

# 國立交通大學

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## 碩士論文

吳天章作品中的詭態美學

The Spectacle of Grotesque: The trilogy of Wu Tien-chang's Works



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# 吳天章作品中的詭態嘉年華

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## 中文摘要

本論文將吳天章歷年的作品分成三期，以傅柯(Michel Foucault)在《不正常的人》中所討論的政治詭態和羅素(Mary Russo)提出的兩種詭態(Carnival and the Uncanny)來探討其作品在不同時期所表現的詭態樣貌。本論文由影像分析一方面試圖找出各時期的主題，另一方面也企圖從這些主題中了解其作品的寓意。

吳天章第一時期(1990年-1991年)作品裡的政治領袖肖像呈現了他對政治議題和社會變遷的關心。第二時期(1993年-1997年)的主題轉向了個人慾望和在地文化，他用俗麗的裝飾和攝影的概念塑造出了獨特的女性詭態影像。第三時期(2002年-至今)的作品運用了電腦科技，模擬複製出各種怪胎或是肉體，並配合文字來挑戰對於因果輪迴和宗教勸世的傳統價值觀。吳天章的作品由政治強人、個人肖像至近期的嘉年華式眾生相，都利用詭態的驚世駭俗來吸引觀者的目光。他的作品能和同期藝術之作有所區別之處就在於他極具後現代特色的拼貼和恣仿風格造成的吳式幽默。

關鍵字：吳天章、詭態、嘉年華、傅柯、巴赫汀、幽默、後現代主義

# A Spectacle of Grotesque Carnival: The Trilogy in Wu Tien-chang's Works

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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, Wu Tien-chang's works are divided into three periods and are investigated with Foucault's grotesque of political monsters in *Abnormal* (2003) and the two kinds of grotesques by Russo – the carnival grotesque and the uncanny grotesque (1995: 7). By analyzing the images, I define a theme for each period and show the allergy of each period through the themes.

During the first period (1990-1991), Wu manipulates the images of four Chinese political leaders (Chiang Kai-shek, Chiang Ching-kuo, Mao Tse-tung and Deng Hsiao-ping) to express his concerns about the political issues and the social transition. During the second period (1993-1997), he uses feminized figures in a way of photography to represent the uncanny grotesque with garish decorations in order to show his concern about personal desires and the local culture. During the third period (2002- present), Wu applies digital techniques in his pictures to generate and reproduce all kinds of freaks and bodies. He also uses religious texts to challenge the traditional values about reincarnation and the religious dissuasion. Wu uses the features of postmodernism – pastiche and collage – to achieve “Wu's humor” which distinguishes him as a unique artist in Taiwan. From the political leaders to common people, and even to the carnival of all flesh, Wu's grotesque images always draw our attention.

Keyword: Wu Tien-chang, Grotesque, Carnival, the Uncanny, Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, Humor, Postmodernism

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## Contents

Chinese Abstract .....		i
English Abstract .....		ii
Acknowledgment .....		iii
Contents .....		iv
Illustrations .....		v
Chapter One	Introduction.....	1
1.1	Three Periods of Wu’s Works.....	4
1.2	Literature Review.....	6
1.3	The Organization of Chapters.....	13
Chapter Two	The Monstrosity of Wu’s Political Iconology.....	17
2.1	The Grotesque in Foucault’s <i>Abnormal</i> .....	18
2.2	The Theme of <i>Four Eras</i> Series.....	20
2.3	Iconographic Study of Wu’s Icon works of Political Strongmen.....	26
Chapter Three	The Uncanny Grotesque in Wu’s Works from 1993 to 1996.....	30
3.1	Theory of Uncanny Grotesque.....	30
3.2	The Themes of Wu’s Works during the Second Period	33
3.3	The Gaze behind the Mask.....	37
Chapter Four	The Carnival of Grotesque in Wu’s Works from 2002 up to now.....	42
4.1	Theory of Carnavalesque Grotesque.....	43
4.2	The Theme of Wu’s Series after the Year 2000.....	45
4.3	The Carnival of Wu’s Grotesque Images.....	48
4.4	Questions on Wu’s Grotesque Images.....	51
Chapter Five	Conclusion.....	57
5.1	The Style of Wu’s Art Works.....	57
5.2	The Humor of Wu’s Grotesque Style.....	59
5.3	The Significance of Wu’s Grotesque Images.....	60
Works Cited .....		63
Figures .....		68

# Illustrations

## List of Figures

- Fig. 1 Wu Tien-chang. *Sayonara*, Mixed Media, 120 x 80 cm, 1994.
- Fig. 2 Wu Tien-chang. *The Rule of Chiang Kai-shek*, Oil and Canvas, 310 x 340 cm, 1990.
- Fig. 3 Wu Tien-chang. *The Rule of Chiang Ching-kuo*, Oil and Canvas, 310 x 360 cm, 1990.
- Fig. 4 Wu Tien-chang. *The Rule of Mao Tse-tung*, Oil and Canvas, 310 x 400 cm, 1990.
- Fig. 5 Wu Tien-chang. *The Rule of Deng Hsiao-ping*, Oil and Canvas, 310 x 360 cm, 1990.
- Fig. 6 Wu Tien-chang. *Four Eras*, (Part of Deng Hsiao-ping), Mixed Media, 1991.
- Fig. 7 Wu Tien-chang. *Four Eras*, (Part of Chiang Ching-kuo), Mixed Media, 1991.
- Fig. 8 Wu Tien-chang. *Four Eras*, (Part of Mao Tse-tung), Mixed Media, 1991.
- Fig. 9 Wu Tien-chang. *Four Eras*, (Part of Chiang Kai-shek), Mixed Media, 1991.
- Fig. 10 Mei Dean-E. *Three Principles of People Reunify China*, Mixed Media, 157 x 122 cm, 1991.
- Fig. 11 Mei Dean-E. *Taiwan Loves Japan/ Japan Loves Taiwan*, Digital Print, 159 x 113 cm, 1998.
- Fig. 12 Guo, Jen-Chang. *95'-96' Chronicles: President and Vice President*, Acryl and Canvas, 390 x 200 cm 1996.
- Fig. 13 Abraham Bosse. Frontispiece of *Leviathan*, Etching, 1651.
- Fig. 14 Wu Tien-chang. *Dreams of Past Era I*, Mixed Media, 120 x 80 cm, 1994.
- Fig. 15 Wu Tien-chang. *Dreams of Past Era II*, Mixed Media, 220 x 180 cm, 1995.
- Fig. 16 Wu Tien-chang. *Dreams of Past Era III*, Mixed Media, 120 x 80 cm, 1996.
- Fig. 17 Wu Tien-chang. *Dreams of Past Era IV*, Mixed Media, 210 x 168 cm, 1997.
- Fig. 18 Wu Tien-chang. *Dreams of Past Era V*, Mixed Media, 170 x 130 cm, 1997.
- Fig. 19 Wu Tien-chang. *Endless Love in Temporal World*, Mixed Media, 218 x 206 cm, 1997.
- Fig. 20 Li Shin-chiao. *On the Market*, Oil and Canvas, 149x 148 cm, 1945.

Fig. 21 Wu Tien-chang. *On the Damage to “Spring and Autumn”*, Mixed Media, 190 x 160 cm, 1993.

Fig. 22 Wu Tien-chang. *United in Our Effect*, Digital Print, 219 x 164 cm, 2002.

Fig. 23 Wu Tien-chang. *Work Together toward Same Goal*, Digital Print, 180 x 228 cm, 2002.

Fig. 24 Wu Tien-chang. *Dreaming of Golden Millet*, Digital Print, 180 x 228 cm, 2003.

Fig. 25 Wu Tien-chang. *Spirit Dreaming Conjunction*, Digital Print, 2004.

Fig. 26 Wu Tien-chang. *Spell to Shift Mountains and Overturn Seas*, Digital Print, 2005.

Fig. 27 Wu Tien-chang. Part of *Spirit Dreaming Conjunction*, Digital Print, 2004.

Fig. 28 Wu Tien-chang. Central part of *Spirit Dreaming Conjunction*, Digital Print, 2004.

Fig. 29 Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire. “Monstrosités.” 1837.

Fig. 30 Wu Tien-chang. English Text of *Spirit Dreaming Conjunction*. 2004.

Fig. 31 Wu Tien-chang. Chinese Text of *United in Our Effect*. 2002.





## Chapter One

### Introduction

Taiwan underwent drastic socio-political transition from the 1980s to the 1990s. Before the lifting of martial law in 1987, people had been prohibited from freely expressing themselves under the rule of the authoritarian regime. After the lifting of martial law, the society is more tolerant of diverse voices. Radical artists in Taiwan who witnessed the rapid socio-political changes started to breathe into their art pieces with free spirits, experimental art forms, and socio-political critiques. Wu Tien-chang (吳天章), who is one of the leading radical artists, has been well aware of the critical power of arts and has imbued his art works with critiques even before the lifting of martial law. Before he became famous, together with Lu Yi-chung (盧怡仲), Yang Mao-lin (楊茂林) and other artists, they found “101 Modern Art Group” (101 現代藝術群) in 1982. Their paintings are in a style of Neo-Expressionism, which is defined in *Contemporary art in Taiwan* (2002):

[...] the appropriation of accomplished images, techniques or styles stimulate the audience’s imagination and also convey ethnic or native cultural fables, ideological symbols, myths or imagined world. The appropriation [by means of] the adoption of accomplished images contains the history of art, myths, legends, primitive totems [...] etc.. The style and techniques are not rational but more emotional, and they are not constrained by specific methods.”<sup>1</sup> (Hsieh 95)

While his colleagues, such as Lu Yi-chung, only used folk legendary stories to softly present

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<sup>1</sup> 「挪用已有圖案、技法或風格，企圖喚起觀眾的想像，表達民族或本土文化的寓言、意識型態象徵、神話或想像世界。已有的圖像、計法或風格的挪用，指得是[...]取自現成圖像。現成圖像的範圍包括美術史、神話傳說、原始圖騰[...] 等等。[...] 風格、技法指得是已有的風格或技法，並無特定方式，但屬於情緒化而非理性的形式。」(謝東山 95)

their ideas, Wu expressed himself in a more straightforward and violent way. He chose to challenge political totems, taboos, and political issues as a way to express himself. As a result, he became distinct from the other artists in his group. By the time martial law was lifted, he was clearer about his critical perspective. In his series of *About the X Color's Hurt* (《關於 X 色的傷害》) (1986) and *A Symptom of the "Syndromes of the World Injury"* (《傷害世界症候群》) (1986-87), he unreservedly displayed the social problems and the damages caused by the political incidents. These works were published when martial law was about to be lifted, but the penetrating critiques can already be seen. The concrete images in his post-martial law art works astonished the viewers. It was a visual impact that the viewers would never have a chance to see during the period of martial law.

The exhibition of *Four Eras* (《四個時代》) (1991) made Wu famous in the 1990s. His original and forceful political "big heads" are mirror images of four political strongmen. He used them to present his parody and criticism of the political authority. He paints the images in a comic way and exaggerates the size of their bodies. Wu is very responsive to the changes of the socio-political climate. In the mid-1990s, his interests went from political issues to personal memoirs not only because of the ebbing of the political waves, but also because of a personal reason: his grandmother's death in 1992. According to my interview with him, after she passed away, he started to think about the meaning of life. Although the flowers and the decorations in his grandmother's funeral are very rough and fake, they never wither. People are eager for an eternal life; therefore, the flowers may convey the desire for it. As a result, Wu became fascinated with the fake world. The paradox inspires him to think about the unique culture in Taiwan, where his ideas come from. The pictures in the series of *Dream of Past Era* (《春宵夢》) look like the old photos in personal albums or on the antique calendars.

The retro-style<sup>2</sup> setting confuses the viewers' sense of time and space. This style is different from his previous ones and indicates the shift of his interest from political events and figures to daily life and ordinary people.

The time he begins to create works using mixed media is after the millennium year. With the approaching of the digital era, Wu keeps up with the technologies. Rather than submitting to the control of the technology, he utilizes them to draw the outlines of his reflections and introspections. His creating technique is called “‘technical revivalism’ [which] uses the latest computer technologies to create artworks, and at the same time adopts a Chinese way of thinking to understand and interpret the functions of computers to establish a common ground”<sup>3</sup> (Pan 138). “To establish a common ground” indicates that the Western and Chinese cultures can work together and share some basic concepts. The digital world implies that there may be one “truth” beyond our being. It is a world composed of 0 and 1, just like mathematics formulas. No matter how the world is changing, the formulas are always self-evident. Wu associates it with the Chinese philosophy that there is always someone controlling our fate-- someone we will never know. Therefore, we take it as the god's or the fate's manipulation. His integration and association of Chinese and Western cultures produce a third hybrid culture.

In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Fredric Jameson notes that “everything in the [nostalgia] film [...] conspires to blur its official contemporaneity and make it possible for the viewer to receive the narrative as though it were [...] beyond real historical time” (Jameson 1991: 21). Wu has been using elements of reminiscence to create a sense that is beyond time and space. In addition, he has employed collage and pastiche, which are important features in postmodernism, in his art works.

<sup>2</sup> In Wu's series, the retro style suggests the aesthetics represented in the early days of Taiwanese agriculture society.

<sup>3</sup> 「所謂科技復古(technical revivalism)，是一方面利用最新的電腦技術創作，另一方面用中國的思考模式去理解、詮釋電腦功能，以確立其共通性。」(潘安儀 138)

Inspired by vintage salon pictures, calendar posters, and New Year pictures, he produces works that are full of reminiscence as well as creativity. Take the series of *Dream of Past Era* for example, although it looks like that the work is made of reminiscent pictures, it is not necessarily the case; the work projects images that seem to be beyond time and space.

Jameson considers this approach “by way of the art language of the simulacrum, or of the pastiche of the stereotypical past, endows present reality and the openness of present history with the spell and distance of a glossy mirage” (21).

### 1.1 Three Periods of Wu's Works

According to the styles and the issues mentioned above, Wu's works can be divided into three periods. In his earlier works, the issue is mainly on authoritative political icons and social events. The painting of the four strongmen and the works before this series clearly show his concern about the oppression and resistance at that time. His works in his early career are famous for rebelling against the authority. The work *On the Damage of “Spring and Autumn”* (《再會吧！春秋閣》) in 1993 opens up Wu's creativity to another subject — the feminine image. Not only his subjects, but also his style is changing: from comic-like leaders to creepy figures. In the similar series, *Dream of Past Era* (《春宵夢》), the female bodies attract the viewers. Underneath the female bodies and the feminized images, there are ghosts among them. The living, the dead, and something between them set up his unique carnival, which is taken as a good art piece of his grotesque aesthetics succeeding his previous work. The motif of gender issues and sexual identity shows not only Wu's aesthetics of grotesque, but also his concern about identities. In Wu's interview on *Emancipation of Arts* with Public Television Service, he claims that he places sexual issue over political issue in his works in the 1990s. Recently, he uses mixed materials with digital technologies to represent the traditional concept of “reincarnation” in his recent works after 2000. The combination of

the latest techniques and the ancient beliefs produces abnormal images. The transformation of Wu's works, however, does not impair his sharp observations. On the contrary, it actually unfolds his critical thinking.

