

## Great Migrations – Lu Ming-Te Solo Exhibition Media and the Body in Lu Ming-Te’s Art

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“Migration” refers to long-distance movements of a whole herd of animals, or part of a herd, from their original living environment to a different place. This kind of movement is usually seasonal. It is a form of mass relocation studied in ethology. Birds, hooved mammals and fish all follow such migratory patterns. The purposes include reproducing the next generation, searching for water or food, or surviving through periods of cold temperatures.<sup>1</sup> Migration has also occurred in human history. Usually this form of behavior in which whole groups shift their habitation is caused by either natural or manmade factors, such as changes in climate, shortages in food, economic pressures, political conflicts, ethnic cleansing or war. Put simply, great migrations are large-scale, long-distance movements to a new living space by either animals or people.

In his current solo exhibition, Lu Ming-Te taps into the concept of “Great Migrations” to express three different dimensions: his own personal artistic journey, observations on the evolution of art through time, and the relationship between humans and nature. At the same time, “Great Migrations” also signals Lu’s boldly disruptive orientation toward art. Unlike other artists who have concentrated on finding a style that gives them renown, Lu’s career includes an astonishing volume and diversity of approaches, resulting in numerous series.

When considering the large variation in his artwork series, most people intuitively sense a certain connection among them, but are also perplexed as to how to view it. This paper considers how the artist has organized his “Great Migrations” from three dimensions – his own personal creative history, the transitions from one period of art to the next and the knowledge production, both subjective and objective, of humankind’s relationship with nature – to gain an understanding of the internal cognitive logic and course of development behind the images in Lu Ming-Te’s artworks.

“Generally speaking, an artwork’s mode of presentation is a mature

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<sup>1</sup> Dorst, J. P. (2019, August 6). *Migration*. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/science/migration-animal>

expression, and the existence of the mode often becomes a stumbling block to the pursuit of the next mode.”<sup>2</sup>

—Lu Ming-Te

When speaking of his own creative ideas, Lu Ming-Te has said that through diligent effort he had been able to develop his own approach and form his own painting style, but for him, once a style has been built up to the point of being overpowering, it in fact becomes habitual, a stumbling block to greater personal creative breakthroughs. Such a creative notion of constantly surpassing oneself is one manifestation of “Great Migration” in Lu’s art.

### **Great Migration 1: From “the pursuit of a purely painting-oriented language” to “everything is a medium”**

Lu feels that what he learned at the National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU) fine arts department could be called “the pursuit of a purely painting-oriented language.” Put simply, it was what he needed to pass through the entryway to art. According to Lu, this was the period when he realized “what art is.” Most of his paintings during this period pursued his flavor of a “purely painting-oriented language” through an abstract expressionist technique with surrealist subject matter. From 1970 to 1981, Lu interwove abstract expressionist lines and potent symbols throughout all his works, from the time he entered university until his solo exhibition at the American Cultural Center just before he traveled to Japan for graduate studies.

His experience as a foreign student in Japan had a tremendous impact, forming the most significant “great migration” in Lu’s artistic career. This migration was a revolutionary change, transforming his art from a “purely painting-oriented language” to an expression of the “language of materials” and then to the “juxtaposition of hybrid materials.”

Lu Ming-Te’s studies in the Master’s Program in Plastic Art and Mixed Media at Tsukuba University had an enormous influence over his creative life.<sup>3</sup> Marshall McLuhan’s (1911-1980) concept that “the medium is the message”; the computer aesthetics of Hiroshi Kawano (1925-2012), which interpreted art as

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<sup>2</sup> Lu Ming-Te, “*Ge zhan zi shu*” (“Artist’s Statement to the Solo Exhibition”), *Lu Ming De zuopin ji 1974-1990 (Collected Works of Lu Ming-Te 1974-1990)* (Taichung: Lu Ming-Te, 1990) no page numbers

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

signs or information; and Katsuhiko Yamaguchi's (1928-2018) division of media into different eras guided Lu in forming the framework of his "mixed media art theory." Joseph Beuys's (1921-1986) concept of social sculpture and Jean Baudrillard's (1929-2007) theory of "Simulacra and Simulation" directly influenced Lu's later creative ideas.

