

L I S S O N   G A L L E R Y

*NY Times*

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# T THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

T'S ART ISSUE

## Alex Katz, Laurie Simmons and More on Their Favorite New York Exhibitions

We asked artists, curators and writers to reflect on the gallery shows that left them forever slightly changed.



An installation view of Mike Kelley's "Day Is Done" at Gagosian in 2005. © 2023 Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, all rights reserved/licensed by VAGA at ARS, NY. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen



By Kate Guadagnino

Sept. 25, 2023



As part of T's 2023 Art issue, we compiled a list of [15 New York City gallery shows](#) that changed art history. We attempted to be as objective as possible but were also aware that there are countless other exhibitions that, whatever their contributions to the culture at large, live on in individual consciousnesses. And so we asked a group of artists, curators and writers, as well as one collector, about the shows held in a New York City gallery or alternative art space that changed their lives. Here, they each speak about an exhibition (or two) that transformed how they thought about art — or simply blew them away.

**Nathaniel Mary Quinn, artist: Liu Xiaodong's "Shaanbei" at Lisson Gallery, 2023**



An installation view of Liu Xiaodong's "Shaanbei" at Lisson Gallery in 2023. © Liu Xiaodong, courtesy of Lisson Gallery. Photo: Mark Waldhauser

When I finally finished the work for my solo exhibition with Gagosian Paris earlier this year, I went to Chelsea, walked around and came across Xiaodong's exhibition. It was a lovely surprise because he's one of my favorite painters. He portrays the lives of everyday people and is exceptionally fluent with his material — it's as though he takes actual flesh and articles of clothing and lays them on the canvas, a bit like Lucian Freud. This was the first time I'd seen an entire body of his work at once, and I was awe-struck.

*These interviews have been edited and condensed.*



### Resonating with Society in Liu Xiaodong's Time

Hu Lingyuan

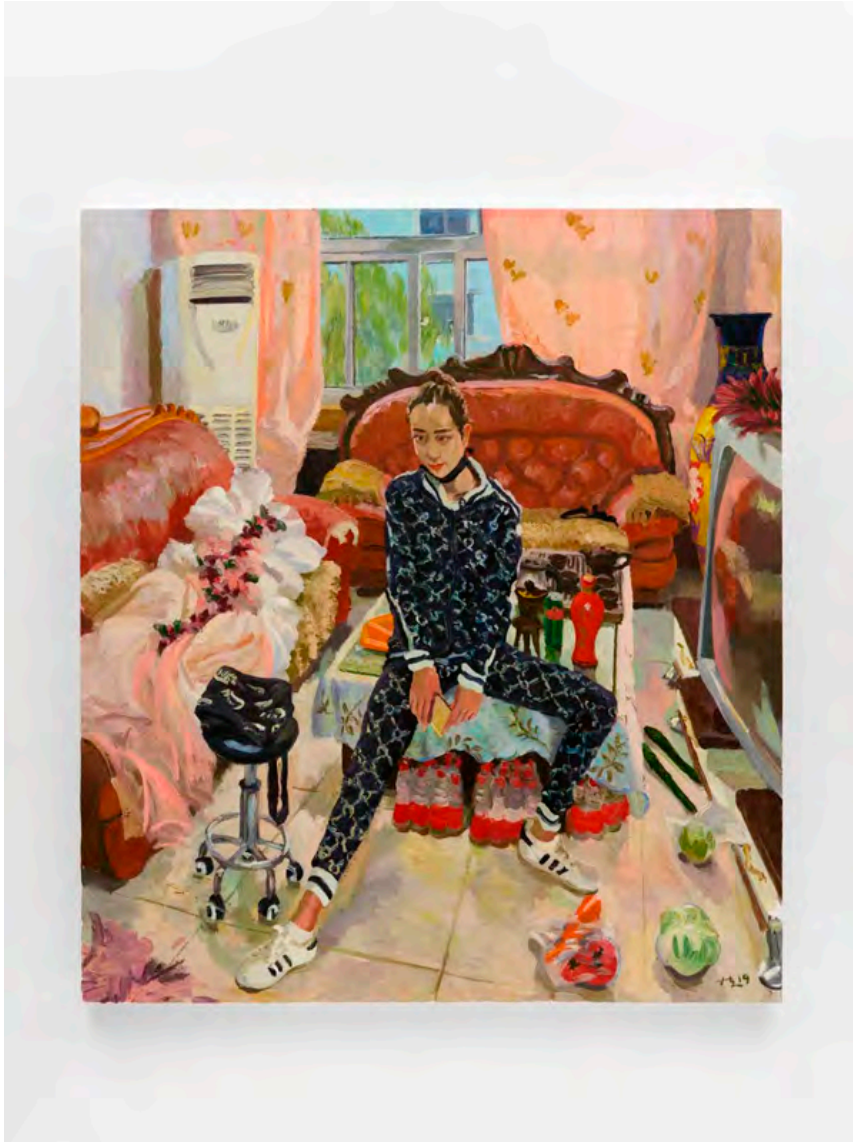
Treading through the river, bearing their slim legs, teenage girls frolic under the sun, one holding a beer and the other lacing her shoes. The moment they look into the camera the image is fixed and turns into the oil painting *Teenage Girls and Beer* (2022) depicted by Chinese artist Liu Xiaodong. Displayed in the documentary *Shaanbei* by Bo Yang, this quick switching scene stirs heartstrings unexpectedly. The wonderful vibes emanating from them strike me as a viewer. I can't help but think of those vivid young lady paintings by 19th-century painters. The two girls in Liu's piece appear to be young people in exile, and the scenery behind them demonstrates their growing up environment. They are the millennium generation, with youthful appearances brimming with ubiquitous wild energy. There is almost no trace of Liu's intervention in the image, as he depicts what he sees and feels relatively unpretentiously.



Teenage girls in the Yan River, 2022, oil on canvas, 140 x 150 cm. Courtesy Lisson Gallery



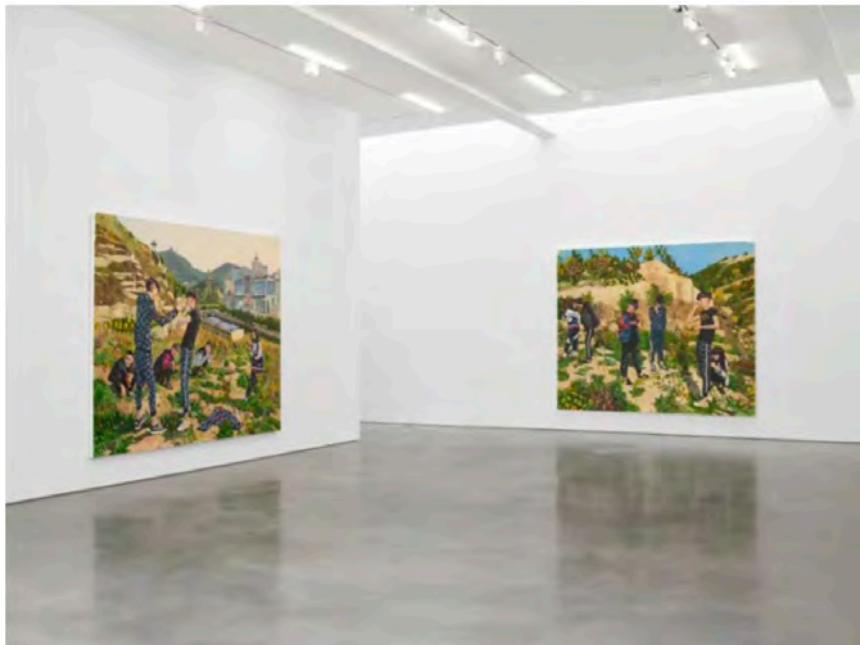
As for the other painting that focuses on the female subject, *Wedding Dress and Vegetables* (2019) has a distinct atmosphere. A young woman in a Gucci-like outfit sits at a tea table and the room she is in flows an atmosphere of delicate rococo, seemingly indicating that her identity is about to change. Despite this, the wedding dress on the sofa and the scattered objects do not reflect the festive atmosphere that should be there. The three women are all from remote areas of Shaanbei as are the other teenagers in the paintings. These young adolescents wander idle through the fields and rivers they know every day, clearly disconnected from the society outside, which values “elite” and “merit.”



*Wedding dress and Vegetables*, 2019, oil on canvas, 180 x 160 cm. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Considering this aspect, one can realize that an artist with a gift for painting demonstrates the potential side of being a director or journalist. The electronics, costumes, and architecture in the paintings reflect the countryside in transition: a mix of modern transformation and contemporary elements amid a primitive countryside landscape. This is analogous to the urban and rural changes reflected in Chinese director Jia Zhangke's films--those images with rural areas, small counties and metropolitan cities as the backdrop are veiled in gray tones with the melancholy of passing times and separated nostalgia. One would be gradually brought into this emotion in Liu's painting by his depiction of the general environment, the layout of figures and landscapes, and the vivid status of the characters. A strong sense of sorrow is apparent in *Two Men from the Back* (2022). The middle-aged man (probably the artist himself) and the older man on the painting's left are on the yellow ground, one looking at the tall buildings across the river as he walks, and the other seemingly stopping to look ahead. Their gesture and action contrast, and the old man occupies the visual center of the image in the composition. His black back condensed into a serene state that slowed down moving sights, and then the image stood still. Our emotional memories of the fading “back” in Chinese writer Zhu Zhiqing's article, as well as those sorrowful and lonely backs in Caspar David Friedrich's paintings are all evoked.





Liu Xiaodong: Shaanbei, Exhibition view. 504 West 24th Street, New York. 4 May – 10 June, 2023. Photography by Mark Waldhauser. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

The blue color becomes a focal point, connecting the elderly and the middle-aged man. This painting treatment can also be seen in the work *The Kids in the Back* (2022) in which a woman playing with a cell phone and a child looking up at the stage are all related together by their blue tops. Both of them are all placed behind two men, one walking straight by with his hands in both pockets and the other seemingly doing a live stream. Like the yellow ground and modern buildings in *Two Men from the Back*, the booming We-Media phenomenon in China and the background landscape collide to convey the close relationship between industrial urbanization and the countryside.





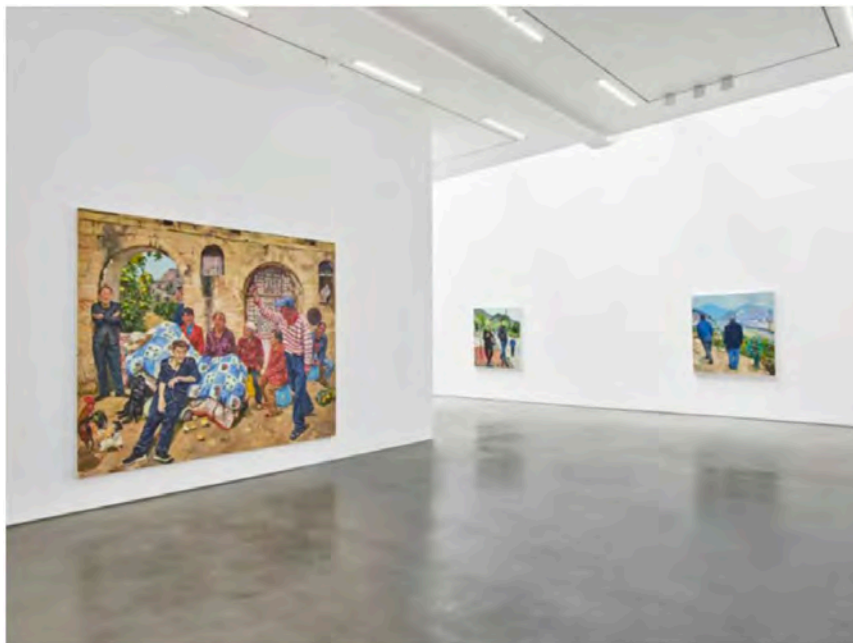
The woman who is squatting on the ground appears inconspicuous, but her position in the center of the view allows her to be seen. In Shaanbei and Guanzhong her posture is called “Ge Jiu” which dates back to the Spring and Autumn Period. And there is a highlight of “Guanzhong Dunjing” in Guanzhong’s countryside, which relates to the eating habit, “Lao Wanhui.” The pose was once popular on the Internet and has become known as the “Asian squat” in global culture. It is the same as “the ‘Hunkerin’ popularized at the University of Arkansas in 1959. Students saw it as a symbol of friendship and suggested that world peace would not be far away if Khrushchev and Eisenhower hunkered at the summit (from the November 1959 issue of LIFE magazine).” In Liu’s youth-themed paintings, this pose appears frequently. By changing culture and lifestyle habits, the “squatting” posture gradually disappeared from the public context and became marginalized, as the kilns in the painting. However, the culture invoked by the posture is vital to non-mainstream communities.



The Kids in the Back, 2022, oil on canvas, 150 x 140 cm. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Through visiting different regions personally, Liu built individual care for our society. And this time it is both personal sentiment and recognition of the region and culture that prompted him to travel to Shaanbei. When creating, he often chooses local people as characters in his paintings, then sets the scene. In *The Roar* (2021), an older man with his right hand fist raised exhibits a charging warrior posture whose slightly leaning forward body creates a feeling like he is trying to rush out of the picture. The five older women seated behind him and four men in four positions balance this elder man in visual composition. Also, their lazy and oblivious demeanor demonstrates that the old man’s passion was artificially shaped in a particular context, which has conceptual and performance implications. This can be interpreted as an homage to a generation in the midst of a torrent, as well as a reminiscence of times gone by.





Liu Xiaodong: Shaanbei, Exhibition view. 504 West 24th Street, New York. 4 May – 10 June, 2023. Photography by Mark Waldhauser. Courtesy Lisson Gallery



View of Jiajiagou from behind the Pear Trees, 2022, acrylic on paper, 26 x 36 cm. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Liu can arrange figures according to his own creation, but rural scenes are naturally drawn in his paintings. Through exquisite painting techniques and coordinated colors, he shows us the state of those trees, cows, slopes, and the village in their own environment. Wherein the paintings of Jiajiagou such as View of Jiajiagou from behind the Hawthorn Trees (2022) and View of Jiajiagou from behind the Pear Trees (2022), evoke Mount St. Victor was depicted by Cézanne many times in his later years which is partly a symbol of his identity that holds his personal emotions and his innovation in painting. Liu's paintings of Jiajiagou's overlook view, front view, and side view also show his art passion. The constant thinking, polishing, and contemplation he displays is a sign of cherishment and recollection of memories. Having sketched here as a young school boy more than thirty years ago, and today, more than thirty years later, he is back again.



*HyperAllergic*  
24th May 2023

## HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews

### Liu Xiaodong's Empathetic Eye

One of the underlying commonalities among the sites Liu has painted is the deleterious consequences of modernization on a traditional society or group.



John Yau May 24, 2023



Liu Xiaodong, "Irredeemable Loafers" (2023), oil on canvas, 98 3/8 x 118 1/8 inches (© Liu Xiaodong, courtesy Lisson Gallery)

In mid-September of 2019, I flew to Beijing to meet Liu Xiaodong and begin research for a monograph on his work. It was scheduled to be published by Lund Humphries for its now-discontinued "Contemporary Painters" series, edited by Barry Schwabsky (*Liu Xiaodong* was released on October 1, 2021.) Over the next 10 days, Liu and I met daily, talking for four or five hours at a time, with his longtime assistant Marco Betelli translating. Our wide-ranging conversations covered many subjects, beginning with his childhood in a Manchurian town with a paper mill built by Japanese occupiers, and continuing to long exchanges about the many places he had visited to paint. One of the underlying commonalities among the sites he chose was the deleterious consequences of modernization on a traditional society or group.



From earlier research I knew that Liu was an observational painter who worked on site, often on a very large scale. I learned that he had traveled to Uummannaq, Greenland, to paint the adolescent residents of what he called, in an interview for the Louisiana Museum in Denmark, “an orphanage at the end of the world.” He had also lived among and depicted men and women in the jade mining region of Xinjiang Province, home of many ethnic minorities, including the now-persecuted Turkic Uyghur people. I was reminded of our many conversations when I saw the exhibition *Liu Xiaodong: Shaanbei* at Lisson Gallery, which resulted from one of the projects we had talked about in Beijing.

Liu was very open about his process. He showed me pages of his daily diary, along with sketches, watercolors, photographs (including ones on which he had painted), and paintings he had started while making two trips to the Texas-Mexico border in 2019. In addition, the filmmaker Bo Yang has accompanied him for many recent projects, to document Liu’s interactions with his subjects and surrounding landscape. Back in New York, I watched films of Liu in Mongolia and Cuba, as well as collaborations with well-known filmmakers Jia Zhangke and Hou Hsiao-Hsien.

Historically speaking, Shaanbei is considered the birthplace of the People’s Republic of China, as it is where Mao Zedong ended the Long March in October 1935. Like the Texas-Mexico border, Mongolia, or Cuba — places where Liu has traveled and painted — progress’s march and the history of global conflict have left their marks on its inhabitants.

The exhibition comprises different examples of Liu’s immersion in the life and culture of Shaanbei. It must be seen in its entirety to sense all the facets of his deeply considered practice. Bo Yang’s 40-minute biographical documentary *Shaanbei* explains that Liu first traveled to this area to paint in 1985. In the film, he shows a notebook drawing he made of an elderly man living in the village at that time and asks the people he meets in Shaanbei about him.





Liu Xiaodong, "Wedding Dress and Vegetables" (2019), oil on canvas, 70 7/8 x 63 x 2 inches (© Liu Xiaodong, courtesy Lisson Gallery)

The entire notebook, which is on display, has been digitized so viewers can scroll through the pages. When Liu visited Shaanbei in 1985, he was an undergraduate student at the Chinese Academy of Fine Art (CAFA), where he now teaches painting. In 1981, he entered a high school affiliated with CAFA after taking a national exam. He was part of the first wave of students to return to school after Mao died and the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976. He was in his late teens and had not been formally educated for many years. In 1984, he was admitted to CAFA's oil painting department.



Traveling to a remote rural area of China and painting the people living and working there was part of school policy, in keeping with the Chinese Communist idealization of the peasant and laborer. An observational painter who never became didactic, contrary to his social realist training, Liu never says why he chose to return to Shaanbei after more than 30 years, leaving viewers room to surmise.



Drawing in Liu Xiaodong's diary (© Liu Xiaodong, courtesy Lisson Gallery)

When Liu shows a drawing from his student notebook to the villagers, he is also identifying the change in thinking that began to take place while he was in art school — the move from idealizing to directly observing the subject. Shaped by the changes and events in China in the years after Mao's death in 1976 up to the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, his return to Shaanbei is loaded. And yet, as I watched the film, I got the sense that he was trying hard to see what was in front of his eyes, and that his motivation was the same as when he was a student: empathy. It is in fact his empathetic longing to become the "other" that originally helped him break through the aesthetic agenda of socialist realism, with its emphasis on idealization and the heroic. Can he imagine what his subjects are thinking and feeling without passing judgement on them? As Charles Baudelaire described the "painter of modern life," can he become "independent, passionate, and impartial"?



Liu marks his return to Shaanbei in the painting “Two Figures from the Back in the Mountain Rain” (2022). Compositionally, he has taken something from Caspar David Friedrich’s “Wanderer above the Sea of Fog” (1818), in which a figure faces away from the viewer and toward the landscape. One of the figures in Liu’s work is the artist himself, who strides on an incline toward the painting’s left edge, while looking across the Yan River on the right, at the city that has grown up there in the years since he last visited. One possible inspiration for this figure may be Edgar Degas’s “Place de la Concorde” (1875), an isolated example in this artist’s work. In addition to a parallel with Degas’s man striding toward the painting’s edge, holding a closed umbrella, both artists use the placement of forms as an expression of politics.

What Liu brings together is stillness and movement, center and periphery. In Liu’s painting, his body tilts at a slight diagonal, in counterpoint to the erect figure in the middle — the viewer’s surrogate. Can we become both of them and see with an open mind what is in front of us and, as the artist’s image implies, behind us at our memories, as we move into the future? The figures’ interaction with each other and the landscape invites further speculation about the relation of past, present, and future. Between the two figures, we can see a bridge crossing the Yan River. It suggests a link between the men without spelling out what it might be. Directly above the central figure, in the distance, is a monument commemorating the Long March, which Mao proclaimed a victory (a claim historians dispute).

What is striking and unsettling about the show’s other eight paintings, all but one of which have between two and nine figures, is how many of the individuals occupy a solitary world, whether it is because they are looking at their cell phones, standing and smoking by a gate, or singing on a temporary stage amid a nearly empty parking lot. In one painting of a sole individual, “Wedding Dress and Vegetables” (2019), the young woman in a knock-off Gucci track suit (as evidenced by its incorrect logo) is seated alone on the edge of coffee table, cell phone clasped in one hand, presumably about to get married. A white bridal gown, along with pink and dark magenta flowers, are spread out on a sofa. While salmon pinks and reds — an auspicious color in China and often the color of a wedding dress — are predominant, the scene hardly feels festive. Liu’s paintings brim with contradictions for viewers to try to disentangle.





Liu Xiaodong, "Two Figures from the Back in the Mountain Rain" (2022), oil on canvas, 59 x 55 1/8 inches  
(© Liu Xiaodong, courtesy Lisson Gallery)

Liu's subjects range in age from young children to elderly men and women. "Irredeemable Loafers" (2023) depicts a group of teenagers while "The Roar" (2021) shows hard-working peasants gathered in front of a wall, listening to a man with his fist raised, singing what the film tells us is a patriotic song.

Working with a loaded brush and a sure touch, Liu does something unexpected: he paints empathetic portraits of people he hardly knows, who are part of distinct social groups existing within a specific geographic locale and economy in which he has immersed himself. The film shows that Liu rented a typical apartment in Shaanbei for two years in order to undertake these paintings. When I was in Beijing, we talked about this project and the



possibility that I might accompany him on one of his trips there; he made a point of telling me that we would not stay in a hotel. Even when he is “played by” them, as he says of a group of teenagers who never show up to be painted, even after he has bought them what they wanted (Chinese-produced Gucci knock offs), he never loses his genuine affection for them. The rapport he establishes with his subjects varies. At times it is stretched but it is never broken.

Liu is one of the few artists working today who has picked up where Édouard Manet left off in his synthesis of form and content. He does so by staging a scene and costuming the figures, something he learned from working closely with film directors, while making it look natural. Liu’s combination of independence, direct observation, impartiality, and passion, as well as his use of a camera and collaboration with a self-directed filmmaker, enables him to see deeper into the hierarchically divided and warring world in which we live. His primary subjects are the people modernization comfortably pushes aside, often with society’s full approval — individuals and classes that few painters in the West have attempted to embrace.