The focus of my project is his breakthroughs after the year martial law is lifted. After sketching the outline of his works in the previous paragraphs, I would like to divide his art career into three periods according to chronology and artistic styles. My chronological classification will also be explained in the following sections. Here are the three periods I have come up with:

1. 1990- 1991: *Four Eras* (《四個時代》) (1991) and *The Rule of Chiang Kai-shek* (《關於蔣介石的統治》) (1990), *The Rule of Chiang Ching-kuo* (《關於蔣經國的統治》) (1990), *The Rule of Mao Tse-tung* (《關於毛澤東的統治》) (1990), and *The Rule of Deng Hsiao-ping* (《關於鄧小平的統治》) (1990).
2. 1993 - 1997: *On the Damage of Spring and Autumn* (《再見吧春秋閣》) (1993), *Dreams of Past Era I-V* (《春宵夢 I-V》) and *Endless Love in Temporal World* (《紅塵不了情》) (1997).
3. 2002 - present: *United in Our Effort* (《永協同心》) (2002), *Work Together toward Same Goal* (《同舟共濟》) (2002), *Dreaming of Golden Millet* (《黃粱夢》) (2003), *Spirit Dreaming Conjunction* (《夢魂術》) (2004), and *Spell to Shift Mountains and Overturn Seas* (《移山倒海術》) (2005).

These three periods are also agreed by Wu<sup>4</sup>. Although I have divided them into three periods, I do not mean to separate them into isolated classifications. In fact, there are continuous

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<sup>4</sup> Shih-hang Chou, personal interview, 1 Nov. 2006.

relations among them. The themes may be different, but there are some concepts or certain styles that remain the same, which I will illustrate later. This is why I regard them as a trilogy of his works.

## 1.2 Literature Review

Most of the critics comment that the main themes of Wu's works during his early period are political issues. After he made a transition into topics of desires by using feminized images, the reviews focus on the gender problem and the nostalgia style. In his latest works, the criticism of his digital images is about his philosophy inspired by technology. Overall, it is Wang Chia-chi's (王嘉驥) review that inspires me to think more thoroughly about the "aesthetics of the grotesque" (Wang 66), and it is also the start point of my thesis. Most literatures regarding Wu and his works are reviews and interviews distributed in exhibition catalogs and journals. There are only a few academic journals for me to consult with. However, I will still try to analyze them with literary theories to produce my discourse about Wu's works. I will present literary reviews according to the three periods. Dividing his works into three parts not only makes his transformation in artistic style more noticeable, but also addresses the variation of the grotesque in the works.

The most difficult part is the first period because the literature is insufficient. There is only one special column on *Four Eras* where I can learn Wu's creating motive. It is based on an interview<sup>5</sup> between Lu Yi-chung (盧怡仲) and Wu in 1990. The interview has become an important reference. In that, Wu declares that he became more concerned about political issues as he started to investigate the history. Affected by many historical events, such as Sino-Japanese Wars and Tien-an Men Square Massacre, he realizes the tragedy and the people affected by ideological struggles (159). In the interview, he elucidates how he uses the fusion

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<sup>5</sup> Chiang Yao, "Tumbling in the Wave of History: The Four Eras of Wu Tien Chang's Iconology," *Lion Art* 235 Sep. 1990: 159.

of physiognomy and masks in Chinese operas to create his iconography. Wu clarifies that his iconography is different from Andy Warhol's, but the information is not strong and evident enough for the viewers to see. (In my next chapter, I will have a further discussion about these two types of iconography.) Chen Hsiang-Chun (陳香君) points out a problem that the viewers may not be able to see the critical issues, such as the conflicts between different ethnic groups and ideologies which profoundly come from the autocrats' images in Wu's paintings (Chen 112). Hsueh Hai-chi (薛懷琦) talks very little about Wu's works of the first period in her thesis, "The Meanings of Femininity of Wu Tien-chang's Work in 1990s" (《一九九〇年代吳天章作品中的女性寓意》). Because the topic of her thesis emphasizes the feminized features and the meanings derived from them, the male figures are not the main subject for her discussion. And the works in the first period are all male. She approves that Wu utilizes the grotesque appearances to deconstruct the authority which used to be represented in noble and serious forms. However, Hsueh indicates that these political icons are only representing the frustration toward the political reality<sup>6</sup>. In the dialectical discussion on the portraits of the four political strongmen, she thinks that Wu uses caricatures to wear down their prominent images. She concludes that in Wu's works the male representation of the political icons is much weaker than the female one in the series of *Dreams of Past Era* (Hsueh 57). Although I agree with Hsueh on the positive power of Wu's female images in his works in the 1990s, I believe this conclusion is partial. She ignores the social-political contexts that Wu intends to address and it is not enough to talk only about the sexuality and gender issues. In my view, the power of Wu's grotesque images primarily does not come from the gender issues, but actually from the folk humor. For example, Wu's political icons actually are influenced by Chinese opera masks and editorial comics. Also, the portraits and photos of the ladies are decorated with the artificial flowers used in Chinese funerals. These characteristics will not be recognized if the

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<sup>6</sup> Hai-chi Hsueh, "The Meanings of Femininity of Wu Tien-chang's Work in 1990s," MA thesis, Cheng Kung U, 2002, 54-56.

viewers are not aware of or do not know the culture Wu refers to. However, they all come from our life. They are the exclusive humor for the folk of the particular culture.

During the second period, the grotesque images are not limited to the political images which are predestined to criticize the contemporary society. It can be seen that during this period, the political leaders are replaced by the ladies and the sissies in a photo studio. Due to the gestures of the female images in the frames, most of the discussions lead to the topic of desires. This topic in Wu's works is a starting point for my project. In Huang Hai-ming's (黃海鳴) review, he attempts to investigate the desires in Wu's works. He states "his works may be 'the constantly transformed reappearance of the repressed things'" which "include gaudiness, desire, memory and corrosion"<sup>7</sup> (Huang 9). According to Huang, "the holes" (e.g. eyes and mouth) are the secret paths to reveal the desires. Instead of being exposed through the holes, the desires are detoured and disguised. The eyes which have a "function [...] as an object from within which seeps, flows, or grows; desire and ugly things frequently" do "not look outwards, or secretly reveal what one is thinking"<sup>8</sup> (11). Huang describes these holes as the damp and rotten images, and they are erotic (11). Cheng also emphasizes his points on desire. He regards the desire from Wu's work as the one about voyeurism. "When walking into Wu's exhibition place, we were like sneaking into the chamber for adventure. It is full of 'desire' and waiting for an exit"<sup>9</sup> (Cheng 315). He describes the whole visual impact as "obscure and smells like Formalin"<sup>10</sup> (315). The sense of sight is associated with the sense of smell. The smelling is internalized to Wu's series of Taiwanese women. "Memories [...] filled with the strange odor of rotten food"<sup>11</sup> (316) corresponds to Huang's interpretation of

<sup>7</sup> 「『被壓抑物』包括了：艷麗、慾望、記憶及腐臭。」(黃海鳴 6)

<sup>8</sup> 「吳天章作品中的眼睛並不往外看，或只是偷偷的露一點眼神，它主要的是把眼睛(心靈)內部的，常常是欲望的、醜陋的東西滲出來、流出來、長出來。」(黃海鳴 7)

<sup>9</sup> 「走進吳天章個展的現場，就好像少年時候偷偷摸摸到茶室去探險一樣，有一種滿『慾』等待著去找到出口」(鄭乃銘)

<sup>10</sup> 「隱晦而瀰漫著福馬林衝鼻味。」(鄭 315)

<sup>11</sup> 「記憶 (...)充滿著如食物腐敗的奇異味道。」(鄭 316)



Wu's desire. The *So Long Venice* series does not have a review as good as the *Dream of Past Era* series although they are both depictions of human desire and the meretricious style.

Cheng considers that Wu's presentation of "memory" is a hollow corpse which is constructed by flamboyant decorations and lighting. The series of *So Long Venice* does not have strong motif, and it is created for commercial factor<sup>12</sup>. For this reason, Wu does not value the series of *So Long Venice* as well.

In Cheng Hui-mei's (鄭惠美) review, she is inclined to interpreting it as sexual desire which is also the main claim of the succeeding critics. The sissy soldier in *On the Damage to "Spring and Autumn"* (《再見吧!春秋閣》) explicates her idea. The contradictory elements of the masculine and feminine are shown in this piece. Cheng's comment indicates that the purpose of putting the contradictory elements together serves for the "repressed and primal"<sup>13</sup> (Cheng 252) desire, implying homosexual desire. The reading from the perspective of gender began from the review "Love Estranged: On the Maidens' Obsession of Grief & Woe in Wu Tien-Chang's *Fantasy of Romantic Rendezvous*" (〈春宵夢斷—吳天章《春宵夢》裡的閨怨情結〉) given by Yang Chih (楊墀). It is based on psychoanalysis, and has some pellucid illustrations on this series. Yang thinks the series of *Dream of Past Era* symbolizes anxiety resulting from the oppression of patriarchy (Yang 75). Each woman in the series falls to be a materialized object and can only wait for the creative artists to give her infinite meanings (76). Women and men are contraries in this description. Although Yang appreciates Wu's idea, the figures are still "on the maidens' obsession of grief and woe"<sup>14</sup> (75) in his implication.

Wu Wen-hsun (吳文薰) points out "[Wu's works] are still controversial from the past issues of 'the national identity' to current one of 'the gender identity'"<sup>15</sup> (Wu 64). Again, the

<sup>12</sup> Shih-hang Chou, personal interview, 1 Nov. 2006.

<sup>13</sup> 「被壓抑的原始慾望。」(鄭惠美 252)

<sup>14</sup> 「閨怨情結」(楊墀 75)

<sup>15</sup> 「從過去的『民族認同』到『性別認同』，果然是同樣具爭議性!」(吳文薰 64)

feminized figures challenge the moral standards and successfully draw the audience's attention like the previous works do. The problem of national identity is a precise point, but the personal cares and the desire in the private field are equally important in Wu's productions. As Hsueh Hai-chi applies psychoanalysis and feminism to interpret the female body and the national identity in her thesis, she indicates that the female images have an ambiguous relation to the male gaze. The object covering the female's eyes in *Sayonara* (1994; fig 1) is like scarlet lip, which is associated with the pudendum<sup>16</sup> (Hsueh 22). Either lips or pudendum does not belong to the part of eyes. It seems like it is cut from the original place and displayed to the viewers (22). Therefore, it implies the castration and arouses the fear of castration from the viewer's sight<sup>17</sup> (23). In Hsueh's project, the feminist viewpoint and the psychoanalysis establish her argument. She thinks the feminized images do not diminish the power of resistance. On the contrary, they form an alternative way for national identity. Hsueh points out that the series of *Dream of Past Era* shows that Wu, as a Taiwanese artist, indeed uses local culture truly to represent the subjectivity of Taiwan (65). The empowerment comes from the strategy of performance, such as the drag queens and the campy boys. In the contrast, the male bodies in Wu's works do not have autonomy. She thinks they are just figures without dignity controlled by Wu since he paints them in the grotesque and comical style (57). When the male images of the political icons are exhibited, the martial law is already lifted. Hence, the authority Wu wants to criticize is gone (56). She concludes that the problem of the gender consciousness reveals the political narrative and ideology of the nation (17). Hsueh takes Wu's sissy sailor of *On the Damage of "Spring and Autumn"* as the example. The image of the sissy sailor in the navy refuses to submit the stereotype that a sailor should be masculine in order to protect the country. Therefore, when this work is displayed in the international

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<sup>16</sup> Huai-chi Hsueh, "The Meanings of Femininity of Wu Tien-chang's Work in 1990s," MA thesis, Cheng Kung U, 2002, 22.

<sup>17</sup> Huai-chi Hsueh, "The Meanings of Femininity of Wu Tien-chang's Work in 1990s," MA thesis, Cheng Kung U, 2002, 23.

exhibition, it presents the image of Taiwan. In her argument, Hsueh remarks that the sailor's gender consciousness presented in Wu's work in fact is an allegory for the strong and confident identity of Taiwan (99) because the sissy boy represents the courage of Taiwanese to show their identity. It is also because of the artificiality and mannerism, such as the patent leather framing in *On the Damage to "Spring and Autumn"* which brings up the sense of fakeness. Wu tries to present the feminized figures with humor by ridiculing them. For example, the sailor in the pseudo-salon photo gives the viewers nothing but a comical feeling because of the contradictory stereotype between the virile army man and the sissy boy. It is a point that I focus on, and it is also the point that has not been treated seriously in the existing literatures.

Based on Huang's writing on Wu's style of "the rotten", Wang Chia-chi goes further in his review. He concludes that the ghostly projection and the drag queen in *Endless Love in Temporal World* (《紅塵不了情》)(1997) compose a work of "extremely stylization" (「極為風格化」) (Wang 66). The moving images from the projector begin from a modern female in oil painting, but when she starts to dance, "she" becomes a drag queen. He names Wu's style as the "aesthetics of the grotesque" (「怪誕美學」) within the "visual spectacle" (「視覺奇觀」) (66). However, it is a pity that he does not define and explain it any further. Can we support Wang's analysis on Wu's grotesque visual effects with effective theories? His statement inspires me to go further to investigate the "ugly" images of Wu's works after 2000. I consider that the grotesque images penetrate through Wu's creating career, but the third period is most remarkable for the grotesque style and the theory of the grotesque.

After Wu's new art works in the third period are presented to the public, the critics start to notice his transition. First of all, it is the impact of computer technologies on the traditional values and the view of the world. The review of Li Wei-ching (李維菁) sums up the connotation of the functions of "format" (格式化) and "undo" (復原). The function of format

associates Wu's with the progress of reincarnation (Li 250). Everything in a computer can be deleted by "format" without leaving any trace. "Undo", a function of going back to the previous state, is like Meng-po soup (孟婆湯) in the folktales. After drinking it, people will lose their memory and never remember what has happened before. It may be a convenient function when we are using computers. Yet, it scares Wu because it seems to be able to change the truth and the memory (Lo 46). These functions used to be impossible in a traditional way of thinking. Technologies frighten people, and they arouse the imagination of a matter of life and death. The technology of photography is another remarkable technology which reveals Wu's ideas. According to Lo's interview, Wu consciously applies Barthes' concept of photography to his works. It symbolizes each moment's existence as well as witnesses its death at the same time (Yao 75). Just like what Wu says, "[Barthes has talked about that] photography is a behavior of past tense"<sup>18</sup> (Lo 44). The moment is dead as soon as we press the shutter button. When viewers look at pictures, they can sense the indescribable sadness which is what Wu calls "the nostalgia for the living world" (Pan 139). Yang Ming-eh's (楊明鏗) "Behind the Glory of a Halo-Vanity Fair of Wu Tien-chang" (〈光環的背後—吳天章展演浮世虛華〉) also has a convincing point on Wu's works after 2000. He claims that the figures in *Spirit Dreaming Conjuraton* (《夢魂術》) are in a state of unconsciousness (Yang 30). Yang points out the feature of consciousness, but there is no further discussion about it. In addition, he regards *Work Together toward Same Goal* (《同舟共濟》) as a "home party" where "the human being with dignity degenerate into grotesque ghosts and goblins"<sup>19</sup> (31). He originally compares Wu's figures in the series of *Former and Current Life* to Chinese zombies in Hong Kong films. Yang believes that abnormal figures indeed can attract our attention just like beauty figures (31). The ugliness in the works now has a more

<sup>18</sup> 「攝影是一種過去式的行爲」(羅寶珠 44)。

<sup>19</sup> 「將有尊嚴的人類淪落成爲醜陋的鬼魅」(楊明鏗 31)。

powerful and positive interpretation. Nevertheless, one may ask why these distinctive and different bodies draw our attention. There is no literature on it yet; however, the grotesque images will be the kernel of my discussion.