Lu himself asserts that his time at Tsukuba had an impact on his concept of art that was "too great to describe." To put it precisely, he was completely reborn. "During the four years I studied in Japan, I encountered light art, electronic media, holography, video editing and computer graphics, and I took part in several performance art events. More importantly, I completed the theoretical framework for what would later become the source of my 'mixed media art theory.'"<sup>4</sup> He fervidly collected data on European and American avant-garde art, and he strategically defined the subject of his master's thesis as "Changes in Art Media in the 20th Century." Preparing copious information for pedagogical use when he returned to Taiwan, he organized an overview of avant-garde art as it had developed up to 1985, which later became material for his courses on mixed media art at Tunghai University and NTNU.

Regarding his "mixed media art theory," Lu explains: "In short, my mixed media art theory focuses on grasping the current system of widely varying ways in which art media has developed by looking at four major directions of expression: media, environment, behavior, and signs."<sup>5</sup> That is to say, given the history of Western art development, he foresaw that Taiwanese art would evolve to find expression through diverse forms of media, relationships with space and environment, with performance serving as a medium and signs serving as subject matter.

Before graduating from Tsukuba, Lu completed a pair of works, *Tsukuba Memories I* and *Tsukuba Memories II* (1984). These two works proclaimed his "great migration" from "a purely painting-oriented language" to a "language of materials," his transition from strictly painting or drawing with symbols to using materials as signs. The series featured a singular arrangement: *Tsukuba Memories I* was rendered with the simplest of drawing materials, the pencil. The primitive nature of the material was echoed in the realist mode of expression, seemingly emphasizing the primal origins of painting. The subject matter was

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

stones, twine, a plumb bob and other materials juxtaposed next to each other in the painting. Meanwhile, in *Tsukuba Memories II* the actual physical objects were placed next to one another. Interestingly, if one considers how the works were produced, their order should have been reversed: first No. II, with the objects arranged on it, followed by No. I, a realistic reproduction in paint. However, Lu's chosen sequential arrangement was clearly from painting—specifically realist painting—to materialist expression. On the one hand, this indicates consciousness of the avant-garde spirit of the times, in which “everything is a medium.” On the other hand, it also represents Lu's migration toward mixed media, in which “everything is a medium.”

In 1989 he took part in the exhibition “Message from Taipei” at the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in Japan, extending his artistic concepts a step further. In his *Ikaho* series (1989), he used cultural artifacts with a natural, regional flavor as his medium, an approach first seen in his *Southern Taiwan* series, and extended the work into the physical space. “[At the Hara Museum] that was the first time I produced a work in the corner of an entire space. So my mental framework extended from a flat canvas to embrace the concept that ‘the content of an installation is determined by the unique way in which it is installed at the site...’”<sup>6</sup>

This concept of art arose from the Bauhaus idea of the “field” as promulgated by the *Jikken Kōbō* or “Experimental Workshop” of Katsuhiko Yamaguchi. Extending the “juxtaposition of hybrid materials” symbolizing southern Taiwanese culture into the space or environment became another of the “great migrations” in Lu's creative life. It is not surprising that in the artist's statement for his 1990 solo exhibition, he noted his 1981 exhibition at the American Cultural Center and his *Ikaho* series of 1989 as significant transitions not only in his creative approach, but also synchronicously in his life, in his experience of life and death. He had what he called “the free expansion of my guiding spirit and a breakthrough at a critical point in the dimension of expression”—a “great migration” in both his life and his art. The *Hon Anya* series of 1994-1995 was derived from this concept—an environmental space composed of symbols.

## Great Migration 2: Media is Everything

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<sup>6</sup> Lu Ming-Te, “Zuowei yiwei bianxie gushi de zhiren” (“Being an Artisan Who Writes Stories”), *Art Critique of Taiwan (ACT)* no. 027 (July 2005), p. 63

In 1986 Jun T. Lai founded the Studio of Contemporary Art (SOCA). Because she too had studied in Japan, she was acquainted with Lu Ming-Te and asked him to take part in the SOCA Opening Exhibition “Environment, Installation, and Video.” For this event he contributed a neon sign reading “Media is Everything” (1986). This “great migration,” using media to declare the arrival of the age of media, also signaled a shift in his creative approach, from an era of two-dimensional composition or ensconced materials, to an era of media liberation. “Back then *Media Is Everything* mainly foretold the arrival of the media age. It served as a manifesto.”<sup>7</sup> In his landmark mixed media work *Tatu Mountain I* (1986), Lu used scavenged tree branches and images of tree branches to form a dialectic of media in multiple overlapping layers. Using a triangular shape, he broke the habitual framework of the four-sided painting, and again, his textual annotation “Media is Everything” declared the dawning of the media age.

