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Lee, Nicole. "Interview with artist Wu Chi-Tsung: Art is never a blank sheet of paper." *Vogue Taiwan*, October 8, 2021.

VOGUE



Bustling back and forth between cities separated by land and sea, Wu Chi-Tsung dexterously shuttled through the art world, as if as if it were a natural practice.

Today day we visited Wu Chi-Tsung's new studio in Tamsui, Taipei. Apart from here, he also has studios in Yuanshan (Taipei), Berlin, Germany and Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. These studios scattered around the world are not only for creative needs, but also Wu Chi-Tsung strategy of observing the world.

A studio space that can accommodate museum level presentation

"This is the most sophisticated space I have ever had. It's like working in an art museum." Wu Chi-Tsung sat in a corner of his new studio, as the sunlight fell through the large glass window and landed on his shoulders.

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Wu Chi-Tsung in the new studio in Danshui

This new studio, with high ceilings, is located in the residential area of Danhai New Town. Facing a wide, neat street, it is located on the first floor of a high-rise building. Here, Wu Chi-Tsung drives a scissor lift truck, ascending and descending in spacious studio, busy making two huge "Cyano-Collage Series" to be exhibited at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York. This will be his first solo exhibition in New York— his new studio coming out of a need to make this work.

The main exhibition hall of Sean Kelly, New York is the size of a basketball court. For the exhibition, Wu Chi-Tsung will be presenting two large works, which were difficult to accommodate in his old Yuanshan studio. "In Yuanshan, when you want to see the complete composition of the work, you have to open the iron rolling door on the first floor and retreat across the road to see the entire work." One of the new Cyano-Collage works is three by nine meters in size. "It is unlikely that I would create works larger than this anymore. We have already challenged to the limits of the new space by creating it." While standing in front of the large "Cyano-Collage Series" work, people would feel as if they are in a real mountain, and would almost lose control to dive in.

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A studio is different from an art gallery. It is a place where the artist lowers his head and sweats to work. However, Wu Chi-Tsung planned his new studio according to the specifications of the gallery, aligning the working environment to the exhibition conditions. Therefore, "Before I arrive in New York, I can accurately foresee what the works will look like on site." He said that the most difficult aspect of planning is to master the scale and proportions. For example, some exhibition spaces have very high ceilings, but the proportion between the work and the space, as well as between viewers and the space may be awkward. Large does have many advantages, but it does not necessarily bring enjoyable visiting experiences.

During his creative process, Wu Chi-Tsung skillfully used the scaffolding and scissor lifts to move across the work, ascending and descending, like playing with a toy. "Compared to the finished work at the exhibition site, where everything is neatly presented, sometimes the creative process is more interesting," Wu says, looking up at the unfinished sections of his "Cyano-Collage Series," with selected Xuan papers to be mounted on the aluminum plate, blowing like ocean waves under the fans. "Normally, audiences won't have the chance to see this kind of scene, the nature of this work is actually a collage of randomness formed by wrinkled pieces of Xuan paper."

Wu Chi-Tsung said that interacting with materials and technology is the most interesting. With a large high-ceilinged studio, and the help of scaffolding and scissor lifts, he is able to change the way he interacted with the works. "When people see what is behind-the-scenes, they can understand how the work is created step by step and will have a completely different understanding to the work." Chi-Tsung and his team have moved to the new studio for less than a month, and there is already a thin layer of paper scraps and glue on the ground underneath the work. "This is a habit of mine in the studio. Basically, no one is allowed to clean up the ground."

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Everything that happened in the studio left traces. When the artist picks his brush, the glue drips along the way and leaves marks. When piles of Xuan paper soaked in photosensitive solution generally turn into different shades of blue, they dye the floor on the ground. "In contrast, I will feel a lot of pressure if the space is too neat and tidy, so I will have to be constantly aware of not to mess the space up, and my attention will be distracted." In the artist's studio, randomness can also be a precious inspiration.



The state of mind and body polished in rock climbing training

"I also plan to install a climbing wall here." Wu Chi-Tsung still recalls his time training on the rock-climbing team in high school. He shared with us the three-day regimen of intensive training at that time. Back then, he only wanted to make himself stronger and free from dust. Rock climbing is all about being present. Wu Chi-Tsung said: "Sometimes you will find yourself in a tricky stage, seven or eight stories about the ground. You may fall at any time, and at this time you have to think about nothing but concentrate on every action in the moment." Rock climbing and art creation are similar things, both require you to be spirituality and physicality present. When you challenge the limitations of your body, you may find the essence of your existence. "It's a kind of freedom."