Installation view of the film *Shaanbei* by Bo Yang in *Liu Xiaodong: Shaanbei* at Lisson Gallery, New York (photography by Mark Waldhauser, © Liu Xiaodong, courtesy Lisson Gallery)

*Liu Xiaodong: Shaanbei continues at Lisson Gallery (504 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 10. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*



*Observer*  
20 May 2023

# OBSERVER

ARTS

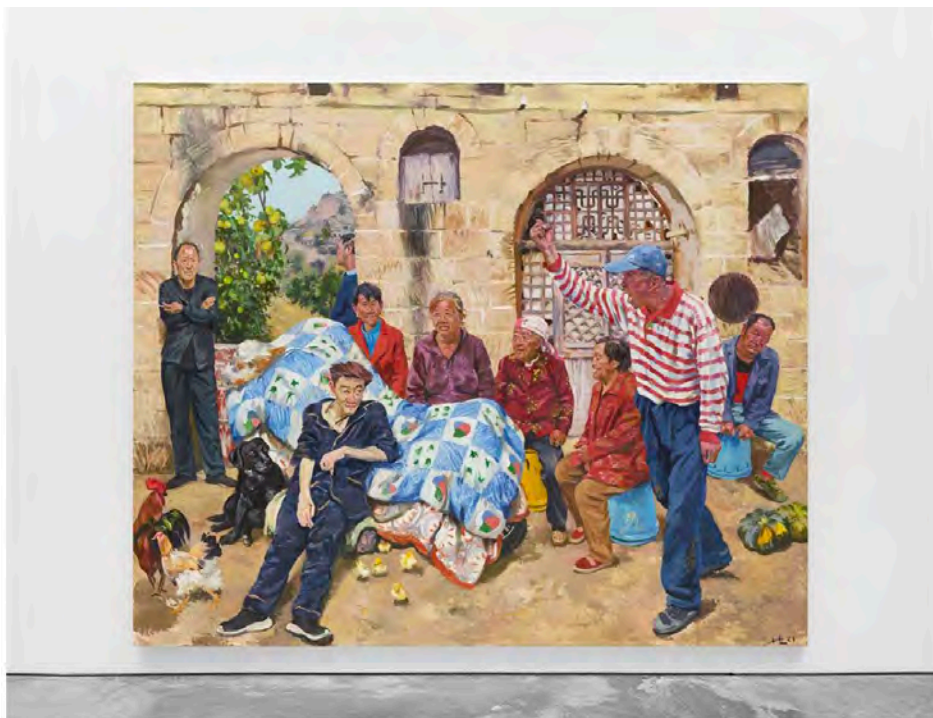
## On View Now: Four Art Shows in Chelsea to See Off-Frieze

Nature, memory and the human condition are in full bloom at these galleries.

By [Farah Abdessamad](#) · 05/20/23 2:00pm

While [New York's Frieze Week](#) is drawing to a close—and Independent, Future Fair and [TEFAF](#) have come and gone—there's thankfully always more [art to experience in NYC](#). Here are four must-catch shows in three Chelsea galleries that reawaken the multidimensionality of landscapes and nature—peculiar, mechanically engineered, pure, surreal, nostalgic and all too human.

### **Liu Xiaodong: Shaanbei at Lisson Gallery**



Lisson Gallery presents 'Shaanbei,' a body of work by artist Liu Xiaodong. Courtesy Lisson Gallery



Conversing with Day Jackson's re-invented vistas of nature's immensity is a solo show narrating the story of an intimate return and landscapes rediscovered. In a new body of large-scale neo-realist paintings, diaries, paper drawings and a documentary, Beijing-based painter Liu Xiaodong revisits his past and an important encounter from three decades ago. In 1985, he visited Shaanbei, a culturally and historically significant area in northern Shaanxi, in China's hinterland. This location has long been associated with Mao Zedong's Long March (1934-1935), a military retreat that led to the rise of Chinese Communism. At the time, Liu was an art student at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Art. He accompanied a troupe and stayed in a modest hillside village. The paintings and his summoned memory come alive in a 40-minute documentary where we follow the artist's watercolor drawing by a river and a towering viewpoint. With his sketchbook from the 1980s, he searches for a vanished world, asking after former models. "It's when I look at my paintings that I remember more," he says to a friend, evoking the traditional art of remembering Chinese characters through stroke sequencing, here extended to drawing. The memory of his pen/brush is more convincing to him than his own as if it were a distinct organ.

His plein-air portraits feature local people of all ages. Because past and present collide, Liu's youth often appears in contrast with the elderly. Boredom and longing permeate both groups (in form, his subjects are masses, many) and the composition of the scenes. Teenagers dressed in sportswear drink alcohol and play with their smartphones, but just like the elderly, they sit or stand watching life go by. They don't appear to be speaking with one another but simply enjoying the physical presence of others. Liu's gaze looks at the rural in modernity, and modernity in mythologized ancestral rural ways. Are the hands of the young man scrolling on his cell phone the same as those of his farming parents or grandparents? As such, his show engages with nostalgia, transience and self-reliability. He is propelled as a narrator of loss and change who is forced to decipher the familiar and the strange. After the bygone days, what remains as the "spirit" of a place?



LISSON GALLERY

*The Brooklyn Rail*  
May 2023

# **BROOKLYN RAIL**







Portrait of Liu Xiaodong, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.



# LIU XIAODONG with Barry Schwabsky

Liu Xiaodong—as John Yau observed in his 2021 monograph on the artist—“epitomizes Baudelaire’s description of ‘the painter of modern life’ as an ‘independent, passionate, and impartial nature,’ even as he expands on it.” For more than three decades the peripatetic artist has roamed far and wide from his base in Beijing to immerse himself, and the viewers of his work, in a world constantly transforming in unpredictable ways. In anticipation of his exhibition *Shaanbei* at Lisson Gallery, New York, for which I am writing a catalogue essay, I spoke to Xiaodong over Zoom. Marco Betelli, the artist’s studio manager, kindly assisted with translations back and forth between English and Chinese.

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*Shaanbei*  
Lisson Gallery, New York  
May 4–June 10, 2023

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**BARRY SCHWABSKY (RAIL):** Liu Xiaodong, it’s a pleasure to meet you at last. I was hoping we could start by asking how you became an artist or rather, when did you discover your desire to make art?

**LIU XIAODONG (L. X.):** Hello, Barry. When I was in the third grade of elementary school, one of my teachers decided that I was quite good at drawing, or anyway better than other kids. At that point, of course, I had absolutely no training in drawing or painting. So I then started copying some Chinese Revolutionary era artists. And then it was my uncle that actually gave me my first real training in the arts, in painting. My uncle had me copy illustrations, and then focus on color. So it was the English watercolors from the eighteenth century and some Russian artists that were my first models. Later on, I applied for the high school affiliated to the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. And that’s when I started off on the path of becoming a professional artist.

**RAIL** So, until you went to the Central Academy, it sounds like you really did not have access to museums or to actually seeing original works of art by fine artists, but were seeing things that had to do with what we might call more like illustration, is that right?

**L. X.** Yes, Barry, you’re absolutely correct. In fact, before going to Beijing, I had no access to museums, to exhibitions. The only art I knew was those English watercolors, and these Russian artists that my uncle had me copying, and what I would do was paint from life my school mates, or go down to the field and do some

drawing, do some sketches. It’s only when I went to Beijing that I had access to libraries, to exhibitions, to museums. So I got to know the French Impressionists. I got to know the works of Cézanne, Picasso. And then I saw art magazines with Pop art and that kind of thing.

**RAIL** I’m not surprised to hear that among the first works that you were shown were these ones by Russian artists, because we know about the influence that Russia’s socialist-realist art had in China, but I’m much more surprised to hear mention of the English watercolors—I think you said eighteenth century? And was that an unusual interest that your uncle had? Or was that something that was more widely appreciated in China at the time? What’s the story there?

**L. X.** My uncle actually graduated from an art academy. What happened was that during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, he was forced to get rid of all of the materials, all of the art catalogues he had—he only saved two: one from these Russian artists, and one from these English watercolor painters. So that’s the reason. And what my uncle would do was encourage me to observe, when painting from life, to be very, very careful about details, even if it was, you know, painting a field, painting a tree, painting the grass. So that really made an impact on my practice back then.

**RAIL** In fact, it sounds like you’re saying that your practice today really has its roots in those very beginnings that go back before your time at the Academy and that you’ve preserved a certain impulse toward direct observation of what’s around you that your uncle inculcated. With that in mind, though, I wonder, were you ever tempted to go off that path to become involved in other modes of art making, maybe while you were at the Academy or afterwards,

that could have been, let’s say, more Pop oriented—as I believe became popular in China for a while—or maybe more abstract, or in any case, oriented in another direction than this kind of observational approach?

**L. X.** I spent eight years at the Academy, first at the high school affiliated with the Academy, and at the Academy itself. I spent those years learning from the masters, learning from great artists and trying to paint like them. It was only when I was done with my academic journey that I kind of went back to my real self and figured out what I wanted to do.

**RAIL** Is that to imply the eight years in the Academy were sort of an impediment to your development? Or did following that path away from what you call your real self, and then circling back to recover your own earlier impulse—was that a positive thing?

**L. X.** Without those eight years at the Academy, I would never have had the confidence to become an artist. Because back then is when I realized how difficult being an artist was. I actually became quite frustrated with my work as an artist when I was about to graduate from the Academy of Fine Arts, and I actually tried to get into film studies. Then, after a while, I went back to the Academy. And that’s the moment when I figured that I needed to let go, I needed to not try to be so serious, not try to be so self-important, if you will. And I just let go of my resolution to start a new artistic movement myself. I just relaxed. And from that point, I kind of found my own path into the art world. So to answer your question more directly, those eight years were not an obstruction to my career, to my path, they were absolutely instrumental to me becoming who I am today. I hope that answers your question.

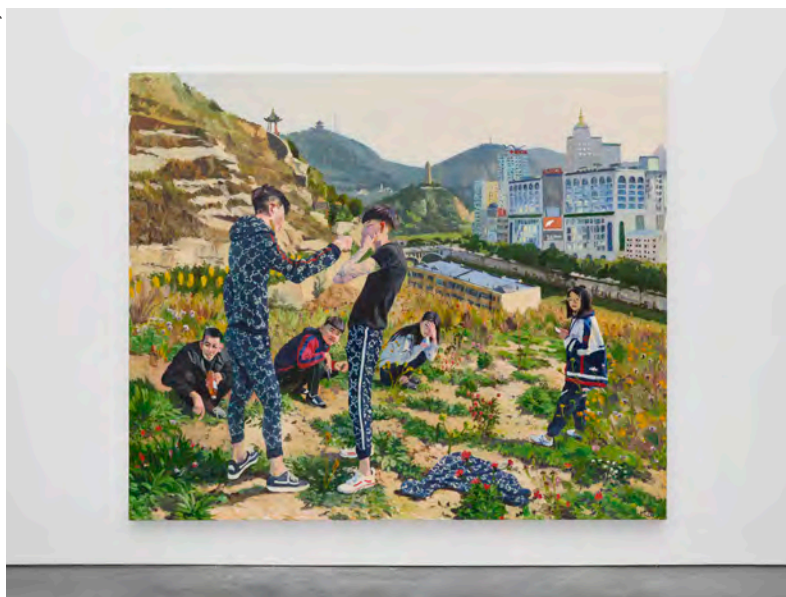
**RAIL** Absolutely, yes. I was also interested in your mentioning that you’d thought of going into film as an alternative because of course, I’m aware that you’ve continued to work very closely with filmmakers, also that you yourself have used photography a lot, even if, as I understand it, you don’t use photography in the preparation of your paintings, which are done directly from observation—*sur le motif*, as the Impressionists used to say. But clearly you have a strong ongoing interest in these, let’s say, modern technical methods for image-making and I’d like to hear more about that.

**L. X.** Actually, I do use photography in the preparation of my paintings.

**RAIL** Ah, okay. Things I’d read about your work made me think that was not the case. So that’s also something I’d like to learn more about.

**L. X.** Back in the Academy, when I was preparing to become a painter, I felt that when I was watching movies, I was always very, very happy. I was always very, very content with myself. I cannot say the same thing about my artistic creation because painting was not about happiness. Also, I felt that it was much easier to express what I wanted to convey through a movie, through a film, through a video, and not through my paintings. Hanging out with people involved in the cinema industry also was a lot more fun than being alone and painting. So that was it, that was why, for a brief while, I considered giving up on my idea of becoming a professional artist, of becoming a professional painter, and thought about walking down the road that would eventually lead me to enter the movie industry. So, as for the impact that movies and films had on my art, on my painting, movies made my painting become more relaxed. I feel that the whole art history is very heavy





with content. And I was at a point in art history where it was hard for an artist to find a logic within art itself. So what I learned from my friends involved in the film industry is that I could just go about my way of being an artist by dropping hints, by giving suggestions in my paintings.

**RAIL** What about the question of time and how that enters your work? I was thinking that a way that your paintings differ from the, let's say, classical or traditional realism that they seem to relate to, is that a traditional realistic painting typically wanted to present itself through the fiction that it represents a single moment in time glimpsed from a determinate viewpoint, whereas I think in your paintings there's much more of a sense of the time that went into making them, the time that goes into seeing them, as well as a multiplicity of viewpoints, and that in fact they don't represent a single moment but rather a sequence.

**L. X.** I think you're right in saying that. I would add that my wish, my desire, is to reflect on the complexity of the work of the society by putting more scenes into one artwork, into one painting. By telling more stories in one artwork. It's a bit as if I was, you know, sitting on a wall and at the same moment seeing inside two different apartments. So as a painter, as an observer, I can observe with only one artwork two things that are going on in separate spaces and in separate times.

**RAIL** I'd like to hear a little bit more about the use of photography in the work, in the painting. How does that go? Is it that you take pictures on the site and then bring them back to the studio to develop them into a painting or is there another method involved?

**L. X.** Yes, that's exactly what it is. I do, of course, paint on site, I do paint from life, but it's not always the case. Especially when I travel to work on a project, I take loads of photos. These photos of course are stored in my phone or in my laptop, but they're also stored in my mind in a very clear way, in a very systematic way, so that when I do go back to my studio in Beijing, and I'm about to paint on a canvas, if there's something that I feel is missing, if I need more of some details, I know exactly from which resources I can draw. And sometimes when you're looking at one of my works, you may

very well feel that, you know, that this was really the scene, that was how the person was in the space, and so on, while more often than not this is not the case: it's actually a collage of many images. I try as hard as I can to do everything by heart, out of my memory, but sometimes the photographs that I took myself come in handy.

**RAIL** That's very interesting to learn because I think from what I've read about the work until now, the emphasis has been much more on this fact of working on site, and so I'd like to hear a little bit more if we can just go into more detail about how that process actually goes. What happens when you go to a place and decide, okay, this is where I want to set up, to start painting, then what happens?

**L. X.** What usually happens is that I set my mind and my eyes on places, on locations that present a high degree of complexity. If a place is not at all complex, I probably have no interest in painting it. So what I do is, I do *not* do my homework. I do not do plenty of research on that place. So I only go with, you know, a very general idea of what is going on in that place, of what kind of people, what kind of environment I'll find in that location. And the reason behind that is that I don't want things to be pre-arranged too much. So I want a level of casualness, of chance, if you will, to be the strongest element in my painting. So I travel to the place, and then what happens happens. I meet with someone, I find someone interesting, find someplace that seems more interesting than other places. And then I start painting a few works on site. And it's never the whole series. So the majority of the artworks are realized in my studio in Beijing. And that's by me taking a lot of photographs and writing diaries. That's generally how I go about a project.

**RAIL** So would you say it's more a question of finding the people in the place that you want to connect to? Or is it more about finding a physical location within the area that seems interesting? Or can it be either one?

**L. X.** What I do is when I travel to a relevant place, whoever I meet there, I am going to be painting; whoever I meet in this relevant location, this relevant place that is willing to be painted and to work with me, that is good for me.

**RAIL** Do you consider that this work is connected to journalism? In many ways it sounds like you act like a sort of reporter who goes and embeds himself into a certain situation and tries to find out the viewpoints of the actors who are in that situation.

**L. X.** Yes, in a way I agree with you. The main difference between what I do and what journalists are supposed to do is that I do not by any means give an account of events. I just get to a place, I decide that I want to tell something about that place, and then whoever I meet, that person is good for me to be a sitter for my portraits. I don't wish to investigate and tell some truth about that place.

**RAIL** It sounds like what you are avoiding, perhaps, is the claim to give an overview. I think about the work that you did around the Three Gorges Dam. And of course that was a situation that was, as you know, reported a lot in the international press. But in the news or in a journalist account, it has to be framed within the larger context of development and industry and so on. You're going down to a more microscopic level, it seems.

**L. X.** Yes, that is very representative of what I do. What I do is a bit like being a very irresponsible journalist. One that does not investigate too much. The only thing I do is get to a place. I paint a painting. That's it. I'm sure that all of the actors involved in my painting have a lot to say, and have many truths. In a way, I have no interest in, and I have not the capabilities to be portraying all of these very complex issues in my art. So that's what I do. That's being a very irresponsible journalist, a lazy journalist.

**RAIL** That's a very modest way of describing what seems to be a very ambitious project. Maybe an irresponsible journalist is a very responsible painter. [Laughter]

I'd like to know a little bit more about how the places are chosen, particularly maybe those outside of China—because I imagine that even before you get there you know something more about the places that you're going to visit in China, even if it's a place that's new to you. But when you go to work abroad, how does that come about? Is it that you are being invited to go to a certain place, or that you've done some research and said "Oh, there's an interesting place I want to find out about," or how does that happen?

**L. X.** During my professional career as an artist, I've worked on around twenty projects, and with half of them, or at least a third of them, I was invited to do those projects. What usually happens is that the institution, the galleries, the museum, that invites me asks me to choose between two places, between two locations. So I decide which one looks more interesting to me. And then I travel to the place and I go out of my way—even though I'm a very irresponsible journalist, even though I do not do research before getting to the place—when I do get to the place, I go out of my way to meet the locals, to live among the locals. I usually rent an apartment and spend time there. I don't go there just for a few days, I stay there. I try to experience life as the locals do, live the local ways of life. And even if most of the time I do not understand their language—because I have done projects all over the world, and I cannot possibly be able to communicate with those people myself—that's not at all important to me, because I'm sure that by depicting their appearances, by depicting their homes, by depicting their jobs, their workplaces, I'm already telling a lot about that place. Putting a lot of that place on my canvas. So in a way, in this world, there are no foreign places to me.



Liu Xiaodong, *The Roar*, 2021. Oil on canvas, 98 3/8 x 118 1/8 in. © Liu Xiaodong. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.



**RAIL** Just to clarify when you say you spend not just a few days but you go and stay in the place, are we talking about a stay of a few months, or a year? How long do you spend being on site for one of these projects?

**L. X.** It's usually one to two months.

**RAIL** And then the amount of time spent afterward in the studio to complete the project would take about how long typically?

**L. X.** This is very, very hard to say because every project is different. So for the *Shaanbei* project, I spent four years working on it. It can very well be that I spend one, two months in a place and then I go back to my studio in Beijing, and I keep on working for another half year, one year. But in the past, I have also completed the whole project on site. So that happens. That

happened in London; it really depends on the condition of the place.

**RAIL** Speaking of Shaanbei, which is the subject of the upcoming exhibition—I'd just like to hear more about that. I have to admit it's a place name that hadn't been familiar to me before. It's not something I think we've heard about much in the United States. So I looked it up. I understand that it's a kind of quite important place in the history of the Chinese Communist Party and also has a lot of folk art and folk music that's very particular to it. Tell me more about the origins of this project and your interest in working there.

**L. X.** There are actually a few different elements that went into my decision to take on the "Shaanbei" project. One of the main reasons is that, as you probably know, Shaanbei, as the cradle of the Chinese Communist Party, was the place where literary and artistic policies

were set, were established early on. So it's a very symbolic place for Chinese art. Another reason that is probably very much related to this is that my own teachers, my own professors, were actually in Shaanbei back in the day, so they very much come from that region. And this is something that I had never thought about. Only more recently did I start to think again about what I actually learned from them—what I learned from the Western arts and what I learned from my teachers at the Academy. A more personal reason is that I had visited Shaanbei when I was a student at the Academy. When I was a boy, when I was a school age boy, I spent time there, I met people there, and this is a place where I went when I was nobody. So I have a lot of personal feelings involved in this project. I felt that I was kind of obligated to go back and to more earnestly, more seriously, think about these questions, think about these issues. So as you can see, there are several elements that made me decide to take on this project.

**RAIL** And so did you find something there that was different from what you expected or what you remembered from your early visits? Was there something that surprised you that came out of the adventure of returning to the spot?

**L. X.** The thing that I noticed immediately and that I was most surprised of is the level of the urbanization process, the way that the tall and modern buildings have made their way into the valleys, and even the very iconic Yan'an Pagoda—which became actually a symbol of the Chinese Communist Party and of the revolution—is now actually kind of dwarfed by taller buildings not so far away. I didn't think that that could be possible, you know, in an ideal socialist society. That was very much a surprise to me.

**RAIL** Very interesting. I don't want to keep you, I know it's very late where you are, but I have one last question. I know that you lived in New York as a young man, and I know that you were also here for quite some time, at the beginning of the COVID pandemic when your flight home was canceled and you had to stay on. Perhaps you've spent more time here as well at other times, I don't know. But I think that you know New York well, and maybe you know it better than we know you. Is there anything that you feel we New Yorkers should understand about seeing your exhibition and your work in general that we might not immediately have thought of or been aware of?

**L. X.** I have one very, very ambitious wish for this show in New York. And it would be that after seeing the exhibition, the audience might be able to see things from my own perspective—to adopt my perspective when looking at things. I am very much aware that this is a very difficult thing to do. So I would content myself to provide viewers in New York with a little diversity. To let them see something that they very possibly have never seen.

Barry Schwabsky is an art critic for *The Nation* and an Editor-at-Large for the *Brooklyn Rail*.

Liu Xiaodong, *Black Cows*, 2022. Acrylic on paper, 10 1/4 x 14 1/8 in. © Liu Xiaodong. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.





LISSON GALLERY

Widewalls  
1 February 2022

# WIDEWALLS

## The Work of Pioneering Chinese Realist Painter Liu Xiaodong Comes to UCCA Beijing



Epochal changes are sometimes deciphered best through art. As we are starting another year of global uncertainties, art can provide a place of peace, and for some artists, it also serves as a site of remembrance - of what is important and who is important in their lives.

Liu Xiaodong's recently opened exhibition at the UCCA Beijing titled *Your Friends* is one such example. Forced to move back home due to global pandemic, Liu decided to shift his artistic gaze to his immediate surroundings and capture, in oil, the significant persons in his life, including family and friends, and everyday events.





Liu Xiaodong - Ning Dai in Person Having a Laugh, 2021, Oil on canvas, 250 × 300 cm. Courtesy the artist.

