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Tsai Ming-liang

To coincide with the 51st Film Fest Gent, S.M.A.K. and the film festival are spotlighting the work of celebrated Taiwanese filmmaker Tsai Ming-liang with the presentation of the complete *Walker series*. The series is a set of ten films the director created between 2012 and 2023.

The *Walker series* is rooted in Tsai Ming-liang's fascination with Xuanzang, the influential Tang Dynasty monk who inspired the 16th-century Chinese literary classic *Journey to the West*. Each film portrays a monk in a striking, reserved pose, barefoot, tonsured, and clad in a crimson robe. With extraordinary slowness, he navigates bustling metropolises or specific locations, such as the director's birthplace.

The filmmaker, with this poetic and minimalist response to the frantic modern world, also expresses his personal search for truth. Tsai Ming-liang claims he experienced the highest level of artistic freedom while creating the *Walker series*, stating, 'It's painting,' free from narrative or explicit meaning.

The *Walker* films serve as moving paintings, with carefully framed compositions that invite the eye to explore each detail while the *Walker* advances, step by step. Tsai Ming-liang wonders why a cinema cannot also be a museum. By stripping away the narrative, he challenges the expectation that the filmmaker must lead us, granting us the freedom to shape our own viewing experience.

Tsai Ming-liang

Born in 1957 in Kuching, Malaysia, Tsai Ming-liang trained in Taiwan as a theatre and film director, and is one of the leading figures of the 'Second New Wave' in Taiwanese cinema. His film *Vive l'amour* (1994) won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, and *The Wayward Cloud* (2005) took home the Silver Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival. The Louvre acquired his film *Face* in 2009, as its first cinematic acquisition for the collection *Le Louvre s'offre aux cineastes*.

Actively engaged in the wider art world, Tsai Ming-liang not only creates exhibitions and performance projects and gives lectures, but has also developed idiosyncratic aesthetic ideas, such as 'hand-sculpted cinema', 'the removal of industrial processes from artistic creation', and 'the museum as cinema'. He presents these concepts, along with other innovative ways of experiencing film, as a counterbalance to the highly commercialised film industry.

Tsai Ming-liang is an intensely sensual, sensitive, and melancholic filmmaker. His films, which frequently forgo plot and dialogue, consist of slow, extended shots that reveal life in its rawest state. They portray human helplessness, desire, emptiness, and solitude. Through a lens almost always focused on actor Lee Kang-sheng, Tsai explores the depth of the human condition.

The origins of the *Walker* series

*In 2011, the National Theatre invited me to create a play.
Lee Kang-sheng was in the rehearsal hall one day,
Rehearsing a 17-minute slow-walking scene,
The form he displayed as he moved his body slowly
was incredibly beautiful.
It touched me immensely.
But once the play was over, it was gone.
I made a decision there and then
to turn the image of his slow-walking into film,
perhaps with him walking in different cities
around the world.
I decided to make a total of ten such films
that I would later exhibit at famous art museums.
I told Hsiao Kang
You're not just an actor.
You're also a slow-walking artist.
Not long after, a Taiwanese company asked me to shoot
a cell phone ad.
I made Hsiao Kang put on a saffron robe,
shaved his head and made him go barefoot.
In the streets of Taipei,
we completed the very first film of the series.*

Lee Kang-sheng

Tsai Ming-liang has been collaborating with the actor Lee Kang-sheng (°1968, Taipei) for more than 30 years. Lee was discovered in the street by Tsai Ming-liang, who cast him in his first film, *Rebels of the Neon God* (1992), where he played himself. Lee's silent face, slow speech, movement and unique sense of rhythm deeply influenced Tsai and led him to the path of 'slow cinema'.

1. No Form

Taiwan, 2012, Digital Cinema Package, 20'

In 2011, Tsai Ming-liang directed the play *Only You* for the National Theatre and National Concert Hall in Taiwan. In an intensely emotional scene, the monk Xuanzang walks at an extremely slow pace for half an hour. Mourning the ephemeral nature of theatre, Tsai Ming-liang decided to create a film, *No Form*, based on this slow-motion walking performance, which initiated his *Walker series*.

Taipei.

Hsiao Kang walks past the Ay-Chung Rice-Flour Noodle shop, past Shilin Night Market, and into a white space.

We don't know where he's from or where he's going.

This is a cell phone ad where the product doesn't even appear. After the film premiered in Macau, the product was pulled before it even hit the shelves.

2. Walker

Taiwan, Hong Kong, 2012, Digital Cinema Package, 20'

In 2012, Tsai Ming-liang was invited to create the opening short film for the Hong Kong International Film Festival. He decided to pay homage to the popular culture of Hong Kong that he grew up with by creating a film for the *Walker series*. The *Walker's* slowness contrasts with the frenzied pace of Hong Kong's cosmopolitan life. The film ends with a song by a Hong Kong actor and singer Samuel Hui, who was Tsai Ming-liang's idol during his youth.

3. Sleepwalk

Taiwan, 2012, Digital Cinema Package, 21'

4. Diamond Sutra

Taiwan, 2012, Digital Cinema Package, 21'

In 2012, Taiwanese architects Michael Lin and Liao Wei-li invited Tsai Ming-liang to make some short films for their exhibition at the Venice Architecture Biennale. Using the space at their preview exhibition in Taiwan, Tsai Ming-liang made two short films, *Sleepwalk* and *Diamond Sutra*, using the *Walker* concept. He said that gazing at the steam rising from a rice cooker reminded him of his mother's face as she lay dying, drawing her final breath.