The artist Tsong Pu, who also contributed to the same group exhibition, recalls his impression of Lu’s epoch-defining declaration “Media is Everything”:

Lu Ming-Te’s textual work *Media is Everything* was hugely influential. It heralded the formation and appearance of the new media age. His video installations also had a big impact. At the time Lu Ming-Te used a small television set as his installation object, applying a new technological product as his art form. I had used different materials in my works early on, but the things he developed were more technological, and their application was more advanced. He announced the very nature of the age. For me, it overturned what art of the past looked like.”<sup>8</sup>

For the evolution of Lu’s artworks, the declaration “Media is Everything” was a transition in process “from expression with materials to the presentation of media,” a shift in direction from “expression through a painting-oriented language” and “expression through objects emphasizing materiality” to the use of electronic media imagery and conceptual performance. We should stress that Lu’s use of electronic media was not simply the concept of electronic images, but the concept of electronic media installation. In the 1987 exhibition “**Action and Space**” at Taipei Fine Arts Museum, he contributed video installation performances—mixed media artworks combining installation techniques, objects, digital art, sound, and documentation of performances. In 1988 he

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<sup>7</sup> Cited from an interview with Tsong Pu, Kuo I-fen and Lu Ming-Te, 2020/12/01.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

participated in the “Cutting-edge Technology Art Exhibition” at the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts in Taichung with a work combining optoelectronics and video installation.

The composite media art he produced from 1985 to 1989 in his *Tatu Mountain* series and *Southern Taiwan* series centered on multilayered juxtapositions of multiple media, stressing the relationships among concept, environment and behavior, as one path of development of the declaration “Media Is Everything.” His *Subtropical Forest* (1988), featured in the 1988 exhibition “Media, Environment, Installation” was a conclusive expression of mixed media art.

Because of the necessities of his methodology, Lu’s mixed media art theory naturally led him to found the Graduate Institute of Transdisciplinary Art at National Kaohsiung Normal University in August of 2006—Taiwan’s first graduate program of transdisciplinary art. Lu relates that his concept of transdisciplinary art comes from the European idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (“total work of art”), especially the Bauhaus perspective of art, which had a very big influence on him. He avers: “Transdisciplinary experimentation lies at the edge of art and pushes to expand the edge as much as possible. Whatever originally was not art, we assimilate it. Therefore, transdisciplinary art actually means there are no domains.”<sup>9</sup> The concept of achieving mixed media by searching for mutual relationships among different disciplines led him to found the Graduate Institute. He believes that transecting disciplines is only a method; its purpose is to erase borderlines. Therefore, it has no strict definition. In his own artistic practice, it occurs without effort. He relates:

I feel that the theme I care about has never changed. It has only evolved in discourse from “composite materials → media → transdiscipline.” I have always concentrated on relationships of fusion, between big and small, two-dimensional and three-dimensional, among environments, or among different media. Indeed it was for this reason that after I came to understand media, incorporating new disciplines became an inevitable decision.<sup>10</sup>

In 1986 Lu’s *Media Is Everything* foretold a paradigm shift in the zeitgeist of Taiwanese contemporary art, a “great migration” that continues to this day.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Lu Ming-Te, “Zuowei yiwei bianxie gushi de zhiren” (“Being an Artisan Who Writes Stories”), *Art Critique of Taiwan (ACT)* no. 027 (July 2005), p. 63

### Great Migration 3: Returning to the Essence of Humanity, Beholding Nature

Beginning in 2010, Lu Ming-Te's artwork shifted toward animal and plant symbols hand-painted with delicate lines, while the content focused on returning human knowledge production to nature, to plants and animals. His solo exhibition titled "If History Were Written by Plants" expressed the "great migration" of returning to the essence of humanity and returning to nature. One of the featured works, *If I Had a Measure of Nature* (2010), was an attempt to visually manifest the inner spirit level. In it he abruptly mixed and connected flora and fauna with artificial machinery to convey the complicated relationship between man and nature, in search of a measure by which to observe nature. Similarly, "The Temperature of Simulacra" exhibition (2020) contained many attempts to view nature using manmade units of measurement, such as the four seasons; the four classic flowers (plums, orchids, bamboo and chrysanthemums); thermometers; levels; numbers; and calibration marks. In so doing, Lu also exposed the many ways humankind attempts to perceive nature.