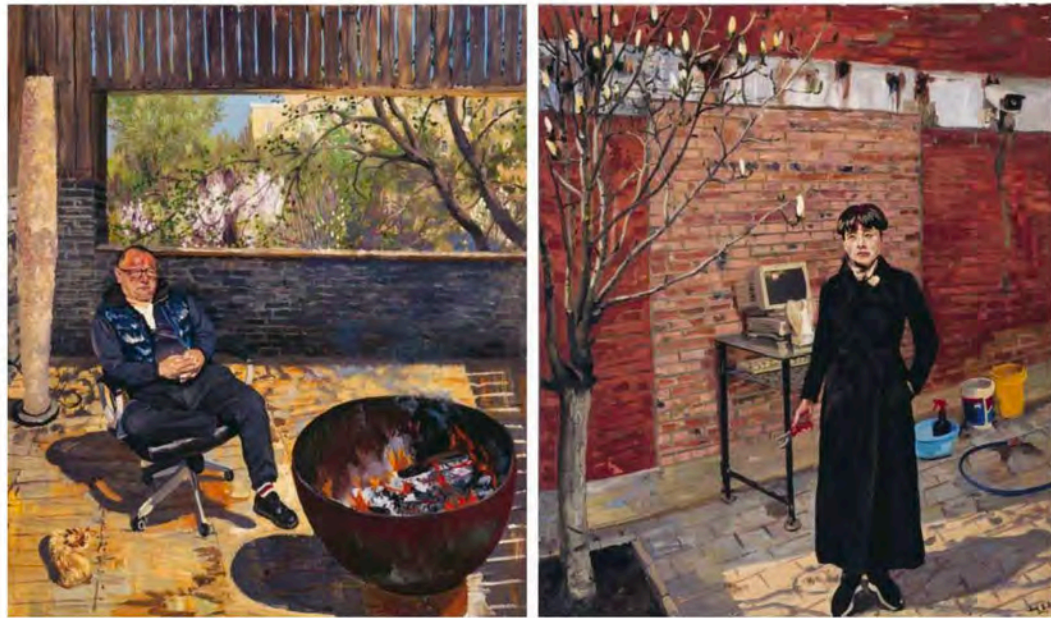
## Three Sections

Your friends is a phrase used often by the artist's friend, the director Zhang Yuan, during their portrait sessions. It is a fitting choice, as the sections of the show, three in total, focus on ordinary people, many of which are the artist's friends, and the snapshots of quotidian life in a small town in northeast China.

The first section, *The Anonymous Walker*, focuses on Liu Xiaodong's previous work in which his sharp photographic eye is exemplified. In his realist painting practice, the artist immerses himself in the lives of others, creating his works on the go, from one place to another. The subject of this section is his hometown Jincheng (shown in *Hometown Boy* and *Jincheng Story* series), the Chinatown neighborhoods of Tuscany and refugee routes in Europe (*Migration* series), ship breaking yards in the Bangladesh city of Chittagong (*Chittagong* series), and ultimately, his adopted hometown of Beijing (*Your City* series).



The second section, *Lands Revisited*, shows watercolor works completed by artists while he was staying in New York during the pandemic. *Square Watercolor* series shows his family and friends while *Heitukeng Brother* series centers around still life and character studies. *Land Revisited* marks a turning point in Liu's practice when he turned to the most important individuals in his life.



**Left:** Liu Xiaodong - Xiaoshuai, 2020, Oil on canvas, 260 x 220 cm. Courtesy the artist / **Right:** Liu Xiaodong - Yu Hong, 2020, Oil on canvas, 260 x 220 cm. Courtesy the artist.

## Paintings of Familial Intimacy

The third section bears the same title as the whole show - *Your Friends*. It comprises the newest paintings Liu completed upon returning to China. Being stranded in New York during 2020 and separated from his friends and family members, Liu began to reflect on the nature of human connections and pushed his creative energy towards the individuals in his life. Among the represented individuals are renowned writer Ah Cheng, leading directors in China's "Sixth Generation" cinema Wang Xiaoshuai and Zhang Yuan, as well as the family members—Liu's mother, brother, and wife Yu Hong.

In all, the exhibition showcases over 120 paintings by Liu, including his sketches, diaries, and a new documentary film by Yang Bo. Although focused on Liu's immediate surroundings, the show also



examines the social changes and development in the last decade both locally and around the world. The lives presented on paintings are caught in the tides of changing times and captured in a new mode of realism developed by Liu.



Liu Xiaodong - Changing a Lamp, 2021, Oil on canvas, 250 × 300 cm. Courtesy the artist.

## Your Friends at UCCA Beijing

The exhibition *Liu Xiaodong: Your Friends* will be on view at [UCCA Beijing](#) until April 10th, 2022. It is curated by UCCA Director Philip Tinari and UCCA Curator Yan Fang. The bilingual catalogue accompanies the exhibition and includes photographs of the exhibited works, a selection of texts from the artist's diaries, and essays by leading experts.

Featured image: Liu Xiaodong - Yu Hong and Honghaier, 2020, Oil on canvas, 152 × 213 cm. Courtesy the artist, Portrait of Liu Xiaodong. Courtesy the artist.



LISSON GALLERY

*Canvas Magazine*  
September 2021

# canvas







Liu Xiaodong. *Boundary River*. 2019. Oil on canvas. 250 x 300 cm. © Liu Xiaodong. Image courtesy of Liu Xiaodong Studio and Lisson Gallery

# POLITICAL CURRENTS

From the Land Art pioneers of the last century to Middle Eastern artists grappling with the very particular circumstances of their region, water sources and their conduits provide inspiration and creative impetus. Urgent contemporary issues such as climate change further reinforce their criticality and bring an increasingly political dimension.

*Words by Gareth Harris*



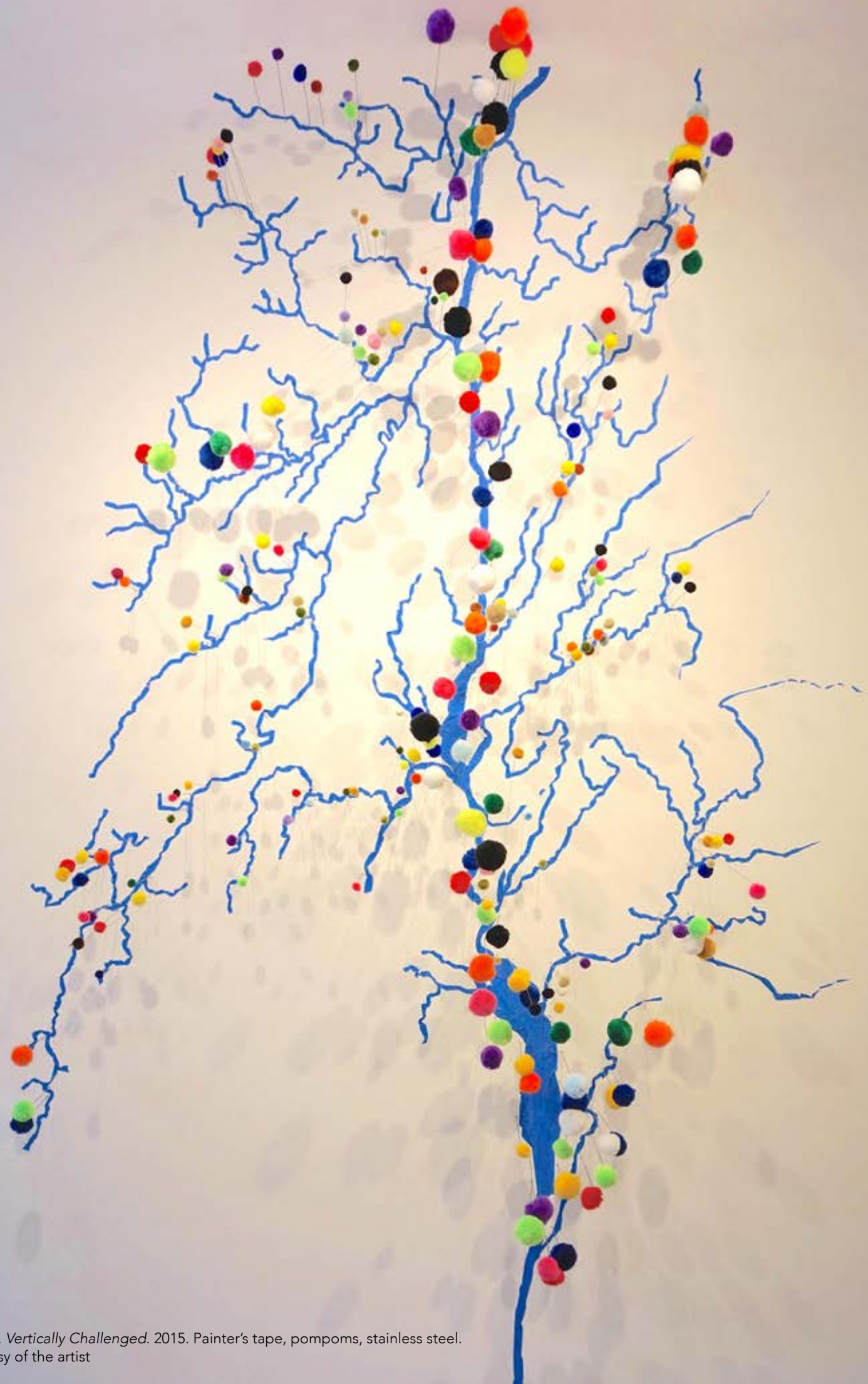
Lamia Joreige. *After the River*. 2016. Installation view at St George's Hall, Liverpool Biennial 2018. Photography by Mark McNulty. Image courtesy of Liverpool Biennial

The Lebanese artist Lamia Joreige is adamant that her 2016 three-channel video installation *After the River* is a political work. The piece scans the eastern neighbourhood of Beirut called Jisr El Wati, taking the viewer along the desolate concrete bed of the Beirut River. Glimpses of activity are seen on the bankside, such as construction workers busy erecting shiny new high-rises. The changing face of the Lebanese capital is presented through the prism of the central waterway, mirroring the city's experiences and transformation and showing how rivers can be a conduit for ideas in contemporary art. The film is open to multiple interpretations, such as the issue of encroaching gentrification or how a waterway demarcates boundaries across metropolitan areas, providing a natural divide that separates socio-economic pockets and different populations. "I think that art is political territory," Joreige stresses.

"The river, a dry dumping ground most of the year, acts as a suspended space," she explains. "[It allows] me to explore notions of borders and landscape and to reflect on the diverse migrant population that has historically settled along its banks since 1915, as well as the current gentrification of some of these areas." Five years on, Joreige maintains that the work is as resonant as ever. "The gentrification process has continued, and the various imagined projects on what the river could become and its potential development, were [mainly] theoretical or speculative, so not much has changed. I guess that now, with the financial and economic crisis, the constructions and development around it have stopped, but the content and reflection are still relevant."

Perceptions of rivers as boundaries, divisive features in need of being overcome, underpinned the multi-site, long-term





Suzan Shutan. *Vertically Challenged*. 2015. Painter's tape, pompoms, stainless steel.  
Image courtesy of the artist



Suzan Shutan. *4000 Plus (Nebraska ground water well)*. 2016. Painter's tape, pompoms.  
Installation view at KANEKO Center, Nebraska. Image courtesy of the artist

project *The River Has Two Banks* (2012–17). “The politics of segregation has greatly hindered a collective understanding of shared realities and common histories across the east and west banks of the River Jordan,” said the organisers, who included the Amman-based curator Toleen Touq. The river represented “the disconnect caused by the segregation of the occupation, and the frayed relationship that we tried to address,” explained Touq. Events such as exhibitions and film screenings would reveal “shared realities and common histories across the east and west banks”, bringing together artists from Palestine and Jordan. These included the *Travelling Artist Open Call* initiative, through which Palestinian “artists, writers and thinkers” who happened to be passing through Jordan were invited to spend more time locally and present their work through artist talks in Amman’s Makan Art Space.

Expectations were high. “In contrast to the ongoing flow of Palestinians entering Jordan, Jordanians are rarely able to visit Palestine. For them, Palestine thus exists mostly as a political or emotional metaphor. *The River Has Two Banks* aims to look behind the curtain and confront the stereotypes each group has about the other,” wrote Alia Rayyan in the journal *Jadaliyya*. Did the project forge connections between Jordanian and Palestinian artists? Touq believes so. “In the curated programme we tried to create connections between the different environmental, historical, social and political issues that intersect between the two places towards a shared reality,” she said. The river was, in a sense, a springboard for collaboration rather than a city limit.

The politics of rivers is also keenly reflected in Ala Younis’s ongoing project *High Dam*, inspired by the Aswan High





Installation view of *The River Has Two Banks* at the Asian Art Biennial in Taiwan, 2017. Image courtesy of Toleen Touq

Dam that was constructed across the Nile in the 1960s. The dam, an engineering triumph that generated electric power and reclaimed desert land for cultivation, was at the heart of President Gamal Abdel Nasser's modernisation agenda. As Younis explains, the mega-project was part of the propaganda apparatus of Egypt and the Soviet Union that controlled how the dam was depicted in film and literature. The Egyptian filmmaker Youssef Chahine, for instance, made two films about the project (the first version in 1968 was followed by a state-approved edit in 1970). "Comparing the two creative works on the High Dam offers an insight into the processes that governed the politics of the era, and the tricks Chahine resorted to when his work did not fit the producers' vision," Younis says.

Reflecting urgent contemporary issues such as climate change and control over water supplies is a major priority for some artists. Connecticut-based Suzan Shutan makes works from multi-coloured pompoms to represent toxins found in water sources, such as pesticides. How audiences reacted to the piece *4000 Plus (Nebraska ground water wells)* shown in the 2016 *Water* exhibition at the KANEKO art centre in Omaha, Nebraska, is significant. "People first tried to locate where they lived on the maps," explains Shutan. "Once they took a closer look at the map key, they learned that the coded pompom colours represent actual chemicals in their drinking water. I also provided information on the effects of the chemicals upon the human body. This empowered the community to take action, to clean up root causes," she said. Meanwhile, Omaha-based artist Susan Knight's work *Notation of Change* (2007) examines the evolving ecosystem in the Great Lakes of North America which is driven, she says, by "stressors" such as invasive species and toxic run-off.

Such art, with its ecological basis, has its roots to a degree in the Land Art tradition of the 1960s. In an interview in 1968, Dennis Oppenheim succinctly outlined the motivation behind the Land Art school, known for its large-scale site-specific interventions beyond traditional museum spaces. "It wanted





Ala Younis. *High Dam. Modern Pyramid*. 2021. Installation view at VI PER, Prague. Photography by Peter Fabo. Image courtesy of VI PER and the artist

to be considered an attempt to contrast relational, traditional forms of object making with a kind of real time dynamic in which the sculptural activity could be considered an activation of real time and real place," he said. Ben Tufnell, author of the book *In Land: Writings Around Land Art and Its Legacies* (2019), says that some early Land Artists – such as Nancy Holt – had concerns similar to those of artists today, particularly regarding ecology.

Some artists and organisations have adopted an increasingly activist stance over the world's dwindling water resources.

Since 2015, the Cyprus-based arts organisation Activate has produced a range of projects and initiatives that have focused primarily on the increasing environmental challenges faced by the countries of the MENA region, including the decreasing availability of fresh water and declining food productivity, says its director Melina Nicolaides. Activate will participate in the *Water in the MENA Region: Preparing for a Changing World* conference due to take place next year at the University of Bahrain. The organisation is not only assisting in the



Ala Younis. *High Dam*. 2019. Installation view at Tabakalera, San Sebastian. Image courtesy of Madrassa Collective, Tabakalera and the artist

organisation of the scientific conference, but also developing with the university "The Year of Water" Programme in order for the initiative to have a much wider impact, adds Nicolaides.

Some artists prefer to let their audience unpick the role of rivers and waterways in their works. The Chinese artist Liu Xiaodong created the *Borders* series of paintings in 2019 along the US-Mexico frontier, after interviewing locals and visiting migrant shelters during two excursions to the region. *Boundary River* (2019) shows a family fishing and relaxing in the river on

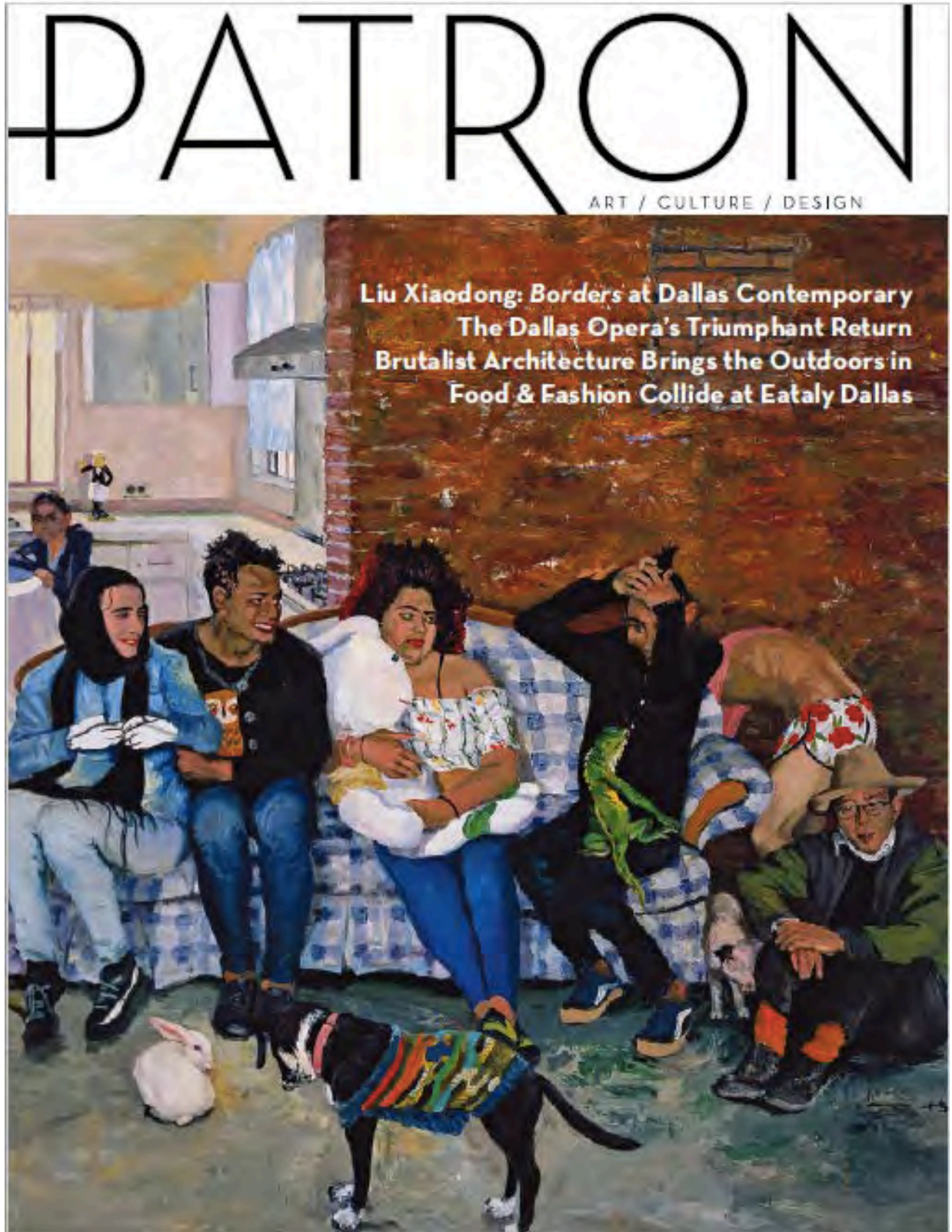
the Mexican side of the border; a police car nestled on the river bank is a reminder nonetheless of the constant tension along the perimeter in the time of Trump. Asked if the series were political, a spokeswoman for Lisson Gallery in London, which represents Liu, replied: "He doesn't have a comment personally. He is happy for you to write about his work from a political angle but prefers not to be specific about it himself," wisely inviting viewers to give their own interpretation of this loaded riverside tableau. ■



# LISSON GALLERY

*Patron Magazine*

February/ March 2021







## *At a specific time and place*

During the height of the immigration crisis, Chinese artist Liu Xiaodong visits Texas border cities to paint portraits of local residents for an exhibition at Dallas Contemporary.

BY DANIELLE AVRAM





Liu Xiaodong, *At the Casa del Migrante in Juárez*, 2019, oil on canvas, 118.12 x 197 in. Courtesy of the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milan/London/Hong Kong.



**I**t sounds like the setup to a bad joke: A Chinese artist travels to the Texas-Mexico border amidst the current immigration crisis to paint portraits of local residents. However, it's not a joke, but the story of Beijing-based Liu Xiaodong and the works he created for his solo exhibition, *Borders*, at the Dallas Contemporary.

Hailing from a small industrial town in northeastern China's Liaoning province, Liu attended high school in Beijing before studying painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, where he has been a professor since 1994. He is associated with the "New Generation" of contemporary Chinese Realism: artists who came of age in the 1980s and '90s, at a time when Chinese art was caught between Socialist Realism, a nationalistic movement dominated by glorified depictions of traditional communist ideals, and post-Cultural Revolution contemporary-art influences. Liu was also part of the throng of peaceful protesters at Tiananmen Square in 1989, during which hundreds (in some reports thousands) of civilian protesters were massacred by the Chinese government. The incident left a lasting impression on the artist, and his career has since been fixated on capturing everyday people caught in the midst of potentially fraught situations.

Using a combination of videography, referential sketches, photographs, and *en plein air* painting, Liu explores global problems such as environmental crises, economic and societal upheaval, and the treatment of minority populations. Although his works encompass broad social issues, Liu focuses on his own accounts of moments at specific times and places; his paintings are empathetic exercises in capturing slivers of contemporary existence.



Above: Liu Xiaodong. Photograph by Wei Bing. Clockwise from top left: Liu Xiaodong, *Mountains and River*, 2019, oil on canvas, 118.12 x 98.5 in. Courtesy of the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milan/London/Hong Kong; Liu Xiaodong, *Policemen in the Park*, 2019, oil on canvas, 98.5 x 118 in. Courtesy of the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milan/London/Hong Kong; Liu Xiaodong, *Chatting*, 2020, oil on canvas, 98.50 x 118.12 in.; Liu Xiaodong, *A Wall that Can Turn Around*, 2019, oil on canvas, 23.75 x 27.50 in.









Liu Xiaodong, *In Marfa*, 2019, oil on canvas, 98.5 x 118 in. Courtesy of the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milan/London/Hong Kong.



*“I only paint the world I see. I usually choose to depict ordinary people’s daily lives. By describing the lives of all kinds of ordinary people, I shape a multifaceted lifestyle. That is to say, by looking at a part, we can experience a kind of overall lifestyle and spirit.”*

*—Liu Xiaodong*



“I only paint the world I see,” he explains. “I usually choose to depict ordinary people’s daily lives. By describing the lives of all kinds of ordinary people, I shape a multifaceted lifestyle. That is to say, by looking at a part, we can experience a kind of overall lifestyle and spirit.”