5. Walking on Water

Taiwan, 2013, Digital Cinema Package, 29'

In 2013, Tsai Ming-liang was invited by filmmaker Tan Chui Mui to make a short film for an anthology film, *Letters from the South*. The artist returned to his hometown in Kuching, Malaysia and made a *Walker* film in the setting of his childhood home. The seven-storey flat which contained the happy memories of his childhood is now occupied by strangers. His former neighbour, an older girl who used to bathe and feed him as a child, has also aged.



During Film Fest Gent

Thursday 10 October 2024	2012
Friday 11 October 2024	2012
Saturday 12 October 2024	2012
Sunday 13 October 2024	2012
Tuesday 15 October 2024	2013
Wednesday 16 October 2024	2014
Thursday 17 October 2024	2015
Friday 18 October 2024	2018
Saturday 19 October 2024	2022
Sunday 20 October 2024	2012

Continuation of the exhibition

21-27 October 2024	2012
28 October-3 November	2012
04-10 November 2024	2012
11-17 November 2024	2012
18-24 November 2024	2012
25 November-1 December 2024	2012
2-8 December 2024	2012
9-15 December 2024	2012
16-22 December 2024	2013
23-29 December 2024	2013
30 December 2024-5 January 2025	2014
6-12 January 2025	2014
13-19 January 2025	2015
20-26 January 2025	2015
27 January-2 February 2025	2018
3-9 February 2025	2018
10-16 February 2025	2022
17-23 February 2025	2022
24 February-2 March 2025	2023
2-9 March 2025	2023

No Form	20'
Walker	20'
Diamond Sutra	21'
Sleepwalk	21'
Walking on Water	29'
Journey to the West	56'
No no sleep	34'
Sand	79'
Where	91'
No Form	20'
No Form	20'
No Form	20'
Walker	20'
Walker	20'
Diamond Sutra	21'
Diamond Sutra	21'
Sleepwalk	21'
Sleepwalk	21'
Walking on Water	29'
Walking on Water	29'
Journey to the West	56'
Journey to the West	56'
No no sleep	34'
No no sleep	34'
Sand	79'
Sand	79'
Where	91'
Where	91'
Abiding Nowhere	79'
Abiding Nowhere	79'



6. Journey to the West

France/Taiwan, 2014, Digital Cinema Package, 56'

In 2014, Tsai Ming-liang was invited to create a film for the Festival de Marseille. Tsai, who was not familiar with Marseille, decided to make a film from the perspective of a tourist, capturing the beautiful Mediterranean sunshine in the late summer of that year. He also invited the French actor Denis Lavant to appear alongside Lee Kang-sheng, who portrays Xuanzang.

7. No no sleep

Taiwan/Hong Kong, 2015, Digital Cinema Package, 34'

In 2015, Tsai Ming-liang was once again invited to create the opening short film for the Hong Kong International Film Festival. This time, he chose Shibuya Station in Tokyo as the main filming location and invited the famous Japanese actor Masanobu Ando to perform alongside Lee Kang-shen. They are seen sleeping separately in a capsule hotel and bathing in public baths. Their tired bodies search for sleep, but their restless minds prevent them from doing so.

*Just an outdoor life drawing
of Hsiao Kang's night walking in
Tokyo
Winter night, cold
Public bath
Smooth, glittering like a baby is
Masanobu's body
Can't sleep
Sauna room
Hsiao Kang's sweat falls like raindrops
In the water, as well as the fog
The transient encounter*

8. Sand

Taiwan, 2018, Digital Cinema Package, 79'

In 2018, Tsai Ming-liang was invited by the Taiwanese natural park administration for the northeast coast and Yilan coastline to create the eighth film in the *Walker series*. In the constant passage of time, the Zen-like footsteps of the *Walker* has finally allowed us to see the Pacific Ocean, the open sky, the seagulls, the black sand, an eel-catching settlement that arose in the cold winter rain, the twisting branches of the lintou tree, flotsam piled up like mountains, and a newly constructed cement house, which seems to offer a temporary place of rest for the *Walker*.

9. **Where**

Taiwan, 2022, Digital Cinema Package, kleur, 91'

*In an unfamiliar foreign city
Anong hums songs from his hometown.
He seems to be searching for something
or perhaps waiting for someone.
He meets the walker.
The encounter feels like a dream.
He wakes up to a sense of déjà vu.*

*Filming the walker is like drawing a sketch outdoors.
The walker is in Paris, and so is Anong.
They cross paths, nothing else happens.
The Centre Pompidou wanted to screen all
the Walker films.
That's why I decided to film this famous contemporary
art museum
And include it in the ninth instalment of the series.
To preserve the memory*

10. **Abiding Nowhere**

Taiwan, VS, 2024, Digital Cinema Package, kleur, 79'

Abiding Nowhere, the tenth and no doubt final film from the *Walker series*, celebrates its Belgian premiere at Film Fest Gent. Tsai Ming-ling and actor Lee Kang-sheng once again bring time to a standstill. This time around, Lee roams through the streets of Washington, D.C. His wanderings are interwoven with the actions of a young man.

*The tenth Walker film takes place in
Washington DC. Two lonely souls on
separate journeys, sometimes
crossing paths but never once
meeting.
Nothing happens between them.
There is no story. Their walking
journeys are like a meditative prayer of
heart and soul.*

This exhibition guide is being published to coincide with the exhibition:

Tsai Ming-liang, *Walker series*

S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent

in collaboration with Film Fest Gent

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