In the three decades since his debut feature, Rebels of the Neon God (1992), Tsai Ming-Liang (b. 1957) has built a contemplative body of work that ruminates on fundamental experiences of existence. His focus on themes of solitude, alienation, and desire early in his career eventually expanded to explorations of the passage of time, memory, and spirituality later on; Tsai aspires to observe life and, consequently, has put his inner self on display. A maverick whose long takes have stretched the limits of filmic minimalism and stillness, Tsai has also reconsidered the very concept of cinema by borrowing elements from performance and Conceptual art. Nothing encapsulates this evolving exploration like his ongoing Walker series (2012–), a set of films or, rather, recordings of live performances, depicting his muse/alter ego Lee Kang-Sheng as a Buddhist monk moving through contemporary settings at an impossibly slow pace, pushing against currents in time and space.

Often associated with Taiwan New Cinema—which marked the rise of a post-1980s generation of auteurs, including Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Edward Yang, whose work explores Taiwanese history and identity—Tsai embarked on a singular path, with an all-consuming focus on the personal and the individual. A decade younger than the aforementioned directors, Tsai, a Malaysia-born Chinese who moved to Taiwan to study theater at the age of 20, found himself immersed in a Taiwan gradually opening up after a long period of martial law, which ended in 1987. It was in this new political climate that Tsai established himself with films dealing with queer themes, personal space, social taboos, and unspoken desires. His second feature, Vive L’Amour (1994), earned him international recognition when it won the Venice Film Festival’s Golden Lion.

Working with Lee Kang-Sheng, a fixture in all of Tsai’s features and nearly the entirety of his creative output, the director has crafted an oeuvre united by overlapping characters, actors, motifs, and scenarios. Projecting an aura of unwavering stillness and otherworldliness, Lee is inseparable from the director’s artistic universe—and even his personal life. On multiple occasions, Tsai has called Lee his reason to make films. As the director-actor duo ages over time, Tsai turns his focus to the subtleties of the human face and body. He has become, more than ever, enthralled by memory and the passage of time—in real life and on screen.

This retrospective, which marks Tsai and Lee’s first visit to the US since 2009, opens with their latest feature, Days (2020), and includes 14 features and four shorts directed by Tsai. A highlight is the first US theatrical run of Face (2009) on 35mm, a new addition to MoMA’s film collection. The director will share his memories of cinema in a special improvised live event, and two rarely seen films directed by Lee and produced by Tsai—The Missing (2003) and Single Belief (2016)—complete the retrospective.
SCREENING SCHEDULE:

Tsai’s debut, about a juvenile delinquent roaming the streets of Taipei, marks the first appearance of Hsiao Kang, a recurring character played by Lee Kang. Rebels of the Neon God puts the youth culture of Taipei at center stage; video game arcades, shopping malls, shady street corners come to life. Despite the seemingly vibrant environment, a sense of alienation is evident, and this theme would continue to inspire Tsai in his later films. Screening here in a digital restoration.
Fri., Oct. 21, 4:00 T2  
Fri., Nov. 11, 6:30 T2

The urban jungle of Taipei is buzzing with activity, but true human connections are rare. A vacant luxury apartment is used for casual sex; a series of comical incidents reveal three people simultaneously finding solace under this same roof, although they each lead a separate, lonesome life. Evoking Michelangelo Antonioni’s theme of urban ennui, Vive L’Amour is a desperate cry for intimacy and human warmth. Tsai Ming-Liang’s sophomore feature, it took the Venice International Film Festival’s top honor, the Golden Lion.
Fri. Oct. 28, 7:00 T2  
Thu. Nov. 10, 6:30 T2

A family of three lives under the same roof but each member conceals a separate, secret life. While son Hsiao Kang’s mysterious neck ailment and an unstoppable water leak keep the family occupied in search of solutions, the mother pursues an unsatisfying affair and the father frequents bathhouses for anonymous sex. Little could prepare the audience for the devastating finale, when father and son finally connect. Winner of the Berlin International Film Festival’s Special Jury Prize. Screening here in a digital restoration.
Tue. Oct. 25, 7:00 T2  
Fri. Nov. 4, 4:30 T1

The Hole. 1998. Taiwan. Directed by Tsai Ming-Liang. With Lee Kang-Sheng, Yang Kuei-Mei. In Mandarin; English subtitles. 93 min. 35mm.
A mysterious virus causes the afflicted to behave like cockroaches. Defying evacuation orders, a woman and a man remain in their apartments. While the woman downstairs finds herself drowning in water leaks, the man upstairs becomes increasingly intrigued by his neighbor below, thanks to a hole connecting the two apartments. Breaking out in dance and song, the two express burning desires for love. Absurdist humor mixes with nostalgic tunes by 1950s–60s pop icon Grace Chang, giving this musical a touch of glamor and warmth rarely seen in Tsai Ming-Liang’s work. Winner of the FIRPESCI award at the Cannes Film Festival.
Sat. Oct. 29, 7:00 T2  
Tue. Nov. 8, 7:00 T2
Thu. Oct 27, 7:00 T2
Sun. Nov. 6, 4:00 T2

