After Li Ran graduated from the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in 2009, with a degree in oil painting, he moved to Beijing. In the years since, he has established himself principally as a video artist, meaning that, though you might occasionally stumble across some of his works on canvas, his background in painting has been largely overlooked. It was thus refreshing to encounter a series of 13 new paintings in ‘Who Are You’, Li’s exhibition at Aike gallery in Shanghai, alongside two videos, a photo collage and a sculptural installation. But we should not confuse the artist’s ‘return’ to the medium with a break in his practice; as is evident in the exhibition design,
characteristically replete with references to the stage, Li’s paintings form part of the mise en scène. A curtain divides the show into two sections: a raised, brightly illuminated stage on the left, where most of the canvases are hung, and a dimly lit, cavernous space on the right. With no signage at the entrance, visitors can choose to go either way.

Li Ran, *Moonlit Night*, 2019, oil on canvas, 120 × 90 cm.
Courtesy: Mike Gallery, Shanghai
Led by intuition (or perhaps by my queer penchant for darkened spaces), I went into what appears to be the backstage area. Projected onto a wall, the two-channel video Persona Swap (2017–19) juxtaposes original footage with a photo sequence of villainous characters from the late 1950s and early ’60s, taken from the artist’s archival collection, to track the many phases (or faces) of realism in modern Chinese theatre and cinema. The narration – delivered by Li, in a hyperbolic style typical of Chinese dubbing in cinema from the same period – begins with the story of V.V. Terevtzov, a Soviet émigré who taught a class on illusionistic stage makeup at the Shanghai Theatre Academy in the late 1950s. These techniques became effective tools for signalling class and ideological positions, as well as antagonism between heroes and villains. But following Terevtzov’s abrupt departure from China in 1960 due to the Sino-Soviet split, these Soviet tropes were abandoned. The images fade in and out, revealing representation and politics to be always entangled and subject positions fundamentally unstable.

The paintings in the other room can be interpreted as dramatized freeze frames that further explore such ambiguity. Their subtle matte tones and faceless figures are reminiscent of the work of Wang Yin, while their use of allegory, shadowing and bodily distortion recalls paintings by Sanya
Kantarovsky. In Domestic Desk (2019), what appears to be a young intellectual (judging by his attire and the books above his right arm) leans after a shadowy figure attempting to dive into a split territory. In Ranger and His Friends (2019), a headless figure wrestles with a quasi-sculptural head, which lies somewhere between an inert bust and an elastic bioform. This image of the subject being wrenchd from itself enacts the limit-experience described by Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot and Michel Foucault: the edge of intensity and possibility, where extreme contradictions become identical.
In his most recent biography, released in time for the exhibition, the artist compares his experience in Shanghai – where he has resided since 2018 – to that of a guest. We can see how this dialectic between host and guest, us and other, became the starting point for ‘Who Are You’ – a question that bridges the show’s themes of subjectivity, performance and politics. By circulating through modern Chinese theater and cinema, Li Ran ultimately veers back towards his perennial questions of realism and subjectivity. Stripped of the expected question mark, the three words in the exhibition title linger instead in the affirmative.
A new country needs heroes; it needs villains, too. In the fledgling People’s Republic, Mao’s government began screening movies on mobile projection units that toured the rural interior, but only a few films were good enough for the Chinese people. Hong Kong productions were banned, as were films made on the mainland before 1949; instead came melodramas and propaganda pictures shot on elaborate sets at facilities like the Changchun Film Studio. You remember the glorious patriots, intrepid martyrs, mothers giving their sons to the revolution — but there were stock villains as well, played by actors in whiteface, hamming it up as dastardly American troops or agents of “the superpowers.” Switch on Bear’s Prints, a spy thriller from 1977, featuring arrogant Russians unprepared for the Chinese sneak attack. “Colonel, may I be frank,” says a bewigged Soviet operative. “We are confronting enemies who have lived through the Cultural Revolution!” Enough to give any komissar pause.
Archival images from local Chinese drama ensembles. From Retransformation of the Supporting Roles, 2017.
The young artist Li Ran spent much of the last year digging through the archives of Chinese film studios and drama ensembles, and he unearthed dozens of photographs of these clumsy, shady outsiders, wearing baroque costumes and heavy stage paint. Some Han actors specialized in these villain roles, but many more were from China’s Muslim minorities, or else of partial Russian ancestry. The photos gave rise to the wry video installation Retransformation of the Supporting Roles: a caustic marriage of slapstick comedy and historical redress, in which six actors throw themselves into pantomimes of drunk sailors, corrupt missionaries, and Yankee soldiers going down in a hail of bullets. Once no one outside of China would have seen these impersonations — but the art world we think is global can be as pitiless as Jiang Qing’s script doctors. For the jetlagged viewers of the latest biennial, you must string up your history and make it dance.

