

Art Radar

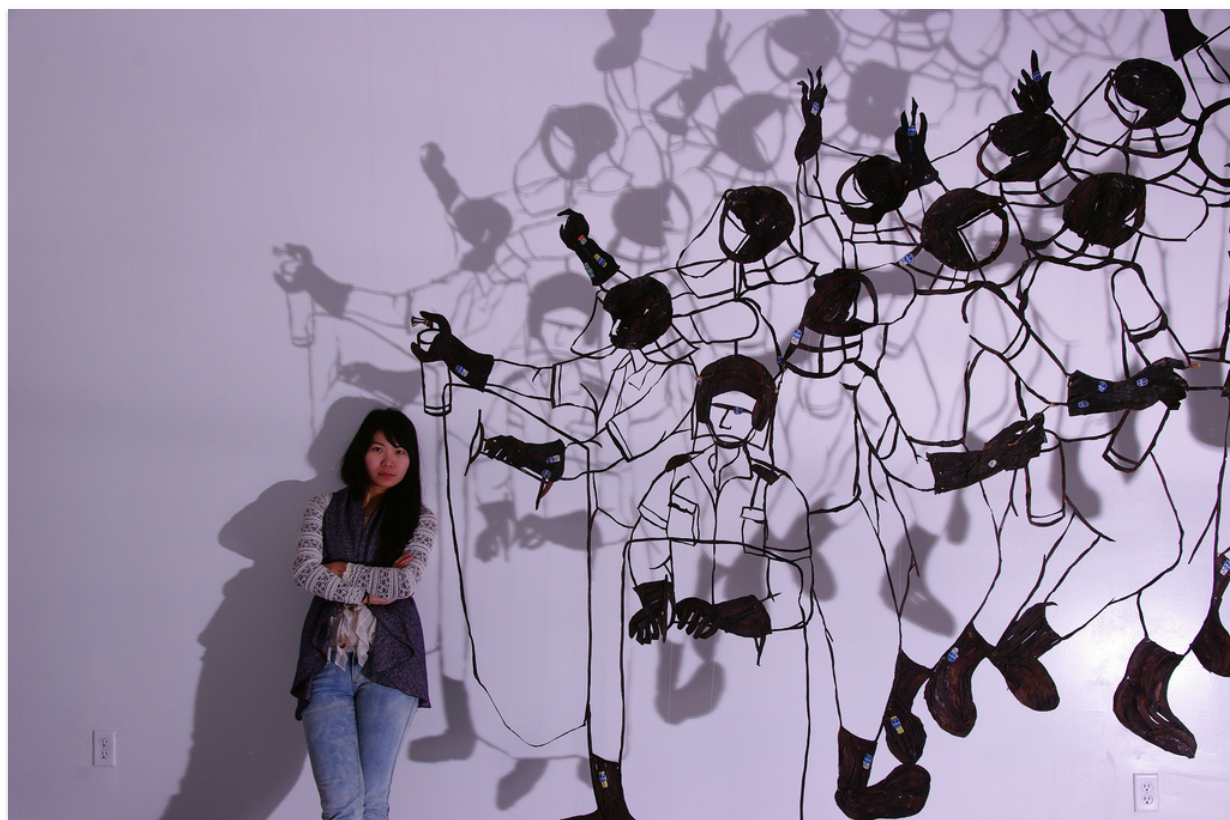
Contemporary art trends and news from Asia and beyond

Taiwanese artist Yi-Chun Lo talks bananas and economics – interview

Posted on **05/12/2014**

Taiwanese artist uses banana peels to engage with issues as diverse as globalisation, capitalism and dictatorship.

Yi-Chun Lo's installations, made from banana peels, address welfare strikes, Hong Kong's Umbrella Revolution and the historical exploitation of banana plantation workers. *Art Radar* asks the artist about her work and being an artist with social responsibility.



Yi-Chun Lo standing in her installation "Banana Justice" at CAI. Image courtesy the artist.

Yi-Chun Lo (b. 1985, Taipei, Taiwan), received her MFA in Sculpture in 2007 from the National Taiwan University of the Arts. Since then, she has exhibited her work widely in Taiwan. More recently, she has travelled to other countries such as Japan, India and the United States with grants from the Taiwan government's Ministry of Culture as an artist in residence to produce site-specific works and expand her artistic practice to community and environmental art projects.