Liu’s subjects have ranged from the jade pickers of Hotan, China (*Hotan Project*), to the occupants of two pubs and a café located mere steps from his London gallery, Lisson Gallery (*Half Street*). One of his most recent projects, the Berlin-based *Transgender/Gay*, depicts the lives of transgender woman Sasha Maria von Halbach and gay Chinese artist Isaac Hong. In 2016, he created arguably his most famous work: an automated painting machine titled *Weight of Insomnia*, which uses a robotic arm to paint images streaming from a digital video feed of a public location. The resulting works capture an extended period of time from a single, locked image, showing the constant regeneration of earthly spaces. People become ghostly images or diffused into the abyss of highly trafficked pathways, birds and clouds are speckled across the sky, and buildings shiver with the movement of the sun.

*Borders* falls in line with Liu’s more traditional painting process. The basis for the exhibition began in 2018, when Dallas Contemporary director Peter Doroshenko was in Beijing, touring artists’ studios. During that trip he visited the studio of Liu’s wife, Yu Hong, also an accomplished painter. Yu encouraged Doroshenko to visit her husband’s studio, where he was instantly struck by the artist’s imagery and process.

“Liu only had one painting he was working on, but I was completely engaged,” says Doroshenko. “It was very moving and able to capture a moment almost like film or photography. I couldn’t let it go.”

Later that year the two reconvened in New York, where Doroshenko invited Liu to consider a project in Texas. Given the prevalence of coverage the US-Mexico border crisis had received all over the world, Liu opted to visit the Texas region of the border. He spent nearly five weeks in early 2019 and four in early 2020 driving

along and traversing it from side-to-side, visiting Ciudad Juárez, El Paso, Eagle Pass, Piedras Negras, Laredo, and Nuevo Laredo.

As do so many people who visit politically charged situations, Liu discovered that life in the area was both similar to and quite different from what is depicted by the media. Despite the ubiquity of border patrol and police officers, there is a casualness to everyday life at the border, far from the state of emergency espoused by certain political factions. It’s not uncommon for people to live in one country and work or attend school in the other, driving or walking across the border on a daily basis.

While in Eagle Pass Liu befriended the local sheriff and even attended a barbecue at his home. The resulting painting, *Tom, his Family, and his Friends*, shows the sheriff seated at a table in his backyard next to a smoking grill, a mix of family, friends, and police officers—including one on horseback—in the background. Like many of Liu’s on-site paintings, which take one to two weeks to complete, the narrative is comprised of multiple sessions in the same location, with myriad events folded into a single image. The painting is one of ten included in the exhibition, alongside over 60 drawings and photographs and a short film documenting Liu’s border travels.

“I’m pretty fast, and I can generally finish one large work in two weeks. By painting on-site, you can also convey in the painting the changes over time; for instance, the weather may be different every day, and this can reflect in every corner of the picture. This way the painting is filled with fortuity and sense of time.”

While it’s impossible to resist trying to tease apart the painting’s individual moments, the strength of Liu’s work lies in his ability to convey an immediate sense of belonging. You cannot help but be thrust directly into the scene. What may have sounded like the beginning of a bad joke is instead the realization that it often takes an outsider to reveal what is going on in your own backyard.

A Chinese artists travels to the Texas-Mexico border to demonstrate that amidst an international humanitarian crisis, humanity still exists. **P**



Liu Xiaodong, *Boundary River*, 2019, oil on canvas, 98.5 x 118.12 in. Courtesy of the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milan/London/Hong Kong.



Liu Xiaodong, *Boundary River*, 2019, oil on canvas, 98.5 x 118.12 in. Courtesy of the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milan/London/Hong Kong.



# LISSON GALLERY

*The Brooklyn Rail*  
30 January 2021

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

**ArtSeen**

## Liu Xiaodong: *Borders*

By **Vivian Li**



Liu Xiaodong, *Boundary River*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 98 1/2 x 118 1/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milan/London/Hong Kong.



Known for his massive paintings of people around the world living at the edge of contemporary society—including Syrian refugees in Greece and Turkey, transgender activists in Berlin, and forgotten working people in his rural hometown in China—the neo-realist painter Liu Xiaodong was commissioned by the Dallas Contemporary to create a series of paintings on the US-Mexico border. As with his other painted series, Liu created the works for *Borders* after spending eight weeks studying the community, taking photographs and sketching, and, when conditions allow, even painting *en plein air*. Clean of any didactics or text elucidating the exhibition's aims, the exhibition is unapologetically visually driven. All ten paintings in the show, created in 2019, equally refuse to cohere or form any singular socio-political crisis narrative of the border.

Instead, the subjects of the paintings are curiously mundane. In *mountains and river* (2019) a tight row of vertical slats runs across the entire top half of the oversized canvas, in contrast to the lushly rendered, freely flowing stream below. Just a few glimpses—offered between the slats—of a pair of military personnel locate this fence at the border. At once a landscape painting, abstract grid painting, and social realist painting, the work embodies the starkly different realities—natural and constructed—that sit closely together at the border. In several other paintings distance and proximity, or the institutional and the personal, are likewise compressed. *Boundary river* (2019) is a close-up portrait of a family fishing and playing in the river on the Mexican side of the border. A hidden police car on the other side, however, tacitly nods also to the relentless surveillance of this narrow strip of water.





Liu Xiaodong, *Mountains and River*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 118 1/8 x 98 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milan/London/Hong Kong.



There is a distance, amplified by their grand physical scale, to these paintings that may reflect Liu's own remove from the border. But at the same time, the transparency of Liu's process and the human content of the paintings are a crucial component of the show. In a back gallery, 60 framed photographs and sketches, as well as a documentary film, present the artist's 1,530-mile trek along the Mexico-US border. While the artist is the film's protagonist, we also can see the subjects' close engagement with him. The film focuses particularly on Liu's friendship with the county sheriff, Tom Schmerber, of the border town Eagle Pass. At one point, Liu, touched by the open hospitality of Schmerber and his family, asks the sheriff about the growing media coverage of the coronavirus and China. Undeterred by political or media narratives, Schmerber responds to Liu that fundamentally "people are people," and adds that he understands what it feels like for the artist to be away from home. Not all, however, are so sympathetic, as the current spike in anti-Asian violence clearly demonstrates—Liu's anxiety about being from China appears more prescient every day. Even museums are not exempt from this problem, as we have seen in the controversy surrounding the show's own organizing institution over its recent termination of two staff members who urged the museum to make a statement in support of the AAPI community.



Liu Xiaodong, *Tom, his Family, and his Friends*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 118 x 98 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milan/London/Hong Kong.



*Borders* is as much a portrait of the transformed artist as it is a collective rendering of those who call the border home. When walking back through the gallery of paintings to exit the exhibition, familiar characters from the photographs and film begin to emerge, as in *tom, his family, and his friends* (2019). Here, Liu dramatically stages a female officer on her horse in the center, yet situates her and her uniformed colleagues in the surreal setting of a backyard barbeque at Schmerber's house—he and his family occupy the foreground. The artist makes cameos in a couple of paintings, too, like in *juarez at the casa del migrante in juárez* (2019). Sitting on the floor in a corner, joined by a pig and mysterious figure in underwear, Liu paints himself awkwardly crashing a hangout of teenagers who look at home relaxed on couches, albeit in one of the largest migrant shelters in Juárez.

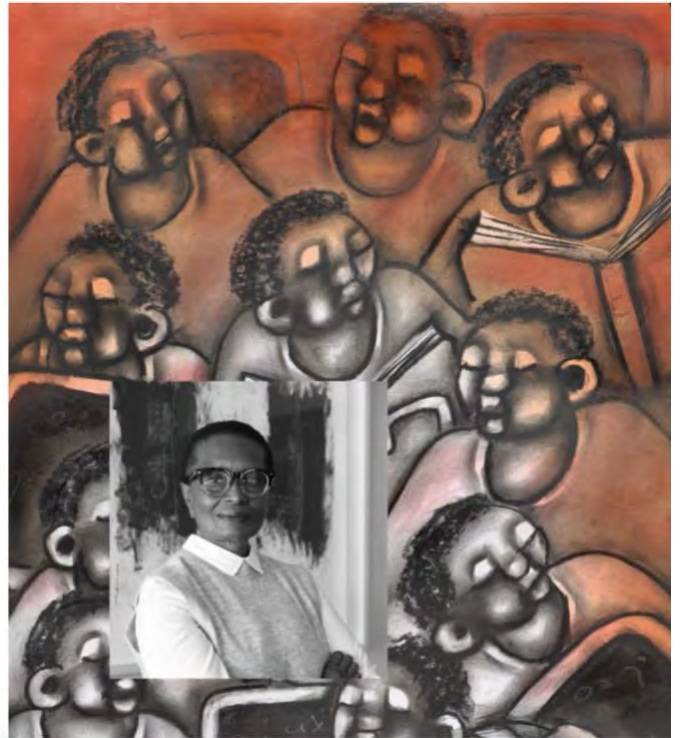
Originally scheduled to open in April 2020, during the show's eight-month delay the politics and the policies that shape life at the border have profoundly changed. However, the exhibition shows us that irrespective of the ebb and flow of institutional and media scrutiny, the life and the extraordinary humanity of the people on the border will remain.





Art Market

## 19 Collectors on the Art They Bought in 2020



• Artsy Editorial Nov 24, 2020 6:03pm



**L**ike most activities, traditional ways of collecting art were upended this year by COVID-19. Galleries in nearly every city with a thriving contemporary art scene shut down for months; fairs and auctions became almost exclusively virtual affairs; and, suddenly, once-secondary channels like online viewing rooms and Instagram became the primary means for artists, dealers, and collectors to connect. Amid the financial rollercoaster caused by the pandemic and other sociopolitical crises in 2020, many collectors remained equally or even more active and engaged than in years past.

We reached out to collectors around the world to get a sense of how their collecting practices changed in 2020; the artists, galleries, organizations, and institutions they supported; and who they have their eyes on going into 2021.





Cindy Chua-Tay

Hong Kong

**What was the most meaningful artwork you purchased in 2020?**

Personally, I “reconnected” with our collection this year. For once we are spending a large portion of time at home and indoors, and in doing so, we are able to fully enjoy and appreciate our art collection. I have also taken to rehanging some works to my husband’s chagrin, but that has enabled me to relook, reflect, and recurate the collection. It’s been therapeutic!

The most meaningful work I purchased is a precious piece by Liu Xiaodong from Lisson Gallery. Liu, the usually itinerant Chinese painter, was unable to travel back to his home in Beijing, China, and was in lockdown in the United States from the middle of February. From his tiny apartment (a far cry from the luxury of space he usually enjoys in his studio in Beijing), he made a series of watercolor paintings documenting the changing landscape of New York City over a period of four months. This body of work serves as a record of this landmark moment in history: from the colorful, poignant, picturesque scenes of the Big Apple in springtime under the pandemic—with quietly deserted children’s playgrounds, unusually abandoned streets, delicate blossoms falling from the trees, and intimate, precious portraits of his wife, fellow artist Yu Hong, and his daughter—to the subsequent zeal, chaos, and crowds of the Black Lives Matter protests that swept the city and the rest of the nation.





Liu Xiaodong, *Coming across a scene like this one cannot but think of Manet's Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe, 2020.06.12, 2020*. Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery.

The piece that resonated with me is entitled *Coming across a scene like this one cannot but think of Manet's Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe, 2020.06.12*, a watercolor on paper. Liu depicted a beautiful picnic scene in a New York City park, which, to him, resembled the famous Manet painting. While Manet's painting focused on a female nude staring plainly and directly onto the viewer and in the company of two dressed men, Liu's scene feels like a contemporary response to the Manet painting. It embraces men of different races, sitting together, their sexuality ambiguous and unknown, yet their togetherness and closeness reflects the unity and freedom so pronounced and apparent in a city like New York. Another thing that stood out for me was the scale, or rather how special it is to own a work by Liu that isn't large and life-size (as his works tend to be). As he was unprepared for art material when he was forced to be in quarantine in New York, he resorted to small works on paper and watercolor, which was all he could find at that time. This is an unexpected departure for Liu, but it also gave him a freedom to document in real time, hence creating a series that is deeply contemplative and meaningful.



**Would you say you've been more or less active as a collector in 2020 than in years past?**

There hasn't been a huge change or shift in my collecting this year. The main difference for me has been how I see art, and the amount of time I actually spent and continue to spend looking at art. Admittedly we all seem to have more time to view and engage with art this year. I am now more engaged with artists and taking part in many artists' talks and studio visits on webinars globally. I am also "participating" in a lot more art fairs, as in attending them virtually. In the past I had to painstakingly pick the fairs I could attend, due to the constraints of my travel schedules. This year, I have been a virtual attendee in an unprecedented number of art fairs! It has been most gratifying.



On View

## 'I Want to Experience the Complexity of the World': Watch Artist Liu Xiaodong Travel to the US Border to Paint Scenes of Moral Ambiguity

As part of a collaboration with Art21, hear news-making artists describe their inspirations in their own words.

Caroline Goldstein, October 15, 2020



Production still from the "Beijing" episode of "Art in the Twenty-First Century," Season 10. © Art21, Inc. 2020.

SHARE



For contemporary artist Liu Xiaodong, personal history is the greatest source of inspiration. His childhood in rural China and his adolescence spent in Beijing studying to be an artist inform his practice even as he travels and shows internationally today, framing the way he sees the world.

Best known for his massive paintings depicting everyday people he comes across, Liu often works *en plein air*, setting up his canvases outside, quickly sketching an outline, getting to know his subjects, and taking photographs to work from later in the studio.



In an exclusive [interview with Art21](#) as part of its new 10th season of *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, the artist is seen on a trip to a small town in Texas, just over the US-Mexico border. The border town is inextricably linked to President's Trump's anti-immigration policies and the conflict that border patrol officers face monitoring the wall.

"I prefer to paint places that can't be easily judged by a single value system," the [artist tells Art21](#). "I want to experience the complexity of the world."



Video still from Art21 of Liu working on *Tom, his Family, and his Friends* (2020). Courtesy the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milan/London/Hong Kong.

In the video, the artist is seen painting County Sheriff Tom Schmerber and his family, some of whom live across the border in Mexico. Schmerber was interviewed on TV explaining that while he doesn't approve of Trump's wall, if he sees migrants trying to cross the border, he is obligated to detain them. The portrait of Tom and his family as well as other paintings Liu created while visiting the US-Mexico border are the basis of his upcoming solo show at Dallas Contemporary called *Borders*, which will open on January 30, 2021.

Liu sees parallels to his own experience being Chinese in America. "Many people don't like China now, I know..." [he says](#), adding that while politics only leaves room for black or white, art allows for nuance. "For artists, we're always looking for a different path."



Watch the video, which originally appeared as part of Art21's series *Art in the Twenty-First Century* below. The brand new 10th season of the show is available now at [Art21.org](http://Art21.org).



This is an installment of "Art on Video," a collaboration between Artnet News and Art21 that brings you clips of newsmaking artists. A new series of the nonprofit Art21's flagship series *Art in the Twenty-First Century* is available now on PBS. Catch all episodes of other series like *New York Close Up* and *Extended Play* and learn about the organization's educational programs at [Art21.org](http://Art21.org).



# LISSON GALLERY

*The New York Times*  
22 July 2020

## The New York Times

### ART REVIEWS

## Four Art Gallery Shows to See Right Now

Works by Jonathan Berger and Liu Xiaodong can be viewed virtually, but if you're up for venturing out, you'll want to see Cristine Brache and Vanessa Thill's art in person.



Jonathan Berger's installation "An Introduction to Nameless Love," which is on view at Participant Inc.'s website. Mark Waldhauser



# Liu Xiaodong

Ongoing. Lisson Gallery; [lissongallery.com](http://lissongallery.com).



Liu Xiaodong's watercolor painting "Liu Wa and Yu Hong Under Flowering Trees" (2020). Liu Xiaodong and Lisson Gallery



The Beijing-based painter Liu Xiaodong first won international attention in the 1990s for his fresh depictions of an emergent China, drawing on the frank modernity of Manet and Courbet as much as the socialist realist tradition, and often executed en plein air. He has painted these genre scenes across his country, as well as in Greece, Cuba, Israel and Palestine — and now New York, where he has been on a protracted stay ever since flights home were canceled.

[“Spring in New York,”](#) an online exhibition of Mr. Liu’s recent watercolors at Lisson Gallery, presents some of the finest artistic representations I’ve seen of the pandemic-gripped city: small, ardent paintings of empty streets and budding trees, whose delicacy gives them astonishing authority. (The exhibition officially “closed” on July 12 but remains on view in full online.) Initial pictures of the view from Mr. Liu’s balcony precede cannily spare watercolors of an empty park, a lone pedestrian, or a hand truck laden with Amazon deliveries, mostly painted in the West Village under an electric blue sky. Yu Hong, Mr. Liu’s wife and a fellow painter, walks with another artist under a flowering magnolia tree, its rich pink leaves complementing the light blue of their face masks. By June, Mr. Liu is painting a Black Lives Matter protest as a spare panorama specked with gray, and gents sunbathing at what looks like the Greenwich Village riverfront, their half-dressed picnic explicitly recalling Manet’s 1863 “Déjeuner sur l’Herbe.”

Online, Lisson is presenting these watercolors (as well as a few acrylics painted atop photographs, not as rewarding) alongside the artist’s diary entries from the days of sheltering in place, plus a film of Mr. Liu walking through Manhattan with his sketchbook and iPhone. The reproductions aren’t high-resolution, and so these paintings can’t be fully judged and appreciated. But somehow it feels appropriate that Mr. Liu’s pandemic works, shot through with tenderness and gratitude, can still be encountered only from a distance. *JASON FARAGO*



# LISSON GALLERY

*China Daily*  
7 July 2020

**CHINADAILY** 中国日报网  
.COM.CN

Online exhibition is a diary of life during the pandemic

By Lin Qi | chinadaily.com.cn | Updated: 2020-07-07 10:52



Charles Street 2020.4.22 [Photo/© Liu Xiaodong; Courtesy Lisson Gallery]



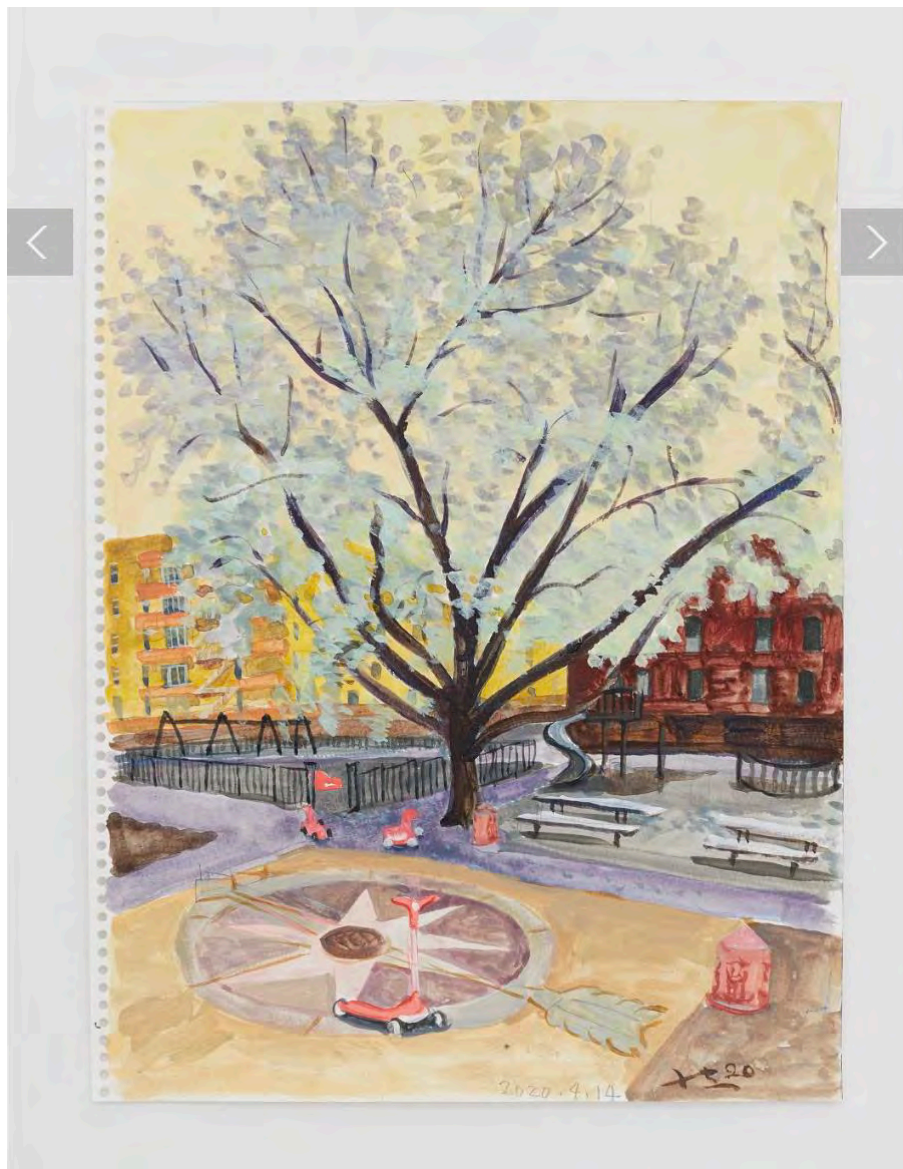
Noted Chinese artist Liu Xiaodong has been held up in New York since April, as flights back to Beijing, where he lives and works, are restricted under the current COVID-19 pandemic.

He has created dozens of watercolors not only to kill time but also to document the changing views of New York over the past four months.

*Li Xiaodong: Spring in New York*, an online exhibition hosted by Lisson Gallery through July 12, displays these vivid paintings that show the metropolitan spring landscapes and street scenes, reflecting the changes the virus has brought to people's lives, such as empty playgrounds and quiet streets in daytime. His painted "diaries" also offer a glimpse of the Black Lives Matter movement in New York.

People can also read the written diaries Liu has kept in Chinese, which have been translated into English, to better understand his observations.

Liu is known for making realistic works that advocate for dramatic changes in the social landscapes and especially people's livelihoods.







*East Village* 2020.5.6 [Photo/© Liu Xiaodong; Courtesy Lisson Gallery]



*Empire State Building - Red Alert* 2020.4.4 [Photo/© Liu Xiaodong; Courtesy Lisson Gallery]





*Hudson Avenue* 2020.4.20 [Photo/© Liu Xiaodong; Courtesy Lisson Gallery]



*The Sparrow who does not fly* 2020.4.23 [Photo/© Liu Xiaodong; Courtesy Lisson Gallery]





*Twin Sisters* 2020.4.7 [Photo/© Liu Xiaodong; Courtesy Lisson Gallery]



# LISSON GALLERY

*Hyperallergic*  
4 July 2020

## HYPERALLERGIC

### Liu Xiaodong's New York Diary

Even in this acute moment in our history, the artist is able to slow down his looking to find and celebrate the beauty of human determination.

John Yau July 4, 2020



Liu Xiaodong, "Thank you 2020.4.9" (2020), watercolor on paper, 9 3/4 x 13 7/8 inches  
(all images © Liu Xiaodong, courtesy Lisson Gallery)



Charles Baudelaire said in his 1863 essay that the “painter of modern life” is the “passionate observer” who can be “away from home and yet [...] feel at home anywhere.”