Li was born in Hubei in 1986 and studied oil painting at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, China’s oldest art school. His father, Li Min, was a painter too — a fact evoked in his early Another “The Other Story,” which juxtaposed Dad’s oil paintings with a precious black-and-white film, starring the younger artist as a Chinese modernist coming to terms with Cézanne. It was one of several projects in which role-playing (channeling past lives, in some; playing avatars of himself, in others) served to make the confusions of today’s China a bit more endurable. In the first of two films known as I Want to Talk to You, But Not to All of You, Li sits with a European curator, spelling out his biography and the aims of his art ahead of a retrospective. But the same footage, with a bit of editing and some easy cuts, turns art
history into psychobabble — and Li’s self-promotion becomes blithering about phantoms of the past.

A new country needs heroes; but world powers have stricter budgets, and heroes are very expensive. In Same Old Crowd, Li’s lavish and disquieting film installation of 2016, a dozen amateur actors play roles we can’t quite decipher, looking into the distance with twitchy, wary expectation. Their clothes, fur wraps and batik shifts and hemp sandals, suggest we are somewhere other than the big city — holdouts from modernity, perhaps, in a province where the generic towers of the new China are rising a bit too slowly. A crow’s wings beat; the cast look up, as if perceiving an augury; and suddenly comes the sound of hundreds of birds, squawking and flapping, harbingers of a future in which a hundred flowers may finally bloom. But the birds never land, no matter how long they look; they are a foley artist’s flutterings, a gimcrack effect from the propaganda studio.
In Li Ran’s new exhibition “Same Old Crowd,” the city of Singapore has been rendered almost entirely abstract. The Beijing-based artist, who spent three months in residence last year at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University Centre for Contemporary Art, takes a “participant observer” approach—using the tourist map as a starting point to craft a dehistoricized, flattened visual model of his subject. The two-channel video It Is Not Complicated, A Guidebook (all work, 2016) presents footage Li shot during a preplanned route through the city’s Gardens by the Bay while accompanied by an off-camera audio guide. This iconic 250-acre park, a fabricated community riddled with contradictions, can be seen as a metaphor for the nation-state itself: Accompanying the tour guide’s formulaic descriptions, tropical plants of all varieties are captured by the artist’s extremely shaky lens, as are leisurely pedestrians. The silhouettes of skyscrapers are visible on the horizon, past the garden’s confines. As evidence of the country’s multicultural inclusivity, Mark Quinn’s The Planet, 2008, a bronze sculpture of a giant floating baby installed in the garden, also inserts itself into the footage. Throughout, multicolored text is superimposed over the imagery in the frame: a string of art-jargon-y keywords and names of twentieth-century movements—ITALIAN FUTURISM, NON-SYMBOLIC FORM, THE AVANT-GARDE OF PARIS among them—plucked from the Chinese-language visitor guide to the Centre Pompidou. The inclusion of this text keys the viewer in to a subtle antagonism: This somewhat garish contemporary faux-
utopia is entangled with various idealistic modernist movements, but who ultimately comes out ahead?

Li’s explorations of Singapore reverberate with an echo of institutional critique, as if the nation were a museum to be mined for ulterior motives. Viewers may all but pass over the textual component of the exhibition, Picnic at the Stadium, 2016. In this novella, displayed on a plinth in the gallery, the protagonist participates in a political rally and has ambiguous conversations with various people on the street. Speakers include representatives from Singapore’s various “tribes.” The gathering seems to have come about rather abruptly, an impromptu insertion of the public sphere into the personal realm of the picnic. The most significant work here, Same Old Crowd, 2016, unexpectedly departs from documentation of the city and enter an ambiguous time frame. In this four-channel video, Li uses staccato sounds and fast camerawork to achieve a high level of tension. The artist positioned amateur actors in highly stylized surroundings that nevertheless remain temporally and spatially ambiguous. It is impossible to determine the identities or time period of the characters; they are deprived of language, stripped of everything but exaggerated expressions and emphatic gestures. Same Old Crowd can be seen as a type of anthropological theater examining performance studies, and in this sense it recalls the artist’s earlier video Beyond Geography, 2012, but the premodern body depicted here evokes a more visceral and emotional sensation.