Presently, Yi-Chun Lo is an artist-in-residence at **Contemporary Arts International** (CAI) in Acton, Massachusetts. During this residency, Yi-Chun has created her artwork entirely from dried banana peels that she collected at local markets and shops while interacting with the local community.

Art Radar caught up with the artist to ask her about the intriguing new direction of her work.



Yi-Chun Lo, "Banana Justice – Umbrella Revolution in HK" (detail), 2014, banana peels. Image courtesy the artist.

What is your latest installation *Banana Justice* about and how does this work relate to Taiwan's history and economic problems and to your previous work?

This work is about the clash of today's political and economic systems. The three pieces of work in this installation are called *History of Banana Republic*, *Boycott of Market Basket* and *Umbrella Revolution in HK*. They are made entirely from recycled banana peels – the most basic fruit that is consumed on an everyday basis – to present the humble position of farmers, workers and common people in the world against mainstream ideologies such as globalisation, capitalism and dictatorship.

The three pieces of work do not have too much of a relationship to Taiwan's history, except that Taiwan has been an important producer of bananas for world trade. But there are two pieces of work in this installation related to the United States' history and current news. *History of Banana Republic* is about the trade

between US fruit companies and Latin American countries in the twentieth century that represents the mistreatment of banana workers, military suppression and coup d'état changes of political power.

Boycott of Market Basket is about the employee strike I witnessed in Massachusetts during my residency period, in which workers at a local supermarket protested for their welfare and tried to prevent greedy capitalism. And the third, *Umbrella Revolution in HK*, is about the student protests against the regimes of power in Hong Kong, which has been gaining a lot of attention in Taiwan as well.

I used the same material and technique in my previous work that I did in Japan in 2013, which was about the market relationship between Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines.



Yi-Chun Lo, 'Banana Justice' (detail), 2014, banana peels. Image courtesy the artist.

How did you interact with the local community in Acton to do this artwork? Is community interaction a major part of your art practice and how did that work in Acton?

I walked into different local shops that produce banana juice, ice cream, yogurt and smoothies, and I told them that I am doing research about bananas and asked for their discarded banana peels. I explained that I don't want to waste any single bit of the banana that is an important food in many countries, and I also explained that the idea of this artwork is about consumption and accumulation in daily life.

After one and a half months of trying to get some local shops interested in cooperating with me to save the banana peels, I got a positive answer from a local ice cream shop called Reasons To Be Cheerful in West Concord, a town next to Acton. The shop preserved banana peels for my art project from the bananas that they used for smoothies and ice cream. Sometimes I even went to this shop to "roast" bananas for their ice cream ingredients and get the peels.

Interacting with the community is a very important element in my art practice. By talking to the local people, I feel myself getting involved in the community, and it also helps me to clarify my ideas and the purpose of doing this art project.

What are your plans for the development of the *Banana Justice* project and what will happen to this artwork after the exhibition in Acton?

I plan to create some sculptures with banana peels, some prints and some animations to project in between my suspended installation. I would like to keep developing the capacity of the banana peels and bring in other elements such as light/shadow, projection/animation, and cross the limit of space from two-dimensional to three-dimensional for it to become a complete installation.

After the show in Acton, I am going to have another show at the ice cream shop Reasons To Be Cheerful from 26 November to 26 December 2014. In 2015, I will have a chance to present this work again in Taiwan. It is possible to fold and ship this banana work because with the proper drying the banana peels remain flexible and do not deteriorate.



Yi-Chun Lo's banana installation at Taipei Artist Village in Taiwan after her residency in Japan.
Image courtesy the artist.

What materials and processes do you like to use for your art installations and why?

I prefer to use natural, organic and recycled materials. The typical process for me to create my work is observing the environment and interacting with the community people, and then doing some sketches and developing ideas on paper. The last step will be working on materials, building models and then making the actual works. All the steps contribute and help me think and practice in the process.

Does your work nearly always have a historical and political meaning or is this a new direction in your work? How did you get interested in bananas and international trade issues?

It's a new direction for me, but I am not surprised by it. I started with environmental artworks, using natural materials to create site-specific work on wetlands, an old brick building and in a granary. I am concerned about farmland issues in Taiwan and worried about the food crisis in the world. I am also paying attention to farmers' and workers' living conditions. Therefore, when policies are made without considering our

environment and against people's basic living standard, I feel I should address these things through my work.

