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Taiwan's Indigenous artists reclaim centre stage

As Taiwan's Indigenous art scene comes of age, a new generation is rethinking tradition, identity and belonging. By Zian Chen

When the Indigenous artist Sakuliu Pavav-aljung was stripped of Taiwan's National Award for Arts following his conviction for sexual assault this April, the case was heralded as a landmark #MeToo moment in Asia's contemporary art world. Following the downfall of one of the island's most influential Indigenous artists, a new generation of artists is emerging and redefining Taiwan's Indigenous contemporary art scene.

Two breakout projects this year highlight that transformation. In May the Taipei Performing Arts Center presented

the Taiwan debut of *Hagay Dreaming*, a collaboration between the digital art pioneer Shu Lea Cheang and the Truku artist Dondon Hounwn following its 2025 premiere at Tate Modern in London. The following month, Tai Body Theatre became the first Indigenous collective to receive the grand prize at the Taishin Arts Award.

"Since the 2010s, a new generation of Indigenous artists has begun challenging the paradigm established in the 1990s and 2000s," Wei-Lun Lu, a curator who also served as a script consultant for *Hagay Dreaming*, tells *The Art Newspaper*.

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Hagay Dreaming, which references the Truku peoples' notions of gender, debuted at Tate Modern before being performed in Taipei

Trump's signature bill could make US arts education even more expensive

EDUCATION

By Dale Berning Sawa

WASHINGTON, DC. When, on 4 July 2025, US President Donald Trump signed his landmark policy and spending bill – H.R. 1 or the One Big Beautiful Bill Act – into law, he claimed it would make the country "a rocket ship", boosting the economy. Experts in arts higher education and the cultural sector are worried it will have dire effects on their field.

The Working Families Tax Cut Act, as the legislation is now known, introduced, among many other things, changes to the financial support available to students at the federal level. First, the graduate and professional PLUS loans

scheme has been terminated. Second, in the extant direct loans programme, different caps have been introduced on the amount that can be loaned, thereby effectively penalising students choosing academic pursuits that are not on the Department of Education's list of programmes granting professional degrees (which includes disciplines like veterinary medicine, law and forensic psychology, but not anything related to arts and culture). Third, and most crucially, it implements an earnings-based accountability framework, which will determine which programmes qualify for their students to access federal financial aid.

This last change has many art schools worried. As anyone working in arts higher education will attest to, the notion that the value of an arts degree

should be measured solely by how much its recent graduates are earning is, to say the least, outdated. As Lee Ann Scotto Adams, the executive director at the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (Snaap), puts it: "It's a one-size-fits-all approach that does not work for artists, designers and musicians."

An F for the earnings test

Quite what impact the act will have on American arts education is not an easy question to answer, if only because the implementation has been slow. The bill was enacted in July 2025. From 1 July 2026, the graduate and professional PLUS loans scheme was cancelled and differential limits on extant loan schemes were implemented. The earnings test will come into effect from 1 July 2027.

Last January, the government published preliminary estimates of how many programmes would fail this test, also known as the "do no harm" test. Across associate degrees, BAs and MAs, the arts at large feature prominently. Among bachelor degree programmes, 17.7% of graphic communications, 12% of film, video and photographic arts, and 11% of music programmes would fail, as would 8.5% of fine and studio arts programmes – "and that includes schools like the Juilliard School and the New England Conservatory", says Scotto Adams, referencing two of the top-performing arts institutions in the country.

Among graduate programmes it gets worse. Nearly half (44.1%) of fine and studio arts programmes would not pass.

The pass rate estimates for associate

degrees, meanwhile, are abysmal: 79.4% of film, video and photographic arts programmes and 73.8% of fine and studio arts programmes would fail. These are undergraduate courses taken over two to three years at community or junior colleges, but also at schools like the Pratt Institute, which sells itself on ranking fifth out of 303 US and international art and design universities. Because they are shorter, associate courses can be cost-effective routes for students to get the knowledge they need before they start working. But students still have to be able to pay for them. And, of course, "start working" in the art world is an ill-defined proposition.

Scotto Adams describes Snaap as the "go-to source for earnings on arts

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HAUSER & WIRTH

LUCIO FONTANA

SPATIALISM. PIONEERING THE CONTEMPORARY

17 SEPTEMBER – 19 DECEMBER

G/F, 8 QUEEN'S ROAD CENTRAL, HONG KONG

Concetto spaziale (Spatial Concept), 1961, oil on canvas, slash, incisions, 81 x 100 cm / 31 7/8 x 39 1/4 in © Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Milano, by SIAE 2026



News International

Taiwan's Indigenous artists in the spotlight

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"Many of the artists emerging in the 2010s were academy-trained... Video and performance became increasingly prominent, alongside more sustained engagement with white-cube contexts."

Today comprising around 2.5% of Taiwan's population across 17 officially recognised nations, Indigenous peoples had endured successive periods of Han Chinese settlement, Japanese colonial rule and, after 1949, assimilation under the Nationalist government. An Indigenous rights movement that emerged alongside Taiwan's democratisation in the 1980s and 90s brought demands for the recovery of language and culture, as well as political recognition, into the broader progressive movement.