Wu's protagonists are never in a complete shape or normal size. The creepy atmosphere and the grotesque bodies are all over the place in his art works. I have been compelled by his aesthetics as well as by learning the symptom of the society implied in his works. Here, I would like to elaborate my ideas by using Foucault's or Russo's the concept of "grotesque". Primarily, the theoretical applications in my analysis will be Freudian concept of "the uncanny," and Bakhtin's idea of "the carnival." These theories and concepts can be applied to Wu's art pieces and even the social and cultural contexts in them. In Mary Russo's *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (1995), she generalizes two kinds of grotesque mainly from the theories of Freud and Bakhtin: the carnivalesque grotesque and the uncanny grotesque. "The grotesque of carnival" is about social bodies and is related to class formation. "The grotesque of the uncanny" is about "the inner state" which is demanded by subjectivity (Russo 8-9). She also puts lots of effort to discuss about the body as an important type to present the grotesque. Her practical classification clarifies Wu's grotesque world. Also, in the introduction, Russo states that "[the category of grotesque] emerged [...] only in relation to the norms which it exceed" (3). It points out the relation between the grotesque and the norms. The norm is one of the important terms what Foucault has emphasized in *Abnormal*. Therefore, in this paper, I would elaborate on Foucauldian grotesque in relation to Wu's works as well.

### **1.3 The Organization of Chapters**

The chapters in my thesis are developed in accordance with my division of Wu's works. In Chapter Two, I will have an introduction to Wu's works and the background of Taiwanese

contemporary art. The first period of Wu's series reflects the transformation of the social, cultural and political situation. The transformation is a time for people to do self-reflection and self-examination (Liu 35). It is a foreshadowing for the coming current which corresponds to the changes of the social order and the environment. Also, during the first period, there is normally only one figure in each piece of his oil painting. When there are multiple figures in the works, they are always presented in 2-dimension only. There will be an iconographic study of his icon works, and *Four Eras* will be the main series to be talked about. This period is also the starting point for him to create grotesque images.

In Chapter Three, I will examine the grotesque images during the second period. Regardless of the type of works, such as oil painting and photographs, Wu's feminized figures never look like normal people. Unlike the portraits during the previous period, the figures start to pose, but with covered eyes. Their grotesque gestures and looks construct a haunted atmosphere for the audience. It is also the phase that the technique of photography brings his works into a new era. In addition, Wu uses set-up photography in his works. It is a kind of performance that everything is well designed beforehand in front of the camera. The effects of set-up photography are added and they strengthen the images of the monstrous individuals in his works. Wu Wen-hsun notes that the author is so smart that he utilizes the traits of photography. It indicates "the contradictions of death, which is absurd and insurmountable in our life"<sup>20</sup> (Wu 64). I would like to use Barthes' interpretation of phenomenology on the denotation of photography to analyze Wu's works. It does not mean that all the works are made in a form of photography; it is the concept of photography that I want to apply to Wu's works. Wu's thoughts about life can be accentuated because of the techniques he uses. I believe that the illustrations foreshadow the coming of the grotesque as carnival.

As to the third period, Wu's style is changing in techniques to reflect different mentalities.

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<sup>20</sup> 「(攝影)直指生命含存著死亡荒謬與不能超昇的矛盾」(吳文薰 64)。

His works during this period contain no more than just monologues; they now look like circuses or carnivals that are full of freaks and disabled people. They are the representations of the contemporary society. They have an allegorical function to show that the society is transforming from monophony to polyphony where people can fearlessly express all their desires through various manners. Wu does not choose to present them in the negative way. He painstakingly sets up his photogenic as a spectacle. It is a carnival where the minorities can talk and all the disaffection can be released. This positive side of the grotesque may also be derived from Bakhtin's definition of "grotesque realism" that "[d]egradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with the earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time"(Bakhtin 21). Wu's works embody the ideal Bakhtin's carnival and the grotesque bodies. In this spectacle, he uses his unique black humor to smooth out the horror stories and make the images acceptable to the audiences at the first sight. However, after that, the impact of warnings and concerns comes along. Therefore, in Chapter Four, I will focus on the carnivals held by Wu's grotesque images during this period. There is a dialectical thinking inherent in his art pieces after 2000. I intent to prove that Wu creates an allegory like Bakhtin's carnival for the grotesque bodies.

Last but not least, I will have a summary of Wu's grotesque images during these three periods in Chapter Five. The common features that can be seen in Wu's grotesque images are: they all have abnormal looks and defamiliarize what the viewers are familiar with. His grotesque images are so ambiguous that they arouse the viewers' anxiety. I believe that the grotesque presentation of his figures is not just for the visual effects. It also has a function to stimulate the introspection of the viewers. Through the "abnormal and weird" appearances of the artistic works, Wu successfully adds the folk humor as well as his serious introspection into his works. I attempt to apply literary theories to support my interpretation of Wu's works during three different periods. Besides literary viewpoints, I will take social contexts and

Wu's situation into account. It is my goal to provide an interdisciplinary perspective to the analysis of Wu's works in the world of Taiwanese contemporary art.





## Chapter Two

### The Monstrosity of Wu's Political Iconology

From 1990 to 1992, Wu Tien-chang created a series of oil-paintings closely related to the political issues. He gained the reputation from his groundbreaking creative works. The comic-strip of these four political figures with the huge historical portraits, Wu's *The Rule of Chiang Kai-shek* (《關於蔣介石的統治》) (1990; fig. 2), *The Rule of Chiang Ching-kuo* (《關於蔣經國的統治》) (1990; fig. 3), *The Rule of Mao Tse-tung* (《關於毛澤東的統治》) (1990; fig. 4), and *The Rule of Deng Hsiao-ping* (《關於鄧小平的統治》) (1990; fig. 5) are composed for the exhibition of *Four Eras* in Taipei Fine Art Museum in 1990. However, some critics suspected that his success might not be resulted from the innovation. They thought it was because Wu knew the climate of the society was changing and the people were expecting everything with an open attitude. For this reason, his series of the political portraits became the hit at that time when they are presented to the public. The historical background is that three years after martial law had been lifted, it was expected that Taiwanese contemporary arts needed to change the climate of the society. Therefore, numerous artists started to create critical art pieces to imply or signify the political issues. They used their art works or performances to challenge the authority. Wu was famous for painting the political figures directly. The impact was immediate and direct for the viewers when they faced these huge portraits. However, his authoritative icons did not cause the viewers profound respect for the political leaders. Portraits which used to be realistic and were supposed to strengthen our memory of the great men are changed to unrealistic and exaggerated forms. In this chapter, I would demonstrate how the authoritative icons are related to the images of the grotesque through the Foucauldian reading.

## 2.1 The Grotesque in Foucault's *Abnormal*

In the course context of *Abnormal*, Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni consider that the “group of abnormal individuals” (331) originates from three types of people: the *monster*, the *undisciplined*, and the *onanist*. Although each type emerges at different times, all of them are against the laws. Foucault focuses on the monsters in the beginning chapters of his work. The reason why the monsters are grouped as abnormal is not because of their biological mutation or disability. They contravene the law because they are the judicial exceptions, which goad them into the group separated from the normal people. The undisciplined can be tracked back to the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> century. With the rise of capitalism, each individual is expected for contribution to the growth of the economy. Those who refuse to obey the law or disturb the social order may cause a loss to the society because it is against the principles of economics. Therefore, the undisciplined are categorized into the group of the abnormal. The onanists (masturbators), in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, were not a problem of morality but instead a problem of biology and medical science. That is to say, their behavior was considered “somatization and pathologization of masturbation” (237) rather than just a moralization. Foucault looked at it as an intervention about juvenile sex. The intervention is the scheme and system of the power. The idea of “the abnormal” is the assemblage of the three types of people in 19<sup>th</sup> century. Besides, it is a medium to control the smallest unit of the society—the individual. The idea of the abnormal is a category produced by the power relation. Foucault wants to highlight the power mechanism, and he tries to criticize the knowledge system which controls the social classification. Also, the abnormal is taken as the object under the knowledge of the power techniques which will be discussed further in the fourth chapter. In the following analysis of Wu’s works in this chapter, my main argument will be based on his analysis of the monsters, especially the moral monsters. To analyze the authoritative figures, I will not only adopt Foucault’s theory, but also point out the

disagreement with regard to the different social and cultural contexts.

Foucault has an archaeological discussion on moral monsters which are the type of the abnormal individuals in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In his works, he puts the word “grotesque” in the context of power relation, which can be found in his first part of discussion about the monsters. It is involved with an authoritative mechanism, and “a discourse or an individual can have effects of power that their intrinsic qualities should disqualify them from having” (Foucault 11) as well. He attempts to clarify the grotesque figures coming from the convergence of the judicial proofs and psychiatry. The convergence refers to the “discourses of truth and discourses that make one laugh” (1). Since the judicial truth and medico-legal opinions in the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century to 19<sup>th</sup> century depend a lot on psychiatry, there were some inappropriate or even ridiculous discourses. It is what produces the discourse of the grotesque. In his lecture in 1975 at the College de France, Foucault indicates that the grotesque is not only an essential process of arbitrary sovereign, but also “a possibility for the bureaucracy” (12). He cites an example of Dostoyevsky and Kafka in whose works the readers can find out the visionary perception of administrative grotesque. Foucault looks back to the grotesque power mechanism which can be found in Roman history where an emperor is “a mode of domination: a discourse qualification that ensured that the person who possessed *maiestas*” (12). Power is bound with the image provided by itself. “As a clown or a buffoon,” when Foucault talks about the functional feature of power, he thinks “[it] provided itself with an image in which power derived from someone who was theatrically got up and depicted” (13). The description of the sovereign or the bureaucracy can be the possible annotation for Wu’s *Four Eras* that I presume the reflection at that time.

Foucault shows in his lecture on January 29<sup>th</sup> that “monstrosity as the natural manifestation of the unnatural brought with it an indication of criminality” (81) in the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but when it came to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a reversed

relation between the monstrosity and the criminality. Monstrosity is “systematically suspected of being behind all criminality” (81). A crime means to endanger others, and what else is that a crime is also an offense against the sovereign in classic law. The punishment is the revenge of the sovereign, and it is a ritual that never achieves a balance. It is always “a sort of rivalry” and “a kind of surplus,” which reaches the “terrorizing character” (83). Paradoxically, the crime is shown again in the punishment because of its terrorizing character. The first moral monster is political monster, a criminal who breaks the social contract. Against the pact is “a kind of abuse of power”, which enables the criminal to become “a little despot who at his own level advances his personal interest like the despot” (93).

The visualization of Wu’s art pieces does not totally correspond to Foucault’s discourse. There is a discrepancy between Chinese history and Western history, especially Foucault stresses the one of Europe. However, Wu’s *Four Eras* embodies the concept of the moral monsters and transforms it into a very Chinese style (during this period, he has not soundly shown his locality yet), which will be demonstrated in the following paragraph. Also, with the help of comic effects, Wu contributes his own definition to the grotesque style during this period. His four political giants are the embodiment of the grotesque that they present the excess and the enormity of the enormous power.

## **2.2 The Theme of *Four Eras* Series**

In the exhibition of *Four Eras* (《四個時代》), the portraits of the four political figures are displayed. Only a half body and the facial close-up are shown in each portrait. The reputations of the four political leaders are diverse in different times and places. In their heydays, they had significant contributions to the society. However, it is unavoidable that they are under criticism. The four political figures, Mao Tse-tung, Deng Hsiao-ping, Chiang Kai-shek, Chiang Ching-kuo, in the series are the most important leaders in Chinese

contemporary history<sup>21</sup>. Mao Tse-tung, whose icon is considered a sacred image in China, is the founding father of People's Republic of China. Mao's and Deng's portraits can be seen everywhere in China. The phenomenon unfolds the new age when portraits are not only to serve the purpose of sacredness. The political icons actually replace sacred images at this time while the religious icons are forbidden in Cultural Revolution. Chiang Kai-shek built up his own orthodox and wanted to consolidate the legitimacy of Republic of China in Taiwan. The icons of Chiang's family, including him and his son Chiang Ching-kuo, are the products of the grand narrative<sup>22</sup>. Both father and son's portraits are hung in all official buildings and public schools.

These four figures became a popular subject for criticism for Chinese contemporary artists to challenge the ideology of deification after the late 80s. The new sacred images they created bring forth a dialogue between the old and the new. The images also give the viewers a critical distance to think about the differences between each figure. In addition to Wu's *Four Eras*, some artists during the same period also make political figures for the purpose of criticism. Take Mei Dean-E's<sup>23</sup> (梅丁衍) *Three Principles of People Unite One China* (《三民主義統一中國》)(1990) (Fig.10) for example. Mei selects the founding fathers, Mao Tse-tung

<sup>21</sup> Mao Tse-tung established People's Republic of China, which resulted in KMT's retreat to Taiwan. Guarding against the Communist Party of China, Chiang Kai-shek took over Taiwan in 1949. Chiang claimed his government as the only legitimation of Chinese political entity. However, the society was conservative under his authoritarian regime. Especially during the period of martial law, people were restrained from freedom of speech, publication, and organization of parties. In 1966, Mao started Cultural Revolution, which also silenced the people. Their successors, Deng Hsiao-ping in china and Chiang Ching-kuo in Taiwan were different from them. There were many economic reforms under Deng's leadership. However, the protest in Tien-an Men Square in 1989 caused unknown number of dead. On the other part, Chiang Ching-kuo led an impetus to the major construction projects in Taiwan and accelerated the progress of economic growth. In 1979, the Formosa Incident happened during his period shocked the masses. But martial law is lifted in 1987 during his period as well.

<sup>22</sup> "In Taiwan, the grand narrative is legitimated and rationalized through a temporal (historical) association to the theory of orthodox of Chinese culture. Replying to an inquiry about the origin of his philosophy from Ma Lin, who had joined the organization Third International, Sun Yat-sen used the southern Song Neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi's system of orthodoxy and explained that he succeeded the five thousand years of orthodoxy starting from the legendary rulers Yao, Shun and Yu, to historical personages Tang, King Wen, King Wu, Zhougong, and Confucius. The statement became crucial to Chiang Kai-shek and his government in their effort toward consolidation and legitimation both Taiwan and in the international arena. [...] In Taiwan [Chiang Kai-shek] was the 'the hero of knowledge,' the vehicle that rationalized and legitimated this orthodoxy on the island- he was worshipped as the savior of Chinese people" (Pan, 2005: 49).

<sup>23</sup> "Mei Dean-E" is the English name Mei uses for all his works.

and Sun Yat-sen<sup>24</sup> to make fun of the orthodoxy constructed in Taiwan. By placing Mao's face in the center of Sun's, Mei tries to imply that the ROC has already been replaced by the PRC. Hence, the slogan "Three Principles of People unite China" trumpeted in Chiang's periods becomes ironic and infeasible<sup>25</sup>. When Li Teng-hui<sup>26</sup> (李登輝), the first president elected by the people of Republic of China in Taiwan, resumed his presidency, Mei makes a portrait of Li with Japanese *samurai* hairdo and use the Japanese Fuji Mountain as the background in order to produce an image of Li's personal experience of Japanese colonization (Fig. 11). Li has the experience of living under the Japanese colonial rule for more than 20 years. For him, China being the mother land of Taiwan is an unacceptable concept before Taiwan restoration<sup>27</sup>. His image in the portrait, though, is not deformed. All the original features of his are kept and the portrait looks just like him.

There are dissimilarities between Mei's portraits and Wu's portraits when they are dealing with the political icons. Unlike Mei's figures that are symbolically deformable, Wu's grotesque portraits are expressionistically deformable. After Wu's reproduction, Mao, Deng and the Chiangs look different from what they are in the photos. Moreover, Mei produces his pictures based on the real photos. Although Li looks just like what he is in the portrait, there are supportive decorations or texts in the portrait (Fig. 11) to assist Mei to present his ideas. In contrast, Wu completes his series of the political icons all by the method of traditional oil-painting. Despite their differences in style and political ideas, their works combine both "national heroes" and "public enemies" to "indicate[s] that the authoritarian era had collapsed, and it was inevitable that the mystique and cult of personality surrounding such leaders would

<sup>24</sup> Generally speaking, Dr. Sun Yat-Sen is esteemed to be the founding father of Republic of China before the split.

