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AHOUSE OF GLASS

Ethereal concepts will take fragile form next weekend when Hsinchu, long known for its glasswork, opens an art museum and factory dedicated to the medium

By Susan Kendzulak

SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR

The glistening bars of the tiny jail cell are glass; the last prisoner's shoes, sleeping bag, wash basin, toothbrush and paste are also glass. Even the toilet he once used is now a laser-cut glass work.

The room, once used by the Taiwan military, is now frozen in time and one of the many striking features of the new Hsinchu Municipal Glass Art Museum and Glass Factory designed by Taipei-based architect Chi Ti-nan.

The "Jail of Glass," created by German artists Stephanie Juenemann and Ralf Schmitt, was handcrafted by Hsinchu's glass artisans. The original materials, such as the steel bars, have all been replaced by glass, weakening the jail's intrinsic power as a place of forced confinement and transforming its dreary nature into a sparkling room straight out of a fairy tale.

The grimy toilet and the prisoner's remnants are alchemized into dazzling objects of marvel and the cell's history, now suspended, is leant the clarity of the delicate medium.

Although Hsinchu is a city renowned for its glass, the new museum promises not to be your typical glass museum for it does not merely focus on glass "objets d'art" but also includes various exhibits of cutting-edge art, ranging from language conundrums



One of the new Hsinchu Municipal Glass Art Museum's exhibits, titled "Running Thoughts." It features a slide box installed under the glass stairway that will project images of people walking. photo: courtesy of the Hsinchu municipal glass museum
PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE HSINCHU MUNICIPAL GLASS MUSEUM

Arts notes:

What: Traditional, conceptual and modern works of art made from or inspired by glass.

Where: Hsinchu Municipal Glass Art Museum and Glass Factory, 2 Tungta Rd., Sec. 1; tel 3562-6091

When: Opens Dec. 18, 10am to 8pm. (First two hours are inaugural ceremony activities.) Operating hours for the first week will be 10am to 6pm.

How much: Adults NT\$120; children and seniors NT\$90.

and neon displays to slide boxes and videos.

The museum will also contain traditional elements, such as stained-glass windows and exhibitions devoted to the history of glass, as well as temporary displays of new glass works. The various techniques used to make glass are also a focus, with special attention devoted to advanced glass technology in Taiwan.

With an incredibly rich past, preserving the building's history while creating an innovative and international museum was a major consideration for the collaboration between the architect Chi, his workshop and the Berlin-based "Foerderkoje," founded by Schmitt, which invites other artists from around the world to contribute and develop their work.

The museum's main building has been a hospital, a residence for the Japanese Emperor, a base for the US military and, until this year, a base for the Taiwan military. In transforming it to a museum, innovative architectural touches were added, such as a glass feng shui wall, an outdoor pedestrian glass bridge that connects two buildings, a screening room with Z-shaped benches and seven tunnel-like passageways to unify the separate buildings that comprise the museum, such as a temple and a former airport check-in station.

The museum's official opening is December 18th, which coincides with the start of the Hsinchu International Glass Art Festival. It's inaugural exhibit will feature a tunnel of "video marbles," various glass-inspired videos by artists from Italy, Japan and Taiwan installed at random intervals along of the length of a tunnel. In one video, a Japanese dance troop glissades over a sea of broken glass; in another, a woman's moist tongue sensually licks a pane of glass.

One of the museum's most prominent displays, the large green neon sign "when rabbitudes become form 1999" installed over the courtyard, is actually an art historical pun. Thirty years ago, the phrase "when attitudes become form" signified the beginning of the idea as conceptual art. Amusingly enough, when "rabbitudes" is translated into Chinese characters it becomes "bearitudes." As Schmitt jokingly observes, perhaps the sometimes confusing distinctions between East and West are

aply illustrated in the obvious differences between a bear and rabbit.

The large, handcrafted "rabbidragon Y2K," peeking around the corner of a glass wall in the lobby, is a powerful-looking glass rabbit holding a bright orange carrot that eventually becomes the dragon's tail. The artist's use of Chinese animal symbols to show how one year slides effortlessly into the next is intended to focus visitors on the tension and anticipation surrounding the end of the millennium.

In another exhibit, one can sense the influence of Aristotle -- whose followers believed walking was equivalent to thinking -- in the concept that inspired "Running Thoughts," a slide box installed under the glass stairway that will project images of people walking. In this work, light, glass and thought are linked.

However, sound becomes the focal point in "Trashy sound," comprised of recordings from the "video marbles" piped to speakers in a trash can outside the building. In the "Broken-into-Infinite-Blessings Wall," irregularly shaped beads of bluish glass form a wave pattern on the outer walls of the visitor center that overlooks the lake. And in "zoo much neon," a directional sign links the zoo adjacent to the museum and the hit song by Taiwanese pop singer Lao Ta-you, who sang that his hometown was no longer home because it had "too much neon."

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