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Bean Curd and Nothingness

Cai Guo-Qiang admires Charwei

Tsai's inscriptions on lemons, trees, and rotting slabs of tofu as meditations on the ephemerality of life

BY JULIE BRENER

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CAI GUO-QIANG'S STAGED EXPLOSIONS are grand in ambition and execution: their scale is colossal, their production costs run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars, and their effect can be almost overwhelming. But what the Chinese-born artist

says he admires most about the work of 26-year-old Charwei Tsai is its quietude.

Tsai's performances and installations are based on the Heart Sutra, a Buddhist text written sometime between A.D. 300 and 500. She inks the 250-character refrain repeatedly—"which is usually how it's recited," she explains—on organic matter like tofu or flowers, and then lets the work rot. Her art, like Buddhism, "is about understanding the transient nature of things around us," she says.

Tsai's work shares with Cai's an ephemeral quality, but both artists agree that that's where the similarity ends. Cai made his name in the early 1990s with "Projects for Extraterrestrials," a series of explosions

so immense they could be seen from space. In 2002 he used 1,000 fireworks to create *Transient Rainbow*, a short-lived virtual "bridge" between Manhattan and Queens, symbolizing the



For his *Illusion II, Explosion Project*, 2006, Cai Guo-Qiang detonated fireworks in a small house in Berlin.



Charwei Tsai uses tofu in her works for its fleshlike quality.

Museum of Modern Art's temporary relocation to the outer borough during its renovation. "His visions are so grand, so different from mine," says Tsai, who worked as an assistant in Cai's New York studio for two years, starting in spring 2004. It was this experience that inspired her to begin making her own artwork.

Though Tsai was born in Taipei, Taiwan, her education was Western: she spent her early years at the American School in Taipei; attended high school at the Stevenson School in Pebble Beach, California; and went to the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence to study industrial design. Creating products like cell phones, she says, "just was not for me." But her art-history courses introduced her to artists like Robert Rauschenberg, whose *Earthworks* had a strong influence on her current practice. After graduating in 2002 and moving to New York, she took a part-time job at Printed Matter, a nonprofit organization that publishes and sells artists' books and multiples, and volunteered at Tibet House. There she began to understand the Buddhist philosophy that "influences everything that I'm doing now," she says.

Tsai says that even though she wasn't particularly religious growing up in Taiwan, she still memorized the Heart Sutra. The text equates emptiness with enlightenment, suggesting that only by being freed from the senses can one be released from suffering. "That's maybe some sort of universal truth," says Tsai, "but there's another side of reality—the passion that people feel."

She explored this contradiction between Buddhist detachment and intense emotion in her installation for "J'en rêve" (I Dream of It), a group show last fall at the Fondation Cartier in Paris, where she inscribed the Heart Sutra on phallic-looking mushrooms and a feminine iris, creating a sexual undercurrent that subverts the text.

Cai nominated Tsai for inclusion in the exhibition, which featured works by more than 100 artists, all in their twenties. "A lot of times when artists assist other artists, their work turns out to be a little bit similar," he says through interpreter Lesley Ma, one of his studio assistants, adding that he admires Tsai for maintaining her delicate style.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Tofu Mantra, 2005, fresh; Tofu Mantra, frozen; Frog Mantra, ink on photograph, 2005; Flower Mantra, 2005; Lemon Mantra, 2006; Olive Tree Mantra, 2006.



Cai is drawn as much to Tsai's outlook as to her craft. He points to a still from her video projection *Tofu Mantra* (2005), also included in "J'en rêve." The work shows the Heart Sutra written out on a three-inch-square piece of soybean curd, which Tsai chose for its fleshlike texture, rotting in her Ninth Street studio apartment over the course of a week. Condensed



An ascetic sutra is written on a phallic *shimeiji* mushroom in *Mushroom Mantra*, 2005.

to two minutes, the video ran on a continuous loop for the duration of the exhibition. "From a philosophical point of view, it has a lot to do with everyday hopes and dreams and wishes, so it loses its meaning as time passes," says Cai. "It's a very Zen way of looking at everyday life and philosophy."

For her second group show, "postER," in Hydra, Greece, last summer, Tsai covered the trunk and branches of an olive tree with the Heart Sutra and left it exposed to the elements. In another piece, she inscribed the text on lemons and allowed them to decompose beneath the tree from which they had fallen.

Tsai has begun to incorporate other texts and materials into her installations. She covered a bonsai tree with lyrics from 1980s Taiwanese pop songs for "Summer Hot," a recent exhibition at the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in New York. At the Singapore Biennial, which runs through the 12th of this month, Tsai wrote the Heart Sutra on lotus seeds, roots, and flowers—which symbolize the purification of speech, body, and mind—and arranged them on the main altar of a Buddhist temple in the city as if they were offerings. She recreated her *Tofu Mantra* at an abandoned military camp nearby.

Tsai is preparing to move to France in January for a four-month artist's residency at the Cité internationale universitaire de Paris, and last month she released the third issue of her magazine, *Lovely Daze*, which features works and writings by artists whom she admires. This project, which she produces biannually and sells for \$18 at Printed Matter and art bookstores, also grew out of her time in Cai's studio. "Every day we worked so much, and there was so much going on," she says. "The first issue is about a day in New York when nothing happens."

If Tsai's installations are at all influenced by Cai, then they are more a reaction to his mode of working than an imitation of it. "I don't have grand ambitions for things on such a large scale," she says. "I'm just making my little traces." ■