A more systematic infrastructure for Indigenous art began to emerge in the mid-2000s. "The Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts has probably collected the most, and most systematically," says the curator Manray Hsu, who has worked extensively with Indigenous art in Taiwan and internationally. The museum launched in 2005 its ongoing programme of contemporary Austronesian art – a term that frames Taiwan's Indigenous cultures within a wider precolonial network stretching across Southeast Asia and the Pacific. The biennial Pulima Art Award, established in 2012 as Taiwan's first dedicated Indigenous contemporary art prize, became a key incubator for emerging artists. It returns next year, alongside the second edition of the Taiwan International Austronesian Art Triennial in Pingtung.

Commercially, Taiwan's Indigenous contemporary art community remains largely underdeveloped. "Today's gallery system favours much smaller-scale works than those seen since the first wave of Indigenous contemporary art in the 1990s, when collecting focused on large-scale installations acquired by museums and tourism hotels," says Hsu, who also curated Art Taipei's Indigenous art section in 2023 and 2025. Launched in 2020, that section offers a recurring commercial platform.

International exposure needed

Only a handful of galleries have begun working with Indigenous artists, and often only those with international exhibition records. Taipei's Liang Gallery, for instance, presented a solo exhibition by Aluai Kaumakan in 2024, following her participation in the 2021 Asia Pacific Triennial and 2022 Biennale of Sydney. The New York-based gallery Nunu Fine Art has shown Chang En-Man, whose work was featured in this year's Biennale of Sydney and who will have a solo exhibition with the gallery next



year. Ciwas Tahos, after participating in the 2025 Sharjah Biennial and Hawai'i Triennial, received a solo stand with Taipei's PTT Space at Art Basel Hong Kong earlier this year.

"Unlike Indigenous literature, which grew more directly from the Indigenous rights movement of the 1980s", contemporary Indigenous art's relationship with the state is one of negotiation rather than confrontation, according to Lu. "From the 1990s, Indigenous contemporary art was often rooted in community-based mentorship and the transmission of traditional crafts." It emerged after decades in which assimilation and economic hardship had drawn many Indigenous people into cities for work, making the recovery of languages, rituals and cultural knowledge more urgent.

That cultural revival had gaps. "Sexuality disappears from the traditions that have been revitalised. But in [Indigenous] oral histories and everyday life, it is everywhere," Lu says. She traces the shift to the 2010s: "By then, I was encountering Indigenous artists foregrounding gender and non-binary experiences, but they were completely absent from magazine coverage or earlier exhibition histories."

Lu's 2023 exhibition *Amorous Mountains, Erotic Seas: Queer, Indigene, and the Hidden History* at the Pulima Art Festival in Hualien addressed that omission. "Transgender performance was extremely common in Indigenous communities along the east coast, but none of the writing talked about it,"



she says. The exhibition sought to make that overlooked history visible, bringing younger Indigenous artists together with performers from urban east-coast Indigenous drag communities.

"I call it the queer confusion of the 2010s," Lu says. "Quite a few of the artists don't present erotic bodies per se. They present bodies negotiating the conflict between personal desire and the community and their tradition."

The *Amorous Mountains* exhibition included works by the artist Ciwas Tahos, who grew up disconnected from her Atayal community's culture. "Every Indigenous group show was like a small tribe for me," she says. "I cherished the openings as gathering points where we could exchange ideas about the issues people were concerned with and what

The Tai Body Theatre (main image), a collective of Truku artists, won a Taishin Arts Award last year and (below) *Raw Ripened Happiness* (2019) by Taiwanese Indigenous artist Ciwas Tahos

was happening elsewhere. Everyone was looking for points of resonance."

Ciwas's work draws upon the marginalised Atayal oral myth Temahahoi. "Learning about an all-women mountain community protected by bees made me feel that there was space for both my gender and Indigenous identities," she says. "In a society dominated by heterosexual norms, the oral stories left by our ancestors become a safe space."

For the Truku artist and ritual practitioner Dondon Hounwn, *Hagay Dreaming* begins with a more personal vocabulary. "*Hagay* is a pathway for understanding people like us without starting from fixed ideas of male and female," he said at a 24-hour gathering at his studio in Hualien's Dowmung tribe late last year. The term dates to his childhood, when village elders called him *hagay*. "*Hagay* is not the same as queer," he says. "*Hagay* has ancestral belief. It has ritual."

Human and spiritual realms

Bringing Dondon's Truku cosmology into dialogue with Shu Lea Cheang's cyberfeminist practice, *Hagay Dreaming* transformed the Taipei Performing Arts Center's Globe Playhouse into an environment of laser light, digital imagery and live performance. Its 90-minute creation allegory follows a Truku hunter's encounter with *hagay*, tracing a journey between the realms of humans and spirits.

