his mother. From his explicit reference to Freud in his artist statement, a connection to Freud's Oedipal Complex is inescapable. Oedipal Complex named after the ancient Greek story of King Oedipus, who inadvertently killed his father and married his mother. Here is how it works: The first love-object for all of us is our mother especially for a boy. He wants his mother's attention and affection. He wants her caresses and he wants her in a broadly sexual way. He also finds that his father is bigger, stronger, smarter, and he gets to sleep with mother. Therefore, father is the enemy and mother is the love. In the video, the boy is embraced with his mother's love. In turn, he is also enjoying her company and her affection because he loves her too. In section 3 of Tseng's writing, he also writes that "once we are born, we grow further away from the body itself, and substitute it with nouns and adjectives." In this context, I think he is also commenting on the difficulties that a child must face during their life time growing up.

The fourth scene is also interesting in that it plays with different sexual perspectives or concepts between children and adults. To be more precise, for adults, they are educated about the differences between male and female and what is supposed to be touched and what is not. However, for a child who does not have any conventional conception of sex, he or she will act with their own logic, which could be considered improper for adults. Therefore, for the viewers, they may feel strange yet natural at the same time when they observe that the boy is running toward his father and finally holding on to his father's private part. I think Tseng is suggesting that people want to act or feel

from direct sensations that sometimes may be illogical yet natural. However, people are often constrained by their own conceptions and knowledge, which would stop them from being direct and natural. This suggestion is also confirmed by Tseng's writing in section 4, "if sensations are to be made with logics, and to be separated from passion, then desire can only be spoken through impressionism, and Rodin and Camille should have never kissed".

If passions are among the basic instincts of human nature, then it would seem that internal passions are subject to modification and adjustment during the lifetime of an individual. I believe Tseng's piece "Who is listening?" criticizes the absurd social interpretations of the transformation that all humans go through in growing from childhood to adulthood. In my opinion, Tseng believes that feelings and emotions should be experienced directly and innocently rather than collectively held through conventional social understandings. I really enjoyed Tseng's work and I believe he succeeds in using children's perspectives to display a world that these children are more comfortable living in, although this world is too straightforward for most adults.

*And I played the role of a child.*

*It is the real skin. It will feel directly.*

*It is before any outside invasion.*

*Its reactions are real, although displayed in a slightly confusing manner.*

*Because while it is labeled on the outside, it will unconsciously drop that label  
right in front of your eyes*

-----Tseng Yu-Chin

Writing of “Who is listening” on [www.oxy-spot.com](http://www.oxy-spot.com).

