

Taiwan Review

DECEMBER 2005

Privatizing and Diversifying
State-Owned Enterprises



Double Happiness

Ceramist and illustrator Shao Ting-ju makes her mark in clay and color.

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHAO TING-JU

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Shao Ting-ju (邵婷如) takes earth, metal and wood and makes them into surreal caricatures of humankind. She takes up a brush and watercolors and creates a cast of acutely observed and congenial characters. Making pottery calms her emotions, she says, and allows her to be objective, while illustrating gives rein to her more childlike and carefree side. There is a strong stylistic similarity between her two modes of expression, a certain endearing wackiness, which is both kind and strange.

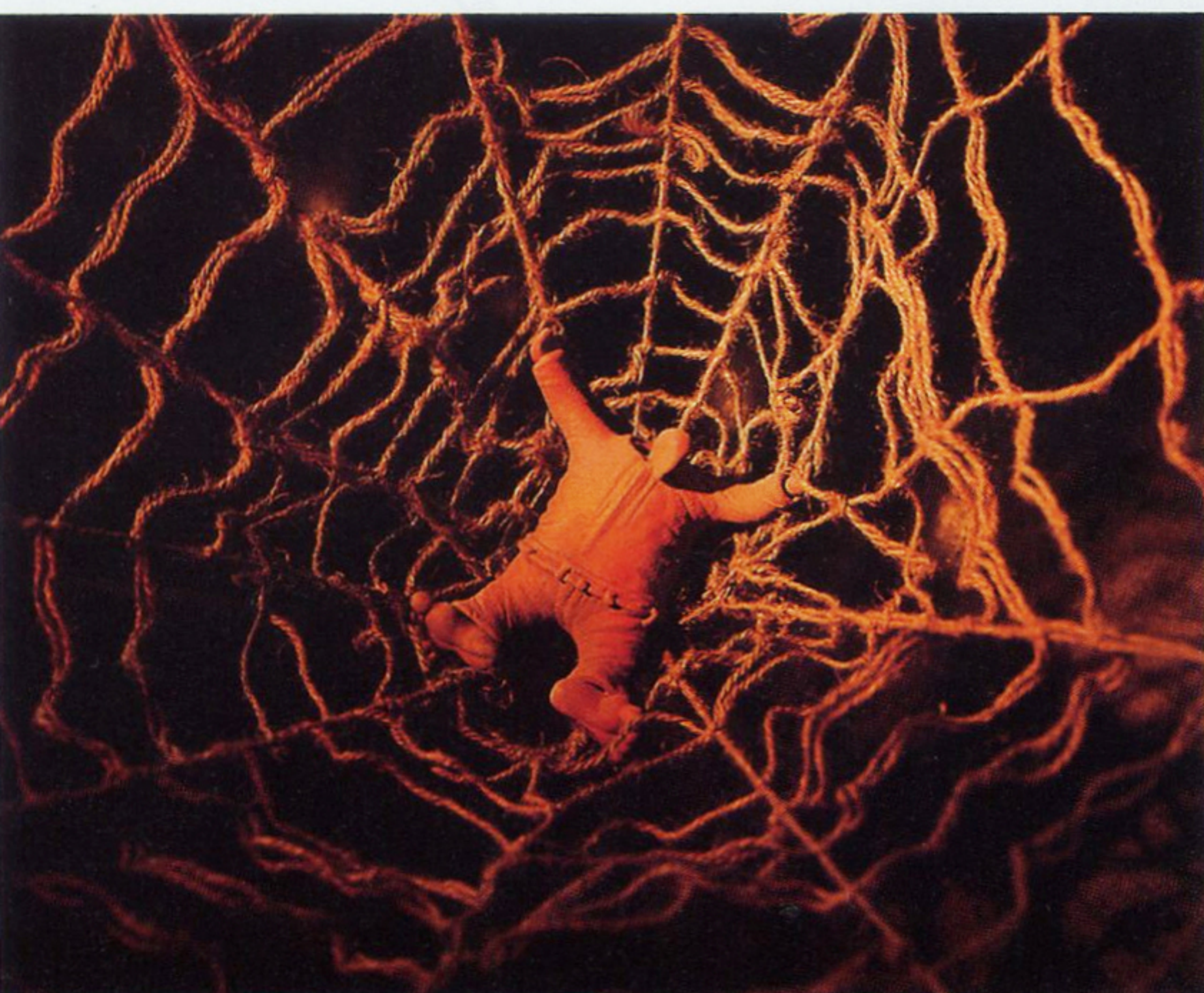
In either vein, Shao's creativity is hard to bridle. Her exuberant creations have landed her invitations to ceramics exhibitions around the world in the 1990s, and all the coming and going has allowed Shao to share a bit