<sup>25</sup> Tai-sung Chen, "Mei Dean-E's Political Iconography," *Displacement: Mei Dean-E Solo Exhibition* (Taipei: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003) 42.

<sup>26</sup> Li has his education under Japanese colonial rule, and experiences the restoration of Taiwan after WWII.

<sup>27</sup> Pan An-yi, "A Moving Memory: A Special Exhibition of Contemporary Taiwanese Art," on-line post, 2006, The Fine Line in the Between: Humanities and Sciences in the 21st Century Conf., 18 Jul. 2007, <[http://mingching.sinica.edu.tw/text/amovingmemory\\_english.pdf](http://mingching.sinica.edu.tw/text/amovingmemory_english.pdf)>.

be challenged” (Pan, 2004; 89). Their breakthrough in art works “can be regarded as an omen signifying the ending of the period of ‘grand-narrative’ period, and can be seen in artistic attempts to de-deify, de-mystify, and humanize the so-called Great Men” (Pan, 2005; 44). There is another example which is Guo Jen-Chang’s (郭振昌) painting of the president and the vice president (Fig. 12). It is much later published than the works of Wu’s and Mei’s works, but it is more like the make-up of the masks in Chinese opera that Wu’s *Four Eras* is also referred to. Guo shares the same idea with Wu to mix the sacred images with the folk elements. However, his works are not as grotesque as Wu’s. The Chinese opera masks worn by Guo’s figures almost cover the whole faces. The viewers can not recognize which president or vice president the icon is in Guo’s work (Fig. 12). Although he intends to satirize the political situation in Taiwan, he does not show any comical or ridiculous elements to make his works good example of the grotesque images. The mask-covered faces are referring to the “Taiwanese politicians who ‘speak human language to people and devil’s language to ghosts’” (Pan 117). This is different from the grotesque countenances of the politician in Wu’s works that show the changes and the subjective comments from the artist. Guo puts on the masks to cover the faces of the figures (Fig. 12), but Wu unfolds the masks. According to many previous and my own interviews, Wu claims that the way he paints these figures is following to their behavior and characteristics. Therefore, the audience can tell the inherent personality from their looks. Among the Taiwanese artists who are dealing with the political issues, Wu is more forthright in his art works which directly display the figures with deformation. In addition, the grotesque images are nicely presented in Wu’s works that they deconstruct the majesty of the contemporary giants.

The images of political giants are one part of Wu’s exhibition. The frontispiece of *Leviathan* (Hobbes, 1651), which is named after the monster in Bible, would be the prototype for reference (Fig. 13). Abraham Bosse, the French engraver, creates the image of the giant

according to Hobbes' inputs. The "politische illustration" (Using illustrations to demonstrate the political situation, in English.) about Leviathan embodies Hobbes' idea that a nation should be like a giant composed of innumerable people<sup>28</sup>. It is supported by the absolute power and the social contract, which may correspond to Foucault's elaboration of the moral monsters, especially of the political monsters—the sovereign. Wu's series about the rules of the four political leaders is also an example for the political giants. With reference to the half-body portraits, the size of each painting is larger than 250 cm square. However, each figure of in such a huge size has an unbalanced upper body. Everyone has a small head and a huge body which reminds me of the figure Foucault cited. It is the "Ubu-esque" (Foucault 11) which "describes someone who, by his grotesque, absurd, or ludicrous nature, recalls the figure of [*Ubu*], the play by Alfred Jarry" (28). In the four giant paintings, the social events are clearly inscribed in the body part. The social events inscribed in the body part of the portraits represent the terror which is like what Foucault talks about in the lecture of the moral monsters. To quell a riot, the policemen always exceed the rioters in armed might. It has to be a kind of surplus, so it accomplishes the end to consolidate the power of the authoritarian. Hence, Wu creates his figures with huge bodies, which represent the overwhelming power of the authority and inscribes anonymous crowd in the bodies to recur the events. In each figure's body part, there are many small army-like people or distorted bodies. Unlike the distinct facial features of these four political icons, the small people painted in the body part are faceless. The countless people shown in Leviathan, the giant, are also faceless. They are the embodiment for Hobbes' political philosophy, but not the subject for him to discuss the ill treatment they may face. Different from the faceless crowd in Hobbes' *Leviathan*, Wu's faceless people in the portrait of Chiang Kai-shek, or in Tien-an Men Square Event in the portrait of Mao Tse-tung connote how the people suffer in White Terror era. During such

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<sup>28</sup> A.P Martinich, introduction, *Leviathan*, by Hobbes Thomas, (Peterborough Ont: Broadview Press, 2002).



chaotic periods, there are so many victims that the authorities are not willing to release the number of casualties to the public. The contrast between the head and the body part reinforces the traumatic effects of the political oppression through these grotesque images. The viewers perceive the incongruity between the comic form, the warm-color tone and the cureless suppression. As Foucault's response to the ethnologists' analyzes about the power shown in the rites and ceremonies, I consider that Wu's figures "to whom power is given is at the same time ridiculed or made abject or shown in an unfavorable light" do not present "power to be abject, despicable, Ubu-esque or simply ridiculous" (13). To make the authority ridiculous or Ubu-esque is not to "limit the effects of power in archaic or primitive society [,]" but to "[give] a striking form of expression to the unavoidability of power" (13). The works during Wu's first period respond to Foucault interpretation of power, especially to the power of the sovereignty. It is the unavoidable power that Wu shows in his portraits, including the portraits of Chinese patriarchal tradition or the icons of the facial close-up. In addition to the huge size of the canvases, the high-contrast color tone and the rough contour in these series reinforce the grotesque of his unusual portraits.

This series discloses the disgrace of the absolute power. The monstrous feature is displayed in the authoritative icons as visualization of the power relations. The leaders' images have to be despicable or they can not be presented. Prior to the lifting of the martial law in 1987, tons of great men statues and portraits had been made. The "great men" are restricted to Chiang's family at that time. Their portraits are hung in every public organization and school. Wu thinks this is the one of the functions of portraits—making viewers feel being monitored. The four sets of political strongmen displayed to the viewers remind people of patriarchal relationships in a family. They replace the traditional patriarchal figures and serve the purpose of surveillance. All these constructs a unique "great-men culture" in Taiwan. The political leaders are molded into national idols or national liberators. People should respect

and worship them as if they were Gods. To challenge and question this kind of value, Wu makes fun of them by distorting their former representations and reconstructs them in grotesque style so that they become his own “great-men portrait.” Wu questions Taiwanese viewers on the concept of democracy by juxtaposing the leaders in Taiwan (Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo) with the ones in China (Deng Hsiao-ping and Mao Tse-tung). As in Foucault’s discussion of the moral monsters, Wu’s works during this period also parody the moral monsters into Taiwanese context.

### **2.3 Iconographic Study of Wu’s Icon works of Political Strongmen**

Another characteristics developed during this period is Wu’s comic-strip style. It is similar to the tradition of caricatures that have facial sketches and the deformation in bold and black lines. They both attempt to use the same sense of humor to provoke the viewers and further manifest the absurdity of political situation (Dong 62). Wu’s iconography is like a “graphic commentary” without any presupposed any political positions. It speaks for most of the people. He considers his own images maladroit compared to the editorial cartoon which aims at ingenious appearance<sup>29</sup>. He not only makes caricature of the political figures, but also designs his painting carefully. Take the face of each political figure for example. He mixes the personality with his facial features to produce his own political icons which are not just simple cartoon sketches. The faces of the figures in his works do not look the same as the models. Therefore, it gives viewers an impression that the identity of his figures oscillate. As such, Wu claims that the figures in his painting are in a style of his own realism where he creates the figures only by his arbitrariness. The similarity that his works share with the editorial cartoon is that they both comment on social issues and political figures, government official in particular. In addition, their images have a common feature that they are easy for

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<sup>29</sup> Shih-hang Chou, phone interview, 5 Jun. 2007.

the readers or viewers to understand. The funny subjects shown in the caricatures are constituted by the ridiculous, asymmetrical and disproportional drawing, which is one of the sources of Wu's grotesque images.

In the huge-size facial close-up portraits in the exhibition of *Four Eras* (Fig.6-9), he does not paint realistically, but exaggeratedly. Overstating the details of each face in order to focus on the facial expressions of the four political leaders, he tries to record the transformation of them in four pictures. However, some critics associate him with the Pop Art icon of Andy Warhol. Wu comments that he is not satisfied with it. Andy Warhol indeed gives him some inspiration, but the conceptions are different<sup>30</sup>. Warhol's famous block-print works of celebrities, such as *Marilyn Monroe*, are aiming at reflecting the consumer society. It is the commodified object that he wants to show. Another important point that differs Wu from Warhol is that his icons have a profound relation with the Chinese literary tradition. Wu stated that he tried to borrow the method of the biographical writing in history to exhibit the exaggerated facial expressions. The grotesques of these works are connected with ancient physiognomy. What the political strongmen look like results from what they are thinking and how their behaviors are. Wu calls it "Biographic Realism" (「傳記繪畫寫實主義」) (Pan 88). Despite the idea from the Chinese literary tradition, Wu also shows his icon with the types of facial makeup in Chinese opera, which enhances the visual impact. In the tradition of the facial makeup in Chinese opera, the colors and the lines on each face are clear-cut and full of meanings. The most representative of the red color on the mask is Kuan Yu (關羽) during the period of the Three Kingdoms (A.D. 220-280), and it stands for the royalty and bravery. White color indicates scheming and treacherousness; for instance, Tsau Tsau (曹操) during the period of the Three Kingdoms and Chin Kuai (秦檜) in Sung Dynasty (A.D. 960- 1279). Black mask in Chinese opera symbolizes the character of fierceness or impartialness which

<sup>30</sup> Yi-chung Lu, "Tumbling in the Wave of History: The Four Eras of Wu Tien-chang's Iconology," *Lion Art* 235. 1990.

can be found in Chang Fei (張飛) during the same period. Therefore, the intention of Wu's icon is getting obvious. These three colors, red, white and black, are the main tones for the political icons. Wu grasps the meaning of these colors to make allegoric evaluations of the four "great-men," and it is his intention to criticize their merits and demerits. Besides, different from Andy Warhol's celebrity icons, it is evidential that Wu utilizes the techniques of caricature to convert the authoritative figures into the easy ones to access. Wu does not keep the outlines of the photographs; instead he reconstructs the portraits as caricatures. Even so, Wu's conception about political icons still strikes the viewers because their faith constructed by the authority is reconstructed again. Now the viewers can be aware of the myth that there is no God-given or god-like leader as before.



Wu's iconoclastic paintings during the period when martial law is being lifted in Taiwan are the necessary steps to start contemporary arts in Taiwan. I consider his grotesque icon a successful device to express his critical vision about the contemporary social conditions in Taiwan. *Four Eras* is a series of four pictures as each represents a leader's attitude toward a specific social event. The leaders may not be the brilliant heroes we know of from the textbooks or some official propaganda; in some special social events, the political leaders are just like the abnormal people or the moral monsters that only care about themselves. Wu's grotesque images attempt to eliminate the sacred elements from political portraits and also form a force against the elite and upper-class culture and art. He provides an opportunity for the audience to touch upon the political issues which used to be brought up only in a very serious way. During this period, Wu builds up his unique style by making the four leaders shown in grotesque appearances. Although he cares about the social issues so much that he creates this series to speak for the people, he does not have any work about the folk during

this period; he has only used grotesque to recapture the political figures. Wu uses the grotesque images of the leaders as the overture of his grotesque carnival series. The images successfully depict the four leaders; however, there is nothing about the transgression power of the civilians shown during this period. It was not until the second period that the grotesque images of the civilians can be seen. In the next chapter, I will analyze the images and adopt supportive theories to distinguish their differences.



## Chapter Three

### The Uncanny Grotesque in Wu's Works from 1993 to 1996

In Wu Tien-chang's works during the second period, the grotesque figures transform from the political strongmen to ordinary people. During this period, Wu built a collective memory of Taiwanese' experience by interpreting his personal history and experience through his own observation. He witnessed the transition of Taiwan from an agricultural society to a civil society. During this time, he observed the birth, aging, illness and death of his close relatives. He chooses to use his personal memory as a metaphor of the collective memory of contemporary Taiwanese. It is the experience of "death" that enhances the grotesque characteristic in his works during this period. He uses Taiwanese local popular culture and nostalgic style of painting to present feminized figures within picture frames. The old-fashioned presentation shows the irretrievable past, and Wu uses it to represent the death. I select several representative works that soundly present Wu's grotesque aesthetics from his series from 1993 to 1997 for discussion, including *On the Damage of "Spring and Autumn"* (《再會吧春秋閣》), *Dream of Past Era I-V* (《春宵夢 I-V》), and *Endless Love in Temporal World* (《紅塵不了情》). The selection is approved by Wu in my interview<sup>31</sup>, and it is also the selection that is most mentioned by art magazines and catalogs. In this chapter, I will demonstrate the secularization shown in Wu's grotesque portraits by adopting Russo's theory of female grotesque. Also, I will apply Roland Barthes' ideas about photography to analyze Wu's grotesque images which can evidently be regarded as an embodiment of death.

#### 3.1 The Grotesque of Uncanny

Adopting Foucault's argument on normalization, Mary Russo points out that

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<sup>31</sup> Shih-hang Chou, personal interview, 1 Nov.2006.

“normalization is one of the great instruments of power in the modern age” (Russo 1995: 10) and the grotesque can only be recognized under a condition related to a norm. If the grotesque transgresses the norms, it will involve serious risk (10). However, Russo remarks in *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (1995) that risk is “a condition of possibility produced [...] by the normalization of the body across disciplines in the modern era” (10-11). In her argument, “the discourse of risk” has the possibility for “[introducing] the grotesque into this space which ‘leaves room for chance’ [emerging] within the very constrained spaces of normalization” (11). The concept of the grotesque cannot be produced without comparing to the rules, the norms or the regulation. Hence, they are not just on the opposite sides, but also in the complementary relation.

Russo’s concern about “the female body as grotesque” (3) is the foundation of her discussion. The female grotesque indicates a body image which is ugly and deviant from the expectation of the society. Male viewers are frightened by female grotesque showing directly in front of them. Female quality is expected to be “quiet and beautiful,” so an exaggerated grotesque characteristic in a female image is considered offensive for the patriarchy<sup>32</sup>. The active side of female grotesque is confirmed by Russo’s theory, which is helpful for me to survey Wu’s art pieces. Russo points out two kinds of grotesques which will be shown in my discussion. One of them is the “comic grotesque”, which is associated with Bakhtin’s theory in *Rabelais and His World*. It is “associated with the active, civic world of the public,” and is related to “class formation” (8). It is the grotesque of carnival which is not fixed and diversified (Russo 58). The comic grotesque will be discussed further in the next chapter which emphasizes the third period of Wu’s works.