Goodbye, Dragon Inn. 2003. Taiwan. Directed by Tsai Ming-Liang. With Lee Kang-Sheng, Chen Shiang-Chyi, Shih Chun, Miao Tien, Yang Kuei-Mei. In Mandarin, Taiwanese; English subtitles. 82 min. Ghostly visitors pay their final visit to a movie theater that is about to go out of business; some cruise the bathrooms and hallways for pickup opportunities while others savor King Hu's martial arts masterpiece *Dragon Inn*, projected in the sparsely attended hall. Among the silent viewers are two real-life stars of the 1967 classic, watching themselves perhaps for the last time on the big screen. With almost no dialogue, the film quietly mourns the glorious days of single-screen cinema. Winner of the FIPRESCI award at the Venice International Film Festival. Screening here in a digital restoration.
Sun. Oct. 23, 5:00 T2
Fri. Oct. 28, 4:30 T2

The Wayward Cloud. 2005. Taiwan. Directed by Tsai Ming-Liang. With Lee Kang-Sheng, Chen Shiang-Chyi, Lu Yi-Ching, Yang Kuei-Mei. In Mandarin; English subtitles. 112 min. 35mm. Never one to worry about taboos and scandals, Tsai Ming-Liang created this quasi-porn musical, with no shortage of watermelon and other edibles. Hsiao Kang, now a porn actor with intimacy issues, reunites with the woman to whom he sold a watch in Tsai’s *What Time Is It There?* (2001), and the two form a peculiar bond. As in *The Hole* (1998), surreal, colorful musical numbers express unspoken yearnings and desires. Tsai’s screenplay won the Berlin International Film Festival’s Silver Bear.
Thu. Nov. 3, 6:30
Mon. Nov. 7, 4:00

I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone. 2006. Taiwan. Directed by Tsai Ming-Liang. With Lee Kang-Sheng, Chen Shiang-Chyi, Norman Atun. In Mandarin, Malay, Bengali; English subtitles. 115 min. 35mm. *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone* is Malaysia-born Tsai Ming-Liang’s first film set in Kuala Lumpur. Lee Kang-Sheng plays two characters: a drifter badly injured in a violent incident and a paralyzed man in a coma. Two caregivers, a Bangledeshi laborer who nurses the injured man back to health and a woman who attends to the needs of the comatose man, form a complicated web of misplaced romantic attractions with Lee’s characters. Meanwhile, the polyglot metropolis is swallowed by a heavy, choking smog.
Tue. Nov. 1 4:30, T2
Fri. Nov. 4, 7:30, T1

Face. 2009. Taiwan/Science. Directed by Tsai Ming-Liang. With Lee Kang-Sheng, Lu Yi-Ching, Yang Kuei-Mei, Chen Shiang-Chyi, Laetitia Casta, Jean-Pierre Léaud, Fanny Ardant,
Jeanne Moreau, Nathalie Baye, Mathieu Amalric, Norman Atun. In French, Mandarin; English subtitles. 138 min. 35mm.

Tsai Ming-Liang brings his regular cast together with legendary French actors, including Jean-Pierre Léaud and Fanny Ardant, for this film commissioned by the Louvre and shot largely on the museum’s premises. A Taiwanese film director, played by Lee Kang-Sheng, mourns the passing of his mother while on a film set in Paris. He relies on silent body gestures to communicate with his French actors, who all seem to have a mind of their own. Lee and Léaud share an unmistakable connection, as both have grown and aged in front of the camera, and both are known for intense, fruitful relationships with a particular director (Tsai and François Truffaut, respectively). With the world-renowned art collection as its backdrop, Face is a gorgeously shot and composed work filled with dreamy sequences that resemble performance art installations.

Fri. Oct. 21, 7:00 T2 (Q&A with Lee Kang-Sheng and Tsai Ming-Liang)
Sat. Oct. 22, 6:30 T2
Sun, Oct. 23, 2:00 T2
Mon. Oct. 24, 4:00 T2
Tue. Oct. 25, 4:00 T2
Wed. Oct. 26, 6:30 T2
Thu. Oct. 27, 4:00 T2

No Form. 2012. Taiwan. Directed by Tsai Ming-Liang. With Lee Kang-Sheng. No dialogue. 20 min. DCP.

Journey to the West. 2014. Taiwan. Directed by Tsai Ming-Liang. With Lee Kang-Sheng, Denis Lavant. No dialogue. 56 min. DCP.