Left: *I See the Flashing of Light in the Universe*, ceramic, 2002, 60 x 41 x 21 cm

Top: Illustration from *The Sound of Angels*

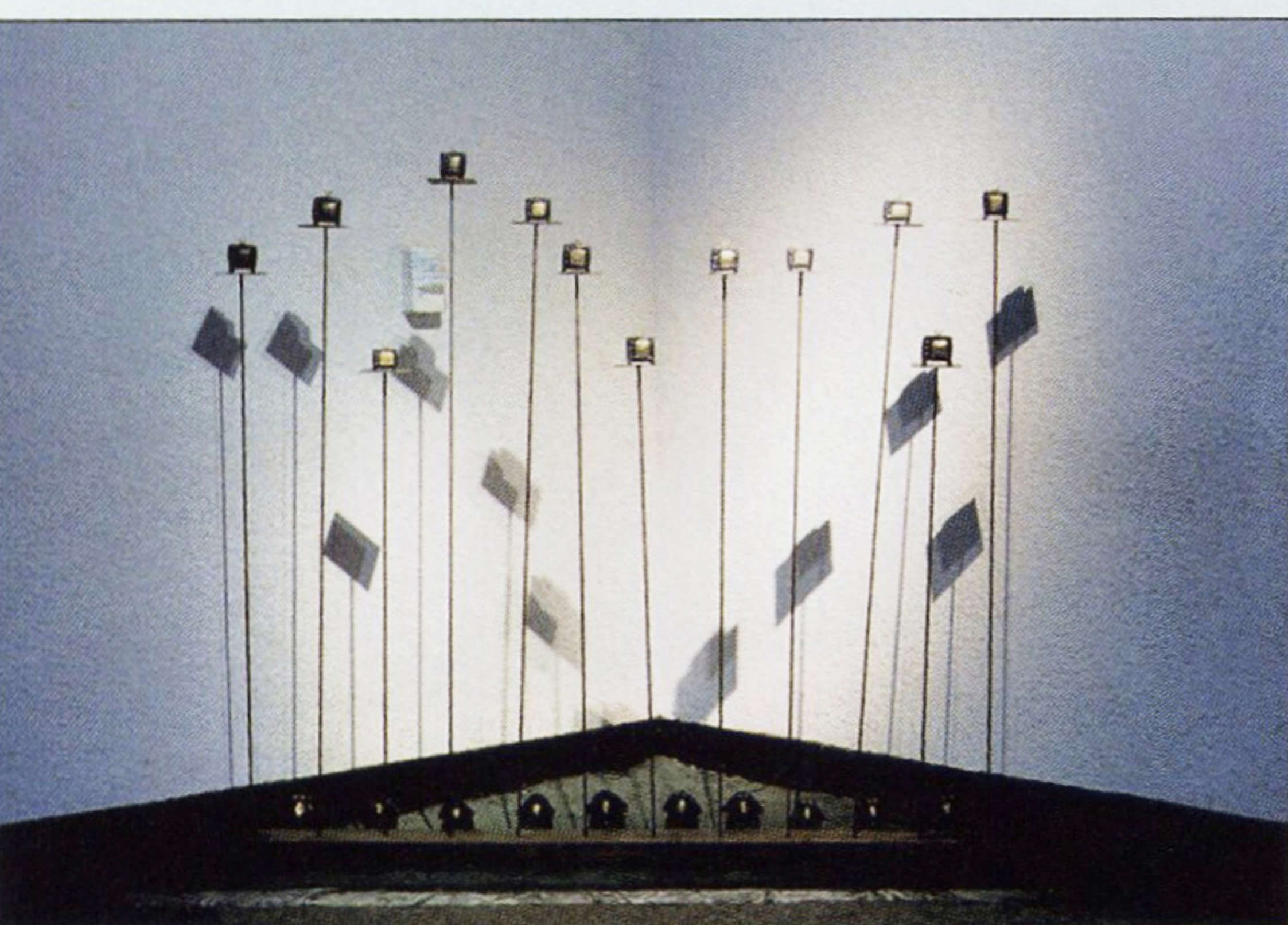


77 Times of Gentle Warnings, ceramic and metal, 2002, 360 x 360 x 15 cm



Top: *Meeting the Beautiful Green Light of the Universe*, ceramic and feathers, 2002, 68 x 32 x 42 cm