"Freedom" has always been a key word to Wu Chi-Tsung: the freedom to exceed the limits of the body when exercising, the freedom to imagine when creating. "However, freedom does not mean to do anything without rules, but something

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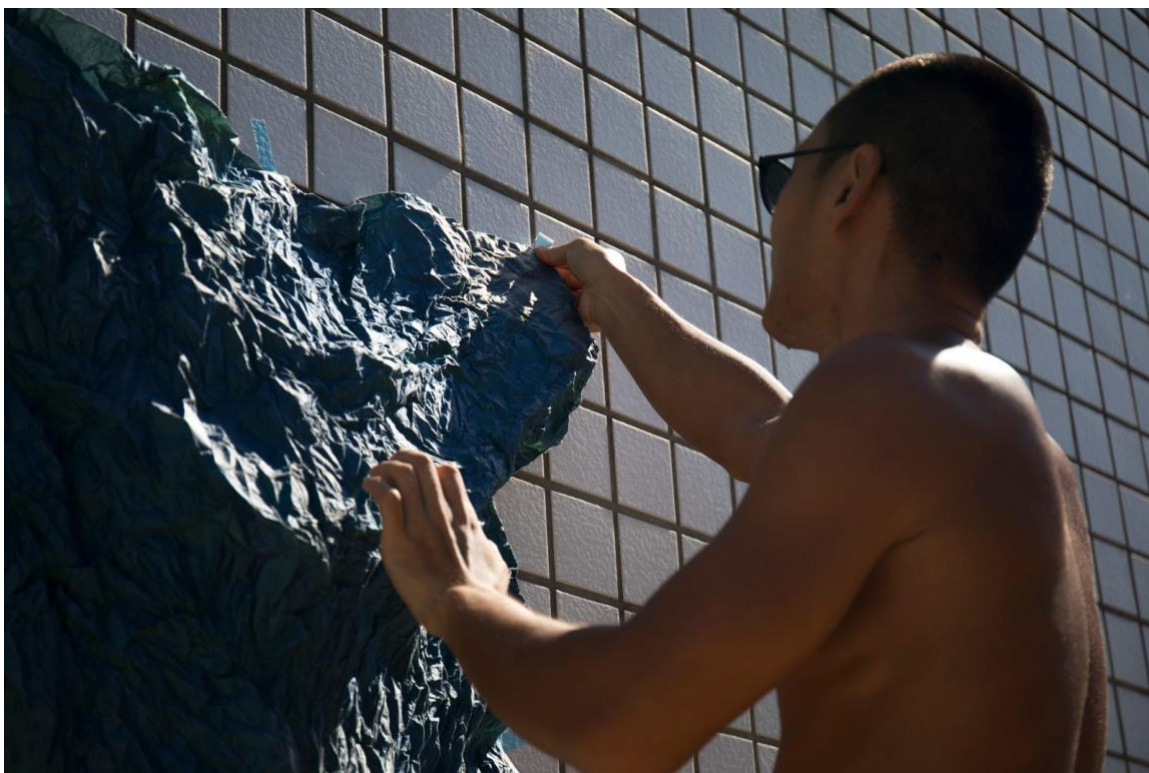
that I, the materials and tools in my hand must conform to each other and develop together in the most natural and comfortable state."

Looking at the half-completed "Cyano-Collage Series" on one side of the studio and the wall with only aluminum panels on the other side, "These two huge works are super marathons. They are very tiring and require strong organizational skills and concentration, but I enjoy this unprecedented challenge." After speaking, he jumped on the scissor lift again, taking the time to finish the 'clouds' on the aluminum plate.

Awakening the Study on Materials of Traditional Media

Wu Chi-Tsung has received art training from both Eastern and Western sources, which is a common upbringing in Taiwan. "We actually grew up bilingual, and it is unlikely that a Western artist would have practiced calligraphy and ink painting since childhood, but Asian artists are generally trained in Western art, and this is obviously our best characteristic and competitive advantage." This has prompted him to reexamine the classic as well as learn from the West, to explore personal, regional, and contemporary particularities, and to try to mend the gap between East and West, tradition and modernity.

Wu Chi-Tsung believes that it will be a hard act to follow what has been achieved by the ancient people, so he has taken a different path by replacing ink and brush with other media and using experimental photography to continue the landscape tradition. He said, "After all, the ancients could not be possible to climb onto the rock wall and observe them as I do."



Wu Chi-Tsung exposes cyanide version of rice paper on the top floor of Yuanshan Studio

For the "Cyano-Collage" series, Wu Chi-Tsung conducted research on Xuan paper, learning materials science.