I have been interested in bananas since I participated in an artist residency in Japan in early 2013. At that time, I was lonely, and confused about the cultural similarity of Taiwan and Japan and the identity of being Taiwanese. I was amazed when I saw Taiwanese bananas nicely displayed in Japanese supermarkets, and I found that during the 1950s to the 1970s, the majority of bananas in Japan were imported from Taiwan. Therefore, I started researching the banana trade history and got interested in international trade issues.



View of the gallery installation "Banana Justice" by Yi-Chun Lo at CAI. Image courtesy the artist.

How did you get the residency at Contemporary Arts International, and how do you think residencies help your artwork to develop and change?

I got the chance to be a resident at CAI from the Ministry of Culture of Taiwan. The government Ministry provides grants for Taiwanese artists to go and develop artwork in different countries.

I think residencies do help me perceive the world in a variety of ways, and I become more flexible and understand different cultures and different ways of thinking.

What advice would you give to young artists who want to have a global career but live in rather remote places like Taiwan?

I would suggest that they pay more attention to global issues and also participate more in local activities. You need to get experience making your art first in your own country and then take that experience of your own culture and ideas out into the world. I feel that today we are living in a global village and what happens in the local area could cause an effect in the world somehow. Our works and ideas can be presented to the public through the Internet and media, and the world is always the source for artists to perceive and observe.

What did you think about this residency at CAI and how has it helped your art career and the

development of your work?

CAI is located in a stone mining area surrounded by pine trees and woodlands. It provided the natural environment and spacious working space for me to concentrate on my work. The founder Yin Peet and the art director Viktor Lois are both artists, who shared their knowledge and artist's life and gave me their critique and advice. Also, CAI provided a complete gallery space for me to hold my exhibition.



Another view of the gallery space CAI with the installation "Banana Justice" by Yi-Chun Lo. Image courtesy the artist.

What other international art residency projects have you done and how did they help your artwork to progress?

The most influential international artist-in-residence programme for me was the **Cheng Long Wetlands International Environmental Art Project** in Taiwan in 2010. It was the beginning of my art career and it empowered me to make some positive change in the community. It was a big fulfillment for me and made me engage with concerns about the world in an artistic way.

Another great influence on my art were the six months between 2013 and 2014 that I spent travelling in India and visiting eco-villages. Also, the residency I did in Japan in 2013 really made me think more about my Taiwanese identity, and this is where I started to use bananas in my work.

What do you see as the future direction of your artwork or art career, and what do you hope to do next?

My work is concerned mainly with land, environment and the community. How to bring them all together to create a new lifestyle is what I have been thinking about. Especially after the four months of eco-village research in India, I was determined to be an artist with social responsibility. I would like to develop this organic material of banana peels further and try to make them into products. I also have a dream to set up an "Art Social Enterprise" in Taiwan that brings local communities to an artistic, respectful and eco-friendly lifestyle.

Related Topics: **Taiwanese art and artists, emerging artists, interviews, residencies, installation, art and the environment, art and the community**

Related Posts:

- ▶ **Taiwanese artist Wu Chang-Jung on raising pigs for the art market – K11 video interview** – July 2014 – Taiwanese artist Wu Chang-Jung discusses the influences behind the first documentary she ever filmed, *Documentary 1 – Pig Five Flower*
- ▶ **Adapting to climate change: Art and the community in the Cheng Long Wetlands, Taiwan** – June 2014 – Cheng-Long Wetlands International Environmental Art Project is back for the fifth year, continuing to raise awareness about environmental issues
- ▶ **Serenading visitors at Lee Mingwei's first Beijing show – in pictures** – May 2014 – Taiwan-born artist Lee Mingwei offers exhibition goers the gift of song in his first solo show in China
- ▶ **Taiwan's first 'Art Bank' opens in Taichung** – April 2014 – Taiwan's Ministry of Culture inaugurates the Art Bank Programme in Taichung, which aims at promoting young Taiwanese artists
- ▶ **Taiwan's 'Schizophrenia' goes global – in pictures** – March 2014 – Taiwanese new media art exhibition "Schizophrenia Taiwan 2.0" takes the works of young and emerging artists on a global tour into 2015

Subscribe to *Art Radar* **for more interviews with Taiwanese artists**

Posted in **Art and the community, Emerging artists, Environment, Installation, Interviews, Residencies, Taiwanese, USA** Tagged **2010 ChengLong Wetlands International Environmental Art Project, Contemporary Arts International, Jane Ingram Allen, Yi-Chun Lo**

permalink [<http://artradarjournal.com/2014/12/05/taiwanese-artist-yi-chun-lo-talks-bananas-and-economics-interview/>]