

PATRICK SUN



Portrait of Patrick Sun. Courtesy: Sunpride Foundation, Hong Kong

XIYADIE, Sew Up, 2017, paper, 118 x 140cm. Courtesy: the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei.

The Whole Spectrum

BY YSABELLE CHEUNG

In a painting by Qian Hui'an (1833–1911), two young boys share a white-fleshed watermelon. At their back is a rock wall; in front is another melon, this one unsplit, its curves mimicking the fluid lines of their embracing, huddled figures. The dress of one of the figures—a loose, red sash around the waist, the same shade as the scarlet of their lips—and a bamboo fan evoke the canicular heat. The symbolic fertile fruit, the rapturous mien and the border that separates them from a critical, heteronormative world, indicate a forbidden intimacy.

This late Qing Dynasty work is one of Patrick Sun's earliest acquisitions, purchased in 1988. Although it would be decades later until Sun would establish the Sunpride Foundation, through which he collects Asian and LGBTQ themed artworks, and organize the first and largest exhibition in a public Asian museum on the same theme, this acquisition, he revealed, was a portentous one, and the precursor to his marriage of two lifelong interests: queer activism and art.

I caught up with Sun at his centrally located apartment in Taipei at the tail end of Taipei Dangdai art fair, where he served as a member of its advisory group. Greeting me at the elevator with a jovial smile, he revealed a modish abode, with geometrical edges and flat planes set in tones of velvet black and marble white. Curiously, there was not a single artwork in the lobby, kitchen or lounge area—a deliberate move on Sun's part, who also maintains a residence in Hong Kong, where he was born and raised. "I don't have any artworks displayed in my homes! You see, Ysabelle"—Sun likes to repeat an interlocutor's name in conversation, a highly effective verbal tag perhaps honed in his many years as a businessman—"I honestly collect only for the exhibitions. I ask myself: Does this artwork have a point of view? How does it work in the context of a show? Does it further our mission?"

This exhibition-based collecting mandate was conferred to him by close friend and collector Uli Sigg, after Sun had ruminated on the idea of branching out into contemporary art, having built up an already sizable collection of classical pieces. "He said, 'Patrick, if you want to do this, you should have an exhibition in mind—because that's a platform you can create through which you can talk about

current issues.'" This hewed with Sun's still-forming idea of merging his support of the Asian gay community with his collecting practice. From there, Sunpride Foundation was born in 2014, along with the seedlings of the exhibition "Spectrosynthesis – Asian LGBTQ Issues and Art Now," which opened three years later at Taipei's Museum of Contemporary Art.

Like a handful of truly dedicated collectors, Sun often travels to meet artists. For example, in November 2018, he jumped on a plane to Hong Kong to meet Danh Võ at the opening of his show at M+ Pavilion. He had previously purchased a set of heliogravures acquired by the artist, taken between 1962 to 1973 in Vietnam by doctor Joseph M. Carrier; some of these images depict two men clasping hands, in what Sun described as a "totally nonsexual manner; this is what Asia was like before all the humbugger and rules." Due to the nature of Sun's collection and a respect for the identities of the individuals that he engages with, he and his advisory team often undertake meticulous and sensitive research to understand an artist's background and their relationship to the LGBTQ cause. They do not necessarily have to be gay; in fact, he celebrates the spectrum and collects works by straight artists as well, such as an ink-rubbing-on-paper work by Cai Guo-Qiang which celebrates same-sex marriage. More recently, he shifted his direction slightly after spotting several works by non-Asian artists that caught his eye at Taipei Dangdai, such as Adrian Ghenie and Hernan Bas. Yet his primary motivation for collecting remains intertwined with a specific type of activism.

In May 2017, four months before "Spectrosynthesis" opened, the Council of Grand Justices in Taiwan stated that it was "unconstitutional" to restrict same-sex couples from wedding, and asked the Legislative Yuan to amend the Civil Code within the next two years. Sun didn't intend for the exhibition to be a direct response to the political fracas surrounding the rights of the Taiwanese LGBTQ community, though the works of more than 50 artists and artist groups from Sun's collection—all of them either of the community or who displayed pieces that spoke to queer themes—were inevitably contextualized in a more urgent light, one that could shift perspectives and engender real progression in areas

of LGBTQ visibility and rights. Those perusing the show were thus surprised to find a more nuanced, balanced discourse promoting egalitarianism, the radical queering potential of works by Wu Tsang, Tseng Kwong-chi, Martin Wong and Xiyadie transformed into subtlety against the roar of gay pride outside the museum walls. Sun explained: "Our target audience is not the local gay community that already exists but those outside of that echo chamber." As an example, he recounted his own eye-opening experience watching an interview with late Hong Kong cantopop and film star Leslie Cheung on television in which he casually talked about his relationship. "I think that influenced a lot of people, perhaps more so than the actions of a gay activist," he said. "I'm not saying that we don't need gay activists; I support them of course. But there are many ways to make it work. I see art as one way to make it work."

Days before our interview, the Sunpride Foundation announced a joint exhibition, "Spectrosynthesis II – Exposure of Tolerance: LGBTQ in Southeast Asia," with the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, to be unveiled in late 2019. Sun hinted that other Asian cities were in the pipeline, and seemed both emboldened and humbled by the success of the Taipei iteration. Several artists flew in to Taipei to celebrate the announcement of the Bangkok show, including American-Vietnamese artist Dinh Q. Lê and multimedia artist Arin Rungjang, who gave a moving speech in Thai about the project's significance, announcing he will create a brand-new work specifically for the show.

Whether in cultivating institutional partnerships with Taipei's Museum of Contemporary Art or the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, or in supporting artists and local communities, Sun slips easily into the role of the "connector," described in Malcolm Gladwell's book *The Tipping Point* (2000) as one of those "people with a special gift for bringing the world together . . . with a truly extraordinary knack [for] making friends and acquaintances." Sun has a more straightforward take on the work he, and we, must do in order to truly attain equal rights: "I always say that the law is the law. You can have a law saying that it is illegal, but yet it's still happening. At the same time a law could pass making it legal but perhaps it's still not socially accepted. Two movements have to go side by side."