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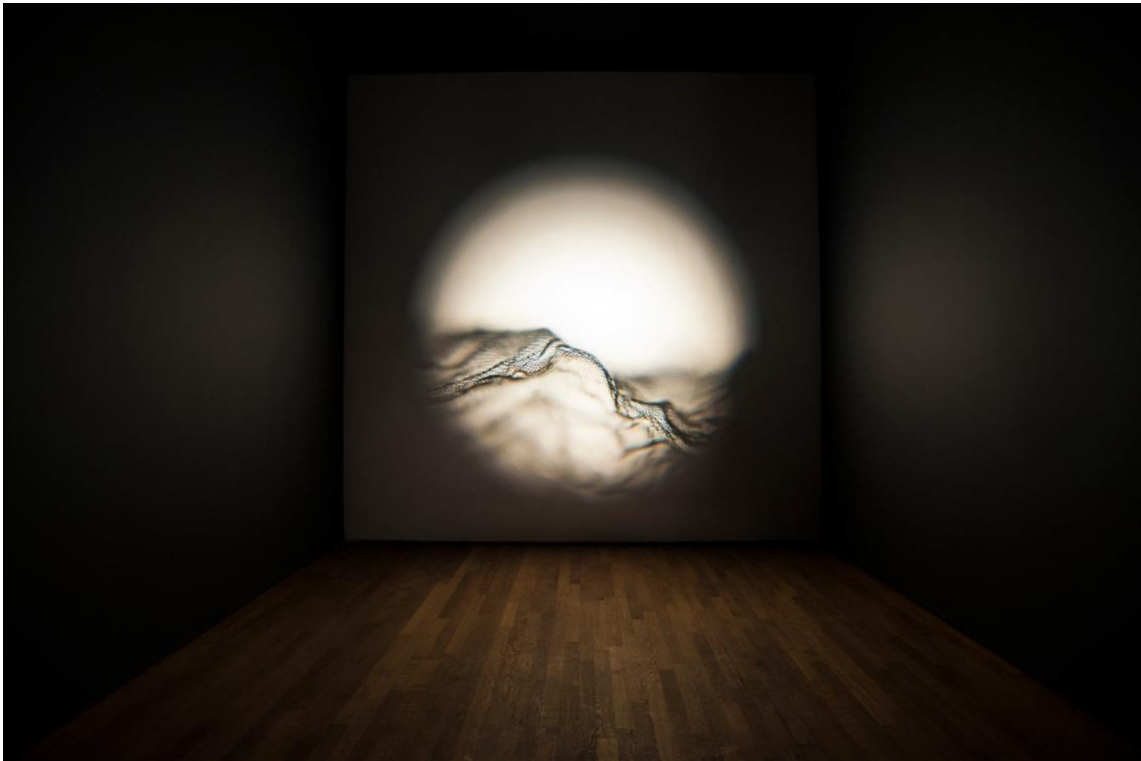
In the creation of the “Cyano-Collage” series, it is necessary to apply a layer of acrylic gel for the collage of xuan paper (Photo: Hedy Chan Credit: Vogue Taiwan)

In 2018, he established a studio in a residential building with a rooftop in Yuanshan. The daily routine of this studio was almost revolving around “paper” and the four floors of the building each has their own function: the rooftop for exposing cyanotype-treated Xuan paper, the fourth floor for “washing” the paper and other machinery works, the third floor for the creation and presentation of the works, and the paper scraps and traces of glue on the floor of the second floor have reached the thickness of snow...“In order to find the most suitable type of Xuan paper for the cyanotype process, we have experimented on dozens of types of them. By countless research and experiments, we get to understand the material better”. This is also what he differs from painters and calligraphers from the past. To Wu, Xuan paper is the paper with the most complicated and sensitive quality among all. With different manufacturing methods, they are capable to carry out broad color variations of ink that are extremely delicate.

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The cultivation of the two cultures of the East and the West gave Wu Chi-Tsung a broader mind and vision, his works combined Western contemporary media and the spirit of Eastern aesthetics translated the world they were not familiar with to Western audiences. "Through my work, Xuan paper has the opportunity to be noticed by more people. For example, when I was exhibiting in Europe, when the audience learned about the production process of "Cyanocollage", they were all amazed by the outstanding resilience of the Xuan paper after being crumpled, flattened, soaked, and dried. If in this way, more artists from other countries will also start to become interested in this material and begin to use it in their creations, can this traditional eastern media breathe a new life in the contemporary art world? "If 20% of the artists working with paper in Europe adapt Xuan paper, the whole industry will be resurrected."