According to Russo, the other kind of grotesque connected with Wolfgang Kayser’s *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* and Freud’s “On the Uncanny” is the “the grotesque as

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<sup>32</sup> Jui-chi Liu, “Cindy Sherman’s Grotesque Parody,” *Chung Wai Literary Monthly* 32.7 (2003): 66.

strange and uncanny” (7). This type of the grotesque is a “cultural projection of an inner state” (9). Based on the notion of the uncanny in Freud’s essay, it belongs to “the realm of the frightening,” but sides with “the beautiful, the grandiose and the attractive [...] with feelings of a positive kind” (Freud 1919: 123). The notion of uncanny “represent[ing] an exploration of unfamiliar territory, the sublime territory of unfamiliarity itself” (Haughton XIII) reveals the dark side of the grotesque, which literally originates from the cave<sup>33</sup>. As the definition of the word *heimlich/unheimlich* in German denotes, *unheimlich* (uncanny) is “everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open” (Freud 132). It is a repression linked with the uncanny element that estranges us from what we were familiar with (148). The uncanny grotesque has a positive feeling for “the beautiful, the grandiose and the attractive”, but the aesthetics is more taken as “the feelings of repulsion and distress” (123). *Unheimlich*, a German word, means “uncanny” and “eerie” in English and is the “the opposite of *Heimlich*, *heimisch*, *vertraut*<sup>34</sup>” (124). The prefix “un-” in the word means to arouse “uneasy, fearful horror” (131) rather than simply giving a contradictory meaning to the root of the word. For Freud, the concept of *unheimlich* in fact is based on the contrary meaning of “[the] uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, ‘the unhomely’) [that] is in some way a species of the familiar (*das Heiliche*, ‘the homely’)” (134). The uncanny grotesque is defined by the denotation of the German word and then demonstrated by Freud’s analysis. In the essay of *Uncanny*, Freud brings up that E. Jentsch’s waxwork figures, dolls and automata confuse people by the lifelike appearances, which create the effect of the uncanny (135). In the story of *The Sandman* written by E. T. A. Hoffmann, the readers may take the animated doll, Olympia, as the motif of the uncanny. However, Freud further points out another motif which is about the sandman,

<sup>33</sup> “Grotesque (both noun and adjective) and the words which correspond to it in other languages are ultimately derived from the Italian. *La grottesca* and *grottesco* refer to *gratta* (cave) and were coined to designate a certain ornamental style which came to light during late fifteenth-century excavations, first in Rome and then in other parts of Italy as well, and which turned out to constitute a hitherto unknown ancient form of ornamental painting.” (Kayser, 19)

<sup>34</sup> In German, *heimisch* is closed to “local, native, domestic; (feeling) at home” and *vertraut* is analogical to “familiar” (159) according to the translator’s note of David McLintock.



who tries to tear out children's eyes if they do not go to bed on time (136). The fear of losing eyes is an anxiety of castration<sup>35</sup> in a psychoanalytic point of view (139). Nevertheless, Freud deems that "the evocation of an old childhood fear" in *The Sandman* "[does not] derive from the infantile fear, but from an infantile wish, or simply from an infantile belief" (141). The animated dolls awaken the viewers' fear and desire at the same time. Freud explains that children are not afraid of their dolls becoming alive, but on the contrary, they wish they were alive and even treat them like they were living creatures. The concept of the uncanny is now separated from the causation of fear, and it explains why the uncanny figures not only frighten but also attract people.

### 3.2 The Themes of Wu's Works during Second Period

Freud thinks that *The Sandman* is uncanny because Nathanael's fear of the sandman comes from the unconsciousness. It is incomprehensible but familiar to the readers<sup>36</sup>. Wu displays uncanny grotesque figures that, under his brush-pen or camera, are far from ordinary. However, the models that he uses in his works look nothing more than just ordinary people. They are not the royals or saints but some gloomy women, kids, and campy boys. They are the people around us or the ones haunting our memories. For example, the ladies from Chinese old calendars, who are not contemporary people but appear in daily commodity, particularly in the antique posters, have become trendy in many restaurants and even in fashion industry nowadays. In addition to the antique photos from the agricultural society in Taiwan, many posters or calendars from old Shanghai are also producing the theme of revival. Therefore, although most people have not been to Shanghai, they are familiar with the images of Shanghai legacies. They remind us of the good old times for the older generation or the

<sup>35</sup> As Oedipus pulls out his eyes in the end of the story, losing sight in psychoanalysis is the "mitigated form of the penalty of castration" (139).

<sup>36</sup> "The Uncanny," *Critical Terms*. ed. Kate Liu, Fall 1999, National Taiwan University. <  
[http://hermes.hrc.ntu.edu.tw/lctd/asp/theory/theory\\_works/3/study.htm](http://hermes.hrc.ntu.edu.tw/lctd/asp/theory/theory_works/3/study.htm) >

mass media. Besides the female images in the calendars, there are girls posing in the pictures in an old salon style in *Dream of Past Era II* and *Dream of Past Era IV*. Wu tries to recapture the atmosphere during the period when Taiwan was ruled by the Japanese<sup>37</sup>. Both the pinup ladies and the salon maidens imply that they are things “that-has-been” (Barthes 77) from the past, which are invoked by Wu’s artistic skills.

During this period, Wu’s painting subject changes from half-length to full-length portraits in photographic frames. Wu adopts photography as the main method of his artistic creations. It shows his concern about the dialectical relation of what is real and what is unreal. He manipulates the technique of set-up photography to highlight the mechanism of shooting (Yao 72). Wu says in many interviews that he wants to create a style of affectation<sup>38</sup>. He believes that it is the typical character of the Taiwanese culture. He points out “the characteristics of Taiwanese aesthetics [are] tacky, fake aesthetics” (Pan 141). Taiwan had been colonized for a long period of time, and the KMT government had had the ambition of recovering mainland China. Owing to these reasons, developing and reconstructing of Taiwan at that time were not the focal aims in the national policy. Illegal lofts on corrugated iron roofs, which can be built up and torn down in a short time, are common in Taiwan. Wu points out, as we can see in the parks or gardens, that concrete poles have substituted the real bamboo and masonite boards have substituted the real marble (Pan 141). Everything can be simulated. This kind of style may look cheap or be considered ugly in traditional aesthetics, but it inspires Wu, who thinks that it is the unique aesthetics of Taiwan, and it also presents the history and particular time-space of Taiwan. Therefore, he uses substitutes or fake materials to embody the “Taiwanese disposable culture<sup>39</sup>” (台灣替代文化), which insinuates his anxiety

<sup>37</sup> Hsueh Haui-Chi, “The Feminized Meanings of Wu Tien-chang’s Works in 1990s,” diss., National Cheng Kung University, 2003, 45.

<sup>38</sup> Wu always uses artificial materials to decorate his works and asks his model to pose affectedly. Everything is designed, and nothing is natural in his works. It is the style of pseudo he has in his works.

<sup>39</sup> Pan An-yi uses “Taiwanese substitute culture” in his article “Contemporary Taiwanese Art in the Era of Contention.” However, according to his context and my interview with Tien-chang Wu, I think it should be

of impermanent and his nostalgia for the old fashion. As we can see in the series of *Dream of Past Era*, the ladies are not brand-new for us. There may be original images that Wu refers to. Two of them (1994; fig. 14, 1996; fig. 16) share the style of the old calendar pictures<sup>40</sup>, which belong to the collective memories about the past. The old calendar pictures which were originally used for promoting all kinds of products presented a better life or fashion for the consumers in China and Taiwan. However, after Wu's handling, they become familiar to us. He replaces the eyes of the figures with plastic flowers, masks or sunglasses. To make them look different from the original old calendars, he also plays tricks in the color tone. Wu employs the printing technique for the packing boxes of betel nuts to turn his ladies into green or blue (Hsieh 62). Meanwhile, the frames of the pictures and paintings are carefully decorated by Wu. He uses the plastic flowers and patterned leather to frame his works. It is the idea he gains from Taiwanese funerals. Fake materials for the decorations in Taiwanese funerals are cheaper than the real ones and easy for preservation. Also, the garish and colorful characters they have will not let the family lose their face since traditionally it is believed that the more flourishing a ceremony is, the more blissful a family will be. It is a style which contributes to the Taiwanese disposable culture.

In addition, Wu's choice about the method and style of his works unfolds another implication—the theme of life and death. Barthes finally “found” his mother among lots of photographs after his mother's death. It is the photo of his mother in Winter Garden. Although Barthes did not exist when this picture was taken, he asserted he recognized the beautiful eyes of the five-year-old girl when he saw it. They are the eyes of his mother. It is too late for him to participate in the moment when the photo was taken, but it does not separate him from the photo. He found the picture and, at the same time, he had the reflection of the past. He experienced what the Greeks did that he “entered into Death backward” because “what he had

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“Taiwanese disposable culture.”

<sup>40</sup> Hai-Chi Hsueh, “The Feminized Meanings of Wu Tien-chang's Works in 1990s,” diss., National Cheng Kung University, 2002, 47.

before was his past” (Barthes 71). When he took care of his ill mother, he found her becoming the little girl just like the one in the picture of Winter Garden. Barthes describes it is how he “experienced her [...] as [his] feminine child,” which “was [his] way of resolving Death” (72). Similar to Barthes’ recall of his mother through the picture in the winter garden, Wu captures the connection between photography and the concept of death since he experienced his grandmother’s death in 1993. It is the year he started his photography works. The reason why the entire series look creepy and gloomy is not only because of the cool color hue, but also because of the significance conveyed by the method of photography. Roland Barthes indicates in *Camera Lucida*: “Death is the eidos of that Photography” (Barthes 15), and photography is “by way of a singular intermediary [...]: by way of Death” (31). Each photo contains death in it, which “is a kind of primitive theater, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead” (32). Every time the shutter button is pressed, the moment is dead but the image is eternally preserved in the frame. Wu consciously appropriates Barthes’ idea that “the photograph is a kind of resurrection, [and it] continues after the person is gone<sup>41</sup>” “The similarity of the deceased is still there,” and it is what Wu sighs with emotion. Hence, he chooses salon photography to elaborate his aesthetics of death in *On the Damage to “Spring and Autumn”* (1993; fig. 21) and the series of *Dream of Past Era* (Fig. 14-18). *On the Damage to “Spring and Autumn”* is a piece of photography with mixed media. Wu asks his model to pose in front of a fake setting, and he carefully develops the photo into black and white with light color to construct the antique atmosphere. As for the series of *Dream of Past Era*, the method is divided into two parts: oil painting and photography. Although *Dream of Past Era I* and *Dream of Past Era III* are created in a form of oil painting, Wu in fact intends to show his understanding of the significance of photography. Wu uses oil painting to present these two works because he is well aware of the

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41 Elsa Dorfman , “Camera Lucida, Review,” *The Journal of Photography in New England*, Volume 3 Number 3, <<http://www.facom.ufba.br/museu/onlab/textos/barthes.html>>

demand in the art market. It is much easier to sell oil paintings than photographs in the 90s<sup>42</sup>. Hence, I believe it is worthwhile to talk about Wu's *Dream of Past Era I* (Fig. 14) and *Dream of Past Era III* (Fig. 16) in Barthes' theory although they are not taken by a camera. In Wu's second period, I choose these pieces instead of his whole selection from 1993 to 1997 because these selected ones are more representative and have more integrated concepts for his grotesque style during this period.

The technique Wu uses is set-up photography, which makes his figures look stiff and artificial. Paradoxically, its aim is to create perfect images. The figures have to pose some uneasy gestures and hold until the photos are taken, for example, the sailor leaning on the guitar (Fig. 21). Although Wu's photographs are in an old-fashioned style like the salon photos in the old time, there are flaws Wu sets up purposely to remind the audience that the photos are made-up and de-familiarized. The images of the breast-touching models are not allowed in the old times (Fig. 15 and fig. 17), and the sailor with a bulged private part is not tolerated either (Fig. 21). Wu uses these poses to pull back the audience to the contemporary time. He clearly knows how to manipulate set-up photography to show the elements of theatricality and affection<sup>43</sup>. At the first sight, the pale figures in each piece make a lifeless impression on the audience. It is not what the normal living looks like, and it creates ambiguity. In many interviews, he always states that he does it on purpose. He grasps Barthes' idea of photography and utilizes a gloomy color and corpse-like body to embody it. The ladies within the picture frames are like ghosts who may revive anytime. The uncanny effect also turns to be the foundation of his style in the upcoming works.

### 3.3 The Gaze behind the Mask

All the figures' eyes in the series during the second period are covered. It shows the

<sup>42</sup> Shih-hang Chou, phone interview, 5 Jun. 2007.

<sup>43</sup> Ben Yu, "Notes on Manipulated Photography," Issue of Fine Art Photography, (Taipei: Taipei Fine Art Museum, 2003) 136.

anxiety of castration as connoted by the theme of *The Sandman*. In Hoffmann's story, the children are frightened by the sandman because if they do not go to bed on time, their eyes will be torn out. In Wu's works, the power of seeing is artistically displayed as well. Wu does not make his theme bare to us, but elusively disguises it with covered eyes. He conceals the eyes of the figures from the viewers so we cannot figure out exactly who the figures are or what they really look like. They "[are] enveloped in an atmosphere of entirely bogus religiosity" (Berger 21) because the emotion part is blocked. The eye-covered women divulge a sense of insecurity since the viewers cannot see through these women. Because the eye contact is blocked, "the reciprocal nature of vision" (3) loses its efficacy, which is a nature "more fundamental than that of spleen dialogue" (3). When the female eyes are seen, it would be a presentation of "a woman responding with calculated charm to the man whom she imagines looking at her" (55). In Yang Chih's review<sup>44</sup>, there is a discussion about the power relation which is shown by the covered eyes of the figures in Wu's works. He thinks that the power to see is the power to control. In the series during the second period, all the figures' eyes are covered by either sunglasses or masks which may intensify the damage of the object which has been gazed and monitored under the system of patriarchy. However, the covered eyes do not block the outside gazes totally. It still keeps a track of communicating (Yang 77-78). Following the concept of the grotesque in *Abnormal*, the power is displayed in a strange way for the viewers. Here Wu deliberately covers his figures' eyes to obstruct the gaze from the male or the authorities. In addition, the fear of uncertainty and de-familiarization produce a ghostly atmosphere. However, his works will not incur the audience's wrath because the force has detoured by the strategy of the covered eyes. They look funny, weird and creepy, so people do not sense the threat at the first sight, which make them more acceptable. When

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<sup>44</sup> Chih Yang, "Love Estranged—On the Maidens's Obsession of Grief & Woe in Wu Tien-Chang's Fantasy of Romantic Rendezvous," *Art Education* 126 (2002): 74-79.

Foucault talks about the masks and grotesque representations<sup>45</sup>, he mentions that “[it] is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself [, and] its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms” (Foucault, 1976:86). Therefore, I believe that Wu’s figures with covered eyes are not powerless; they are just well-disguised. At the first sight, the figures with covered eyes may be regarded as objects without the power to see. However, when his works are turned on with electricity, the lights will start to flicker (1995; fig. 15) and the flowers on the eyes (1997; fig. 18) will begin to blink; all of a sudden the figures seem to be invoked to return to the living world. They are invasive. They are not helpless objects to be gazed. Instead, they are the forceful ghosts haunting the viewers. Behind the masks or the sunglasses, the subject can have a kind of resistance. The resistance comes from the isolation caused by the covered eyes – the audience cannot figure out what the figures are looking at although they are vivid in front of the audience (Berger 117). The figures confront “the inevitability of power” from the gaze of the audience. The objects obstruct the audience from seeing their eyes. Because of that, the relation between the figures and the viewers are reversed. For example, in Venice carnivals, it is a time for overlooking the status or position of people because they will not be recognized easily when wearing masks. However, people can still see everything through the holes of the masks. Wu’s figures are like the people in Venice carnivals. Comparing with the viewers, the figures are mysterious and have more protection from the gaze.

Besides covered eyes, disguised gender identity is another scheme in Wu’s works during the second period. Wu integrates all of the techniques and concepts into his work, *Endless Love in Temporal World* (1997; fig. 19), and shows the homage to Li Shin-chiao’s (李石樵) *On the Market* (《市場口》) (1945; fig. 20) in his own grotesque way. The pair of sunglasses on her face is not just a modern signification; it is a mask to disguise the figure’s true colors.

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<sup>45</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vo. 1: An Introduction* (New York:Vintage Books A Division of Random House, 1976) 86.