Bottom: Detail of *What's Wrong?* ceramic, 2004

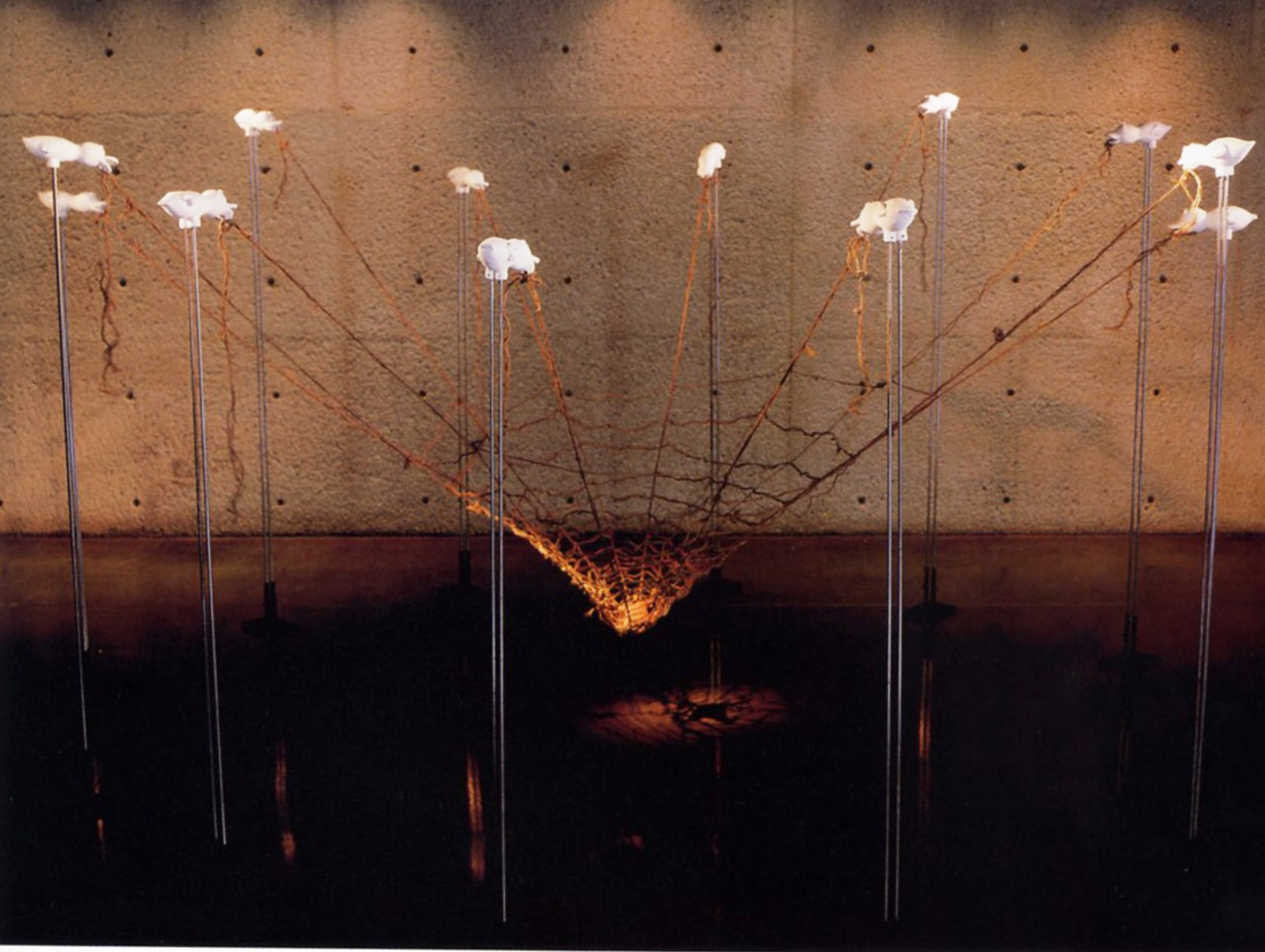


Top: Detail of *Living in the Generosity of Time, Do We Know Who Is Near the Finishing Line?* ceramic, rope and metal, 2004

Middle: *Traveling Between Faith and Deceit, They Establish and Overturn Documentation of First Pages*, ceramic, metal and wood, 1993, 180 x 12 x 155 cm

Bottom: *What's Wrong?* ceramic, 2004, 430 x 23 x 35 cm





Living in the Generosity of Time, Do We Know Who Is Near the Finishing Line? ceramic, rope and metal, 2004, 360 x 180 cm

about her native land with other people.

While traveling abroad, she discovered that few overseas ceramists either knew anything about Taiwan or had met any Taiwanese, despite the island's long history in ceramic arts. Their unfamiliarity made communication difficult and personal relationships chilly. "It's unbelievable that people treat you differently because of your nationality, but that was the case," Shao says.

These days her peers know more about Taiwan, and her recep-

tion is nearly always warm. "Now I get hugs and compliments instead," she says.

Shao attributes her talents to her mother, who is good at crafts and arranging the colors and textures of various flowers into artistic creations, an art known to the Japanese as ikebana. Although her mother's creativity influenced her siblings as well, Shao is the only one who became an artist. "I guess I was more persistent than the others," she says.

Art class was always her favorite at elementary school, and she has long known that she gravitated toward art, rather than academics. Although the emphasis in her education fell on areas aside from the

arts, Shao spent her vacations learning various crafts, such as batik, stone-chop carving and Chinese painting. Art has always been more than just leisure for her. "I didn't just attend classes, but also got hold of the tools of the craft so I could practice at home," she says. She remembers being so engrossed in painting that she was oblivious to the presence of family and friends.

The spell intensified when she put her hands on the natural texture and plasticity of clay. "Pottery clay has infinite possibilities," she points out. "I have never been bored by it."

After graduating from the English Department of Christ's College at Guandu, Taipei County, in the