Among contemporary artists, the Chinese observational painter Liu Xiaodong is the closest embodiment of Baudelaire’s ideal that I know. For years, he has been, in the words of Baudelaire, an “independent, intense, and impartial spirit” who observes the “ebb and flow” of the world around him. This has led him to set up a temporary studio near an orphanage in Greenland and one among Uyghur jade miners in China’s harsh northwest.

Liu recently told me by email that he was in Eagle Pass, Texas — the first United States settlement on the Rio Grande — from January 28 to February 17, 2020, working on a series of large plein-air portraits for his exhibition *Liu Xiaodong: Borders* at the Dallas Contemporary. The show, which was scheduled to open this spring, has since been indefinitely delayed.

After Liu finished, he came to New York, where he met up with his wife, the painter Yu Hong, and their daughter, Liu Wa, also an artist, who were visiting for other reasons. Because of COVID-19, their flight to Beijing was cancelled, and they have been stranded in New York for months. In the masked, socially distanced conversation I had with him and Yu in the West Village, late in the afternoon on June 26, Liu told me that he had been studying to improve his English and working on watercolors every day (images of which he had been sending me).





Liu Xiaodong, "East Village 2020.5.6" (2020), acrylic on C-print, 12 7/8 x 15 7/8 inches

Liu's ability to productively adapt to his circumstances further confirmed what I already knew about this remarkable artist and his work ethic. As I had visited him in Beijing last August to begin writing a monograph on his work, I was not surprised that he was working in watercolor every day. Employing different mediums (graphite, oil painting, photography, and analog and digital film), he has been chronicling his immediate surroundings since he was a teenager.

In 1978, when Liu was 15, his family sent him to live with his uncle, who had studied Western painting at the Jilin Academy of Fine Arts and had gone on to become the art editor of a magazine. His uncle taught him watercolor, and showed him the books he had about English watercolors, European oil painting, and the Peredvizhniki, a group of late 19th-century Russian realists who believed that Russia and its people possessed an inner beauty.

The date of 1978 is significant: it is two years after the death of Mao Zedong, the end of the Cultural Revolution, and the Tangshan earthquake, which devastated the region where he and his family lived. Born in 1963, Liu belongs to a generation that has both witnessed and been directly affected by the convulsive social, political, and economic changes that China has undergone during Mao's lifetime, and since his death.





Liu Xiaodong, "Empire State Building - Red Alert 2020.4.4" (2020), watercolor on paper, 13 7/8 x 9 3/4 inches

Liu's openness to his immediate situation sets him apart from other contemporary artists (Gerhardt Richter, Henry Taylor, Marlene Dumas, and Luc Tuymans, to name a few) who also focus on our indifferent, paroxysmal world. His instinct to respond to what is directly in front of him with whatever medium he has on hand endows his views with an unrivaled propinquity. He is, to cite Baudelaire, at the very center of the world he is depicting, and unseen by it.



In his current online exhibition, *Liu Xiaodong: Spring in New York* at Lisson Gallery (through July 12) — which includes watercolors, photographs he has taken and painted over, and a diary — we are given a visual and written record of a specific area of Manhattan, determined by what he can walk to. Liu made his watercolors during an extreme period in New York's history, starting with the empty streets during the first months of the COVID-19 quarantine, and including the Black Lives Matter protests and demonstrations in response to the video-recorded murder of George Floyd. It is an ongoing project — each work is dated — determined by the length of time he and his family are stranded in New York.

Liu's eye for an understated but dramatic view is further enhanced by his masterful sense of spacing and keen sensitivity to color. He might be painting while sitting on the balcony of the apartment where he and his family are staying, or while outside, but it never seems that the world is too much with him; he is both responding to the immediate circumstance and in control. There is nothing hurried about the looking or the doing, which adds to the meaning of these works. Even in this acute moment in our history, he is able to slow down his looking to find and celebrate the beauty of human determination, as well as recognize feelings of wariness and displacement.



Liu Xiaodong, "The Back of the Line 2020.6.5" (2020), acrylic on C-print, 12 7/8 x 15 7/8 inches

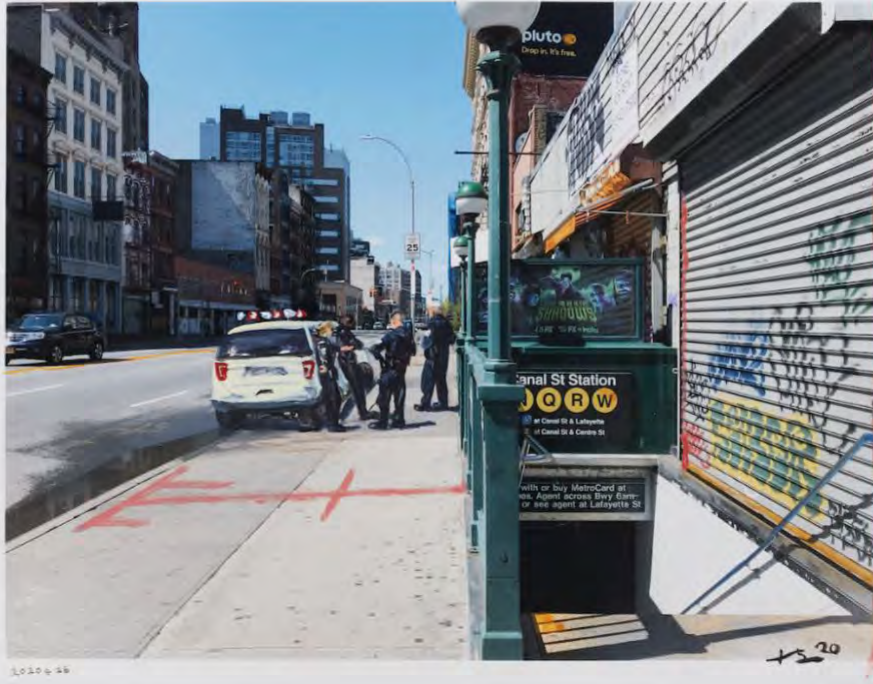


In the watercolor “Coming across a scene like this one cannot but think of Manet’s *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe*” (2020), which is dated June 12, 2020, the artist depicts a large group of bare-chested men in shorts lounging on an urban plot of grass. The date tells us that it was made shortly after New York began to open back up, and people started to gather in outdoor public spaces. The three men seated in the foreground echo the woman and two men in Edouard Manet’s groundbreaking painting, but this is neither pastiche nor parody. Rather, the correspondence the artist noticed and calls attention to, as he does in other works in the exhibition, suggests the immensity of his visual memory.

At the same time, what transports Liu’s watercolor into a singular place is his attention to color and light. The central figure in the group of three men is Black; all those around him are white. The people on the left are tinted yellow, as the sun is shining on them, while the ones on the right are pink. Many different tones and hints of light are integrated to compose the central figure’s dark brown skin. Careful and affectionate attention is paid to each figure’s skin tones, posture, and facial expressions, all achieved in the medium of watercolor, where nothing can be erased. Every mark and color is devoted to the artist’s perception — there are no embellishments or elaborations.

The watercolor “Kitchen Paper cannot be flushed down the Toilet, right, 2020.4.4,” is a wonderful tonal view of a roll of paper towels resting on a toilet tank, a quick yet careful placing of pale yellows, blues, off whites, and grays. There is a close-up profile of a fat sparrow standing on the sidewalk in “The Sparrow who does not fly,” dated April 23, 2020.





Liu Xiaodong, "Chinatown Police 2020.4.26" (2020), acrylic on C-print, 13 x 16 inches

The range of subjects and views underscores a person who is remarkably open to the world, from a blooming tree, to children's toys left at a park, to an evening view of the top of the Empire State Building, seen between two buildings, to a homeless man's legs sticking out of a doorway. The fact that we do not see the entire figure in the latter seems deliberate, at once tactful and direct. Liu paints daytime, evening, and nighttime views. You never get the feeling that he is looking for something; there is no hierarchy to what he chooses.

In the photographs that he has painted over, I felt that he was painting something he had remembered or, perhaps, had seen in another photograph of the same scene. For "Beatles plus One," dated June 4, 2020, Liu begins with a C-print of an empty street, and paints five policeman in various postures, masked and unmasked, crossing the intersection from right to left. The work's title refers to the famous photograph of the Beatles striding in a line across Abbey Road, from left to right. If Liu is being critical of their slovenly attitude, it is with a light hand. If anything, the policemen look rather ill-prepared and a tad pathetic, perhaps even apprehensive of what awaits them.



As Manhattan transitioned from the largely empty streets of the quarantine to demonstrations and large groups of police, Liu kept looking, kept going out, and kept making watercolors and taking photographs, to work on later. His attention to detail, to the color and light, is masterful and precise.



Liu Xiaodong, "At my Doorstep" (2020), watercolor on paper, 10 1/8 x 14 1/8 inches

Following his encounter with Asian art, Vincent van Gogh dislodged the mark and line from description, helping set art on a journey toward abstraction. The root of Liu's mark-making is calligraphy, which he moves toward realism. From the daubs of color evoking light passing through blossoming trees to the indication of wood grain on a boarded-up window to a sidewalk's changing complexion, the range and fluidity of his marks are always in response to the particularities of the actual world. The merging of mark and color, and his sensitivity to light and dark, feel effortless, though we know they are not. This is Liu's genius; there are no signs of hesitation in his work.



In Liu's watercolors and painted-over photographs, the viewer encounters scenes in which hand, eye, and intelligence work in astonishing tandem. The transitory and ephemeral world, at once hauntingly beautiful and coolly indifferent, has left its imprint on the artist's senses. Along with the wide range of marks and densities and nuances of color, we get deep pools and unexpected eddies of feeling. We are the lucky beneficiaries of a vision at once candid and sophisticated, open and sincere, witty and compassionate — an unlikely combination in this dark, nerve-fraying, and isolating period in history.

Liu Xiaodong: Spring in New York *at Lisson Gallery is viewable online through July 12.*



*The New Yorker*  
20 June 2020

## THE NEW YORKER

ART

### Liu Xiaodong



© Liu Xiaodong / Courtesy Lisson Gallery

When the virtuoso Chinese realist **Liu Xiaodong** began making watercolors of locked-down New York, he had already hit Pause himself. The fifty-six-year-old artist had just finished a beautiful series of plein-air group portraits, painted on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, and was hanging out in Manhattan until the opening of a related museum exhibition at the Dallas Contemporary. When Liu and his family became stranded—the show was postponed and several flights home to Beijing were cancelled—he took



up a new daily practice, documenting the eerily empty city: April brought blossoming trees in a closed playground; in early May, he captured a socially distanced game of chess at Astor Place. In late May, the energy shifted as Black Lives Matter protesters took to the streets (as seen in “At My Doorstop,” above). On June 29, the Lisson gallery launches an online exhibition (at [lissongallery.com](http://lissongallery.com)) of Liu’s new watercolors. It’s hard to imagine a better eyewitness to New York’s historic spring than this artist, who has been shedding light on social struggles for years, picturing everyday people, from Uyghur jade miners in northwest China to Syrian refugees in Turkey and Greece, with candor, affection, and respect.

— *Andrea K. Scott*







# THE ART NEWSPAPER

## 艺术新闻

18 / ISSUE 79 / JUL &amp; AUG. 2020

展览 | 国际

THE ART NEWSPAPER CHINA

## EXHIBITIONS

今年 2 月,居住在北京的艺术家刘小东因工作原因前往达拉斯。然而,在仅仅一个月不到的时间里,疫情席卷了美国,返回中国的航班一票难求。于是,滞留在美的刘小东便和家人在纽约的一间小公寓里住了下来。在过去的几个月中,他用心观察和体会,创作了一系列坦诚而放松的水彩作品,记录下了疫情时期纽约春日如画的动人景象——无人的游乐场,落花的树木,空荡的街道。还有戴着口罩的妻子和女儿。五月下旬,随着“黑人的生命很重要”(BLM)抗议在纽约大规模爆发,他又用生猛而准确的笔触勾勒出了这次社会运动中的众生相。这些最新作品记录了刘小东在这段特殊时期于纽约的所见所感,连同一本记录了这四个星期所经历的苦闷与豁达的日记,构成了在丽森画廊线上展出 (<https://www.liSSongallery.com/>) 的“刘小东:纽约之春”。

“我开 Instagram 10 天了,有 662 位粉丝,心情特别愉悦。”

——刘小东日记 2020.4.7

本次展出了刘小东的一套即兴水彩作品。纽约的公寓特别小,没办法进行大幅的绘画创作,他便买了一本速写本开始画水彩——先画阳台,再画妻子和女儿。同时,他也学着玩起了美国的社交媒体 Instagram,“初衷就是为了吸粉!他们也好喜欢我这么轻松地画。慢慢地画多了,影响力可能慢慢就出来了。”放上几张水彩,再放几张在达拉斯画时的照片。看着飞速增长的粉丝,收到来自世界各地陌生人的留言,刘小东觉得特别有趣。从 4 月份开始每天争取画一张水彩。“那个时候纽约正好是春季,树上的花都盛开了,我觉得用水彩画那些花会很美。”就这样,被困异乡自然生发的创作欲望,加上粉丝们的期待和鼓励,共同促成了这一次水彩画系列创作的契机。

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在刚刚得知美国疫情爆发时,刘小东觉得“看微信、看新闻,都是负面。但是看日常生活都是正面的”。老头老太太出来买菜,人出来遛狗,虽然彼此不太打招呼,但是能感受到一种很自由的日常生活。街上的人少得出奇,也让他有机会用另一种角度去体验这个城市。“对于画家来讲,没有人的街道很难得。平时纽约 60% 都是游客,当地人并不多。而且疫情中,当地有钱的人也基本去到农村的别墅里面了。剩下的都是一些小中产,也没有别的地方可去。所以你能看到一些真正的生活,就是像我们中国老百姓一样。非常日常的生活。”刘小东说。

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滞留在美的刘小东用坦诚而放松的作品记录下疫情时期的纽约



上:刘小东,《谢谢你们》2020.4.8, 2020 年作 下:刘小东,《儿童乐园》2020.4.14, 2020 年作

作为上世纪九十年代开始活跃起来的中国新写实主义画家中的领军人物,刘小东以“看人们本来的样子”为创作原则,激励人们看清现实,也警惕艺术对于真相的粉饰。在看似松散和随意的笔触中建立起层层意义。无论是记录新加坡变性人的生活(2001),或是柏林变性及跨国艺术家的生活(2018),还是《三峡》系列中讲述社会变迁下民众的生存状态(2003)抑或是其伦敦系列《半条街》(2013)中多元文化生活的复杂性,他都积极探索着深入社会的复杂问题,用艺术重构真实。

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“绘画上,人家都说我是现实主义。其实我是乱搞的,好多都是虚构的。”刘小东说无论是水彩还是照片,他只要素材来源于真实。但是如何搭配,完全要凭自己的拼凑和想象,“我可以把白天的照片变成夜晚,把唐人街的人画到西村,也可以把西村的人放到 Chelsea 去。”

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“母女相隔两米,各自坐在长凳上,母亲也要保持社交距离。”

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疫情期间,刘小东和妻子喻红、女儿刘娃,三个职业艺术家共同生活在纽约的一间小公寓里,坐在一块桌前,各自沉浸在创作世界中。刘小东在速写本上画小水彩,同为画家的妻子喻红画一些板上的丙烯小画,女儿刘娃则只需要一台笔记本就能与团队沟通创作她最新的 VR 作品。

艺术是这个家庭生活与工作的一部分。刘小东此次的水彩作品中少不了妻子和女儿温柔的剪影,喻红的《自由成长》(1999-2002)系列也是由女儿的诞生为契机和灵感,回顾了自己的成长历程。

刘娃的多媒体创作则采用了一种更加先锋的方法来探索自我心灵与外部世界的碰撞。在她 2017 年的作品《自拍系列》(Selfie Series)中,她介绍道,“每个人都像海绵一样,都在无时无刻接受外界的影响,但是外界影响可能某一天就内化成自己的性格还有行为方式,思维模式的一部分。那个时候其实人已经在潜移默化被改变了。”

刘小东觉得同一代人总是受着同样的社会背景和教育环境的影响。夫妻双方因生活有了接近的美学理念和审美情趣,自然会有一些回避不了的影响。但在画法上仍是坚持各自的创作。谈到曾经尝试过的机械绘画作品《失眠的重量》(2015-2016),他觉得并不能像女儿刘娃那样自己编程,这样依赖于他人的大工程,不太适合在这个季节去做。采访、撰文/陈曦





# 疫情下的纽约春日 刘小东的水彩生活

滞留在美的刘小东用坦诚而放松的作品记录下疫情时期的纽约

今年 2 月，居住在北京的艺术家刘小东因工作原因前往达拉斯。然而，在仅仅一个月不到的时间里，疫情便席卷了美国，返回中国的航班一票难求。于是，滞留在美的刘小东便和家人在纽约的一间小公寓里住了下来。在过去的几个月中，他用心观察和体会，创作了一系列坦诚而放松的水彩作品，记录下了疫情时期纽约春日如画的动人景象——无人的游乐场、落花的树木、空荡的街道，还有戴着口罩的妻子和女儿。五月下旬，随着“黑人的生命很重要”（BLM）抗议在纽约大规模爆发，他又用生猛而准确的笔触勾勒出了这次社会运动中的众生相。这些最新作品记录了刘小东在这段特殊时期内于纽约的所见所感，连同一本记录了这四个月所经历的苦恼与豁达的日记，构成了在里森画廊线上展出 (<https://www.lissongallery.com/>) 的“刘小东：纽约之春”。

“我开 Instagram 10 天了，有 562 位粉丝呢，小愉悦的很呢。”

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本次展出了刘小东的一套即兴水彩作品。纽约的公寓特别小，没办法进行大幅的绘画创作，他便买了一本速写本开始画水彩——先画阳台，再画妻子和女儿。同时，他也学着玩起了美国的社交媒体 Instagram，“初衷就是为了吸粉！他们也好喜欢我这么轻松地画。慢慢地画多了，影响力可能慢慢就出来了。”放上几张水彩，再放几张在达拉斯画画时的照片。看着飞速增长的粉丝、收到来自世界各地陌生人的留言，刘小东觉得特别有趣，从4月份开始每天争取画一张水彩。“那个时候纽约正好是春季，树上的花都盛开了。我觉得用水彩画那些花会很美。”就这样，被困异乡自然生发的创作欲望，加上粉丝们的期待和鼓励，共同促成了这一次水彩画系列创作的契机。

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上：刘小东，《谢谢你们 2020.4.9》，2020 年作 下：刘小东，《儿童乐园 2020.4.14》，2020 年作



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*The Art Newspaper*  
28 March 2019



THE ART NEWSPAPER

## Liu Xiaodong: an interview with China's great documentary painter

The artist on portraying ordinary people and travelling  
the world with a "local spirit"

LISA MOVIUS

28th March 2019 02:15 GMT



MORE



Having started at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Art aged 17, Liu Xiaodong is now a professor. Courtesy of the artist.



Few artists capture today's world with as much intimacy as Liu Xiaodong. The Beijing-based figurative painter has portrayed ordinary people in the rural corners and urban centres of his native China, including the autonomous regions of Tibet and Xinjiang, as well as around the world, from Cuba to Greenland, Iceland to Thailand. Born in 1963 in a small industrial town in north-eastern China's Liaoning province, Liu moved to Beijing aged 17 to study painting at the Central Academy of Fine Art, where he is now a professor.

Earlier this year at London's Lisson Gallery, he showed paintings from the *Weight of Insomnia* series, made by a robotic arm programmed to reproduce live-streamed images from surveillance cameras in locations such as Trafalgar Square and Gwangju's May 18 Democracy Square, the site of the 1980 uprising against the South Korean military government.

They are a conceptual and stylistic departure from the paintings by Liu's own hand, which capture farmers and factory workers, prostitutes and art collectors with the same sympathetic gaze and bold strokes. But at the root of it all is a documentary impulse that parallels Liu's involvement with China's independent cinema from the early 1990s. Liu and his wife, the artist Yu Hong, played dissolute young artists in *The Days* (1993), the debut film of Wang Xiaoshuai, and that same year he provided art direction for Zhang Yuan's classic *Beijing Bastards*.

Liu has continued working with filmmakers to document his paintings and subjects around the world, making more than 20 films. His collaborations with Taiwan's Hou Hsiao-Hsien and China's Jia Zhangke, respectively *Liu Xiaodong: Hometown Boy* (2010) and *Dong* (2006), are being screened in the Film section of Art Basel in Hong Kong, as is Yang Bo's documentary *On the Riverbanks of Berlin* (2018) about Liu's works made in the city last year.





Liu Xiaodong's *Xiao Yi* (2007) © Liu Xiaodong Studio. Courtesy Lisson Gallery. Photo: Mark Waldhauser

**The Art Newspaper: Tell us about the works at Art Basel in Hong Kong**

**Liu Xiaodong:** Eslite Gallery has a small solo show with one big painting from 2014 of a rich Indonesian couple. Plus some small recent still-lives of fruit and vegetables around me, and portraits of my family—my wife and child. Lisson also has another painting from 2007.



[The fair] is also showing a new film I did with a young director, Yang Bo, in Berlin. In 2018, I did a project painting two people, one gay and one transgender, which he documented, called *On the Other Riverbanks of Berlin*. It is about these two people, their lives and art, and being gay or transgender in Berlin.

**How did you meet these subjects? What drew you to the LGBTQ theme?**

[The German transgender artist and actress] Sasha [Maria von Halbach] and the young Hong Kong artist Zhuang Wei are very interesting people. They were introduced to me by Heinz-Norbert Jocks, my Berlin curator friend. I was there doing a big show, *Slow Homecoming*, at the Kunsthalle and NRW-Forum in Düsseldorf, and I wanted to paint something with a connection to the city and to work with the local spirit. I don't really think about the political context. I try to look at local cultures, but not as a tourist. It is a way to understand each place's local life, a way to enter its society.

## Country people have more time to chat with me and share their ideas

**What are your impressions of Hong Kong? How do you approach the rural-urban divide?**

It is hard to find my way in Hong Kong. It is chaotic and everything is vertical. It makes me dizzy as a northerner. You can't see anything, just buildings.

I was born in a small village, so I am very familiar with country life. I encountered city culture much later, after the age of 17, so it is more mysterious. To me, both are of equal value, though of course they have differences—country people are more tanned, city people are paler. Country people have more time to chat with me and share their ideas when I paint them. So I paint rural people more. Urbanites in China have such a fast pace and deal with so much change.

**How do you prepare for your sitters?**

Sometimes it is very easy to understand people's lives. And some things you can't use language to communicate. Often I have local friends introduce me to people and help me out. Locals can talk to each other easily, so I don't need to talk a lot. Ultimately, I'm not a novelist; I don't need language or stories to build my impression. Painting is comparatively simple.