It is different from Wu's other series during this period. Unlike the ready-made objects such as plastic flowers and shining eyeshades covering the eyes of the figures, the pair of sunglasses in *Endless Love in Temporal World* is in accordance with Li's original works. It can be inferred that she is a modern girl from the city. Her sunglasses become a symbol of modern. The viewers can tell from her outfit that she belongs to a different world, but not the market. In *On the Market*, the lady is isolated by the crowd in the market. The viewers will easily single her out when seeing the painting. Wu reinforces the isolation. When the music is on and the lights are off, "the lady" in the frame will start posing and even dancing in the dark. The moving image projected from the video is blue with a greenish hue. The music is sampled from the theme song in *Red Rose, White Rose*<sup>46</sup> (Kwan 1994)(《紅玫瑰白玫瑰》) which tragically describes women's romantic part of life. With the beautiful song, the lady slowly twists her hands and dances. If the viewers pay close attention to "her" in Wu's version of "On the Market," they will find out that they are fooled by Wu. The haunting image of a dancing lady is not like the one coming from Li's painting, but rather a posing drag queen. As long as the viewers unmask the feminized man, Wu's scheme of deceiving the audience succeeds. Beginning with gazing at the feminized figure, the viewers see her movement. Then they find out "she" is not a woman, but a man performing the role of a fair lady. Moreover, the image projected on the painting has an effect of floating in the air back and forth, which makes the viewers wonder whether the image is representing a phantom or a human being. The ambiguity causes anxiety and curiosity for the viewers. During the process, the feminized image changes its position from passive to active. It is a threatening existence.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes claims that he studies photography "only for 'sentimental' reason" when he is "as *Spectator*" (Barthes 21). In his exploration, photography is "as a wound" for a study about "I see, I feel, I notice, I observe, and I think" (21). He thoroughly

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<sup>46</sup> *Red Rose, White Rose*, dir. Stanley Kwan, perf. Joan Chen, Winston Chao, and Veronica Yip, Golden Flare Films Company, 1994.



understands that photos have strong potential for presenting people's feeling and love. Wu's pictures, whether they are in a form of photos or oil paintings, have the same message for the audience. His yearning for his grandmother makes him find out the sentimental part of the pictures. His works have a good reputation since he creates them from the point of his true self. He is not only an artist but also a spectator of life during this period.

Wu successfully connects the past with the present by means of reminiscence and the photography techniques. Set-up photography helps Wu reconstruct a reminiscence of the good old times. With the excessively gaudy decorations, such as the artificial flowers, colorful paillettes, shining beads, and mirror panels, his picture frames strengthen the “vulgar-acrimony aesthetics” (「俗辣美學<sup>47</sup>」) during the second period of Wu's creative works. The secularization displayed in Wu's pictures presents not only the secularity in the consumer society, but also the grass-root power in the Taiwanese local culture<sup>48</sup>. He uses simple materials in our daily life to recreate new looks. Instead of appropriating the images entirely from old pictures or antique calendars, Wu creates his own images anew. Therefore, the audience may have a feeling of déjà vu when they are in front of Wu's series during this period. The uncanny images look grotesque and make Wu a master of the grotesque in Taiwanese contemporary art.

The grotesque in this phase lays particular stress on each individual figure appearing as a monologue in a play. In the next period, there is another grotesque associated with the carnival theory. Wu's comprehensive grotesque style is also presented in that period where the carnivalesque grotesque is embodied by complicated and heterogeneous visual effects and techniques. Also, the composition of the figures and the settings are more dramatic than his previous works. There will be further demonstrations in the following chapter.

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47 Kuang Lu, *Taiwan Contemporary Art Series: Society in Relation to Secular Culture*, (Taipei: Council for Cultural Affairs, 2003) 89.

48 Kuang Lu, *Taiwan Contemporary Art Series: Society in Relation to Secular Culture*, (Taipei: Council for Cultural Affairs, 2003) 78.

## Chapter Four: The Carnival of Grotesque in Wu's Works from 2002 upto Now

After the year 2000, Wu has created *United in Our Effect* (《永協同心》) (2002; fig. 22), *Work Together toward Same Goal* (《同舟共濟》) (2002; fig. 23), *Dreaming of Golden Millet* (《黃粱夢》) (2003; fig. 24), *Spirit Dreaming Conjuraton*(《夢魂術》) (2004; fig. 25), and *Spell to Shift Mountains and Overturn Seas* (《移山倒海術》) (2005; fig.26). These are the works that Wu first started to use digital technology. Technology here is not only a tool to create his works, but also a metaphor to reveal his concern about the contemporary society. Wu uses digital techniques to reveal human desire for eternal life and folk religious beliefs. According to Lo Pau-chu (羅寶珠) (2005), one's aesthetics has been primarily cultivated from his/her mother country<sup>49</sup> (Lo 46), especially from the local culture to which he/she is ethnically related. Wu puts a lot of effort to incorporate more Chinese religions and philosophies into his art pieces during this period. The theme of life and death has been expanded, and the combination of technology and religious beliefs has become the origin of Wu's idea about the philosophy of living. The grotesque images during this period can be examined by Bakhtin's theory. According to critics, Wu's works are commonly regarded as metaphors for gender issues. My view is that Wu's works are not only about gender issues, but also about his experimental aesthetics and the social context. Besides, the author's self-consciousness is supported by Bakhtin's theory of carnival in *Rabelais and His World*. The grotesque here is a classification which is distinguished from "its opposite, the classical, in terms of class rather than gender. In here, 'Classic' aesthetics are associated with 'the ready-made [...] the finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development'" (Vice 156). Based on Mary Russo's discussion about two kinds of grotesque, I will focus on Wu's works

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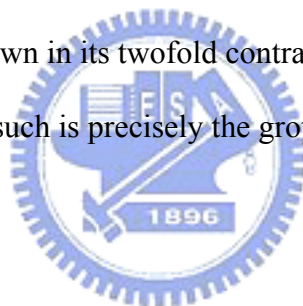
<sup>49</sup> Pau-chu Lo, "The Composition and Decomposition of History/ Reality and Simulation/ Illusion," *Modern Art* 121 2005: 36-51.

in the style of the carnival of grotesque.

#### 4.1 Theory of Carnival and the Grotesque

In the previous chapter, I have discussed the uncanny grotesque and have saved the arguments for “comic grotesque” for this chapter. It is a grotesque which is associated with Bakhtin’s theory on carnival (Russo 7). The comic element can be traced back to the Kerch terracotta figures of “senile pregnant hags”:

It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its twofold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness, and such is precisely the grotesque concept of the body. (Bakhtin 25-26)



Besides, the old hags are laughing. This kind of figure makes a funny (and repugnant) impression, and it can be a “typical and very strongly expressed grotesque” (25). Bakhtin uses the carnivalesque “to conceptualize social formations, social conflict, and the realm of the political” (Russo 8). It is “historical and locatable [...] within a certain nexus of space and time, marked by dates, material events, and exteriority” (7). In this case, the grotesque body is a “social body”, that is, it is highly connected with the world and the living creatures in it (8). Russo analyzes the grotesque body to come up with its characteristic as “open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing; it is identified with non-official “low” culture or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation” (8). As Bakhtin talks about the forms of grotesque realism, he remarks that it “[...] link[s] with the bodily lower stratum” (Bakhtin 20).

The grotesque body is “not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries. It represents the entire material bodily world in all its elements” (27) that it makes “a spectacle out of [itself]” (Russo 53). Russo brings up the discourse of female grotesque to complete the discourse of grotesque body that “Bakhtin [...] fails to acknowledge or incorporate the social relations of gender in his semiotic model of the body politic” (63). Russo claims that the grotesque makes women in the danger of an exposure (53). To make a female body “a spectacle out of herself,” it is “more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries” (53). Under the pressure of social expectations, women are restricted by all kinds of moral standards and are always in the danger of being accused if they do not fulfill the expectations given by the family and the society. When they appear in grotesque images, women can have a chance to be free from the restraints and expectations.

According to Bakhtin’s discussion on carnival theory, folk customs originate from pagan traditions. Through all kinds of ceremonies or festivities, the general populace can have a chance to subvert the sacred and inviolable legitimacy. The folklore provides opportunities to provoke the subversion of social orders and the beauty value<sup>50</sup> (Kuang 78). The “folk humor” (Vice 151) appears to be a very important feature in the theory of carnivalesque grotesque when Bakhtin talks about Rabelais’ work. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin mentions that this kind of popular humor is different from “the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture” (151). Bakhtin also claims that the power from “the laughter of carnival associated with these spectacles and unconstrained speech” is positive (Russo 61). The carnival laughter is closely related to the world and the folk. Furthermore, this kind of humor can be categorized by ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions and various genres of billingsgate (Vice 151-52). The folk humor will be the foundation for my arguments on Wu’s the carnival of grotesque.

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<sup>50</sup> Kuang Lu, *Taiwan Contemporary Art Series: Society in Relation to Secular Culture*, (Taipei: Council for Cultural Affairs, 2003) 78.

## 4.2 The Theme of Wu's Series After the year 2000

When it comes to Wu's works after the year 2000, for example the *Former and Current Life* series<sup>51</sup> (《前世今生》系列), the grotesque images penetrate the civil world in his pictures. The main theme in this series is “technical revivalism” (Pan 138), which means to use the latest technologies from the West on one hand but to think in a Chinese way on the other<sup>52</sup>. In *Work Together toward Same Goal* (2002), *United in Our Effect* (2002) and *Dreaming of Golden Millet* (2002), the visual images co-exist with poems and mottos from the Gods to explain something bewildering. Wu fabricates the names, the address and the personal background of the figures in this series. The fabrication serves two purposes. On the one hand, the pseudo-professional judgments<sup>53</sup> try to convince the viewers to believe his stories. On the other hand, it responds to the previous idea of fake aesthetics claimed by Wu as the characteristic of Taiwanese culture. What he is confronting is the advanced technology. He expresses his anxiety about the functions of “format” and “undo” in the world of digital technology<sup>54</sup>. His anxiety becomes the inspiration for him in creating the eerie pictures of this series.

In the *Former and Current Life* series, he performs the grotesque narratives to tell the stories of his works and makes his figures extremely grotesque in order to face the inevitable power. Wu now becomes the God, or a *chi-tung*<sup>55</sup> (shaman) to claim his professionalism and practice his power to control his figures' fate. Also, his pseudo-oracles point out the keynote of the audiences' “infantile beliefs [...] such as the belief in the ability of the dead to return life” (Schneider 169). The monstrous people Wu creates remind the audience that there is a

<sup>51</sup> This series includes *United in Our Effect* (《永協同心》) (2002; fig. 22), *Work Together toward Same Goal* (《同舟共濟》) (2002; fig. 23) and *Dreaming of Golden Millet* (《黃粱夢》) (2003; fig. 24).

<sup>52</sup> See footnote 3 of Chapter One.

<sup>53</sup> In Chinese folk culture, people believe that each person will be judged by the King of Hell. All the crimes and the punishments will be described in the judgments to warn the living people.

<sup>54</sup> See 1.2 of Chapter One.

<sup>55</sup> Chi-tung, a “human spirit medium” (Pan 139).

certain power controlling us imperceptibly but inexorably. It can not be named for sure. Thus, he regards the religious language as a metaphor to tell the audience the dreadful stories which the audience may have heard of in their childhood. The original idea can be traced back to the concept of uncanny derived from the infantile psychology. In Freud's *Uncanny*, there are some ideas that can be used to analyze Wu's works in the third period. Adopting the terms such as "mirror-images" and "the repetition," there are symmetrical arrangements in Wu's works, such as the androgynous twins in *Spirit Dreaming Conjuraton* (《夢魂術》) (2004), and the anonymous bodies in *Spell to Shift Mountains and Overturn Seas* (《排山倒海術》) (2005). Unlike his previous style, Wu uses computers to create many clones which are evolved from the process of repetition. These pictures contain not only the scenes of carnivals, but also the uncanny figures which are always the trademark of Wu's works.

Wu makes many clone-like figures in his pictures, and they look more like freaks than just abnormal people in both *Spirit Dreaming Conjuraton* and *Spell to Shift Mountains and Overturn Seas*. They are naked and hairless; some of them are even just heads without bodies or bodies without heads. The figure in the backdrop (Fig.27) catches my attention. It reminds the audience of the image of the pregnant hags<sup>56</sup> in Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*. This time, it is more ambivalent than the hags Bakhtin talks about. When looking at it closely, viewers can tell that it is not a real female body, but a body (without gender specification) with fake breasts. The expression on its face is covered, and it reappears on the main figure in the center of the picture (Fig. 28). Additionally, the main figure in the center of *Spirit Dreaming Conjuraton* is also a spectacle of freaks. The appearance is like Siamese twins (1837; fig.29) which were treated like freaks in the literatures in the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>57</sup>. Russo suggests that "the freak and the grotesque overlap as bodily categories" (79) in her research.

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<sup>56</sup> See 4.2.

<sup>57</sup> Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, "Monstrosités" *Histoire Générale et Particulière des Anomalies de l'Organisatoïn Chez l'Homme, et les Animaux*. Paris: J.B. Baillièrre, 1837, Plate 15.

According to the definition, the freaks, “as a cultural representation in the late nineteenth century, [it] belongs to the increasingly codified world of spectacle [...and] as beings to be viewed” (79). However, Russo does not mean “freaks are born to freaks” (80). The freaks are “made to seem like ‘real, living breathing monsters’ in the intersection between their presentation in freak shows, photography, cinema, the discourses of biology, and [...] all of which supported this illusionism” (80). Therefore, the spectacle is what people impose on the freaks, but not something inherent in the freaks.

Wu links the spectacle of freaks to the folk humor<sup>58</sup>, and the combination produces the carnival atmosphere as in Bakhtin’s carnivalesque. The oaths and Taoist talisman (Fig. 30) can be found in his fake oracular judgments on the sides of the pictures. These are, however, not made arbitrarily. Wu actually refers to the real religious rituals to make the arrangements in the pictures. Although Wu borrows the real rituals and religious narratives, the contents of his fake judgments are ridiculous, and the talismans are mixed with graffiti (Fig. 30). According to my interview, Wu thinks that there always seem to have some secrets among the staff and the magicians in circuses which make them so enchanting<sup>59</sup>. Circuses travel and show in local festivals and state fairs. During performances, people can have a chance to simply relax and have fun; it is just like spending time in a carnival. Wu thinks it is the time for all kinds of desires to emerge. Also, in circuses, people pay for the spectacles they cannot see outside the circus tents. The Siamese twins are grotesque spectacles<sup>60</sup> to fulfill the audience’s desire of watching and consuming the spectacles. After Wu’s extra work on the picture, the figures are endowed with multiple meanings. They are not just bodies to attract or disgust people, but with a mission to present the desire and the inner fear of people.

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<sup>58</sup> See 4.3.

<sup>59</sup> Shih-hang Chou, personal interview, 1 Nov. 2006.

<sup>60</sup> In *The Female Grotesque*, Russo has cited some pictures of Siamese twins which were taken in the displays or circus’ museums (81-82).

### 4.3 The Carnival of Wu's Grotesque Images

Bakhtin uses the term “heteroglossia” to describe a characteristic in a society where a variety of voices and the multiplicity interact to convey ideas and communicate. The Bakhtin School thinks that heteroglossia can present different voices and diverse personal experiences in a society and hence open up the possibility of disrupting the authority<sup>61</sup>. It was not until the third period of Wu's artistic creations that he first started to use heteroglossia in his works. During this period, his works start to present multiple figures at a time, and they are more elaborate than the ones before. It is the advancement of digital techniques that makes Wu's pictures more and more meticulous. He has also developed his thoughts into different levels by means of the advancement.