Detail of *Your Majesty, Where Are You Going?* metal and ceramic, 2004

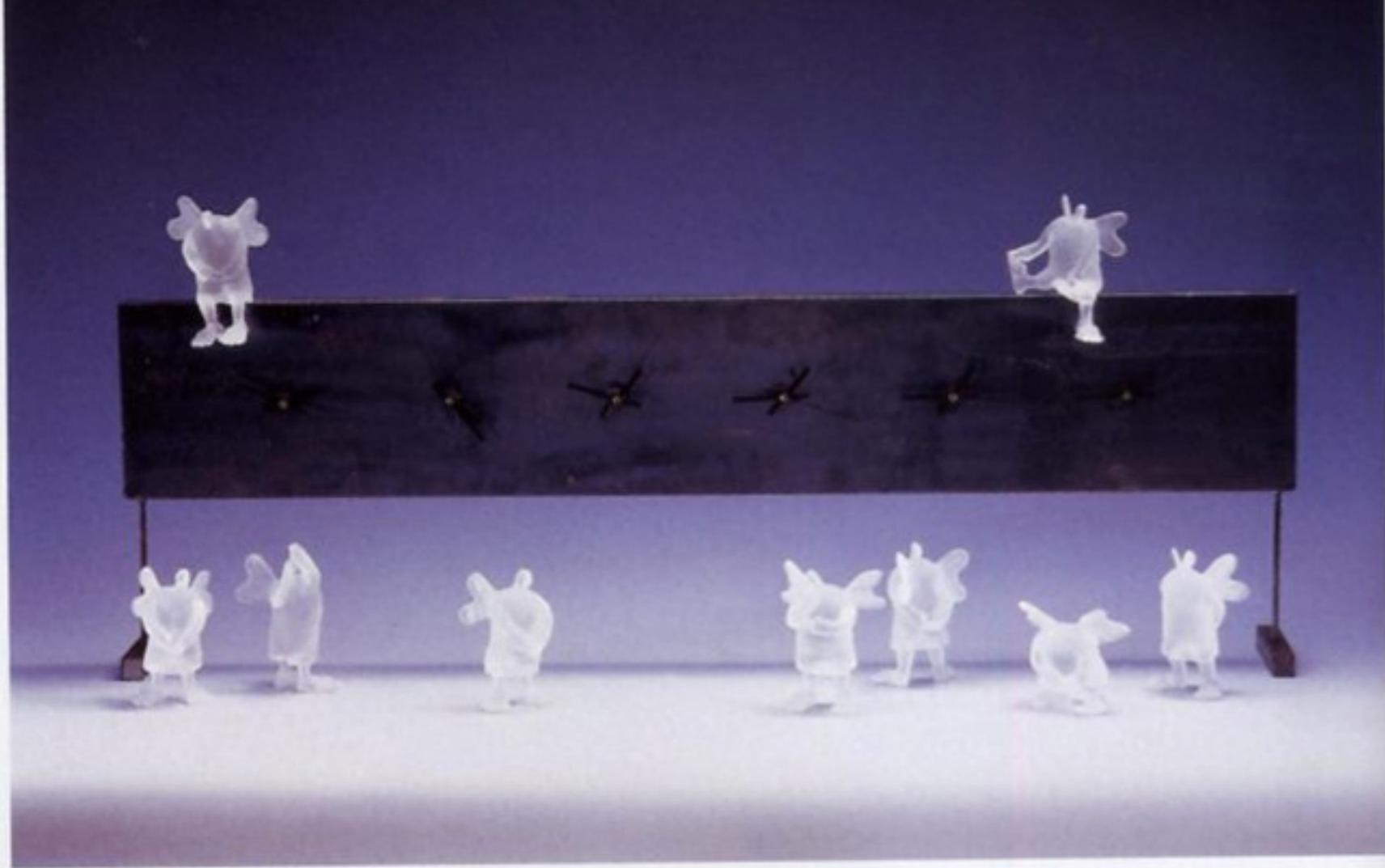
1980s, her mother suggested studying abroad, like her siblings, so that she could become a professor. Shao chose instead to pursue ceramics at a pottery studio in Taipei's northern suburb of Tianmu. "When I told my parents that I would like to apprentice myself to a ceramist, I knew they were very worried. Some relatives even thought it was a joke, but my parents understood my determination and supported me," she says. Indeed, they proffered an empty floor at her grandfather's house to use as a studio.

Like all beginners, Shao started out making tableware. She recalls being invited to exhibit household utensils in the early days of her career with some other potters. Her vases were so popular that they sold out not long after the opening, and the gallery urged her to make some more in a hurry. Making vases, however, was not her intention. When she realized that her work had an

artistic edge over the others, she knew that making tableware could no longer satisfy her.