Like manifestations of a
psychological symptom that lurks forever in our unconscious, the characters that populate Same Old Crowd are consistently intruded upon by elements residing outside the picture frame. The work directly, even crudely, conveys the anxieties of a more primitive awareness. Like a group of savage outsiders, its subjects exist on the margins of history and seemingly have never been colonized. Or perhaps they serve as physical embodiments of the anxiety that accompanies artistic production, or of all lived experience—a tension that can only be temporarily allayed, never fully displaced.
LISSON GALLERY

Art Asian Pacific
2013

ARTASIA PACIFIC

Text: HO Ruian
Will the specter of modernism ever take its leave? Far from announcing the completion, if not the exhaustion, of the modern project, postmodernism and its varied inflections—antimodernism, the altermodern, the off-modern—seem to have only preserved modernism as a ghostly afterlife that rebounds, poltergeist-like, with each successive attempt at exorcising it. Modernism returns, time and again, even in places where its claim to a prior presence is at best tenuous: to what extent can one, for instance, speak of a Chinese or an African modernism? Across time and space, histories and geographies, modernism haunts.

For the Chinese artist Li Ran, however, no anxieties are harbored towards this lingering ghost. His project is neither that of a ritual purge nor a steadfast recovery, but rather of a skittish flirtation with the null object he takes modernism to be. Working across performance, video and installation, Li invokes the names of such masters as Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso and Mondrian in a register that is ostensibly parodic, except that the target here is not so much ridiculed as merely taken as a device for play. For Li, the histories and reference points of Western modernism are instituted, arbitrary markings against which he choreographs his schizo-modern dance. His curiosity towards the modernist legacy, in this sense, lies not so much in the referent as in the critical distances at play. He operates in the gaps that open up with each incursion and recursion of the modern project, in the spaces of dismeasure that are also spaces of freedom, experimentation and fiction-making.

Li’s Another “The Other Story” (2013) is an installation that takes its title from the 1989 exhibition “The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Postwar Britain” curated by Rasheed Araeen. While Araeen’s show has since been criticized for failing to transcend the Eurocentric logic of art historical canonicity precisely because the exhibition attempted to correct it, Li’s work deftly skirts the problematic by way of a critical remove that allows him to check rather than be undermined by the anxieties of influence. The installation consists of the oil paintings that Li’s artist father made in the 1970s, accompanied by photographs and textual documents recreated by Li from memory, which together reveal the man’s admiration of the European canon. In one note, it is written: “About Art, the Soviet’s way is too simple, the American’s way is too common… if you want to learn Western Art, you better go to Europe.” The naïveté of tone is striking, but more startling is the fact that Li takes no pains to make an issue of it. Li presents his father as merely a fan, as just another modern artist, as opposed to the other modern artist whose very appellation invokes the canon to which it is other. The proposition here is curious, if not radical in its simplicity: the only way to get over our postcolonial hangover is precisely to get over it, to re-understand our relationship with the West through notions of distance and discontinuity rather than those of disavowal and disruption.

We see this logic at its most developed in Li’s performance and video pieces, which often involve the artist playing a myriad of characters. His signature move is that of remake and dub. In Another Modern Artist (2013), a video presented as part of the aforementioned installation, for instance, he plays a Chinese modern artist coming to grips with his Western influences. Notably, the natural voice of the protagonist has been dubbed over by a baroque, overly inflected voice reminiscent of those heard in imported foreign films dubbed in Mandarin. The grain of the voice here is peculiar, seeming to defy cultural designation. It belongs to neither of the cultures it mediates; it is the mark of their incommensurability. This vocalic eccentricity is pushed further in Mont Sainte-Victoire (2012), a performance installation.
which takes its title from the mountain from which Cézanne drew much of his inspiration. In the performance, the artist, groomed, suited and cloaked in an air of mock formality, sits at a table and reads a dubbing script into a condenser microphone. The text is a tissue of quotes drawn from numerous theoretical writings by various Western thinkers from Barthes to Žižek, and the gamut of tones the artist adopts to play a variety of characters attests to his rather astounding facility at voice acting. But the feat performed here is not mimicry but ventriloquism. The artist speaks, but the voice that emanates from him does not seem to belong to him, traveling like an unruly vector knowing neither origin nor destination.