From 2012 to 2018, Tsai Ming-Liang dedicated multiple short films to the Walker series, in which Lee Kang-Sheng appears as the seventh-century Chinese monk Xuanzang, known for his journey to the west to obtain Buddhist scriptures. Dressed in a saffron robe, the actor walks in slow motion, sometimes through crowded streets in urban cities around the world and sometimes in spaces that resemble art installations. In No Form, he is simultaneously in a staged all-white space and on the streets of Taipei. In Journey to the West, he walks in Marseille, joined by the French actor Denis Lavant. These short films form an entrancing set of conceptual works combining performance and documentary.

Mon. Oct. 31, 7:30 T1
Thu. Nov. 3, 4:30 T1


Lee Kang-Sheng plays a middle-aged single father who squats with his two young children in abandoned buildings, while taking a job holding up signs advertising condo developments. A realistic depiction of their plight is mixed with surreal and stylized set pieces to create an exceptional experiment in form. Winner of the Grand Jury Prize at the Venice International Film Festival.

Sat. Oct. 29, 4:00 T2
Sat. Nov. 5, 3:30 T2

Afternoon. 2015. Taiwan. Directed by Tsai Ming-Liang. With Tsai Ming-Liang, Lee Kang-Sheng. In Mandarin; English subtitles. 137 min.

Tsai Ming-Liang’s films typically have few lines of dialogue. He must have saved all his words for Afternoon, a conversation between him and his muse, actor Lee Kang-sheng, filmed in four static takes as the two sit next to each other in front of the camera. The visibly moved director talks to Lee about mortality, his beloved grandfather, sexuality, and their special
bond in this laying bare of intimate thoughts. Lee, like the characters he plays in Tsai’s films, speaks little, but the connection and love between the two are unmistakable. This is a must-see companion piece to Tsai’s rich body of fiction work.

Sun. Oct. 30, 4:00 T2
Sun. Nov. 13, 4:00 T2

Tsai Ming-Liang makes portrait shots of 13 individuals, including his regular actor Lee Kang-Sheng and Lee’s mother. Some speak of their pasts; one massages her face; one plays the harmonica; another dozes off. There is a lot of silence, fittingly accompanied by Ryuichi Sakamoto’s minimalist score. Subverting the talking-head documentary tradition, Tsai refocuses our gaze on the shifting light and the passage of time evident on these gentle faces.
Wed. Oct. 26, 4:30 T2
Mon. Nov. 7, 6:30 T1

Days. 2020. Taiwan. Directed by Tsai Ming-Liang. With Lee Kang-Sheng, Anong Hounghueangsy. 127min. DCP.
More than 20 years after the making of The River (1997), Lee Kang-Sheng once again appears in a Tsai Ming-Liang film with a neck ailment, which the actor has suffered from on and off for years in real life. The mundane continues to draw Tsai’s ever-observant camera in Days; while Lee’s middle-aged character seeks various medical treatments, a young man meticulously prepares a meal in a small apartment. The two eventually meet in a hotel room in Bangkok, where they share a tender moment. Almost totally dialogue-free—and intentionally lacking subtitles—the film quietly observes two solitary figures and a rare moment of solace. North American premiere.
Thu, Oct. 20, 7:00 T2 (Q&A with Tsai Ming-Liang, Lee Kang-Sheng, and Anong Hounghueangsy)
Sat. Nov. 5, 6:30 T2

In Afternoon, a documentary that features a single conversation between Tsai Ming-Liang and Lee Kang-Sheng, Lee jokingly laments his scrubby presence in Tsai’s pictures. In this short film, directed by Lee and produced by Tsai, Lee dresses up as a suave, glossy fashionista, posing in portrait mode in different parts of Ximending, a busy nightlife/shopping district in Taipei. This is in stark contrast to his appearance in Tsai’s Walker series, in which Lee dresses as an unadorned Buddhist monk walking slowly through crowded streets.

Lu Yi-Ching, a regular in Tsai Ming-Liang’s films, plays a grandmother who has lost her grandchild in a park. A sympathetic camera follows the desperate grandma tightly, as she runs all over in search of the missing child—including to a crematorium, where she channels the help of her late husband.
Mon. Oct. 24, 7:00 T2 (Q&A with Lee Kang-Sheng and Tsai Ming-Liang)
Mon. Oct. 31, 4:00 T1

Tsai Ming-Liang: Improvisations on the Memory of Cinema
Tsai will give an improvisational talk on his memories of cinema, drawing on his experiences growing up in Malaysia, where he was first introduced to the art form that would forever change his life. Tsai will also display his rarely seen paintings
Sat. Oct. 22, 4:00

Organized by La Frances Hui, Curator, Department of Film. Thanks to Taipei Cultural Center.

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