

STYLE

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT • ISSUE 15, APRIL 10 - 16, 2008

CINEMA SHOW TIMES	\$11
CLASSIFIED	\$14-15
EXHIBITION OPENINGS	\$13
FILM	\$10
MUSIC	\$10
RESTAURANT GUIDE	\$9
RESTAURANT REVIEW	\$8
SOCIAL DIRECTORY	\$13
10 - DAY CALENDAR	\$12

LIFESTYLE RESTAURANT \$8

SPRING FINALE \$10

TITANIC FESTIVAL \$10

Multicultural Budapest

Andreea Anca
meets American
artist **Bullet Shih**.

THE American artist **Bullet Shih** is currently exhibiting his paintings at the **The Chinese Characters**, an art gallery in Pest's District VII run by an Englishman, **Tim Etherington**.

It is a living definition of multiculturalism, and the Chinese connection reminds me of the theme of the Hungarian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2006, which revealed the existence of a so-called "meta-city" formed by Chinese immigrants in Budapest.

The project tried to prove, from an architectural perspective, the existence of an "alternative" town based on a loose Asian network of irregular markets, shopping centers and restaurants, reliant on social connections rather than on the construction of monumental architecture.

That research, conducted by a team of Hungarian artists, architects, sociologists and psychologists, did not include people like Shih and Etherington, self-imposed immigrants from the West, but the metaphor could easily be extended to them as well, because their living and working here have become the epitome of the multicultural reality of Budapest.

As is the Chinese Characters gallery, the mission of which, I am told, is "to open a dialogue between Hungarian and foreign artists."

The name of the gallery, Etherington explained, is his acknowledgement that Asian culture is omnipresent; a personal statement, it seems, that paraphrases those meta-city researchers, who claimed that the Asian community filled the empty spaces of the concrete structure of the Hungarian capital like a fluid.

But, apart from Shih's Chinese descent, which is rather accidental here, and the red Chinese writing on a white sign that leaned randomly on one wall, there seemed to be little concrete relation to anything Chinese.

Shih's strong green and blue paintings entitled *Life on the Meniscus* suggest some pre-occupation with his living here as a foreign artist, tied in with some environmental cry for the global loss of green spaces.

No matter what the message is, the large paintings are eye catching, and are a long way from Shah's usual beautiful, if slightly tenebrous, portraits of women, sometimes resembling **Tim Burton** characters from his animated films like *The Nightmare before Christmas*.

"Here, I summed up all the thoughts I've had over a year. They are about the environment, and the meniscus refers to that borderline connection," said the artist, just before the opening of his exhibition last Friday (Apr 4).

"As a foreigner coming here, my interaction



Photo by Boglárka Katona

with Hungarian society is on the surface," he said, but he confessed to the need to articulate more clearly his belonging.

"At some point, there is always the question of whether you become a Hungarian artist, or always stay a foreigner. I'm a Hungarian artist in the way that it is where I'm living, and where my inspiration come from."

Shih came from New York eight years ago and not, he says, because of any of those figures he painted, but because he was fed up with life there.

He used to work in the banking sector during the day, and painted at night, until the community of artists in Manhattan was squeezed out by property investors.

Then he felt he needed to decide whether to pursue his professional career, or try and make it as an artist.

"I left New York because it became too

commercialized, it was all dying around me." Although he's vague about the reason he chose to come to the Hungarian capital, he claimed that the appeal lay mainly with the sense of community he felt here, where people still had time to talk and visit with one another.

CAFÉ SOCIETY

"There is a café society here of artists, poets and writers; when I go to New York, nobody has time. Even now, when I go back, my friends say: you're here for three weeks? I don't have time to meet you, even housewives with kids say that. And I ask, why don't you? You have a baby sitter, you have a cleaner and a cook, what's the point of all that if you still haven't got the time?"

But banking in New York at least gave a financial security Shih does not have as a full

time artist in Budapest.

"As an artist, you need to push 500 peanuts in different direction with your nose," said Shih, who seemed to have come out of his Budapest bohemian shell and activated his business sense in order to be able to make a living from his painting.

He detected potential in the Hungarian market when it comes to the small private businesses which, he claimed, were overlooked by the community of artists and cultural managers in the capital.

"Here, painting is such an elitist thing, it is a closed circle of artists, art historians and curators. They sit around with some wine and *pogácsa* and nobody is reaching out to the banking community, to the doctors and lawyers.

"When I go to the dentist here, for instance, I'm told that they would like to buy art, but

don't know from where. Nobody is serving these guys.

"People have now started to have nice apartments, nice cars, go on nice vacations, but they are still buying IKEA prints."

That's multicultural too, in its way, but no where near as enlightening.

INFOBOX

Bullet Shih: Life on the Meniscus

Until Apr 19

www.bulletshih.com

Chinese Characters Contemporary Art Space, Kertész utca 4, Pest, District VII. Open Wed, Thu 3-7pm, Fri 4-10pm, Sat 11am-3pm

www.chinesecharacters.hu