Some of Li’s works are more consciously parodic. Such is the case with Beyond Geography (2012), a mockumentary of the famous Discovery series by the BBC that features Li’s usual stilted dubbing. In it, Li plays an intrepid travel host who ventures into the wilderness in search of a certain ancient Shynna Babahajarro tribe. In an amusing mix of Indiana Jones-style gallantry and touristic zeal, the host treks through the punishing terrain, sampling river water and evading imagined cannibals along the way, before finally discovering the secret tribe and gamely joining in their rituals. But there’s a catch: the filming is all done against an empty blue screen studio, thus stripping down the entire documentary to its bare staging. Documentary, in one stroke, becomes theater. In one telling sequence, the host points to the empty walls as he speaks effusively about the invisible cave paintings, comparing them to works by Picasso, Gauguin and Pollock. It is an echo of the primitivist thinking that informed modernist discourse, which through its fetishization of cultural contact obscured the power differentials at play. But as with most of Li’s works, the role of parody here is not simply to mock its subject but to toy with it at arm’s length. There is no urgency to correct a wrong. The misunderstood, the mistranslated and the miscast are all a part of a charade that transforms any incongruity into the basis for humor.

Indeed, humor is the single thread running through Li’s recent works, often serving as a way to release accumulated tensions. In the first part of the two-part video installation I Want To Talk To You, But Not To All of You (2012), we see the artist, stripped of all his personas, engaged in what appears to be a serious conversation with curator Biljana Ciric. The conversation covers a range of issues concerning the Chinese and international art world, especially the failures of communication across different cultural, linguistic and discursive frames of reference. The solemnity of the black-and-white recording is hefty, but this is all quickly dispelled in the second part of the video which remixes and dubs the first part such that it reads as a conversation between a man and his psychiatrist, refiguring the failed transmissions spoken of and enacted earlier as phantoms (by the man’s account) and hallucinations (by the psychiatrist’s). Parody here punctures the bloatedness of artistic speak, but its mode of release is not a laughing at but a laughing to—a projectile across a space of discontinuity towards a distant and unplaceable other. The joke is the loss in transmission.
Li Ran, video still from Another “the Other Story”-Another Modern Artist, 2013, single-channel, sound, HD video, 7:05 minutes [courtesy of the artist]

Written by Venus Lau

LI RAN

AIKE-DELLARCO GALLERY, HONG KONG
Chinese writer Wang Xiaobo once wrote that history has a fatigued umbilical cord—his aversion to one-dimensional historicity demonstrated by the novels he filled with history that never happened. Chinese artist Li Ran also casts doubt on historicity by stirring up a multiplicity of possible narratives that certain historical settings can harbor. In his video installation Another “The Other Story,” about 30 images on a robust wooden table rest beneath the canopy of a glass case. These photographs, presented by Aike-Dellarco Gallery at Art Basel Hong Kong [May 23–26, 2013], are a constellation of objects choreographed by a fictional narrative about the artist’s father and early Chinese modernist artists that stems from these artifacts. The photographic images are selected from an archive of modernist paintings by Li’s father, depicting diverse scenes: from coastal landscapes to quiet village alleys, gloomy naked young women to still lifes of crabs and clay bowls. Short texts accompanying the pictures reveal little. The texts are the product of Li Ran’s imagination regarding social conditions and his father’s personal trajectory in China back in the 1980s and 90s, as evoked by the images; if there are any representational relations between the images and the text, they emerge as if from a tarot reading wherein crossed destinies and imagery are bound together by random sensory data. The line “Be it in the garden or be it in the rain, reality is no more than decoration” juxtaposed with images wherein gardens, office chairs, or preserved fish are visible. Readymade texts interpolate into the artist’s script: “The moon disappears, covered by hazy clouds, the birds disappear in unclear heights …” lyrics from a Mandopop song of the late 70s.