For Cheang, a Taiwan-born ethnic Han whose artistic language was shaped in New York's queer art scene before she settled in Paris, the project upended her understanding of queer life. "Current-day queer life lacks a sense of faith – we float," she says, but "working on *Hagay Dreaming* does solidify some belief. To promote *hagay* is to push the *Gaya* spirit" – a reference to the Truku system of ancestral principles – "to lay down some grounding."

In last year's award-winning performance *qaqay*, Watan Tusi (who founded the Truku-led collective Tai Body Theatre in 2012) worked at a traditional Truku ground loom. Around him, five performers developed a percussive language of barefoot steps, combining floorwork and task-based movement drawn from physical labour rather than traditional dance. The piece, which won the grand prize from the Taishin Arts Award last November, explores how, during the Japanese colonial period, his Swsal tribe was forcibly relocated around 100km from its ancestral territory.

The loom evokes this history. "When we move, we'd had to decide how much of the old belongings to carry into a new place, yet we would still carry the heavy loom with us," Watan says, becoming a metaphor for what to carry forward from tradition and what to transform. "Beyond traditional rituals or performances staged for tourism, what other possibilities might Indigenous performance hold?"

Trump's signature bill could make arts education even more expensive

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and design graduates". Data from the non-profit's surveys go back almost two decades, to 2007, providing ample, granular proof of how non-linear art graduates' careers often are.

During the public consultation period for the bill, Snaap submitted substantial public comment, warning the Department of Education of the inequity built into the flattening approach this earnings test takes to assessing a degree's outcome.

"The biggest thing for us," Scotto Adams says, "is that the earnings, three to four years after graduation, for an arts alum, whether at the undergraduate or graduate level, don't really provide a complete or representative picture of the programme-level outcomes in arts and design fields."

Further, the Department of Education is comparing recent graduate earnings against the median earnings of local high-school graduates aged between 25 and 34, which, as Scotto Adams points out, represents up to 17 years in a career: "It's not a comparable time horizon."

A bigger question revolves around what the motivations behind the act are, and whether it is possible to understand the changes it introduces as not being ideologically driven. After all, student debt is a big deal. Holding institutions to account and weeding out exploitative, for-profit schools has rightly long been a priority for the Department of Education

The impact of debt

Richard Paulsen, an economist at the University of Michigan, has studied the impact of student loan debt on arts graduates' career choices. He has found that having debt decreases the likelihood of working in the arts by over 25% and of working as an artist by over 30% – particularly for students of Black, Hispanic and working-class backgrounds. But his conclusion is not that arts students should therefore not have access to loans. Rather, it is that government should devise policies that help to alleviate such debt.

"Even if it's the case that the average art graduate is not making a tonne of money – and certainly the median art graduate is not making a tonne of money – there is, in my view, a lot of value to society in having a thriving creative sector," Paulsen says. The long-term implication of these changes, in his view, is that "it's going to keep potentially some really good artists out of the arts because they can't pursue their degree, because they can't afford to, because the



The Working Families Tax Cut Act, signed into law by President Trump on 4 July 2025, will reduce loan provision for arts students by introducing a link to postgraduate earnings

student loans are no longer available".

Joanna Woronkiewicz, a cultural economist, senior research fellow at Snaap and associate professor at the Indiana University in Bloomington, concurs. She describes the earnings test as a "very crude solution".

"I'm an economist, so I do see the value of thinking about productivity and economic outcomes," Woronkiewicz says. "But if you want to think about productivity, you also have to think about how to foster a competitive market and innovation. And all of those things come through providing people with funding access. You can't just cut it off and think

that the arts are going to thrive."

Some colleges and universities are pre-emptively making changes and contracting. Florida A&M University, a historically Black university in Tallahassee, is closing its studio fine arts programme and merging its wider arts programmes. State legislatures are also following the federal government's lead. The Indiana Senate Bill 199, which passed into law last March, specifies that state educational institutions with "degree programs that meet the definition of a low earning outcome program under federal law must request approval from the commission to continue the degree

program". This kind of shift risks making access to arts programmes even more inequitable, because if your state's institutions close their programmes, your only options are to head out of state or go to a private university, both of which are typically more expensive.

Johanna Taylor, an associate professor at Arizona State University's Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts, says of her cultural policy colleagues in higher education that, over the past year, "we were in a holding pattern, unsure what to do. Now everyone's mobilised."

"Policy is a reflection of cultural values," Taylor says. "It's as if the government is saying: 'We are following this American cultural narrative of: you are a product of your own success.' That is all about the individual American exceptionalism narrative – that's what we're valuing."

Taylor says that arts programmes are not the only ones affected – so, too, are education, social work and other fields. To her mind, the fact that the law is now enacted could be a galvanising force: "It's an opportunity for us to collaborate with others and not just see it as an attack solely on the arts. All of these other precarious industries, both within higher education but also the career pathways beyond them, can align and say, 'We have this greater value on society, on community wellbeing', and create a stronger narrative, rather than just be further decimated or pushed to the sidelines."