Wu Chi-Tsung believes that the overall consideration and management of art from the stage of the production of materials is a practical matter. "I spend so much time researching materials, of course, I hope that it will continue to be produced. People tend to think that art is something remote and abstract. In fact, it IS such a practical thing. Interacting with materials and technology is part of the creation."



"Wire II", metal, glass, acrylic, 2003 ZENARI

Be natural, be harmonic

Behind the huge Cyano-Collage landscape, the research and application of materials also embody Eastern philosophies and fundamentally establish the aesthetic tone and value orientation of the works. “Western paper was developed for a high degree of control, while Eastern paper has a high degree of variability in aesthetic values.” This is the so-called “naturally.” When creating, Wu Chi-Tsung thought about how to make the material develop. For example, rice paper is thin and tough. When crumpled, its characteristics can be expressed naturally. But if you make origami, expect it to have a specific shape, “I will do it very painfully, and the paper will probably be very uncomfortable.” The idea of control arises, and the characteristics of paper cannot be unfolded, so the more you create, the more limited it becomes.

It is necessary to minimize control and allow the integration of materials and technologies to occur naturally. Only then can the underlying “own being” unfold. He showed us the pottery he made in his spare time during the Covid-19 pandemic. He said that while making pottery, you also need to learn to interact with the clay, not attempting to control them. “Every material has its own character, just like people, we can only follow it to dig out its unique texture, or the unique chemical reaction between me and the material.”

International studio across Europe and Asia

Speaking of his life as an international artist, Wu Chi-Tsung introduces, “If it weren’t for the Covid-19, I would be spending maybe only one-third of the year in Taiwan, and other times I would be living, creating, finding inspiration, or conducting research on materials and technology in my studios around the world.”

The two huge “Cyano-Collage Series” on the wall of the Tamsui studio will be sent to the United States immediately after completion. While being asked why not consider establishing a studio in New York? Wu Chi-Tsung replied, “New York is too charming for anyone to dislike. But it may not be suitable as a base for artists to create.” In 2013, Wu Chi-Tsung was granted by the Asian Cultural Council (ACC) for a half-year residency program. It is when he realized that the high cost of goods and intense competition made it a difficult place to live and work in as a young artist. “It’s not a place where people can calm down and be focused.”

“I like Vietnam very much. Compared with New York, it is a jungle where everything is in a very initial and chaotic state.” It is an art world that is growing and forming its shape, and the experience here is unprecedented. “For example,” Wu Chi-Tsung said, “if you hold an open studio in Saigon, half of the Saigon art circle will show up, and the art ecology here is a close community.” Berlin is an intermediate value for Wu Chi-Tsung. The historical background and economic structure of the city have brought artists from all over the world into the city, forming another spectacle full of life. “Berlin has changed a lot. My studio is the place where the secret police gathered in the old East Germany.” The history of political prisoners and the political atmosphere of the East German era are still there, but at the same time, it is an inclusive city “Why there can there be so many interesting things happening in Berlin? The relatively low price is absolutely the key.” Because the space cost is low, you can try as much as you want without the pressure to succeed.

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2018 at Bali Studio, now relocated

Free artistic spirit

He added that as an artist, he is very lucky. He travels around the world and communicates with different people. Through traveling and working in various cities, he accumulates the experience of interacting with different people. He sees that people have very different imaginations towards what it means to work with art.

“Most people consider that artists are people who make works, which is incorrect. The creation of works is only part of the work. What we do is ‘the whole thing about art.’” Wu Chi-Tsung said. “Including academic research, art market operation, international relations, and even thinking about the production of materials. The international studio layout allows him to integrate information and resources most efficiently, and to re-recognize himself from the perspective of others so that he can really know himself and understand his uniqueness compared to others. “When I was in Taiwan, I didn’t think there were any problems; after I left Taiwan, I could see its characteristics and limitations.”

He chose to transcend limitations. He is exploring to make use of his studios in Berlin, Ho Chi Minh City, Yunshan, and Tamsui. In each of them, an aspect of Wu Chi-Tsung’s personality dwells. Shuttling between the past and now, east, and west, his personality and creativity never stop growing.



"Dust", camera, projector, tripod, 2006, taken by the artist at the 2019 Weimar Art Festival in Germany

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The cyanotype-treated Xuan paper in the sun, the color is gradually developing under the light due to the impact of photosensitive solutions

The settings of these studios seem to be rational and full of logic, but they actually more of a natural result of Chi-Tsung's career development to fit his need than a deliberate arrangement... And the fundamental reason that drives him to bravely cross the border may be just the kind of spirit he has experienced in many years of rock-climbing training, that is, beyond the limits, the spirit of freedom.