

Rethinking Gender and the Body: In Conversation With Su Hui-Yu



Su Hui-Yu, *The Women's Revenge* (video still), 2020, five-channel video installation, 12'00". Image courtesy of the artist.



Installation view, Su H

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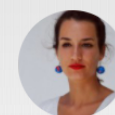
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Naima Morelli

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Naima Morelli is an art writer

Taipei-based artist Su Hui-Yu reshoots Taiwanese exploitation movies from the '80s, celebrating queer identity, women's empowerment and promoting inclusivity.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

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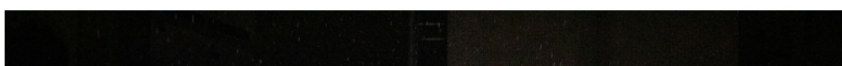
Take Hong Kong film director Wong Kar-wai's impeccable aesthetics, mix it with Italian film director Pierpaolo Pasolini's gut-wrenching *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975), and you get an idea of the power of Su Hui-Yu's work. The Taiwanese artist and film director's oeuvre is at times startling for its depictions of crude violence and explicit sexuality. However, the refined aesthetics of the visual imagery and cinematography make it irresistible to turn away from the screen.

Only if you keep watching do you discover the multiplicity and complexity of Su's language. From his early days in painting and body art to his venture into feature films, Su has been a researcher of mass media communication all along. He remains a keen observer of the perception of the body in Asian societies, and the projection of mass desire in mainstream media.

Over the past few years Su began reshooting classic Taiwanese B-grade movies from the '80s, but with heightened cinematic flair. Bringing contemporary elements to these classics, Su seeks to promote diversity and celebrate queer and LGBTQ culture in light of Taiwan's recent same-sex marriage ruling. All of this with exciting Tarantino-like visuals.

Su currently has a solo exhibition in The Hague, the Netherlands, titled "[The Cinema of Séance](#)". His most recent project *The Women's Revenge* (2020) was selected for the International Film Festival Rotterdam, entering the [Ammodo Tiger Short Competition](#) and is also part of a new group show at the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, Taiwan, titled "[From Object to Cosmos](#)". Later this year, Su will also have solo exhibitions in Winterthur, Switzerland, and Manchester, UK.

CoBo Social spoke with the artist about working across art and filmmaking and his most recent projects.





Su Hui-Yu, *The Women's Revenge* (video still), 2020, five-channel video installation, 12'00". Image courtesy of the artist.

Did your transition from the art world to cinema happen organically?

Cinema and the contemporary art scene are still considered worlds apart in Taiwan and Asia at large. The movie audience have different expectations from the visual art folks, so it's a bit of a challenge. When I'm shooting for a film, I need to conceive it both for video installations and for the cinema screen, because I don't know how it will be showcased. In Europe, I feel the difference between audiences is not as sharp, and I see more and more video artists invited to participate at festivals, as well as more and more museums focusing on the work of some directors. After all, we have many artists and filmmakers doing cross-field activities.

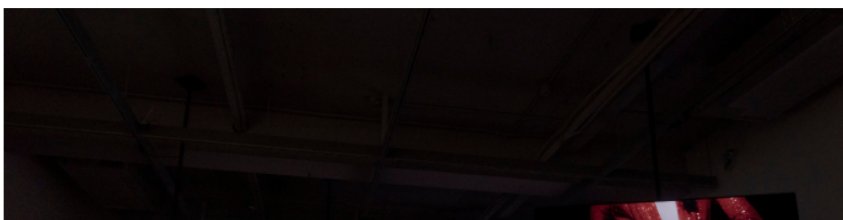
Your most recent short films, such as *The Glamorous Boys of Tang* (2018) and *The Women's Revenge* (2020) are reshooting of Taiwanese movies from the '80s. Is it nostalgia that motivates you to look into Taiwan's cinematic past?

It's not nostalgia. I want to create something that intersects personal memory and historical collective memory, and then use my personal language to present it. There are many movies from the old days in Taiwan that had a strong spirit, but they ended up unfinished, or some parts in the script were not shot, as they were seen as forbidden at the time. If you really pay attention to this kind of film, you see many interesting possibilities that directors couldn't take back then. I feel now is my time and I can reshoot them. It's about reimagining these possibilities in a freer society. What if we can do them better? What if we rethink them?

Do you have personal memories attached to these movies when they first came out, in the context of Taiwanese society at the time?

I share my memories with many people of my age. As an elementary schoolboy, I wasn't able to see movies in the theatre, but I recall seeing the posters. In the 1980s we had a lot of fast food joints for workers, and it was there that I used to see these adult movie posters on the wall. Being exposed to those images of naked bodies and violence, blood and eroticism together was a weird yet unforgettable experience for me. You can imagine, I was a child eating with his parents; it was exciting and embarrassing at once.

In 1980s Taiwan teenagers felt their sexual desire was always repressed, and they didn't know how to express that power or pressure inside them. Those movies were a form of expression, but the socio-political dimension didn't allow it to fully surface. They just shut sexual desires down for control. It's a very unhealthy mental state. I see those movies as a very interesting reflection of a social phenomenon. So from that early memory, I started researching into those movies, into the genre of exploitation films. There were good ones and bad ones, all geared to commercial success. Eventually, the government forbade their production altogether because they were deemed not healthy for the public.