The elements of cinematic effects become an issue in Yang Ming-eh's (楊明鏗) review<sup>62</sup> on Wu's works. Like the ghost wondering in the films<sup>63</sup>, Wu's figures do not look different from the normal people in daily life at the first sight. When the viewers find out that the figures are not human beings but dead people, they immediately feel creepy<sup>64</sup> (Yang 29). Besides, according to my interview with Wu, I believe that some elements in films are also shown in his works. He tells me that he thinks all the artists like films, and so does he<sup>65</sup>. Wu insists that each of his works has an integrated story, but he wants to compress the story, including the prolog, the analysis and the end, into one shot. Set-up photography becomes one

<sup>61</sup> “The Popular Culture in the Public Sphere,” *Cultural Policy and Power*, ed. Shu-chen Chiang, 2004, National Chiao Tung University, Center for Emergent Cultural Studies, <<http://www.cc.nctu.edu.tw/~cecs/web/context.htm>>

<sup>62</sup> Ming-eh Yang, “The Composition and Decomposition of History/ Reality and Simulation/ Illusion,” *Taipei: Modern Art* 121 2005: 24-35.

<sup>63</sup> *What Dreams May Come* (Vincent Ward 1998), *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan 1999) and *The Others* (Alejandro Amenábar 2001).

<sup>64</sup> 「這三部電影(《靈異第六感》、《美夢成真》、《神鬼第六感》)的手法安排，讓你起先在看的時候，覺得與人類社會無異，覺得稀鬆平常，可是當你得知他們早已死亡不再是人，立刻會讓你毛骨悚然」(楊)。

<sup>65</sup> In my interview, Wu said David Lynch and Peter Greenaway are his favorite directors. There are some similarities they share. The topics which Lynch has dealt with are always around psychos and criminals. Also, he is good at presenting them in an aesthetic style, such as in *Twin Peaks* (1991) and *Lost Highway* (1997). The crime scenes are so beautiful that they may be taken as art performances. When it comes to Greenaway, his presentation of art history is conspicuous, especially in *Prospero's Book* (1991). Wu's personal favorite is *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (1989) which utilizes an extremely gorgeous setting to decorate the ugly and sinful story.



of the most important ideas in his works which are also closely related to theatricality. He does not want the natural elements in photography; he needs dramatic tension. He adds so many elements in his works; consequently, his works cannot be classified into the category of either photography or digital graphic design.

The grotesque in this series can be examined visually. From Wu's previous style of iconology to photography, he has been catching up with the latest technologies. The *Former and Current Life* series (《前世今生》) reveals a cinematic language, and the framing is like a "tableau vivant." The mise-en-scene is ludicrous but in a horrible way. Wu zooms out his works from a body part to a whole body, and finally he does not only display the figures in full-size but also make them in motions. However, the full-size figures are not healthy-looking; what is even worse is that they are physically and mentally abnormal. For example, the four little people managing to row a boat in *Work Together toward Same Goal* (《同舟共濟》) (2002) or the two buddies riding a Tandem bicycle in *United in Our Effect* (《永協同心》) (2002) or the couple sitting on the people with unicorn-like gesture in *Dreaming of Golden Millet* (《黃粱夢》) (2003). Their freakish smile creates a sense of monstrosity rather than happiness. The strange atmosphere reminds us of the formula of horror films. According to the analysis of *Horror Film Reader* (Schneider 2002), one's fundamental fear of watching horror films comes from his/her self-identification with the roles on the screen. Wu sets up stages where monstrous figures embody the intrinsic monsters inside the viewers' minds. It is a collective anxiety about the return of the repressed. Similar to monsters in horror films, the monstrous images in the series are also the "metaphorical embodiments of such narratives [... which] are capable of reconfirming surmounted beliefs by their very presence" (Schneider 169). The superstitious beliefs abandoned before are coming back. What makes the viewers uncomfortable is "something which is familiar and [previously established] in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (171). The spirit

of death spreads out in this series. The photography symbolizes “an existence at that time,” and the images which are in the photo claim the necessary death<sup>66</sup> (Yao 75). However, the images are prophetic to the content of the words beside them. The dialectic relation discloses our fear of the unknown side of the world, and also reveals a potential for a “self-demonized” spirit (76). After his manipulations, the figures are not simply physically different, but have done something evil, just like some atrocious villains. The “self-demonized” character appears on their looks and in their minds as well.

In one of Wu’s latest works, *Spirit Dreaming Conjunction* (2004), the viewers can feel the atmosphere of Chinese New Year pictures. The child-like figures wearing aprons are similar to the ones in ordinary New Year pictures which depict children playing games. People believe that having more children can bring happiness to the family, and it symbolizes birth, fertility, reproduction and regeneration. The title “Spirit Dreaming Conjunction,” which means to attract the opposite sex, implies sexual desire. Wu’s conjunction includes “lovesick conjunction” too. According to the instruction of the conjunction (Fig. 30), by praying sincerely, people can receive an intercourse of “Yin and Yang” (陰陽) which means the harmony between men and women through intercourse. Some pictures of this series even provocatively portray the ecstatic sexual orgy through promiscuity of faceless clone bodies.

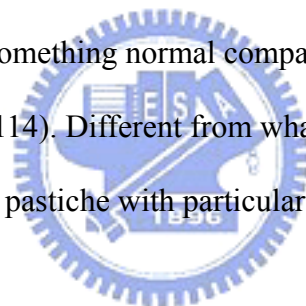
In *Spell to Shift Mountains and Overturn Seas* (2005), the scene of orgies took place in a hell-like landscape. The masculine figure at the center is surrendered by many naked female bodies, while the male seems painful and the females seem expressionless. The combination symbolizes the flesh and sexuality. This in contrast to his previous works where figures of sexual orgy have smiley faces. The sturdy male image has no lower body; hence, it is suggested that his sexuality is gone. The allegory skillfully conveys the meaning of “everything visible is empty” (色即是空), a proverb which literally admonishes people

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<sup>66</sup> Jui-Chung Yao, “Wu Tien-chang’s Digital Transmigration,” *Main Trend* Dec. 2004: 75.

against indulgence in sex. Also, the female bodies and the floating heads in the picture are arranged in an order similar to the ones in *La Danse Macabre*, the dance of death. Therefore, it is implied that the flesh and sexuality will eventually vanish.

During this period, Wu's pictures look familiar but they are not exactly the same with the originals<sup>67</sup> because Wu produces them by computers. The original images of his collages from Chinese New Years pictures, Taoist spells, and vaudeville costumes into his own pictures. After the reproduction of the digital editing, the images appear repeatedly or appear as clones in Wu's pictures. Hence, they lose their previous particularity. It is what Fredric Jameson calls "pastiche" which is "one of the most significant features or practices in postmodernism today" (Jameson 1983: 113). He remarks pastiche as "a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic" (Jameson 1983: 114). Different from what Jameson terms as "pastiche is blank parody" (114), Wu supplies his pastiche with particular texts to add some humorous elements to his parody.



#### 4.4 Questions on Wu's Grotesque Images

During this period, Wu challenges people's commiseration to disadvantaged minorities. All the freak-like figures in the series of *Former and Current Life* deserve the disablement. According to the contents, the cause and effect is doomed: they must have done something immoral in their previous life so they have to pay back in the current life. It is against the modern views about the abnormal people. Wu makes fun of the incantations and the rituals with the grotesque figures and absurd stories to enhance the parody in his works. On the one hand, his parody challenges the stereotype of the abnormal people and the religious belief that

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<sup>67</sup> In fact, the audience can find this phenomenon in his pictures during the previous period.

“Evil will be recompensed with evil.” (惡有惡報) On the other hand, it questions the social norms which confine people to a dualistic world.

In a medical perspective, they are just suffering from genetic problems so people should not hold prejudice against them. However, Wu addresses the saying in Chinese society that “what goes around comes around” by placing short texts aside the pictures:

Believers Lin Tsung-cheng, et al., afflicted with what is commonly known as Down syndrome. The cause of which is the incorrect alignment of the eleventh set of DNA chromosomes. [...] On the occasion of Hsin-tien city’s Charity Dragon Boat Race for Down syndrome, they were regrettably drowned in concert, as a result of karmic retribution. Mysteries of the heavens unrevealed, the living unenlightened. [...] Have pity! The gods above cherish life. Chen Hua-sheng, et al., having committed such an atrocious act and sentenced in the court of Ni-luo King of the Netherworld, are hereby ordered to be reborn as believers Lin Tsung-cheng, et al. and taste the fruits of karma. Enlightened by our Lord Buddha, I hope that the families of the said believers aspire to good deeds and sincerely beseech the forgiveness of the gods for their kin’s suffering<sup>68</sup>. (2003; Fig. 31)

Wu uses religious languages to influence his audience. He presupposes the cause and effect for the sufferers of Down syndrome to rationalize the reasons of their suffering. He would name the figures and describe their syndromes in scientific terms to make it look real. Also, he would make up a decree from the King of Netherworld to highlight the contention. For

<sup>68</sup> 「信男林宗正等人，自幼罹患俗稱唐氏症，此乃 DNA 基因序列第十一調排列不齊所致[...]此次諸信男參加新店市主辦的二〇〇二年唐氏症龍舟賽，不幸發生意外集體滅頂事件是因果所致，天機參數隱晦未明，不經無佛開示，世人不啓。(…)哀哉！上天有好生之德，陳華生等人造此殺業，經閻羅王秦廣殿審判後。今生以集體轉世為現信男林宗正等人。今受果報，為因果不爽，今日經無佛開示，希弟子之家屬能秉真誠發願行善，並叩請上蒼之恩辭寬赦汝等親人之前冤，是也。」

example, the person who offended Buddha who is against killing is punished to be born with illness in the reincarnation. Wu exhibits the people with Down syndrome to cause the judgments given by the society. It can be seen that this brings up an issue of social norms. As Mary Russo points out, “the category of the grotesque [...] emerges only in relation to the norms which it exceeded” (Russo 3); the audience can be aware of the internalized norms by viewing the pictures of the sufferers that Wu makes up. By looking at the pseudo-judgments by the pictures, the audience may be relieved that they are different from those abnormal people. They can rebuild the sense of security by setting up a boundary between the normal and the abnormal. However, there might be a critical problem: is it an exploitation of the images of the minorities and the abnormal people? Is he providing their images for the viewers to consume?

Wu’s works are controversial since he uses images of people with disabilities as a comic element. Wu chooses these freak-like figures to unfold “the freak ethos” which involves the viewer’s reflection of his own inferior alter ego (76). They are like a mirror for the viewers to introspect and question themselves. The photographs during this period are all filled with painstaking design. However, those who are in his works are in fact not disabled people; they are the so-called normal people. They are Wu’s friends who are asked to perform in front of the camera<sup>69</sup>. He takes the pictures on the premise that the models are fully conscious of what the pictures are going to become. The post-production employs digital techniques to make up facial expressions and the uncoordinated actions. Although Wu uses many techniques to transform the models, he still cannot evade the problem of exploitation of the disabled people.

Wu does not intend to exploit the images of the disabled people but attempts to expose the pretense of people. When the viewers see these images, they may feel sorry for the abnormal people in the pictures and feel lucky or gloating because the misfortune does not

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<sup>69</sup> Shih-hang Chou, personal interview, 1 Nov. 2006.

happen to them. In order to ease the viewers' guilty feeling about the abnormal figures, the figures are shown with heavy make-up and smiles. It seems that they do not care about their disabilities. In addition, Wu thinks that people tend to be pretentious and self-defensive when a spotlight is on them. They know there might be someone watching them so they present an affected attitude to show a better side of them. Wu thinks that the flattery and fear resulting from one's wish for protecting himself/herself can cover up his/her sincerity<sup>70</sup> (Yang 28). As long as the viewers get Wu's idea, they will know that the figures' smile does not come from their happiness but from pretending there is nothing to be unhappy about. For example, it can be seen that the smiley or joyous faces in the series of *Former and Current Life* are something they conjure just for the pictures.

It is like a process of invoking the spirits from the grotesque images when the viewers see Wu's creative works during the third period. He leads the audience's viewing experience from pictures to texts. The grotesque bodies alone are not shocking enough for the viewers unless they read the texts on the sides too. Through reading the texts, the audience may get a better understanding and start to put more thoughts into it. It can be seen that his works after the year 2000 are composed of a mixture of different styles accumulated over years. Wu has tried various approaches to achieve his understanding of life and he later realizes that digital technology is not only a medium or method, but also a symbol for his creations. Hence, the grotesque presentation that incorporates the cultures of Chinese, Taiwanese and Western world, has now evolved into his own way.

All the characters in Wu's works during this period, including the people with Down syndrome or with disabilities, are smiling and even dancing with joy. However, with set-up photography, their expressions look unnatural and exaggerated. The statements that he adds

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<sup>70</sup> 「人類因自保而自動衍生的奉承心與恐懼心，遮掩住人的真誠」(楊明鏗 28)。

on the sides of the pictures read like authentic folk stories that draw viewers' attention.

Nonetheless, viewers often take them too seriously until they get a chance to take a closer look and realize the satiric denotation behind them. This is the comic element that Wu's works always have. Besides the comic element, it can be seen that Chinese folk elements exist in his works too, such as dragon boats, *dudo* (stomachers), and the costumes in folk performances. During the third period, it can be seen that both the elements of Bakhtin's carnival theory – comic and folk – are shown.

Different from the ironic political icons during the first period and the pathetic feminized images during the second period, the digital pictures during the third period reveal the contradictory world which is presented by the carnival of the grotesque. The grotesque figures do not criticize any national issue or political situation, but instead try to present human's mentality. Unlike the veiled ladies from his previous works, the figures during this period directly display their bodies and their sexual desire to disclose the nature of human being. In the series of *Former and Current Life*, all the bodies are pathological or fragmented. When it comes to his latest two works, there is only "the flesh" left, such as the "pregnant-hag-like" figures (Fig. 27) and the incomplete bodies (Fig. 26).

Wu has shown the knowledge of aesthetic techniques and his works have completed the embodiment of philosophical thinking. The grotesque images require the most complicated techniques. The feature of pastiche illustrates that Wu's images have a strong intention to the features of postmodernism. In order to enrich the pictures, Wu has instilled the most difficult philosophy among the three periods into his creations. However, the works he has created after the millennium are overloaded with excessive artistic performance and ideas. When he devotes himself to his works and utilizes them to call the viewers' attention, he forgets the danger of exploitation of the images. He ignores those who are with the same symptom will experience the second injury when observing his pictures. He accomplishes his purpose

without careful consideration.



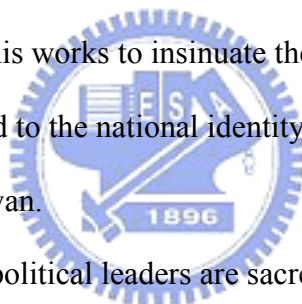


## Chapter Five

### Conclusion

#### 5.1 The Style of Wu's Art Works

Wu has been avoiding abstract painting and has created his works in figural art because he wants his audience to be able to understand his works easily. His straightforwardness on political issues makes him known to the general public quickly. In *The Rule of Chiang Kai-shek*, *The Rule of Chiang Ching-kuo*, *The Rule of Mao Tse-ting* and *The Rule of Deng Hsiao-ping*, the political figures have unbalanced bodies and heads, and in the series of *Four Eras*, only faces with comic expressions are shown. Under the grotesque images, there are serious issues that Wu is concerned about and is trying to tell the viewers. He uses the figures with abnormal appearances in his works to insinuate the abnormal social situations caused by the authorities. He is not limited to the national identity and has a general concern about both of the people in China and Taiwan.



Traditionally, portraits of political leaders are sacred and serve the purpose of iconolatry. However, Wu chooses to use comic – a form originally used to show caricatures and to entertain – to represent the images, such as in *Four Eras*. The way he presents the images is mainly based on his personal opinions on politics; however, using comic as a presentation actually softens the subjectivity and to some extent impresses the audience. His grotesque presentation on politics illustrates caricatures as well as analysis in power relations. As what Foucault remarks in *Abnormal*, the absolute power of a sovereign has to be shown in grotesque presentations.