The tactile pleasure of the potter's art prompted her to see just what she could create with her imagination and her hands while being apprenticed at the Tianmu studio. "I was so obsessed that I begged the studio's owner to let me stay on every night after the studio closed," she says with a laugh. As her skills improved, she realized installation would be the best way to convey her ideas.

The subjects of Shao's installations reflect her concerns about mankind's relationship with the environment and her unique view of the human body. Her ceramic figures have big shoulders, bare feet, disproportionately small heads and no facial features. The thickness of the figures contrasts with the artist's own slimness. "Most slim people I know, including myself, tend to



***Discarding Darwin's Evolution, I Rather Believe Angels Are Hiding in the World*, glass and metal, 1999, 122 x 50 x 15 cm**

worry a lot," Shao says. "I don't think the human prototype is like this." In her artistic lexicon, bare, bloated feet symbolize innocence, while small, inquisitive heads satirize pride and selfishness. Unlike some ceramists who first sketch their ideas, Shao molds her clay directly, letting ideas take shape through her hands. Even though her figures look humorous, the story they tell is rather more philosophical than entertaining.

In search of expressive purity, Shao avoids "disturbing" the raw, unprocessed clay with color; she treats the finished works only with transparent glaze. She also uses metal in her installations. She thinks that the characteristics of the two materials are at once contrasting and complementary. "Although people love the warm texture of pottery, it is fragile. On the other hand, metal is cold, but it lasts," she says.

Giving free reign to her creativity won her some recognition from her peers in Taiwan, and she won a few local competitions in the early 1990s. But Shao found it difficult to exhibit regularly in Taiwan so she



Top: *The Harmonies in Nature Are Between Heaven and Our Joy of Mind*, ceramic and feathers, 2005, 105 x 18 x 22 cm

Bottom right: Illustration from *The Sound of Angels*

decided to take her work abroad. Since then she has exhibited in Asia, Europe and North America, winning prizes along the way. Museums and galleries have also added her work to their collections.

This June Shao was invited with five other Taiwanese ceramists to attend the Second Biennial of Contemporary Mosaics in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Chuang Hsiu-ling (莊秀玲), head of collections at Taipei County's Yingge Ceramics Museum, accompanied the ceramists and instructed them to bring a 15 by 15 centimeter mosaic work for exhibition. Shao only took one day to finish her mosaic, and to her surprise, her *Encounter with Angels in Argentina* won an honorable mention in the sculpture category. "I thought our work was only being exhibited, not competing," the artist says bashfully.

Chuang believes that the great thing about the exhibition, in fact, was not the recognition but the time Argentine and Taiwanese ceramists spent together, learning each other's techniques. "The five ceramists who went all have very different skills," says Chuang, Shao's forte is the actual shaping of the clay with minimal use of tools, according to Chuang.

In Chuang's opinion, it was not only Shao's work, but her vivacious personality as well that stole the show. "Her straightforward manner and artistic talent make her a very charismatic person. Thanks to her broad international experience, she knows how to communicate well with foreign audiences."

In addition to her international exhibition and competition experience, Shao is often invited by overseas ceramic associations to be their visiting ceramist, and she therefore spends months abroad at a time. Some ceramists start straight into a working routine as soon as they arrive. Shao, however, likes to explore the places she stays in first to soak up the local color. "Some people think

I don't take my work seriously, but that's just not true. New work requires new ideas, so I need the new environment to inspire me," she says. "Pieces resulting from these visits are still in my style, but something local comes through in them too."

For instance, during her stay in the United States she was invited to watch a play about Afro-American cultural roots. Returning from the show, Shao thought up an installation called *If We Could Only Listen to the Harmonies in Nature, then We Could Truly Appreciate the Joy of Life*. Twelve chairs of different size and shape surrounded a large human figure with feathers on its back, and smaller figures sit on some of the chairs. "The different chairs symbolize the diverse backgrounds of African Americans," she says. "I'd never find such inspiration if I stayed at home."

Shao's international exposure, however, helped prompt a greater interest

