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SPECTROSYNTHESIS

ASIAN LGBTQ ISSUES AND ART NOW

Among those in attendance at the opening night celebrations of “Spectrosynthesis,” held at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei (MOCA Taipei), was Chi Chia-wei, an activist who, after decades of tireless campaigning, brought a case to Taiwan’s highest court to determine whether same-sex marriage should be made legal. The judges ruled in Chi’s favor, paving the way for Taiwan to become the first Asian territory to recognize marital unions between gay or lesbian couples.

In part a celebration of this landmark occasion, “Spectrosynthesis” was the first major LGBTQ-themed public museum exhibition in Asia and featured 22 artists from Taiwan, mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore whose creative practices span more than half a century. Many of the works grabbed visitors’ attention through the sheer shock value of their content or the immersive experiences proffered, but a quiet gallery on the upper level of MOCA Taipei’s two-floor display showed four subtle, intimate canvases by Ku Fu-sheng. In particular, *The Room at the Top of the Stairs* (1983)—depicting two copies of the same nude male body, one rendered in pale flesh tones and the other glowing in nearly neon pinks—was hung in its own chamber, which restricted viewing through a rectangular portal. Though this was a thoughtful treatment, the pomp in presentation detracted from the spirit of equality embodied in the rest of the exhibition.

On the same floor, Taiwanese new-media pioneer Wang Jun-Jieh’s *Passion* (2017) appropriated images from three films—the sailors, rich dusk colors and phallic architectural constructions in Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Querelle* (1982); the astronauts and all-seeing HAL 9000 in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968); and the incredible production values (and title) of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Passion* (1982). Wang’s three-channel video installation, complete with a bed of water to mimic the dockside setting in the 12-minute film, carried themes explored by the artist in the past, including the equivocal male gaze found in his 2008 creation, *Project David III: David’s Paradise*, and was made to commemorate the death of a close friend.

Matters of identity were explored elsewhere. Su Hui-Yu’s *Nue Quan* (2015), which literally translates as “dog abuse,” reminded the predominantly Taiwanese visitors of a nightmarish 2001 incident that involved sadomasochistic sex and a body disposed in a suitcase. The man charged with homicide went by the moniker “Nue Quan” online, and the media followed the case closely because of his sexuality. Responding 14 years later, Su created a two-channel video, with one projection showing a nearly naked man



sitting on a bed, inhaling and exhaling within a see-through plastic bag fastened around his neck. On the other side of the screen, we see someone stuffing another man’s nude, limp body into a Samsonite suitcase, reenacting the crime.

“Spectrosynthesis” aimed to tackle “the life stories and related issues of the post-war Chinese LGBTQ community.” However, many young artists who place their LGBTQ identity front and center in their practices were overlooked in favor of presentations that failed to link with other entries in the show, such as Wang Liang-Yin’s wax sculpture *Cup Cake with Star* (2008). The inclusion of Hou Chun-Ming’s *Man Hole* (2014–16), a collection of drawings of and by 13 gay men, warranted an atmospheric showcase, with each subject’s imaginative self-portrait paired with the artist’s own interpretation. But did the artworks in “Spectrosynthesis” truly represent the broad spectrum of personalities found in the Chinese-speaking LGBTQ community?

Inclusion is a knotty matter. Samson Young recruited a chorus for the video installation *Muted Situation #5: Muted Chorus* (2014), in which certain layers of sound are suppressed to accentuate others, and self-proclaimed transfeminine Wu Tsang employed martial artists performing swordplay on a boat in Hong Kong in *Duillian* (2016), to expose the city’s maladjustments. Ming Wong’s *Life and Death in Venice* (2010), which features an older gentleman pursuing a young sailor with voluminous blond locks (both played by the artist), provided the impetus to critique identity politics. The many contexts present in the exhibition required explanation, and the absence of such illumination was where “Spectrosynthesis” fell short.

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