Installation view, Su Hui-Yu, *The Women's Revenge*, 2020, at Double Square Gallery, 2020. Image courtesy of Double Square Gallery.



Installation view, Su Hui-Yu, *The Glamorous Boys of Tang* (1985, Qiu Gang-Jian), 2018, for the 2018 Taiwan Biennale, at the National Museum of Fine Arts, 2018. Image courtesy of the artist.

In *The Glamorous Boys of Tang* you present many contemporary elements, from queer culture to body representation issues, all treated in the context of the reshooting of an erotic folktale movie from the '80s. How did you approach the multi-layered nature of the movie?

I was fascinated and surprised by the director Chiu Kang-chien who was able to do such a movie in 1985, under the martial law. I respect him very much. When I started to research his original script, I realised that because of censorship a lot of scenes from the script were not produced, especially the most beautiful but radical ones.

The story is about two beautiful boys, quite unusual for 1980s Taiwan, at a time when people [had less awareness] about homosexuality. It was quite a unique and avant-garde representation at that time. But in 2019 we had a remarkable year for gender politics in Taiwan, with same-sex marriage becoming legal, and it was a great time to reshoot the film. We wanted to pay tribute to Chiu who already articulated those sentiments 30 years ago, and we wanted to draw a connection. *The Glamorous Boys of Tang* was sponsored by the Taiwan's Ministry of Culture. and they gave me a big budget and carte blanche to realise this movie.

How did you work with the actors?

The majority of the actors were not professionals; most of them were from different kinds of BDSM communities and other subculture groups. We also had a group of bigger ladies fighting for a more inclusive body image depiction, and the drag community in Taipei, as well as an older gentleman dressed like a lady in the movie, who is actually a film critic. He was the very first to explore gender theory in Taiwan.

We held two workshops where actors started developing their body languages. Many of them would have been nude in nature, touching each other, so they had to develop 100% trust in each other. So *The Glamorous Boys of Tang* is ultimately not just the final product or the movie. It is also the story of the process and the whole context in which it was developed. Each group of people or individual involved shared an agenda for a more open society. And it all started with a movie done some 30 years ago, which already had kernels of what Taiwanese society would become.

Your most recent work is *The Women's Revenge*. How did you work on this short film?

We have just finished it. This time the reshooting looked into another genre; namely the so-called female-

exploitation films. This genre was created in Italy in the 70s, and it spread all over the world, including Taiwan via Japan and Hong Kong. This time I also acted in the film, as a part of the ladies' squad. I'm a very weird and tall woman dressed in red. That's my first time appearing in a movie, even though I have always performed in my earlier video art.

The idea for *The Women's Revenge* was to bring up a catharsis, and from there, build a new relationship between women and men. The work also questions the definition of sexuality, as nowadays we don't see gender as clear as it was considered before. The film asks: What is a woman? What is a man? It's an open question to me, and I turned it over to the public.



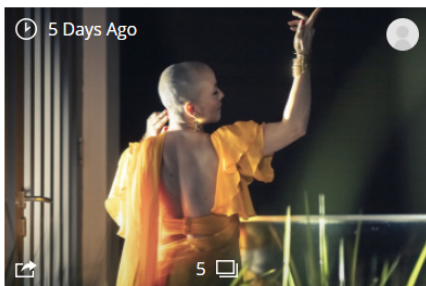
Portrait of Su Hui-Yu. Image courtesy of the artist.

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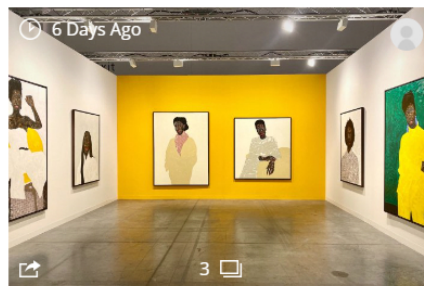
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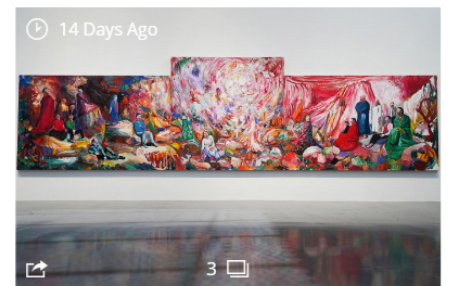
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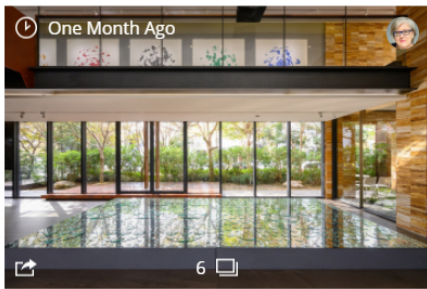
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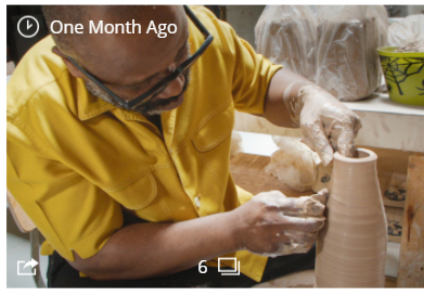
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