Though a pioneer of Taiwanese electronic media art in the 1980s, Lu Ming-Te ceased working in electronic media and video installation sometime in the early 1990s. He remarks, "I believe that technology is technology and cultural content is cultural content. The point is cultural significance, not technology. Therefore, so-called technological techniques will always be progressing, but the evolution of formal logic and cultural significance are what really matter."<sup>11</sup>

He believes the central point of art is not the development of media technology, but the influence that the development of media technology has on society and the human environment. If one merely treats media technology as a form, then media will produce novel appearances, constantly changing, and art will have no choice but to follow in its footsteps. For Lu, this will only result in empty form, without content. He asserts: "If we limit ourselves to the pursuit of form, such forms will inevitably devolve into the superficial manipulation of media. We will be forever limited to new media whose external appearances are perpetually in flux, guided by the latest fads."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cited from an interview with Tsong Pu, Kuo I-fen and Lu Ming-Te, 2020/12/01.

<sup>12</sup> Lu Ming-Te, "Ge zhan zi shu" ("Artist's Statement to the Solo Exhibition"), *Lu Ming De zuopin ji 1974-1990 (Collected Works of Lu Ming-Te 1974-1990)* (Taichung: Lu Ming-Te, 1990) no page numbers

Thus, from the *Pattern Analysis* series of 1996-1998, to the *Dust Covered Memories* series of 1998, the *HON AN YA* series of 2002 at IT Park Gallery, the *Intertidal Zone* series of 2005, the *Invisible Landscape* series of 2009, and the series *If History Were Written by Plants* of 2010, Lu migrated from cultural mimicry to environmental mimicry, his scrutiny shifting from consumer culture to history and finally to nature. In reality, even though Lu has based his artistic ideas on a comprehensive theory of media and his work superficially takes the form of media art centered on video imagery and other kinds of technology, expression through painting and nature as subject matter have always been present ever since his *Tatu Mountain* series. In the catalogue for his solo exhibition "If History Were Written by Plants," one passage in the explanation of the works elucidated the thinking that has guided his use of painting:

Interaction and participation in new media are still popular methods of art. But in recent years, the artist has been pondering what will come after trans-media explorations. He believes that art must return to the essence of humanness, requiring hands with a high degree of precision and skill. Therefore, he has depicted a variety of plants to serve as symbols, connecting them with lines as a reflection of contemporary life revolving around social activities and the internet.<sup>13</sup>

Lu returned to painting because he was convinced that in the digital age, people's intuitions were constantly being blunted, and he still missed that "bodily" sensation.

Whether he is pondering the essence of humanity or his view of nature, Lu Ming-Te has recently employed the concept of "mimicry" to look back on his own process of creative development. But whether he turns his mimicry to media, technology, the environment or culture, Lu's art always focuses on his thoughts about people and nature. Regarding mimicry, Lu observes:

In human society there is no so-called reality. All that we see are virtual images. On earth there is no so-called stasis. Everything is in motion. Supernatural culture is the human imagination about the unknown world. Culture is an expression of cognitive mimicry. The act of art is the process of aesthetic mimicry.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Pai Hsueh-Lan, Chang Yan-Ju, *Lu Mingde: Ruguo lishi you zhiwu shuxie* ("Lu Ming-Te: If History Were Written by Plants") (Taipei: Mingshan Art, 2014) p. 22

<sup>14</sup> Lu Ming-Te, explanatory text for "Wonderland I" (2021)



He believes that all things are in motion. Thus, everything is a virtual image. Everything is mimicry. Therefore, Lu's art has returned to the warmth of humanity and a vision of the cadence of nature. The "great migration" of art ultimately returns to human warmth. The "great migration" of life ultimately returns to nature. Lu uses the concept of the migration of animals from his *Intertidal Zone* series as the central theme of this exhibition, inserting his creation (mimicry) within it. At both the entrance and exit of the exhibition, we encounter giant eggs, symbolizing the inception of life. This resonates with a philosophical view (from the *Tao Te Ching*) of nature and our own human condition: "The universe is not sentimental; it treats all things as straw dogs."