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Art | Media | Movies

Swords into art on Taiwan

By Caroline Gluck

KINMEN, Taiwan

Lee Shi-Chi is an artist who knows from experience about the misery of living on Kinmen, an island controlled by Taipei in the Taiwan Strait, when it was a fortress in the cold war battle between mainland China and Taiwan.

He was born on Kinmen (better known in the West as Quemoy) in 1938 and his family's home was destroyed when the two sides fought it out at the end of the civil war in 1949, when the Nationalists fled to Taiwan and turned Kinmen into one of its main lines of defense. He said that his sister and grandmother were both killed by a prisoner on the run during the chaotic period that followed.

For 20 years, China rained artillery shells on Kinmen, which is just off the mainland. China still describes Taiwan as a renegade province to be reunited with the mainland, by force if necessary. Most of the artillery shells were fully armed and the rest, more ritualistically, were often loaded with propaganda leaflets on alternate days over the years.

"It was like gambling," Lee said. He is one of 18 artists from China and Taiwan who are taking part in an exhibition on the island at the Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art, curated by a Chinese artist, Cai Guo-Qiang. "For example, on the second or fourth day we had peace, safety. On the first or third day, danger. My artwork is based on this idea."

His installation in a disused military bunker is entitled "War Bets on Peace." It consists of a lottery machine, larger-than-life dice and a roulette table, reflecting his view that life or death during the war was only a matter of chance. "I want to show artists who are taking part from mainland China what kind of horror, suffering and pain I went through as a local when war broke out," Lee said, "my feeling of being bullied, being invaded. But I also want to show the cruelty of war, to let people learn from the lessons of history, so we can achieve peace and stability."

The exhibition took three years to put together. Cai — best known for his large-scale outdoor performance pieces involving pyrotechnics — grew up in southeastern China opposite Kinmen and remembers hearing the artillery barrages as a young boy.

After managing to win permission from Taiwanese military and government officials, he invited artists from across the strait to transform abandoned bunkers and military installations into works of art. "Artists are like bees carrying pollen and spreading it around the world," Cai said. "I hope that pollen can help culture blossom here like flowers."

Some of the installations are overtly



Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art

"Lovemaking for World Peace" by Yin Ling was a big hit on the exhibition's opening day.

political, such as a documentary by Tung Wang Wu entitled "Surrender." In it, children from Taiwan talk about their views on surrendering, about being bullied by older and bigger siblings. The political parallels — tiny Taiwan and its bigger neighbor — are clear. "Kinmen plays a very important role in the conflict between Taiwan and China," Tung said. "You can't ignore it."

"Withering Flower" by Tsai Ming-Liang, a Malaysian-born filmmaker and a longtime resident of Taiwan, is strangely calming and personal. The concrete structure is illuminated by candles outside and in, and it resembles a tomb. A huge statue of Chiang Kai-shek, the Nationalist leader, stands in the first chamber. His back is turned as he gazes through a lookout point toward China. The former cannon openings are wrapped with medicinal bandages that flap in the breeze, a symbol, the artist said, of the "castration" of the building when its artillery was removed. Visitors are invited to leave messages with their hopes for the future.

Equally compelling is the Chinese composer Tan Dun's "Visual Music." Tan, who won an Oscar for the soundtrack of the film "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," uses audiotape of a piano being smashed to pieces against a backdrop of music by Beethoven and Bach.

Lining the path as you walk farther into the building, as rainwater seeps through the ceiling, are pieces of partly buried, broken and reassembled piano pieces. A series of video screens shows Tan smashing up a piano.

"Lovemaking for World Peace," a performance by a Taiwan actress, Yin Ling, dancing suggestively with costumes that represent Mao and Chiang

and cavorting in bed with a skeleton, drew large crowds on opening day.

For his project, Liu Xiaodong, a Beijing artist, spent several months at a military base in China and six weeks near a military base in Kinmen painting life-sized portraits of young soldiers, now displayed in a former military classroom.

"It was easy to get permission to stay in the military camp in China, because I had a friend who could help me," Liu said. "But I could not tell them that I was making the paintings for this show in Taiwan. It was too politically sensitive. I felt I was spying on my own country, because I hid the truth."

"But in Taiwan, I really was regarded as a potential spy," he said with a laugh. "This experience has been life-changing. It's had a purifying effect on me."

Political sensitivities meant that many artists and journalists from the mainland, including a troupe from the Beijing Opera, were refused visas to attend the exhibition opening. While it might be seen by some as a setback to one of the goals of this show — encouraging a wider dialogue, across the strait, Cai was philosophical. "It just goes to show that it's worth doing," he said. "Today, a Chinese artist can hold an exhibition anywhere, but in Kinmen, it's still a problem."

"It's still a sensitive issue. It has its difficulties. It's even more worthwhile to me that we are doing this, that we are opening up something."

The show at the Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art runs until Jan. 10. More information is on its Web site, bmoca.kinmen.gov.tw.

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