Two paintings on the walls are relics of Li’s father’s experiments merging Dunhuang murals and modernist paintings—renderings in which flying Apsaras, strewn with streamers, are delineated on small canvases. In the video Another Modern Artist, Li Ran plays a painter with all the dramatic flair of German expressionist cinema. The video’s narrations are like a mixtape derived from the letters between Chinese painter Xu Beihong and poet Xu Zhimo (where aesthetics, technique, and Paul Cézanne are discussed), excerpts from Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid,” and Li Yu’s instructional title Art History of the West—all attempts, paralleling one another, to attempt to construct a dialogue with quotes. A projector in the corner focuses its light on a blury image where the faces of the artist and his father amalgamate.

Li’s deliberate blurring between historic and imaginary narratives recalls Simon Fujiwara’s archaeological excavation on the dialectics between intimate and public histories, between lived events and fictional discourses. As both archival materials and texts lacking sequential structure, chronologies are tenuous in Another “The Other Story”—making manifest Li’s obsession with staging a chaos of linguistic and visual narratives. At an art fair, where a suspension of historical narratives is reified by presupposed neutrality in the white-box-style spaces, Li’s approach of fragmenting and seaming fictional histories finds the right place. Similar (language) chaos can be found in his earlier performance/installation Mont Sainte-Victoire (2012) in Beijing, whose voice-acting resembled the standardized dubbing of national television in China. The artist interlaced poorly translated Chinese editions of Roland Barthes’ The Pleasure of the Text and Michel Foucault’s Madness and Civilization while imitating a panoply of voices: an old man, a poet, a rapist, and a rapist’s victim. Random words such as vegetables and rooms are blended in his narration to agitate a “lost in translation” syndrome—an epidemic in the Chinese art world.

While drawing inspiration from Rasheed Araeen’s 1989 exhibition The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain, Li’s video eschews exploring the repressed aesthetics of others through a postcolonial lens, offering instead a form of role-played alterity expressed through textual fabrications and shifted bodily movements. His foregrounding of the practice of acting is almost turned into a performative contradiction in its
othering of Li’s artistic practice. With an attempt to investigate the role of the artist by externalizing himself from the identity of the profession, an intimacy distances Li from the figure of the artist as an unknown other. This otherness—just like what Giorgio Agamben characterizes as “gesture”—“supports” and “endures” with the possible imaginary histories that may emerge from the assemblage of images and objects. By a distancing gesture with respect to the originary point of his own identity, Li orchestrates an event like a Bunraku (Ningyo joruri) play—wherein puppets are controlled and narrated by the puppeteers and chanters who, although veiled in dark costumes, remain visible onstage—inducing “effected,” “effective,” and “vocal” gestures that are respectively related to the motions and speech of the puppet, the puppeteer, and the vociferator, constructing a spectacle formed by three gestural strata.

Li animates the puppets of identities and histories, not only by playing the role of an “artist” in the video, but also through tugging the strings of possible histories from the debris of his father’s personal past. Li’s “puppetry” summons Walter Benjamin’s metaphorical use of a puppet in describing historical materialism. The German philosopher sees the “puppet” as being controlled by a dwarf named theology. The puppet’s real identity—historicism, an “eternal picture of the past”—is contrasted with the multitude of images and narratives in Li Ran’s installation. Through suturing together objects abandoned by time, Li attempts to expose a pool of unhappened historic events no less hermetic than Bunraku’s puppeteers. The unmasking of possible, yet fictional, events brings forth a temporal disorientation—a sudden pause formed by the “tensions” within the artist’s constellations of intimate and public histories.

—Venus Lau
There are plenty of art exhibitions that are obscure and difficult to fathom – this is usually a cover for a lack of thought and depth that becomes painfully apparent when they are placed under the least analysis. So I’m very happy when a show comes along which, while flirting with obscurity and confusion, manages to hold my attention with the possibilities for meaning that it urges the viewer to explore, and productively uses a certain level of obscurity to sustain the interest in delving further into the works. Li Ran’s new installation at Magician Space seems to be just such a show.

The installation of Li Ran’s Mont Sainte-Victoire is comprised of three related parts. On the left a window-like opening in the wall frames a small, rather theatrical space. Backed by heavy, velvet curtains, a small table and chair sit in front, while on top of the table sit some sheets of paper and a professional
The space implies a figure that would be seated reading from the typewritten script into the microphone. In the video projected on the opposite side of the room, this figure is revealed as the artist, although minimally “disguised” by a pair of “retro” glasses. The script presents the transcribed words of various people, articulated through the artist’s varying intonation and characterisations. For the opening of the exhibition, the artist provided a live reading of this script in the left-hand space, but the video shows a pre-recorded version of the same material.