Installation view of Liu Xiaodong: *Weight of Insomnia* at Lisson Gallery in London © Liu Xiaodong, Courtesy of Lisson Gallery

**Your diaries are often exhibited along with your paintings. What role do they play in your preparation and process?**

I go to a new place for one or two months, and before I sleep at night, I record all my thoughts in diaries. Otherwise, once passed, I will forget about what I see or the small experiences. Using words to say something provides an extra angle. All of this is supplementary to the painting.

**You have said that some Chinese artists' studio operations are palatial compared to yours. Can you describe your studio in Beijing and your travelling studio?**

My studio is very simple—just over 50 sq. m, plus a storage area of 60 sq. m for completed work. Painting is very simple—it just needs four blank walls. I have two assistants: one foreigner for overseas exhibitions, an Italian guy, and a Chinese woman handling materials and administration.

When I work outside, it's simple to take an easel, palette and canvas. Overseas, it is about the same, but it's not so easy to take an easel out in cities. I do more at homes and hotels, and work more indoors.



**What was the origin of your Weight of Insomnia project, which uses artificial intelligence and surveillance technology?**

It has been going for two years, using a robotic arm to paint from images transmitted every second from a public site to the gallery or museum. When I started them I had three exhibitions already lined up—the first in Shanghai at the Chronus Art Center, China's first non-profit multimedia space. So there I did pieces filmed in Beijing, Shanghai and my hometown. Then I had a show at Germany's ZKM, its best multimedia art museum, and I did sites there like a BMW factory. Finally, I was showing in South Korea and did two there; then I had the show at Lisson Gallery in London and did works there finishing the project. Ultimately, I did about ten AI works.

**You have called time the “greatest art of all”. What did you mean by that?**

Time is a kind of mystery. Time is what endows a painting with aesthetic feeling and time gives people an appreciation of a painting. So time is what determines whether art is great.



# LISSON GALLERY

*Elephant*

1 February 2019

## ELEPHANT

### These Break-Out Art Stars Need to be on Your Radar

From a photographer capturing childhood forts to a sculptor whose giant textile renditions of pizza slices and burgers look good enough to eat, our editors select the artists to watch.



Liu Xiaodong, *The Position of the Moon and Stars*, 2016

### Technology/painting: Liu Xiaodong

Visitors to Frieze London in 2018 will remember meeting one of Xiaodong's large-scale works: a topless portrait of Berlin-based transgender actress Sasha Maria von Halbach, wearing skin-coloured tights and draped in furry textiles—a portrait worthy of a Hollywood star. Xiaodong was in fact once an actor himself, and his work as a painter has been described as “humanizing”, perhaps a method of identification with his subjects that he learned from his previous art form. He is concerned with the documentation of our times and sociopolitics, and is back with a current solo exhibition at Lisson Gallery (until 2 March). The exhibition displays Xiaodong's development (with artist and technologist, Fito Segrera) of a robot painting machine, responding to images it was fed by the artist. (Charlotte Jansen)



LISSON GALLERY

*The Art Newspaper*  
28 March 2019

TimeOut

## Liu Xiaodong: Weight of Insomnia review

Art ★★★★★



Liu Xiaodong 'Weight of Insomnia' (2018) © Liu Xiaodong Courtesy Lisson Gallery

**Time Out says** ★★★★★



When we imagine the impending robo-apocalypse, the day when the machines finally rise up to enslave the human race, we largely think of violence, nuclear wastelands and those big towers that shoot blue lightning bolts. But inside the Lisson Gallery, humanity is being tossed aside in a much more pleasant way.

Chinese artist Liu Xiaodong has created a painting robot that is in the process of depicting Trafalgar Square in deep, dark blues. The visual information is transmitted to it from a live feed of the square. The robot paints the constantly moving shapes of dithering tourists as blurry masses, the fleeting passing of clouds as juddering droplets. All around hang its previous canvases: visions of Beijing, Karlsruhe and Düsseldorf. Monochromatic digital vistas. They're serene, placid and quite beautiful. Time to chuck out your Constables and Turners.

The forms created by the robot are deeply unnatural. The clouds, for example, are painted in a way no human has ever attempted, like lines of Arabic script with no sense of calligraphy, or the characters of a digital alien alphabet. But the robot is beautiful to watch, its motors singing a microtonal chorale in its long, graceful performance.

In the last room, Xiaodong has hung a hand-painted canvas depicting the scene of the 1980 student protests in Korea. A figure lies face down on the paving stones, blood red clouds hang overhead. Next to that work is a robot painting of the same square. Can an AI ever come close to the pain captured by a human? Maybe it's because the man-made work isn't very good, but the swirling brutality of the robot painting feels considerably darker and more affecting.

Throughout, what Xiaodong has done is communicate digital information in an approachable way. He's showing us the bare mathematics of what we are. It's a cold, harsh look at humanity, at us as a population. From the outside, the seething mass of bodies that visit Trafalgar Square becomes a swarming, dark, faceless blob. Months' worth of human movement is caught and condensed into shadow. It's kind of terrifying in its anonymity, sending a shiver through your body like the one you get when you stare at the stars and realise that you're barely a blip in history.

Ironically, by creating something so entirely artificial, he's managed to make humanity a little bit more understandable. By showing us how we look from the outside, he fills you with realisations about how you feel on the inside. The apocalypse might mean the end of us all, but at least we'll get some nice art out of it.

**BY: EDDY FRANKEL**



*The Art Newspaper*  
06 October 2018



## Mega-galleries bank on Chinese art at Frieze

Trend follows dealers' move into Eastern market

ANNY SHAW

5th October 2018 09:43 GMT



White Cube has dedicated its Frieze London stand to the Chinese artist Liu Wei © David Owens/The Art Newspaper

White Cube, the London-based gallery historically associated with the YBAs, has given over its entire stand at Frieze London to a striking display by the Chinese artist Liu Wei. Where once hung spin paintings by Damien Hirst now stands a cage-like construction built by Liu to house his new paintings and sculptures. The majority of the works, priced between £90,000 and £450,000, sold on the opening day.



After a decade of Western dealers exporting art to newly wealthy Asian collectors, it seems that this one-way flow is starting to reverse. As with many big international galleries that have recently expanded into Asia, White Cube has promoted its largely Western stable of artists there since opening in Hong Kong in 2012.

White Cube's stand also reflects what dealers describe as a resurgence in the popularity of Chinese contemporary art among Western collectors after a boom ten years ago. "Our focus is to introduce Liu Wei to the West," says Georgie Wimbush, the gallery's associate director, noting that French and US collectors are showing serious interest. White Cube Bermondsey is due to host a solo show by Liu in April 2019, with more planned for the US.

Adam Sheffer, the vice-president of Pace Gallery, which is celebrating ten years since it opened a space in Beijing's 798 art district, says that Chinese art has gone from "being a phenomenon that people speculated on to being a reality".

At Frieze, Pace is showing works by two Chinese artists (16% of its roster comes from China, more than any of the other mega-galleries): two porcelain wall sculptures by Yin Xiuzhen, which sold for \$86,000 and \$68,000, and a new mirror installation by Song Dong, which fetched \$65,000. Pace will present an all-Chinese stand at Fiac art fair, in Paris, in two weeks' time.

At Lisson Gallery, a 2018 portrait by Liu Xiaodong of a transgender woman, titled Sasha in skin coloured tights (priced at \$350,000), is stopping fair-goers in their tracks. Although the artist is an established name in China, his market is relatively underdeveloped in the West, although his first ever retrospective, at two venues in Düsseldorf this summer, aroused interest from local collectors. There are no immediate plans for Lisson to open a gallery in China, but it is "certainly looking more towards the region", says its head of content Ossian Ward.

Younger Chinese artists are also garnering attention this week. The Hong Kong-born artist Wong Ping was awarded the inaugural Camden Arts Centre Emerging Arts Prize and will have a show at the London institution in the next 18 months. He is represented by Hong Kong- and Shanghai-based Edouard Malingue Gallery, which is participating at Frieze for the first time. The gallery is presenting the artist's three-part animated film *Fables* (2018) in an immersive installation. Editions of his works, priced upwards of \$12,000, have sold to collectors from London, Paris and Düsseldorf, among others.

Jennifer Caroline Ellis, an associate director of the gallery, says that the growing popularity of Chinese artists is simply a result of a more globalised art world, although she notes that few Asian galleries have opened in Europe. They are finding other ways to show their artists abroad—for instance, by collaborating with European institutions and non-profit organisations.

Outside of Frieze, Hauser & Wirth, which opened in the H Queen's tower in Hong Kong in March, is heavily promoting another Chinese superstar, Zeng Fanzhi, with three exhibitions spanning its galleries in London, Zürich and



Hong Kong. The strategy appears to be paying off. “For the two shows we have opened, all sold works have been placed in Western collections and all with new Fanzhi collectors,” says the gallery’s owner Iwan Wirth, who added Zeng to his roster in March, bringing the total number of Chinese artists he represents up to two.

But is this simply history repeating itself? After all, ten years ago, the market for contemporary Chinese art grew exponentially, but that spurt was short-lived. Not so, says Magnus Renfrew, the co-founder of Art HK, who is launching a new fair in Taipei in January.

He acknowledges that there was a “period of intense interest” between 2006 and 2008, during the “heyday auction market for Chinese contemporary art, which was fairly uncritical”, but a correction followed in 2010. Renfrew says the “institutional scene is developing rapidly” in China, lending critical and curatorial clout to a new generation of artists coming up through the ranks, as well as those who survived the bust.

Western galleries are also now “doing due diligence and creating meaningful relationships with artists”, he says. “Their engagement is no longer primarily commercially driven.”



🏠 » Kultur » Chinesischer Maler Liu Xiaodong: „Ich traue nur dem, was ich sehe“

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**Zu Gast im Künstlerhaus Bethanien**

Chinesischer Maler Liu Xiaodong

18.05.2018 10:26 Uhr

## „Ich traue nur dem, was ich sehe“

VON GREGOR DOTZAUER



Letzte Spuren des südkoreanischen Gwangju-Massakers im Jahr 1980. Liu Xiadongs Gemälde "Time" aus dem Jahr 2014. ABB.: LISSON GALLERY/KUNSTHALLE DÜSSELDORF/LIU XIAODONG

Ein strahlender Apriltag am Kreuzberger Mariannenplatz. Liu Xiaodong hat sich für einige Wochen im Künstlerhaus Bethanien eingemietet, um zu seiner ersten umfassenden, von Heinz-Norbert Jocks kuratierten Retrospektive, die vom 9. Juni an in der Kunsthalle Düsseldorf und dem NRW-Forum stattfindet, das Projekt „Transgender/Gay“ beizusteuern. Für den ersten Teil steht ihm Sasha Maria van Halbach als Modell zur Verfügung, für den zweiten der aus Hongkong stammende Künstler Isaac Chong Wai.

Liu ist eine unauffällige Erscheinung: klein, wendig, drahtig und mit einer nervösen Energie begabt, die nichts von seinen 55 Jahren ahnen lässt. Unruhig saugt er an seiner E-Zigarette und steht prüfend vor halbfertigen Kleinformaten,



die die großen Porträts ergänzen sollen. Das Genderthema ist ihm nicht fremd, seit er 2001 in Singapur aus purer Neugier Transvestiten und Transsexuelle zu malen anfang, wie er überhaupt einen Sinn für nackte Körper hat. Das lockt in China schon lange keinen pruden Hund mehr hinter dem Ofen hervor.

„Nacktheit ist eigentlich gar kein Problem“, sagt er, wobei He Jian, ein junger Maler, der in Kassel studiert hat, seine Auskünfte ins Deutsche übersetzt. „Auch bei queeren Themen sehe ich keine großen Hindernisse. Zumindest in den Großstädten wird das meistens toleriert. Im Fernsehen gibt es zum Beispiel eine ungeheuer populäre Transgender-Moderatorin namens Jin Xing.“

Während in Fragen der sexuellen Toleranz eine Liberalisierung eingesetzt hat, scheint es auf politischem Gebiet derzeit rückwärts zu gehen. Jedenfalls ist fraglich, ob Liu heute nicht neuralgische Punkte berührt, die man ihm nicht mehr ohne Weiteres durchgehen lassen würde. 2009 reiste er in die Provinz Gansu, um am Beispiel zweier Familien das selbstverständliche Miteinander von Christen und Muslimen zu dokumentieren.

### **System und Verantwortung**

Er war in Tibet unterwegs und im Bezirk Hotan bei den Uiguren, einem muslimischen Turkvolk mit eigener Sprache und Schrift, das im Namen der hanchinesischen Mehrheit neuerdings massiv unterdrückt wird. 2010 reiste er in die Sichuan-Provinz, um sich mit den Folgen des großen Erdbebens auseinanderzusetzen. Meist stellte er seine Staffelei unter freiem Himmel auf und ließ sich in aller Öffentlichkeit beim Arbeiten beobachten.

„Ich bin in einem System aufgewachsen, das ein hohes Maß an Anpassungsfähigkeit verlangt“, gesteht er. Dabei habe er sich stets gefragt: „Was kann ich als Einzelner tun, um mich vor mir selbst rechtfertigen zu können? Habe ich alles getan, was ich tun konnte? Ich habe versucht, nur dem zu trauen, was ich unmittelbar sehe.“ Dafür ist er auch ins Ausland gereist. Er hat die Sperranlagen im Westjordanland gemalt, die Israelis und Palästinenser gegeneinander abschotten. Er hat Wanderarbeiter in Bangladesch porträtiert und Bargirls in Thailand: „Ich bin nicht sicher, ob ich China dabei stets mitdenke, aber es geschieht sicher unwillkürlich. Alles, dem ich irgendwann begegnet bin, kann eine Art Echo finden.“





figures portrayed included the iconic folk hero to the poor Ji Gong (also known as the “crazy monk”); Canadian physician Norman Bethune, who brought medicine to the front lines of the Second Sino-Japanese War and rural China, and was eulogized by Mao Zedong; the female Eighth Route Army soldiers; masses of happy people; and revolutionary landmarks (for example, the Neva River in Saint Petersburg, where Russia’s October Revolution began). These affirmative images, which derive from traditions of folk or socialist culture, match the elevated aesthetic values of beauty, fluidity, and solemnity. But just as a play’s antagonist is often portrayed with more charisma than its protagonist, the clumsy and dodgy images in the show’s back area—designated for “disgrace”—which referenced farcical anti-Japanese television programming from recent years, seemed to stand out. The works depicted Japanese soldiers (who are literally called “devils” in Chinese) and Chinese traitors performing ridiculous shenanigans in a village, while the haystacks and houses in the background seemed to display the faces and expressions of armed anti-Japanese villagers.

Works in this “disgrace” section demonstrated a unified style and method that more accurately represents Wang’s recent output. The artist blends modernist styles such as children’s painting, caricature, Cubism, and Futurism with a reckless and apparently untutored drawing style. Behind this mishmash, however, is a carefully controlled technique. Take, for example, *Traitors*, 2015. The vividly colored postures of a fat and a thin “traitor” in the foreground are meticulously drafted. In particular, the stance of the slender man, and the center-parted hair falling onto his face, is the result of extensive research and practice.

This doubling of method and result, foreground and background, extended beyond a simple comparison of the exhibition’s two distinct physical spaces. Removing the superficial disguise of the show’s moral theme, the real, hidden subject of the exhibition was a confrontation of the relationship between morality and style. The exhibition’s inscription—the preface—cited a correspondence between eighth-century Zenist Han Shan’s poem of admonishment and Yuan-dynasty scholar Zhao Mengfu’s poem of painting theory. Those texts paralleled Wang’s undemonstrative establishment of his artistic style, as well as his political and moral principles, within the an overarching illusion of chaos. Ji Gong’s image, as depicted by Wang, resembled the artist himself.

—Bao Dong

Translated from Chinese by Chelsea Liu.

## SHANGHAI

### Liu Xiaodong, Carsten Nicolai, and Nam June Paik

CHRONUS ART CENTER

Combining *datum* and *sensoria*, the neologism in the title “Datumsoria: An Exhibition of Liu Xiaodong, Carsten Nicolai, and Nam June Paik” simultaneously refers to a new sensory space and a creative apparatus opened up by the information age. The three artists might seem an odd combination at first, but the exhibition offered coherent narratives that told an enthralling, thought-provoking, and, in the end, frightening sci-fi story.

Paik’s 1993 video sculpture *The Rehabilitation of Genghis-Khan* welcomed visitors as they entered CAC’s exhibition space. Without the title, one would not recognize the figure as Genghis Khan at all. Equipped with a diving helmet, a Bohemian shawl, pipe sleeves, and a mechanized body that shares parts with the bike it rides, the cartoonish figure looks more like a funny delivery guy than the leader of the Mongol Empire. The neon tubes and screens inside his body and on a bunch of

TV monitors that he’s delivering suggest that the Great Emperor is now fully robotized or even artificially intelligent.

Behind Genghis Khan hung Liu Xiaodong’s painting series “Weight of Insomnia,” 2015–16. Or should we call it “his,” given that it was being painted on site by robotic arms? The renowned oil painter’s first attempt at new media seemed to reflect on the spread of automation in society and now also in the arts, and easily became the focus of the show. Liu worked with technicians to develop a program involving streaming data and computer vision algorithms to continually paint three canvases for the entire duration of the three-month-long exhibition. The system traced traffic (both human and vehicular) across three public spaces in three cities

and turned the real-time data into brushstrokes. At CAC, we saw three large monochromatic paintings (never finished) create themselves: one in black (a view of Shanghai’s Bund), one in blue (of Liu’s hometown of Jincheng, Liaoning), and one in red (depicting Sanlitun, Beijing). The perspectives and compositions of the pictures resembled those taken by surveillance cameras. There is a mesmerizing paradox here: Every stroke is both awkward—due to the mechanical movement and the formally unpredictable traces left by the brush—and accurate. The works are simultaneously painterly, performative, technological, and monumental.

If Paik’s work envisions the future in the past tense and Liu’s work constitutes an effort of the present, then Nicolai’s *unitape*, 2015, could represent the eventual realization of those visions and efforts: It looks fully automated, the artist’s hand completely invisible. The graphic patterns in this immersive, room-size digital projection follow the principles of programmed control through punch cards, and seamlessly interact with an electronic audio element. Watching it made you feel like you were inside a giant piece of machinery—perhaps even part of it. The exhibition ended in a techno-utopian hue. Compared to the whimsy and humor of Paik’s work and the implied struggle of Liu’s, Nicolai’s clear-cut mathematical minimalism seemed to be free from any humanity at all. It was not as much fun. It exposed the dilemma a lot of new-media works face: To use and exemplify technology is one thing; to explore the imagination of it is another. If “Datumsoria” claimed to envisage the potential roles art and technology play in relation to each other, in the end its representation of the beauty of the machine represented a rather obsolete point of view.

—Hanlu Zhang



Nam June Paik, *The Rehabilitation of Genghis-Khan*, 1993, mixed-media installation with television monitors, video player, neon lights, video (color, silent, 25 minutes 58 seconds), 102 1/4 x 39 1/4 x 86 1/4". From: "Liu Xiaodong, Carsten Nicolai, Nam June Paik."

## MOSCOW

### "Proof: Francisco Goya, Sergei Eisenstein, Robert Longo"

GARAGE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Francisco Goya, Sergei Eisenstein, and Robert Longo are the three diverse artists compared in “Proof,” curated by Kate Fowle of the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in collaboration with Longo.



# LISSON GALLERY

*TimeOut Shanghai*

15 September 2016

**TimeOut** SHANGHAI ▼

## Great art events to hit up over Mid-Autumn Festival

Stay out of the rain and soak up some art this long weekend



Last weekend saw the most successful ever [Photofairs](#) at Shanghai Exhibition Centre and a flurry of art openings including [OVERPOP](#) at the Yuz Museum, [Truth](#) at MD Gallery, [I will be your eyes](#) at Art+ Shanghai Gallery, and [Nature: A Subjective Place](#) at Shanghai Center of Photography. Slightly more low key, this Mid-Autumn festival holiday welcomes two new art events, with these and all of the above offering the perfect opportunity to stay out of the rain, grab a glass of wine, and get your culture fix. Long weekend: sorted.

### 1. [Datumsoria: An Exhibition of Liu Xiaodong, Carsten Nicolai, and Nam June Paik](#)



[Chronus Art Centre](#), Saturday 17, 5pm-7pm, Free



The M50 gallery known for its quirky exhibitions is unlikely to disappoint this weekend, with an opening reception on Saturday 17 for their latest show. We're told to expect to be greeted by a 'Genghis Khan of the 20th century riding a bicycle' (legit) before being led through an exhibition exploring the intersection between art and technology, including a monumental installation titled 'Weight of Insomnia.' We're intrigued.

## 2. Art in the City free bus tours



**Tours start at K11 Art Mall, Friday 16-Saturday 17, Free**

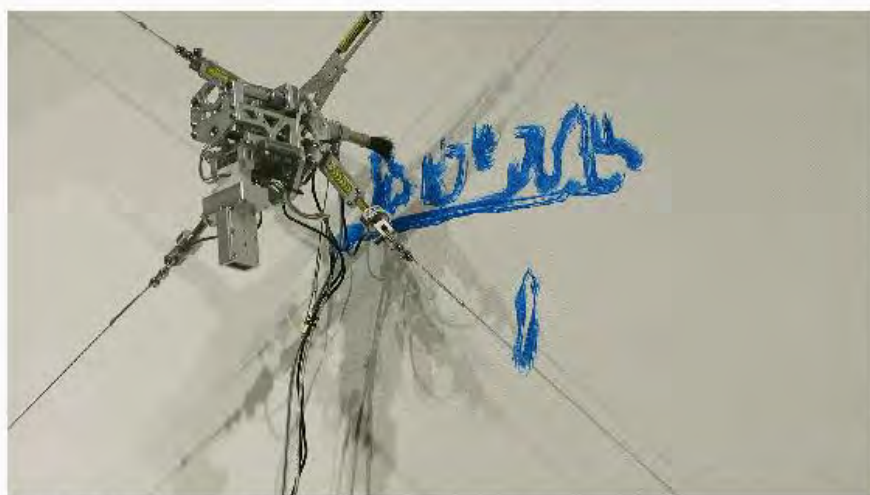
The Art in the City festival has this year transformed its previous four day art fair/two day bus tour into a month-long festival of art – including an exhibition at chi K11 Art Space, public art displays, exclusive parties and, of course, their ever popular free hop-on hop-off bus tours. The free bus tours are taking place over three weekends, carrying passengers on different routes to many of the city's art hot spots, museums and galleries, including M50 art district, Power Station of Art, The West Bund Art Area and Shanghai Exhibition Centre (all of which will be hosting exhibitions specifically for Shanghai art season). This Mid-Autumn festival weekend the tours take place on Friday 16 and Saturday 17.