In the second period of Wu's works, the characters are just civilians rather than political figures. It can be seen that all the characters are either females or female-like males, such as drag queens and sissy boys in *Endless Love in Temporal World* and *On the Damage to*

“*Spring and Autumn.*” Wu believes that the effect of the feminized characters serves the purpose of the affectation that he has been trying to depict. In my interview, Wu talked about the sissy characteristic in his works: “I believe that everything has a purpose of serving the art; everything can be used as a tool for an artist. Things do not necessarily have to be presented in their original forms but they do have to be presented in the forms that can achieve the best effects. Affectation can be better than reality<sup>71</sup>.”

It is the affectation Wu intentionally creates that makes his works during this period uncanny to the viewers. After Wu thorough his grandmother’s death, he came to comprehend the melancholy of photographs, which is one of the main ideas in Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*<sup>72</sup>. He uses the photographic skills to give his works a feeling of “death.” Although not all of this works are in a form of photography, he uses the idea of photography to create them during this period, even for oil paintings. It is done as if there were only black-and-white photos so colors have to be added afterward<sup>73</sup>, just like in the old days. Vintage photos, moreover, have not only an allegory of death, but also a characteristic of uncanny grotesque. “Covered eyes” is another element that makes his works unusual. Some of the characters in his works are unpredictable because their eyes are covered. The old calendar pictures and salon photos are supposed to be gazed by the viewers. However, when the eyes of the characters are covered, the viewers do not know where to look. They cannot tell who the characters are nor can they have any eye contact with them.

With the help of technology, Wu’s grotesque presentation in the third period has advanced to another stage. During the first period, he creates art to challenge the authorities and reveal the injustice in the society. During the second period, he shows his confusion and attachment to the world of mortals. Now during the third period, Wu’s creations turn to

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<sup>71</sup> 「我是講求導演的工具論，我認為所有東西都是要服務藝術的，我不需要表現真實的樣貌，我只要能或是效果更好的東西。我要假的感覺，不要真實的東西」(吳天章 2006)

<sup>72</sup> See 3.2 of Chapter Three.

<sup>73</sup> See fig. 21.

philosophical thoughts. He combines the similarity between the Chinese belief and Western technology. The Chinese belief about reincarnation is like the concepts of “format” and “undo” in computers where everything can start from the very beginning with or without memories. Wu’s statements portrayed in the works tell the audience that the figures are dead because of karma. Besides the skills in photography, photo editing by computers makes his works more grotesque. Wu made a bizarre figure in the *Former and Current Life* series. The figures are either ambiguous in sex, or short and disabled. This kind of grotesque body, according to Bakhtin, is a body that is against the Classic body<sup>74</sup>. This is an open and unfinished body. The statements which combine conviction and medical diagnosis on the sides of the images which imply the figure’s death make his works more grotesque.

## 5.2 The Humor of Wu’s Grotesque Style

Wu’s unique black humor is well known in Taiwanese contemporary art. His humor comes from the observation of the contemporary society. The topics of his works range from political figures to civilians. He exaggerates the characteristics of his figures no matter who they are, and presents the cruel world with sarcasm.

His works in the first period impresses the audience and the art critics because of his comic presentation and straightforwardness. His humor can be seen in the expressions of the figures in his works. In the second period, he focuses on common people’s lives and depicts the features of Taiwanese disposable culture<sup>75</sup>. Garish decorations and presentation, which have a connotation of flourish, can be seen all over the place in his works. The salon photography technique he uses originates after World War I with an intention to capture images perfectly<sup>76</sup>. Although the images seem perfect, this kind of photography is too

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<sup>74</sup> See 4.1 of Chapter Four.

<sup>75</sup> See 3.3 of Chapter Three.

<sup>76</sup> Shih-hang Chou, personal interview, 1 Nov. 2006.

scrupulous and methodical<sup>77</sup>. Therefore, he arranged some embarrassing poses such as breast touching and erection to add some spice of humor. Continuing the comic style in the first period, Wu tries to present his stories in a form of comic strip, only here he combines all the frames into one<sup>78</sup>. In the series of *Former and Current Life*, although the figures are all dead, they apply cosmetics and wear fancy clothes. On the one hand, this makes them act like normal performers so the audience does not get scared. On the other hand, it is hoped that the audience will recognize that it is similar to the custom of dressing up the dead so that they have a nice last look. He believes that since viewers are not fond of seeing disgusting people, using fancy packaging is necessary<sup>79</sup>. Messages can never be delivered if the viewers are not interested in the works to begin with. Hence, his carnivalesque grotesque can release the tension to convey his messages to the viewers.

Wu's black humor is funny because the audience can feel the garishness and ludicrousness in the works. Also, they can feel that Wu is different from other artists. He does not invariably present the dark side of the world, or incurably insist on being optimistic. On the contrary, he has a broad understanding of life and is good at using all kinds of different viewpoints to present his "garish yet powerful" black comedies.

### 5.3 The Significance of Wu's Grotesque Images

For each piece of the art works, Wu always has a clear motive. As the viewers can tell from his works from the 1990s to the 2000s, he designs all his works cautiously. He is aware of the fact that every piece is influential for the viewers. He gives his works a mission to represent the contemporary society.

In this paper, I found out the meanings of the works he has done. I started from analyzing the aesthetics in his works and found out the grotesque images he tries to present. Theories are

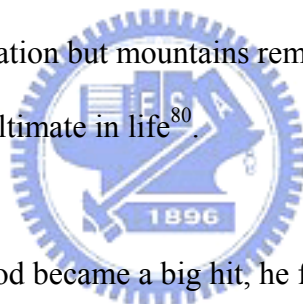
<sup>77</sup> Shih-hang Chou, personal interview, 1 Nov. 2006.

<sup>78</sup> Shih-hang Chou, personal interview, 1 Nov. 2006.

<sup>79</sup> Shih-hang Chou, personal interview, 1 Nov. 2006.

employed to support the idea that there are three periods in his works. The three periods each focuses on a topic that he is concerned with at a different stage. In my interview with him, he said that he started with a big topic, and then he came to a middle-sized one, and finally he focused on a small topic: “people.” It can be seen that he finally returns to a point where he is more private and closer to the souls. Everything is changing. However, the faith in life is something that never changes, which is also what he is trying to return to. As he is aging, he knows how to appreciate the beauty of life and apprehend the change of life. Here is a four-line verse he interpreted for me in the interview:

Silent Nature sighs for the death,  
 Seasons change and Nature transits.  
 People find no destination but mountains remain,  
 Empty dream is the ultimate in life<sup>80</sup>.



After his works in the first period became a big hit, he faced a choke point for his next creation. Unexpectedly, he heard the verse from a Taoist priest in his grandmother’s funeral. This verse inspires him to make his works more philosophic and humane about the daily life. He reminds me with the verse during my interview that he was suddenly enlightened when he finally understood the meaning of life expressed by the verse. From this moment, he does not stop creating his art works with his philosophy. Although Wu has known well about the techniques to create all kinds of pictures and got many local and international awards, he actually cares about the naught that life will eventually come to. He does not follow the trend blindly. The grotesque images he creates are not showy without substance. They all come from his real feelings and experiences.

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<sup>80</sup> 「青山無語歎人亡，草露風燈閃電光。人歸何處青山在，總是南柯夢一場。」

A lot of Taiwanese artists are often invited to international exhibitions and Wu is not an exception. Wu has been invited to display his works for so many times, however, there are only a few academic discussions about his works. After doing research on his works in each period, I deem that it will enrich the academic field of Taiwanese contemporary art. Meanwhile, my analysis on the characters in his works will help the viewers get closer to Wu's art world. In the age of innovation, I look forward to his future works where this kind of philosophy continues to create more grotesque images.



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Figures

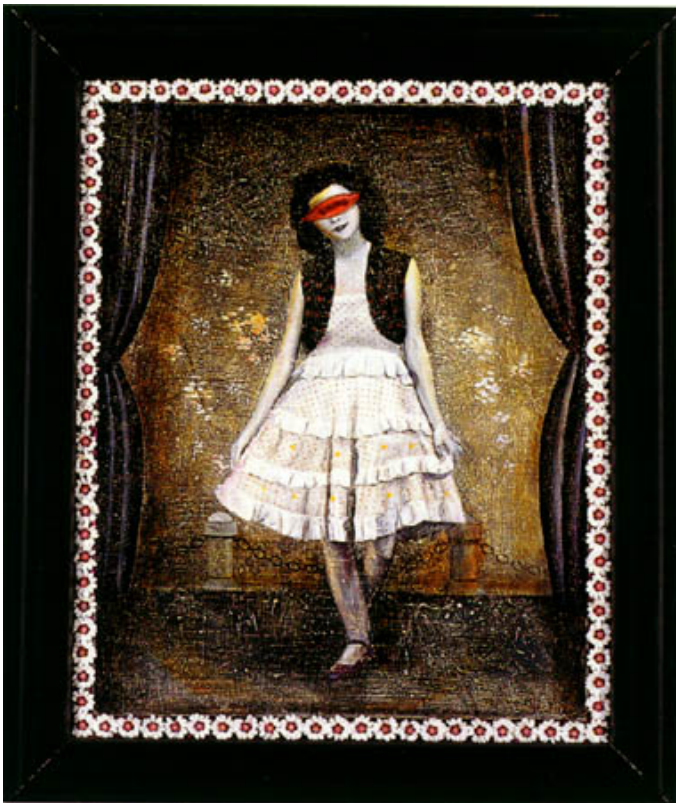


Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig.11





Fig. 12

Fig 13.



Fig. 14





Fig.15



Fig.16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19



Fig. 20



Fig. 21



Fig. 22



Fig. 23



Fig. 24



Fig. 25



Fig. 26



Fig. 27



Fig. 28



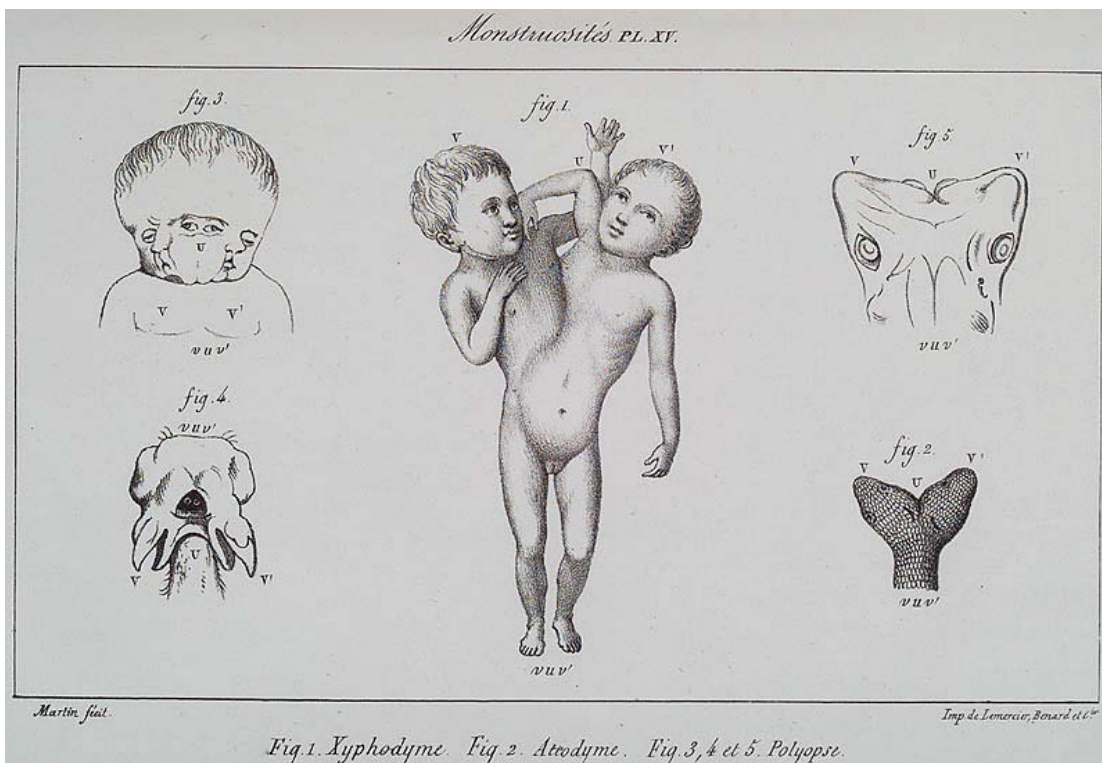



Fig. 1. Xyphodyme. Fig. 2. Atrodyeme. Fig. 3, 4 et 5. Polyopse.

Fig. 29

**Spirit Dreaming Conjunction**

People who are not able to attract the other sex or not able to approach women they yearn for, can cast this spell.

On a set date of the calendar of the underworld or at the midnight on a full moon, prepare a paper bridge and set it toward the east. Mix mother's milk, with vermeil and write "dream spell" on the paper bridge. Carve a human figure of myrtle wood and write the birth date and hour of the lady you ache for on the figure, then put it under your pillow along with the spell. The spell will answer your wish and before dawn it will bring the lady into your dreams.



Among layers of rocks, mist rises as water falls. Before you, a picturesque scene of a bridge outlining a creek unfolds. Looking into your eyes the woman of your desires will fall in love and will enjoy a sensual experience with you. When you wake up in the next morning, you will still feel her body warmth. Ever after that time, whenever you crave for her, she will turn up in your dreams. This is the spell that fulfills your desires.

**Lovesick Conjunction:**  
 Man is yang, woman is yin. The intercourse of yin and yang is the ultimate goal in accordance with the Yin-Yang Scripture. Such uniting absorbs the quintessence of the universe, the earth, the sun and the moon. With the quintessence of the universe, the vision of the constellation and the figuration of spirits, woman's heart joins man's and man's heart joins woman's. All of their thoughts fuse into one. This is the adjuration of the supreme Taoist god.

**Taboo:**  
 If the devotee wants to stop such lovesickness, he can cover his head with a cloth that has been used for women's menstruation, his desires for the woman will stop immediately.




Fig. 30



## 濟公活佛 降

詩曰：碧潭深悲千載冤 插鼓嘈嘈喚亡魂  
魂兮歸來洗罪愆 錯把青潭當汨江

民國九十一年十月五日  
歲次辛巳十一月十八日

聖示：

汨江

：又名汨羅江，為中國北方之大江，古代詩人屈原，不能懷志，抱石投此江自盡，當時村民皆感召其節志，紛紛結船成隊，打撈營救，鑼鼓震天為趕驅魚，後來演變為龍舟競賽的由來。

查

請事者：信男林宗正等十二人，現庚二十幾歲不等，皆住台北，其家屬代位請示。

信男林宗正等人，自幼罹患俗稱唐氏症，此乃DNA基因序列第十一條排列不齊所致，此症明顯特徵短頸、扁平臉中外皆然。諸信男雖非同月同日生，卻懶於同年同月同日死，是因果所致，天機參數隱晦未明，不經吾佛開示，世人不啟，此緣應由清乾隆年間說起，河南省洞庭湖岸住有陳華生等十二人以船家為業，以捕魚為生，某日於湖內捕獲一尾重達百斤之罕見的娃娃鯊，為稀有的淡水胎生鯊魚科。農曆七月為其受孕期，此鯊魚頭似人臉，被捕時會發出酷似嬰兒的泣聲，於剖殺間，在魚腹裡發現懷有三十八尾小鯊魚，且活蹦亂跳，村人悉知，皆以為罕象，主張將此遺腹鯊放生，但陳華生等十二人，不聽勸阻一意孤行，以至此遺腹鯊皆一命嗚呼。哀哉！上天有好生之德，陳華生等人造此殺業，經閻羅王泰廣殿審判後。今生以集體轉世為現信男林宗正等人。今受果報，謂因果不爽，今日經吾佛開示，希弟子之家屬能秉真誠發願行善，並叩請上蒼之思慈寬赦汝等親人之前冤，是也。

Fig. 31