In between these disjointed occurrences of the script, in the middle of the room, are three free-standing slide projectors, their circular carousels clattering through a set of details from paintings, drawings and other images, the sources for these images cutting a broad swathe across the history of art, but always focusing on small sections of the larger images.

The artist is apparently something of an accomplished mimic. In this installation he puts this skill to good use to add humour to the proceedings and to confuse the boundary between the artist and the various characters he portrays. Present in his reading are various incarnations of a narrator, an elderly person, a middle-aged man, a youth, a poet, a rapist and a victim, with combinations of these also appearing with adjectival epithets including "honest-," "cunning-," "shameless-," "life-coach-" etc. rendered by the artist
through modulations of tone and gesture.

These characters, reproduced through the artist’s mimesis, recount an apparently rambling narrative, at times seeming to quote from art history, while dramatizing the whole as a sort of disjointed dialogue, in parts suggesting William Burroughs "cut-up" textuality. At the beginning of the speech, the Mont Sante-Victoire of the title is mentioned as if by someone living in view of its peaks. For the proto-Modernist artist Paul Cezanne this mountain became one of the pivotal images through which he developed a formal practice that laid the way for Cubism in the early 20th Century. The relevance of this to Li Ran seems to lie in its repetition as an art-historical marker, as signifier, related to the general subject of duplication and the nature of change through duplication, a process forming part of virtually every aspect of this show.

In the dense text accompanying the show, the critic Su Wei makes much of a general connection between Li Ran’s work and writings on “the virtual” by Robert Musil and of Gilles Deleuze, particularly from Deleuze’s early text Difference and Repetition. Su Wei picks up on the nature of repetition as presented there through aspects of the installation: including the dubbing script with its allusions to art history; the presentation of the pseudo-recording studio within but held apart from the gallery; the mimicry of the artist’s voices; the semi-academic slide shows.
The virtual is a subject which is difficult to get to grips with at the best of times, and while Li Ran’s work perhaps adds to the vocabulary of its representation, I am not certain that it does much to make it clearer. It is perhaps inherent to the nature of a Deleuzian concept that it should remain this way, but this leaves a sense of frustration at the difficulty of the work and the accompanying text.

That said, I really welcome the opportunity to experience a show that attempts to go that much further in challenging my thoughts and expectations. Of course, such a move risks shooting itself in the foot by alienating the audience if it puts unnecessary barriers between them and the exhibition’s meaning – so it’s a fine balance. Mont Sainte-Victoire is a show that, while it will never fully reveal itself, manages to create and sustain an interest in the work by capturing the imagination through its fictions and humorous mode of presentation.

(All images: Li Ran, Mont Sainte-Victoire, Exhibition Shot; Photo Courtesy of Edward Sanderson, Magician Space, and the artist)
LI RAN: MENTAL MASTURBATION

TEXT: Einar Engström

THE YOUNG ARTIST Li Ran (born 1986) is able to eloquently delineate nearly every facet of his burgeoning artistic practice. This should come as no surprise: in the last two years, his work, through the lens of video, has come to hinge almost entirely on the spoken word and the collation of written text. Li’s most basic account of his art employs the language of architecture: an artwork is a room, a room that should not shut the door
on its audience or corner them into forced, unilateral interpretation. Nor should the door remain completely open, the room easily probed “like a whore.” Rather, it should remain considerately and pensively half-open, allowing viewers to enter and exit its domain at their will but not without resistance. This virtual-minded analogy is fitting inasmuch as Li’s practice increasingly hinges on the exploration of the nonreality within reality.