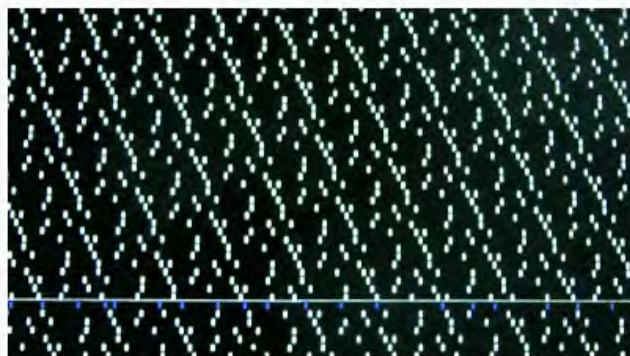
## 刘小东以机械手绘制《失眠的重量》，与白南准、卡斯滕·尼古拉链接出“艺术&技术@”的新线索

Sep 19, 2016 艺术新闻 / 中文版

SHARE f 6 7 8



▲ 刘小东，《失眠的重量》，局部，图片来源：TANC



▲ 卡斯滕·尼古拉，《unitape》，图片来源：TANC

上海。“术问——刘小东、卡斯滕·尼古拉、白南准三人展”在新时线媒体艺术中心开幕。此次展览被命名为“术问”，寓意在汉语文化语境下由信息技术变革所带来的一种新的认知型的范式转移。西文名“Datumsoria”，由“datum”（数据）与“sensoria”（感觉中枢）合成新词，意指“内在于信息时代的一种新的感知空间”。

**刘小东：用机器代替双手展现另一种真实**



### 刘小东：用机器代替双手展现另一种真实

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刘小东为此次展览特别制作的机器绘画装置《失眠的重量》备受关注。作为上世纪90年代开始活跃起来的中国后现实主义画家中的领军人物，刘小东首次运用数字技术，运用录像与机械装置创作新媒体作品，对他来说也是一次新的尝试和挑战。

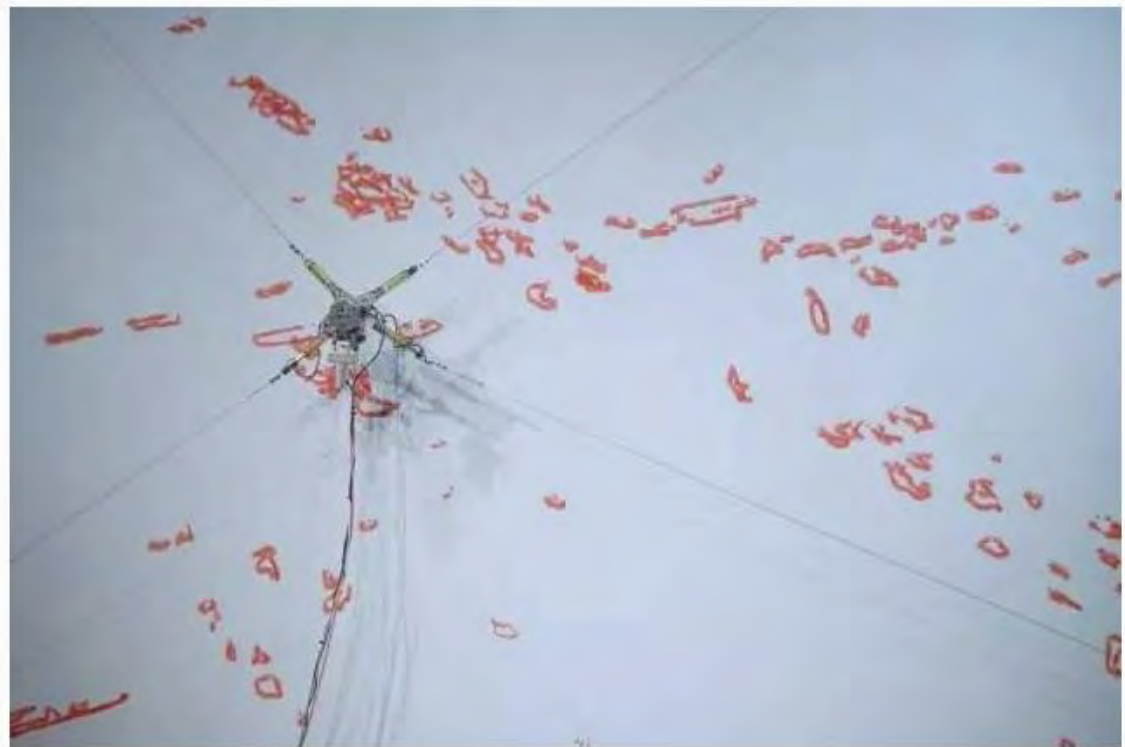
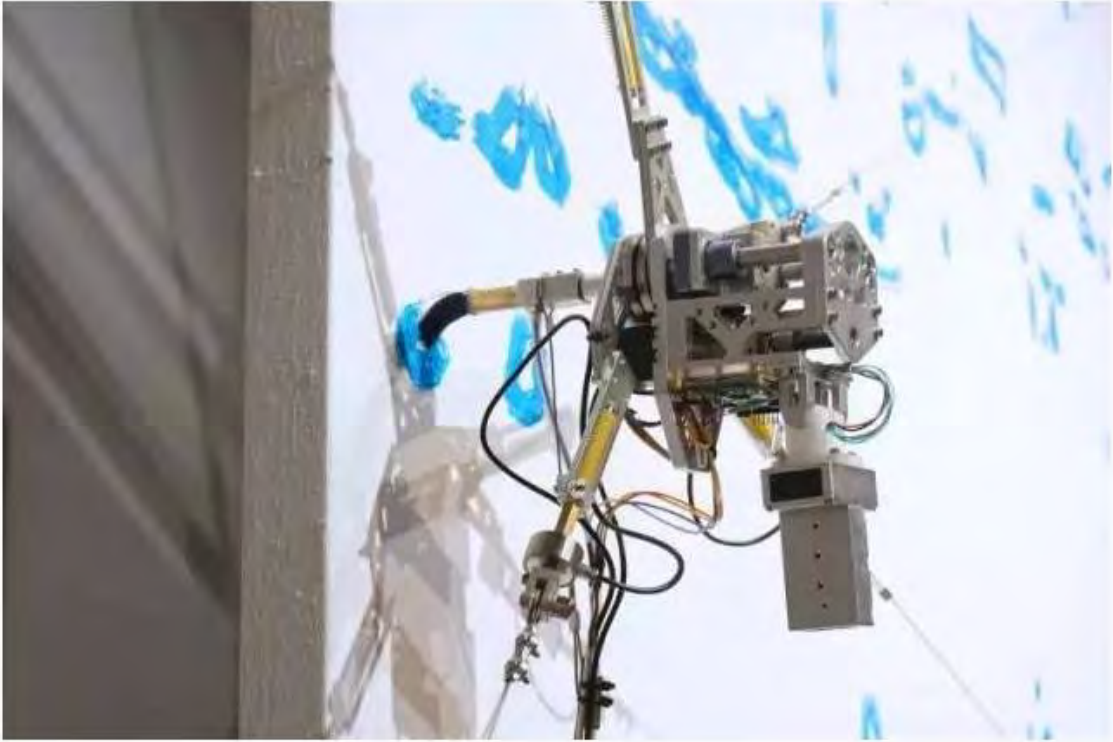
“当时提议这个项目的一刹那我很兴奋，因为我觉得这是一个挑战，而且这个挑战来自于张尕。我答应了，但是我真不知道怎么做。我最早的想法是想把精神变成物质，比如说，悲伤到失眠的这种感受，我想把它抽离出来看一看，或者是称出它的重量，所以最早我就叫它悲伤的重量，我就想了这个题目给自己。”刘小东说。



▲ 刘小东为创作《失眠的重量》测试中，图片来源：CAC

《失眠的重量》是由三块3×2.5米的巨型画布组成，架置在粗陋的建筑脚手架上。在展馆之外，3座城市被分别架设了实时纪录的摄像头：一处位于有着地标意义的上海外滩，另一处则探视着北京三里屯的一个十字路口，第三个摄像头注视着艺术家家乡辽宁的一处广场。









▲ 刘小东，《失眠的重量》现场，图片来源：CAC

一支由机械操控的画笔抖动着，将由摄像头捕捉到的持续不断的数据转译为建筑物的轮廓、树木的侧影、交通工具的轮廓线和人物的影子，并开始24小时不间断地作画，将连续作画3个月。这件作品中，艺术家仿佛成为机器意识的化身，技术在此与艺术家共谋，开始了一场与无尽之失眠的博弈，将欲望与焦虑、飘逸的梦魇和升华相互交织成一幅不断展开的拼图。



▲ 《失眠的重量》刘小东，图片来源：CAC





▲ 刘小东在现场展览中与观众讲解作品，图片来源：CAC

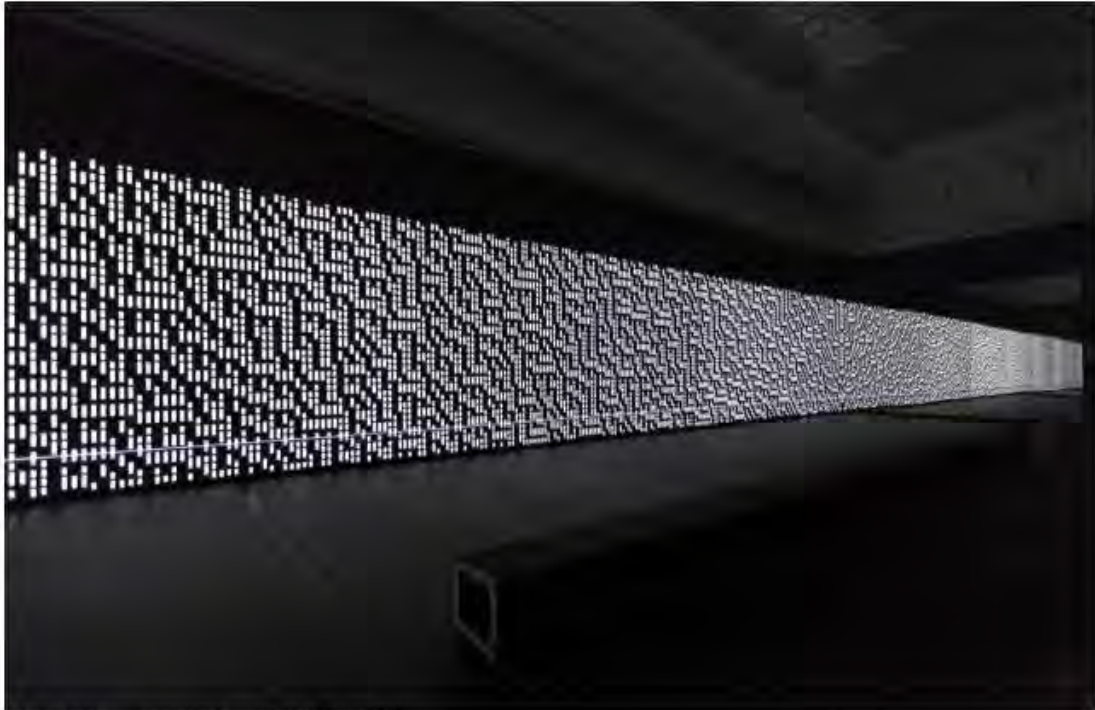
这件作品历时两年，与编程技术人员合作完成。“我的绘画其实就是看一眼画一笔，看一眼画一笔，这个机器几乎代替了我的眼睛，通过摄像头，正对着一个城市的街角，十字路口，它看一帧画一帧，不停地画，要慢慢地画3个月，层层叠叠的，满足了一种我追求的绘画的愿望，就是绘画的客观性，绘画的那种层层涂改、层层堆积，用时间积累起来的一种艺术，其实跟我以前的绘画有非常直接的联系。”刘小东说道：“不过有趣的是，机器是完全客观的真实，而最后的结果可能是一张抽象画，而我以自己的主观视角作画却画成了客观具象的真实。”

#### 卡斯滕·尼古拉：数据抽象的泛化现实

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与《失眠的重量》中经由实时流媒体数据所造就的忐忑起伏的敏感图像形成对比，卡斯滕·尼古拉创作于2015年的装置《unitape》则以类似于早期计算机穿孔卡片的图像结构来提供一种对感知的检验。这件作品对工业时代的通讯过程进行了观照思考，也提出了人与机器之间互动的社会及心理层面的相关议题。





▲卡斯滕·尼古拉，《unitape》，图片来源：CAC

步入卡斯滕·尼古拉《unitape》的展览空间，连续运动的图像在两侧镜面的映照下形成无限延展的空间，降落的白色颗粒与节奏感的配乐给观众以空间运动浸入式错觉体验。

尼古拉是德国音乐艺术家，创作集中于音乐、艺术和科学之间的交叉领域。通过将声光频率这类科学现象转化为可被感知到的作品，来抵御人类感知的分离。在科学参照系的影响下，尼古拉常常着手于研究数学规律，如网格和代码，以及错误的、随机的和自我组织的结构。

### 白南准：技术历史的关照

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白南准的《成吉思汗的复原》创作于1993年。一代帝王头戴潜水帽，躯干是由一具加油机改造而来的拼接物，其双臂则由两根塑料管充当。负重累累的坐骑，以一堆电视机壳叠置而成的后座，霓虹灯管制成的符号和字符装饰，预示着加码信息经由电子路径得以传输。





▲ 白南准，《成吉思汗的复原》，图片来源：Nam June Paik Art Center

这件作品的创作时间正值第一个图像浏览器Mosaic诞生之际——自此，信息高速公路成为了一种物质现实，《成吉思汗的复原》与一个新的历史纪元的降临直观地产生交感共振，在这一新纪元里，人类的全部经验将很快被网络、微处理器、以及细小的存储媒介所改变。

据策展人张尕介绍，这是新时线媒体艺术中心与德国卡尔斯鲁厄艺术与媒体中心（以下简称ZKM）、白南准艺术中心在“艺术&技术@”的框架下合作呈现的第一场展览，之后每年，3个艺术机构都将推出一位艺术家举行联展。







▲ 刘小东，《失眠的重量》，现场，图片来源：CAC

刘小东的最新作品《失眠的重量》由新时线媒体艺术中心委约，并获得艺术家的代理画廊里森画廊（Lisson Gallery）、中鸿创艺（北京）、日本画材公司Pigment等共同支持。同样，卡斯滕·尼古拉的作品《unitape》的实现也得到了艺术家的代理画廊EIGEN+ART的协助。以上画廊的负责人和赞助企业均悉数到场。

ZKM的策展人菲利普·齐格勒告诉《艺术新闻 / 中文版》，这3件作品明年还将巡展至ZKM，但会根据具体的策展思路增加新的作品。谈及机构的展览与商业画廊、企业如此密切的合作，他表示，这种情况在西方还非常少见。

（撰文 / 黄天然，蒋立言）

术问——刘小东、卡斯滕·尼古拉、白南淮三人展  
上海新时线媒体艺术中心 | 展至12月30日



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**Lisson Gallery** supports the much-anticipated presentation of **"Datumsoria"**, an exhibition of **Liu Xiaodong, Carsten Nicolai, and Nam June Paik**. A neologism, 'Datumsoria' conjugates datum and sensoria, denoting a new perceptual space immanent to the information age.

Upon entering the gallery, the audience is first greeted by a Genghis Khan of the 20th century transformed in a tongue-in-cheek fashion by Nam June Paik to amusingly pedal a bicycle rather than majestically command from horseback. Topped by a diving helmet, the prince's torso is a patchwork made from a fuel dispenser conjoined with plastic pipe limbs. Loaded in the back of his overburdened vehicle is a pile of television cases stacked on top of each other encasing symbols, characters made of neon lights, intimating the transmission of encrypted messages through an electronic pathway. A screen that is embedded inside a hollowed-out part of the fuel-dispenser displays video images that morph from mundane objects to a pyramid of ancient glory. Created in 1993, the year when





Liu Xiaodong, Out of Beichuan, 2010 © the artist;  
Courtesy of Lisson Gallery



Liu Xiaodong, Weight of Insomnia, 2016 © the  
artist; Courtesy of Lisson Gallery



the first graphic web browser Mosaic was launched making the long-promised information superhighway a material reality, “Rehabilitation of Genghis-Khan” intuitively resonated with the coming of a new historical epoch in which the entire human experience would soon be transformed by the instantaneity and simultaneity of network immediacy, the gargantuanization of processing power and the nanonization of storage media.

Surrounding this Quixotic caricature unfolds the monumental installation “Weight of Insomnia”. Working closely with a group of technologists over a period of one and a half years, the work is Liu Xiaodong’s latest daredevil endeavor venturing into an unfamiliar zone of telematics and computer vision-engendered automation systems. Pushing boundaries of his documentary style of live painting, the artist completely reinvents himself by penetrating into the digital now. Three locations were carefully identified and equipped with video cameras: one near the iconic Bund in Shanghai where humans, cars, buses and bicycles vie with each other to cross street, another monitors the Apple Store in Beijing’s fashionable Sanlitun district where urban sophisticates rub shoulders



Liu Xiaodong, Weight of Insomnia, 2016 © the artist; Courtesy of Lisson Gallery



with novices from the provinces, and a final camera watches a public plaza in the artist's home town. At dawn or at dusk, the plaza is often enlivened by troupes of elderly people dancing to disco rhymes with a definitively folkloric twist for an aerobic drill. Three large-scale canvases, each 3 x 2.5 meters, are mounted on crude construction scaffolds. A robotically controlled paintbrush jitteringly translates the three discrete, incoming datum captured by the video cameras into contours of buildings, silhouettes of trees, outlines of vehicles, and shadows of human figures. If the canon of live painting is to arrest a fleeting second, to fixate a bygone moment for a rumination on signification, then what Liu Xiaodong's canvases depict are a multiplicity of instants that are forever fluctuating, generating at each moment a new sediment of emotional residue, overlapped, juxtaposed, concatenated and truncated. It is as if the artist, reincarnated in a robotic consciousness, wrestles through an endless, restless insomnia to piece together an ever-evolving jigsaw of amorphous desires and anxieties, fleeting nightmares and ruptures. Liu Xiaodong thus constructs a new awareness of contemporaneity. In



Liu Xiaodong, Weight of Insomnia, 2016 © the artist; Courtesy of Lisson Gallery



so doing, the artist not only re-assesses painting in the age of internet and algorithm but also makes apparent a new reality that situates itself in the materiality of media informed by data fluxes.

In contrast to the topsy-turvy fabrication of a pictorial sensibility through live-streamed data as evidenced in "Weight of Insomnia", Carsten Nicolai's installation "unitape" offers an examination of perception on graphic structures that resemble punch cards of the early computing era. If Liu Xiaodong's gradual abstraction of live streaming data is the result of the additive entropy of real world uncertainty, Nicolai's immaculate images and sounds are pure mathematical precision that illuminate an algorithmic sublime. Series of patterns and endless permutations reminiscent of code-scanning reverberate with generative sounds. Here repetition creates difference and difference engenders unison that is charged with psychic force as well as pictorial finesse. The materiality of the generative data is manifested by the very projection medium and heightened in the mirrors flanking the projection screen to both sides, extending the field of imagery in infinite depth and breadth while the sonic cadence echoes reverberatingly to create a totality of sensory immersion. "unitape" borrows its inspiration from the artist's involvement with the history of the city of Chemnitz, once one of the most important locations of the German textile industry. Inspired by the invention of the mechanical loom by Joseph-Marie Jacquard (1752–1834) which enabled the swift production of complex patterned fabrics using the principle of automated control by punch cards, Nicolai's "unitape" reflects on communication processes in the industrial era while at the same time addressing issues related to the socio-psychological aspects of the interaction between man and machine.

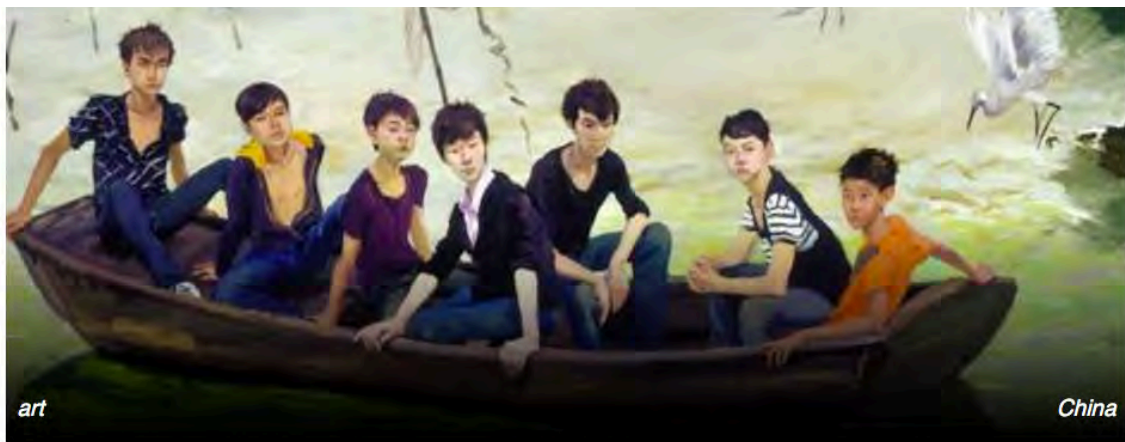


**“Datumsoria”** brings three highly idiosyncratic works together, shedding new light upon relations that bespeak the logic of the Real in the information age, a reality predicated on binary instructions of the generic, of the uniformity of Ones and Zeros, from whose generality comes forth of a hardening of shapes and forms. Precipitating sentient residues and invoking emotive potentials, there emerges a consciousness of technical autopoiesis that is capable of a subjectivity of another order as intuited by the media theorist Friedrich Kittler: “The arts (to employ an old word for an old institution) entertain only symbolic relation with the sensory fields they take for granted. On the contrary, media relate to the materiality with – and on – which they operate in the Real itself.”





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## Chinese artist Liu Xiaodong: Painting Natural Disasters

[Art](#) [China](#)



Rajesh Punj  
November 13, 2015

Known as one of a new breed of 'neo-realists' to emerge from [China](#) in the 1990s, [Liu Xiaodong](#) has always had great faith in figurative painting's ability to capture the modern experience as it presents itself. Reflecting on China's breakneck social and artistic transformation, the Beijing-based artist explains what inspires him to keep going.





*Images from Lisson Gallery | © Liu Xiaodong Studio; courtesy of the artist*

In conversation, Xiaodong wants it known that he is as much a neo-realist as he is a documentary film-maker and diarist. For him, everything comes about as a consequence of his being present at a specific place, within a given period of time, and in circumstances that allows him to almost forensically conceive of new works. And Xiaodong is categorically much less interested by the notions of contemporary aesthetics as I attempt to attach them to him. When sited at the foot of a mountain, or at the edge of a ravine, settled on a level of land with his canvas covered over by temporary tarpaulin – a process for which he has become renowned – Xiaodong's objective is to positively generate a new canon of work, in places damaged and devastated by natural disaster and man-made adulteration.