This exploration was first revealed in Li Ran’s long and lumbering Mont Saint-Victoire. Based on a performance given at the opening of his 2011 solo exhibition at Magician Space in Beijing, the 33-minute video stumbles throughout a seemingly illogical, furcated dialogue between a number of imagined characters, all meticulously impersonated by a bespectacled, throwback Li seated before a microphone. On the whole, the phrases and concepts articulated therein—from “This is a constantly alienating, nonfictional world within a contradicting argument, a world that could remain in the transposition between vegetables and fruits” to “It isn’t a dream, but we are the objects inside someone else’s dream”—weave together to construct an anteroom to the great chamber that is his Art, intimidating in the isolation they affect in the viewer. In detail, however, each carefully constructed phrase can be seen as an indicative confession, and thus may serve as a key to opening the door beyond—and furthermore, to maneuvering the intellectual architecture within. But just how real is that intellectual architecture?
Li Ran’s affinity for imitation functions as an initial blueprint of this dubious artistic framework, loudly superimposed over form and content. In Mont Saint-Victoire alone, the personalities of dozens of different characters he adopts, from the withered meekness of an old man and the husky righteousness of a left wing youth to an aged rapist and his victim, are all filtered through the splendid exaggeration of voiceover film actors from 1970s and 80s China. For viewers (listeners) familiar with the soundscapes of the scant imported films and television series of the time, Li’s imitations are inevitable invitations to close one’s eyes and contextualize each character within one’s own personal perceptional histories. Together with the dialogue’s intentional rhetorical failures, this induction of a constructed reality from the past (film and television) into another constructed reality (the video, which itself is a reproduction of yet another reality) is Modernism par excellence. It is a self-inflicted fissure in the feasibility of the artwork, and thus of art itself— a driving force of Li’s practice.

Or, at the very least, Li Ran aims to remind us of one of contemporary art’s incomplete tasks: the everlasting tenets of Modernism. It would seem that in his eyes, contemporary art fails to achieve full consciousness of its historical place and right, no matter how much it feigns such awareness. His suspicion is particularly relevant in China, where artists have rushed to catapult themselves ahead in the annals of art history— even if these annals, amidst the foil and folly of other histories, never had the chance to sincerely address what Modernism means to.

In one of Li Ran’s newer works, Beyond Geography, this issue is more frankly addressed, as the artist dramatizes his role as imitator to the point of sheer parody. Head to toe in the garb of the typical Discovery Channel adventurer-explorer, the artist dashes suavely through the uncharted jungle habitat of a primitive tribe. While on his search for this mysterious society of hunter-gatherers— narrating every step of the way, like any good host, although here in a completely unintelligible language masked by, again, Li’s own voice in laughably accurate mimicry of the dubbed Discovery Channel protagonist familiar to Chinese ears— he daringly gulps fresh water from a river, expertly admires exotic vegetation, and whimpered in fear of the dark sounds of the night (screaming, even, as he
trips on a human skull). Yet all this takes place in an empty, bare blue television studio, with nothing for the eye to actually behold except the ridiculous visages of the savage tribesmen when Li “discovers” them. As Li ritually accepts the traditional warpaint of his new friends, the viewer begins to understand this comic adventure into the imaginary realm is as backwards as our fundamental understanding of human creativity. When, near the end of the video, Li with the sternest of faces likens the tribe’s (invisible) cave paintings to the masterpieces of Picasso and Mondrian, the parody is complete: the artist is condescending protagonist; the caveman is artist. But of course, art has evolved beyond the horses of Chauvet… or has it?

Ultimately, the representation of what we see is no less complex than the representation of what we think, imagine, or predict. In the title work of Li Ran’s 2012 solo exhibition “Pretty Knowledge,” this uncomfortable reality is confronted head-on. Again playing the part of parodist, Li emulates a viral video of a French clairvoyant in 1980 predicting the happenings of the next 32 years (viral internet content being a new entertainment phenomenon that perhaps serves to disclose the laziness of the collective mind—or its efficiency). His take on the smug (and suspect; no one but Nostradamus could be so accurate, and besides, Final Cut Pro can swiftly make any video look like it was filmed decades back) know-it-all attitude of the clairvoyant is undercut, again, by an imitation of French so ignorant that it resembles not one word of the actual language. The humor of such connerie is amplified this time by Li Ran’s omission of any voiceover; any meaning to be gleaned from this babble relies entirely on subtitles, i.e. creativity’s most reliable tool, the written word. Elsewhere, it is invalidated by the awareness that while the original clairvoyant discussed the future, Li in fact discusses the past—thereby equating the two, casting them under the same dubious light. The work is yet another cry for a serious evaluation of Modernity, and is seconded in the exhibition space by Before-After, four small reproductions of details of William Hogarth’s 1736 pre-Modemist painting of essentially the same name. A fine coat here, a barmaid’s dress there, and a flash of creamy thigh: Li transplants, with an entirely Postmodern sleight of hand, the juicy semiotics of a context almost 300 years past. Unsurprisingly, the canvases are not all that “pretty.”
These and many other works that cannot be delineated here form only one small corner of Li Ran’s artistic architecture. Should we choose to heave ourselves deeper into its chasms, let us first return to Mont Saint-Victoire, and be warned. A cursory listen suggests that there is a dialogue taking place, but the more attention one pays, the more obfuscatory their exchange seems. For the writer, painter, parodist, and skeptic Li Ran, this is the art world: a lot of posturing, and very little statement of any worth. Allow us to invoke the nasally-inflected counsel offered by the “proud middle-aged man” halfway through this pas de charlatans: “There is no need to discuss this tough philosophical statement any further. Back in Art, what we observe is beyond the definition of the system and global organization. Although it could be sorted and sequenced, this clumsy division, the tedious writing, mingled with the urgent and yet fabricated illusion hidden behind, actually amount to a kind of mental masturbation.”
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LI RAN: MONT SAINTE-VICTOIRE

Text by: Dai Weiping

Mont Sainte-Victoire, 2012, live performance
In the past couple of years, performance art has seen a resurgence in popularity on the international art scene, at the same time igniting in China renewed enthusiasm for theoretical writings, especially translated texts. Li Ran’s recent solo exhibition stands at the crossroads of these two trends.

The exhibition’s title is directly borrowed from Cézanne’s famous series of paintings, “Le Mont Saint-Victoire.” Its content, however, is a combination of performance and video installation. The exhibition’s key performance happened on opening night. Inside the gallery, a wall separated the performance space from viewers. Through a hole in the wall, audience members could peer into a narrow space barely large enough for the props: one small round table covered with a green velvet tablecloth, one chair, and hanging behind it all, dark red velvet curtains. The viewer’s line of vision, however, fell on an exaggeratedly large condenser microphone. The artist sat cross-legged at the table, his shiny hair combed back and his gold eyeglass chain out of place next to his gray suit, as if purposefully exposing an impostor’s defects. During the performance, the artist read from the script in his hand like a voiceover actor, using different voices for difference parts and altering his gestures and intonations according to changes in the texts.

Prior to this exhibition, Li Ran most often appeared in public as a member of the “Company” collective. In “Mont Sainte-Victoire,” which is also Li’s first solo exhibition, topics previously explored by “Company” are also present, such as the methods of an artist’s practice, art history and institutional pressure, anti-modernist attitudes, and more. All of these are expressed via the script that Li himself wrote, and which he reads during the performance. The performance, later exhibited on video, takes place over four acts. Interspersed within the script are carefully chosen excerpts from translated theoretical works, which when pieced together create a new dramatic context for the performance. For example, selections from Roland Barthes’ The Pleasure of the Text are included in act two; and a passage about psychiatry from Michel Foucault’s Madness and Civilization appears in act three. When thoughts turn to accuracy of the translations, however, one is reminded of subpar efforts that err on the side of style over content, and the performance’s inclusion of these borrowed words thus carry a whiff of ridicule. This, while choosing to perform as a voiceover actor is already stiffly ironic; audiences prefer to watch Yilms with the original actors’ voices, not second-hand imitations.

But mockery and ridicule are not the goals of Li Ran’s exhibition, even though the artist’s roaming reference points and insistence on faking out the viewer can lead to confusion. During the last two acts, titled “Tournament” and “Chance Encounter,” the focus shifts from questions about art to literary representations.
of the dimensions of humanity. This transition is foreshadowed in the first two acts, “ReYlected View” and “Gaze.” The overall effect that emerges from a seemingly empty background are Ylashes of human yearning for spiritual connections.

At the performance’s end, a video recording of what just took place is projected onto the opposite gallery wall. The size of the video image is the same as the opening through which the audience watched everything unfold. In this moment, the performer and his performance have doubled their presence in the gallery; the performer is present at the same time as the performance, which is represented through the medium of video. Suddenly the live performance does not seem so necessary. Posed against the other three projections— showing slides of images from the history of art— this video of the performance seems more appropriately in dialogue with the setup than the performance itself.