Asked about the nature of his coming to [London](#) for last year's Lisson show, Xiaodong confirms through his spirited translator that this was 'his first solo show in London, for which Liu Xiaodong wished to be closer to the people of London.' And, to that end, Xiaodong spent almost one and a half months painting from improvised locations – pubs, restaurants, and connecting thoroughfares – in order to be able to properly represent the visual circumstances around Lisson Gallery. Selecting his sitters by their association to a given landmark, and the space available to him to set up a large scale canvas and paint, Xiaodong befriended those that frequented his temporary studio over many days and weeks. Recording details of their posture, complexion, and recording their personalities both by anecdotal conversations and through labored observations, before deciding upon whether they, 'the sitter', suited a central position in one of his large scale London canvases or not.

In pursuit of such dogmatic details, Xiaodong carries with him sheets of paper that, when amassed, became illustrated diaries; laboring over them like a technocrat absorbed by new industries. Xiaodong adds beautiful little sketches of possible compositions, of where the light falls into a room, and details of the architectural layout and furnishings of the spaces that he occupies. Consequently, Xiaodong's compositional layout is determined by his wish to open the painting up to his audience, as the foreground is rendered without obstacles or any kind of intrusion. Figures and furniture are all pushed left and right as the spectators are given pride of place at the forefront of his works.



Yet, unlike the original visionaries of 'plein air' painting, who sought to capture the elemental atmosphere of a given moment, Xiaodong is much more interested in the passage of time that is allowed to augment with his being present at a specific location. Thus, what transpires is much more of a documentary-styled narrative of the lives of many people, as they are either invited to dutifully sit for him, or otherwise become one of his many new acquaintances, immortalised in his make-shift diaries and photographs. Using film, his camera, sketching and scribbling paragraphs of initial information, Xiaodong exercises with very playful possibilities of points of entry into the lives of the people permanently conditioned by their tormented geography. Xiaodong has in the past used film as medium, working with Wang Xiaoshuai in the highly acclaimed *The Days*, 1993, and when discussing his involvement with film Xiaodong refers to major independent films that have been recognised in previous years at [Venice](#).



Images from Lisson Gallery | © Liu Xiaodong Studio; courtesy of the artist

Xiaodong's international significance lies in his landmark projects, which include [The Hotan Project](#) (2012-13), comprising of a two month self-determined residency in Xinjiang province. Within this, Xiaodong depicted and documented the lives of the jade miners, in a region best known for its reserves of the precious stone. *Hotan Project*, curated by Hou Hanru, included reams of photographs, initial sketches, interviews, diaries, and large-scale canvases, of which there were a quartet of works. And in parallel to Xiaodong, Hanru looked in greater detail at the wider geography, history and circumstance of Xinjiang province, in order to extract as much research material as possible for a documentary style exhibition. Co-curator Ou Ning added a further dimension to the project by introducing outside researchers and journalists to collaborate with local writers, historians, musicians, and craftsmen, in improvised acts of free expression of the creative energies that were present there at that time. Consequently, Xiaodong's work proved to be a catalyst for an alternative look at a province otherwise plagued by [natural disasters](#).



In a similar vein to Xiaodong's *Hotan Project*, two of the artist's leading paintings from 2010 were born of his documentary style need to reinterpret China's recent history. *Out of Beichuan*, comprised a large scale canvas of an all-female cast of foregrounded figures congregated around a dilapidated cargo bicycle, against the harsh background of collapsed buildings and uneven mountains of resettled rubble. The painting has as its backdrop the aftermath of the [seismic earthquake](#) in 2008 in Beichuan, central China, in which hundreds of thousands lost their lives, and where a smaller quake occurred again in 2013. The city was transformed into a ghost town, defined by its apocalyptic landscape and utter desolation, and in which all of the survivors of the original quake were relocated to a city some distance away from the epicenter of the disaster zone.



Images from Lisson Gallery | © Liu Xiaodong Studio; courtesy of the artist

In *Into Taihu*, Xiaodong depicts a group of adolescent men gathered inside a small fishing boat on the polluted lake in Taihu, on the border of Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces in Eastern China. Seven boys spread across this small fishing boat are mirrored by seven unruly birds returning to flight, and for this work Xiaodong had asked a handful of young boys from an opera group to act as his leads in his temporary fable of social ills. Unlike the obvious natural disaster depicted in *Out of Beichuan*, the scene in *Into Taihu* appears more appealing, tranquil almost – that is, until you focus on the waters cradling the composition. The murky green-blue lake alludes to a man-made disaster that has infected that part of the Yangtze Delta plain for many years now. The boys, likely to have been from the nearby city of Wuxi, have seen the waters slowly change color due to the fall-out of the chemical engineering plants in the township of Yixing. Critically for Xiaodong, Beichuan's heaven-sent calamity, and Lake Taihu's man-made disaster, are aided by ritual ceremonies, in which 'virgin boys and young girls' are paraded in honor of heaven in the hope of averting or lessening the damage done. For Xiaodong, the age-old proverb appears to sanction his production of these two related works, as he enacts and enables a tangible relationship between fable and fact. Xiaodong also saw it fitting, when taking residence in Beichuan and at Lake Taihu, to initially draw on a series of visual diaries, taking regular photographs of the villages, the occupants and surrounding landscape, and drawing on videos. He thereby had an entire glossary of the lives of the people in these effected areas. Tellingly for Xiaodong, the nature of a disaster of any kind, and his understanding of it, is as much about the subsequent days and years after the immediate events in which people perish and entire villages disappear, as it is about the seismic damage itself. Visually, then, it appears that Xiaodong tries to reason with the aftermath, as the nature and the condition of a disaster becomes a visible scare upon the landscape, and upon the lives of generations of people.





Images from Lisson Gallery | © Liu Xiaodong Studio; courtesy of the artist

Located, as he is, at the epicenters of such 'natural' and 'man-made' disasters, Xiaodong always begins his projects by employing a procedure and practice that is as practical as it might be if he were entering a studio to paint a small canvas of a seated figure. The elemental requirements for such an endeavor appears the same for the artist, though the scale and materials differ greatly.

Firstly, and most practically, the size of the canvas and the accompanying crate need to be considered and constructed in Beijing well before the project begins. Once the canvas is complete, it is delivered by large truck to the site, where a makeshift shelter is constructed of tarpaulin and bamboo, temporary easels are erected, containers of oil paints, diaries, drawings, reams of photographic film, and video recording equipment delivered and employed. These have become the choice apparatus for the artist as he takes up residence on a site for many weeks and months, in order to source a point of entry for a new documentary-style body of work. Once the painting is complete it is recreated to be returned to his studio. Xiaodong explains how 'he likes to paint a place that has a troubled background, and this kind of background will give him the inspiration to paint.' For Xiaodong his temporary relationships with the inhabitants begin as 'strangers in discussion, and then they become good friends, and it is always like this', in order he can arrive at a work that serves everyone well. When asked if he seeks to return to a location he has earmarked for an artwork, he confirms he would, 'if the opportunity presents itself. Xiaodong, as much preoccupied with new locations and their accompanying circumstances, is as interested in nostalgia and his feelings for the familiar.

In 2010, Xiaodong made such a return visit, to his hometown of Jincheng, in the north-eastern province of Liaoning. Xiaodong encamped himself there for several months, employing many of his signature approaches to making a new body of works. Conceiving of a diary in the first instance, he wrote and drew an initial narrative for what he wanted to depict on a grander scale. When discussing Liaoning, Xiaodong declared something of his self-interest in what had drawn him back to his place of birth. Professing, 'as soon as you begin to talk about your homeland, something starts to happen inside you, something like homesickness. I think in my innermost self, I do not want anything to change in my hometown. You just want your old home to stay as it always used to be. Only if it stays that way can it remain a refuse for us, however reality is different.' 'However reality is different, urbanization is spreading much too quickly, destroying everything that we loved or did not love; forming a new city out of everything.' This certainly goes some way towards explaining why Xiaodong is less inclined to be rooted in any of China's modern cities, and is more interested in the wider agricultural landscape, in *Taihu*, on the boarder of Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces in Eastern China, and *Beichuan* in central China, as seen through the eyes of its workers and peasant famers. For Xiaodong, there is much more in China's history, its people and regional provinces, than there is in the industrial cities fashioned by modern interests.



For Xiaodong, *The Hotan Project* (2012-2013), explores the imposition of modernity as a project of social progress and the insistence on the preservation of traditions that is at the heart of China's road to transformation, and central to Xiaodong's work. Leading, as it does, to the alienation of one over the other, its ultimate conclusion regards the superiority of modernity over existing social and cultural value systems.

*By Rajesh Punj*



## FINANCIAL TIMES

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August 4, 2013 10:26 pm

### Liu Xiaodong: life as he knows it

By Barnaby Martin

The Chinese artist's poignant paintings are born of an intimate relationship with his subjects



Liu Xiaodong painting in The Perseverance pub in Marylebone, London

When anyone mentions Chinese contemporary art, we have come to expect the wilder shores of conceptualism, performance or installation. But there is also another rich vein alive in Chinese art today: realism. Liu Xiaodong is a figurative Chinese artist based in Beijing, where he is also a professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), and for the next four weeks he will be working at a series of locations in and around the unglamorous setting of London's Edgware Road. Last week he was in The Perseverance, a pub in Marylebone, where in the midst of the comings and goings of customers he painted the landlord and landlady and the chef. It had taken him two weeks to choose the location before he found what he was looking for: an emotional connection with the staff.

"I have faith in figurative painting," said Liu when I interviewed him after one of his three-hour painting sessions. He was collapsed in a chair, physically and emotionally drained but happy with his progress. "It is the only way I can capture what I see."

For more than three decades, Liu has been painting people. His canvases are large, often upwards of two metres square, and more often than not he paints people he knows in their homes or their place of work, or standing around in their neighbourhood. Sometimes he paints people he doesn't know – as he is doing in London – but he first spends time getting to know them. He has been invited into the homes of the staff at the The Perseverance, has had dinner with them, smoked with them and walked their dogs.



This strong documentary urge reflects his interest in documentary cinema. Liu's involvement in film extends to several credits as producer, a starring role in the 1993 Chinese indie hit *The Days* and the job of artistic director on *Beijing Bastards* the same year. Liu does not paint from his imagination, or from photographs, preferring to carve out "a set" from the corner of a pub, or a busy restaurant, or a side street in his hometown, and then direct his subjects.

"It's primitive, mixing colours on the spot," he says. "It is like a peasant labouring on the land. Physical labour and spiritual pleasure come together. They form a strange power. One is exotic while the other is provincial. They create a wonderful chemistry . . . As long as you do this the painting is good because the texture is born in the environment."

His preference for painting from life is also the result of the circumstances of his artistic training and apprenticeship. Born in 1963 to factory worker parents in Jincheng, a small northern industrial town, Liu won a scholarship in 1980 to the prestigious high school that feeds into Beijing's CAFA, before gaining entry to the art college itself in 1984. An important element of art training in those days was to go out to villages and paint peasants at work. The only permissible aesthetic was socialist realism, or revolutionary realism as it was also called: peasants glowing with health, factory workers with bulging muscles. In Liu's case, habit became instinct and, although he lost his faith in the credo of the Party long ago, he has never lost the taste for going into the field, like a documentary film-maker, and painting directly from life.

Liu is at ease with both western and Chinese painting traditions. The composition and the arrangement of objects in his work is consciously influenced by the Song and pre-Song classics that he admires above all else – in particular the pictures of banqueting scenes, where the guests, busy stuffing their faces, inadvertently expose their true natures.

Critics have compared his work to Lucian Freud's, although Liu's brushwork is, if anything, broader and more apparently casual than the late British master's. Liu himself is quick to cite Cézanne as a major western influence. But his work, which is so often about his old friends, many of whom have been left behind by the post-Mao boom, overflows with poignancy in a way that is reminiscent of Arshile Gorky's "The Artist and his Mother". When I mention Gorky's painting, Liu is voluble in his admiration for Gorky's work.

The intimate emotional force that emanates from Liu's paintings, the moral aura that he sees in the "nobodies" that he chooses as his subjects, gives them an almost religious atmosphere, even though the settings may be banal: someone's kitchen, an empty karaoke club, the corner of a field. But, he says, there is always a risk: "It is a balancing act. Because you must not eulogise people, you must not be sentimental. It makes me very anxious every time I start to paint."

*Liu Xiaodong's London paintings will be on show at the Lisson Gallery, September 27-November 3.*  
[www.lissongallery.com](http://www.lissongallery.com)





**Liu Xiaodong: Hotan Project**  
Today Art Museum, Beijing  
13 January – 23 February

**Just what is** it that makes Liu Xiaodong's painting so different, so appealing? The fifty-year-old artist's work has been exhibited from Beijing (*Hometown Boy* at UCCA in 2011) to Graz (where *The Process of Painting* has just closed at Universalmuseum Joanneum); *Parkett* this month launched its 91st volume at Leo Koenig, New York, featuring editions by Liu Xiaodong, among others. Now a concise show of large paintings and supporting work occupies Today Art Museum – the results of his *Hotan Project* in the jade mining region of Xinjiang Province.

The exhibition consists, in the first room, of four large paintings and a documentary film about the project (Liu is a 'process' painter, documenting the making of his art). The paintings depict miners – three show a group of men at work or posing in a blanched landscape of loose rocks and dust amid which they spend each day digging for jade; the fourth shows a young couple together in similar surroundings. The canvases are each 250 × 300 cm – big, but not so that the figures are quite lifesize. The mode of application is painterly, with large, lively, visible brushmarks to describe the forms of stones, clothing and the approximate expressions of the figures. The impression is direct and lifelike, conveying less a preoccupation with detail than

with the overall character of the scene and demeanour of its cast of local labourers. As is Liu's habit, the works were painted outside and onsite. In another room, a large number of sketches and photographs painted over in places with acrylic evoke the artist's period of work in Hotan – though these are not especially absorbing.

A recent interview with Liu threw out the comment that 'truth in painting does not equal truth in reality'; the artist's approach is purposefully anthropological – in recent years, travelling to remote or socioeconomically strained regions for periods of months at a time to observe and paint them. The resulting canvases are 'impressions' of certain realities, and also (the artist admits) proof that he was actually there. His practice thus encircles an idea of 'truth', the nature of which has generated far more discussion than have the actual places or people he visits. Faced with these realistic images, one might ask (as did Christopher Moore in a recent article) where their truth really lies, or adapt a common adage: 'I saw it in a painting, so it must be true'. It can be easy to accept these works simply as true to life. In fact, they are true not so much to their places of origin as to the artist's hand and eye. Liu's paintings finally evoke less journeying to a new location and the delivery of its image to outside viewers than the import of 'local' people and scenes into the locale of his own artistic realm. Thus interpreted, these paintings are primarily revelations not of places, or people, but of painting and its ability to address different subjects alike in a firm, consistent language. As such, Liu Xiaodong's work is without doubt convincing.

**IONA WHITTAKER**





Liu Xiaodong

TRUTH IN  
PAINTING  
DOES NOT  
EQUAL  
TRUTH IN  
REALITY.

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LIU XIAODONG & PHILIP TINARI

*PHILIP TINARI* is director of the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing.

LX: Kinmen, Taiwan. The exhibition venue was not a traditional museum but a bunker. If I had painted some small paintings in Beijing and brought them down there to hang, it would have been meaningless. This bunker did not even have lights. I felt that I absolutely needed to create a connection to this place.



LIU XIAODONG, *QIQI*, 2007,  
*Öl auf Leinwand*, 78  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 78  $\frac{1}{4}$  /  
*Öl auf Leinwand*, 200 x 200 cm



that any paintings I showed in this bunker needed to seem as if they had grown out of it like plants, not potted flowers raised in a greenhouse and brought over. That is why I decided I needed to paint on-site, because of this feeling that it would be the only way to do something meaningful.

PT: That project, the “Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art,” which took place in 2004–2005 in Kinmen, was initiated by Cai Guo-Qiang, if I remember correctly. Are you saying that this experience changed your way of working?

LX: Yes. Before that I went to Taiwan for a teaching engagement, which offered some time to adjust. Art education in Taiwan follows the American model, and secondarily the Japanese and European models. All of the teachers have returned from studies

abroad, quite unlike the Mainland, where art education is built on a very realist set of foundational principles, which take a long time to learn. I was like a performer, painting my subjects with observers gathered around me, watching me turn abstract pigments into human forms; there was no need for debate, as this kind of figurative painting is difficult to discuss. I thought it was quite interesting—prior to that, painting had been something I did furtively inside the studio, afraid to let anyone else see; I needed to produce something complete and beautiful before making it public. But in these circumstances I could only paint as people watched, and in the process I revealed many details that were less than perfect.

PT: There is a work of yours along these lines that is rarely discussed—an installation you did in 2006



Liu Xiaodong

at the now defunct Xin Beijing Gallery in an old Ming-dynasty granary along Beijing's Second Ring Road. You painted young models directly onto the walls of the gallery, and then at the end of the exhibition, painted them over in white.

LX: Yes, I painted onto the walls, and then at the end of the exhibition, completely destroyed the paintings. This piece had everything to do with the background of that particular moment: In 2006, the art market suddenly exploded.

LIU XIAODONG, *18 NEW DISCIPLES*, 2004.

oil on canvas, 8'1/4 x 39'1/8" /

18 NEUE SCHÜLER, Öl auf Leinwand, 200 x 100 cm.

PT: Including the market for your own works.

LX: I was so surprised. But it made me ask myself: Why am I actually painting?

PT: I remember that exhibition so clearly. On the closing evening, you invited a group of guests to watch the paintings, suddenly so valuable, be painted over. It was the night after your *THREE GORGES* work had sold at auction for what was then a world record for a living Chinese artist. And then everyone was invited next door for a very pricey Peking duck dinner! It was all quite theatrical.

LX: There was an element of theater, but there was also the entire social backdrop of the time. Artists' interactions with society are almost respiratory in





nature: Society exhales, you inhale, you exhale, society inhales. At that particular moment, I felt this was an interesting thing to do. If you can paint whatever you like and sell it for an astronomical price, then working as an artist loses all interest; it becomes too easy. Sometimes if things are more difficult, they are also better.

PT: Following this same idea of the relationship between the artist and society, it is interesting today to look back two decades at the group with whom you first came to prominence, the "New Generation." This group of artists emerged in the months immediately following the 1989 protests and crackdown, just after the avant-garde heroics of the '85 Movement had run their course. Where the '85 Movement looked for inspiration to Western conceptualism, the New Generation was a new direction in realist painting, which aimed the grand figurative lens of the Chinese official tradition at everyday scenes and characters. It was as subversive as anyone could be at that particular moment, when the official guard was up, and it turned out to be a viable long-term position. But do you feel that the New Generation was truly an artistic movement or more of a critical construct?

LX: I think it was the beginning of an unnamed collective consciousness. But I did not actually participate in the exhibition "New Generation," which took place in the summer of 1991.

PT: Really? And yet it seems you are always associated with this movement.

LX: That is because most of the artists who emerged at that moment ended up labeled as "New Generation." As soon as anyone tries to place me in any group, I resist and run off. Previously in China, we had always worked in collectives, and it wasn't easy for an individual to make a name. I was not willing to go back to that. And contrary to popular belief, there was actually a lot going on at that moment outside of painting. There were people working in installation and other media, even after the end of the '85 Movement.

PT: Painting seems to raise the question of academic inheritance.

LX: Yes, there are lineages because there is a technical aspect to painting, and if you do not master certain technical principles, it is difficult to express

anything. These lineages grow out of the long training period that painting requires of its practitioners.

PT: Your first experience of painting from life must have occurred while you were a student at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts.

LX: It was even earlier than that. Before entering the academic system, all artists in China have to do this, because the entrance exams are all based on your ability to paint from life. The importance of creativity is quite small; for these exams, the most important skills are drawing, color, and sketching, followed by creativity. Creativity is the fourth most important.

PT: What about traveling to a specific location to paint, like going to the countryside?

LX: As a student I would go to the countryside every year. Painting from life was the basis of every class we took.

PT: I ask this because the most widespread critical gloss on the New Generation is that this was the group who shifted socialist realism's emphasis on representing "greatness" to the representation of the individual. And it seems from looking at your early work that you were looking for visual possibilities within socialist realism—for example, in strange people and scenes that were somehow able to reveal different phenomena. Of course, there is also an element of randomness, as many of these scenes were things you just came across, things that were simply part of your reality.

LX: Yes, my works are impressions of reality. Painting has a very long history, and as an individual I have always been painting, always looking for things that have not yet been painted—these are the things in which I am most interested. If you look closely, you may notice that I paint more men than women. The simplest explanation is that there are so many female forms throughout art history, so I decided to paint men. There are so many subjects from traditional painting that are now off-limits, and I particularly enjoy working on subjects that have not previously entered painting. This eventually meant that my painterly endeavor became a reflection on both my respect for and dissatisfaction with the history of painting and, more important, on expressing life as opposed to simply researching methodology. We encounter so many unanswerable questions that can



only be expressed through art. I use painting to make these troubles visible; this is the method that is best able to influence my real life.

PT: When you travel to an entirely new place for a painting project, as you did last summer when you went to Austria, or to Rome before that, are there specific differences or challenges compared to working in China?

LX: There are certainly differences. It is interesting to paint things one is familiar with, and quite difficult to paint things one does not know. When you arrive in a new country, with no understanding of the social background, of course painting there is a quite different experience. But I believe the most important thing is to conquer oneself. As a young painter, I was working in the specific context of China, but then fate suddenly drove me to the United States, and I had to ask myself whether I could even continue to paint. So this is one of my most basic work-related fears. If I were a mathematician, it would not matter—a mathematician in China is still a mathematician in the United States. But for artists or writers, it is difficult. When you leave your soil, your familiar political and social surroundings, what does your art have left to say? I travel so much, to the United States, Europe, Africa, and I always ask myself: If I lived here, could I still have become an artist?

PT: Before you go to a new place for a project, what is your research process? For example, for this coming trip to Hotan in Xinjiang, will you spend time going through materials of any sort?

LX: No. If people suggest books, I will read them, but in general, if no one suggests anything, I do not do research, I just go. For Hotan, some friends recommended some books and I read them, but before going to Austria, I did not even look at a map. When I get somewhere, I make discoveries of my own directly, because I live through my eyes. Direct perception is most important.

PT: By now you have seen and participated in exhibitions all over the world. You must realize that your way of working, placed in a global context, is quite distinct.

LX: I have my own way of thinking. I persist in working in a way that everyone knows, but against the background of art today, it takes on a new meaning.

Perhaps it looks like what the Impressionists were doing one hundred years ago when they took their canvases outside, but today painters who do this are seen as “park painters.” And for this reason, my choice is also a very dangerous one, because if I cannot work through it, I become a park painter myself. PT: Your approach is quite different from the strongly analytical painting of the late twentieth century, such as the work of Gerhard Richter.

LX: It is completely different from that. To me, Richter is an entirely different kind of painter, who could even be understood as an abstract painter, because he uses forms and figures to paint something else. Of course, he is amazing. But my expectations of painting are different. I hope that my colors and subjects can live and breathe, and this requires that I go on-site and actively create there. If I were to work entirely from a photograph, I would not know how the subjects depicted in the photograph actually looked. This would not be effective. For example, when I went to Rome, I took photos and brought them back to my studio in Beijing to paint, but nothing happened. It was bullshit, entirely wrong. For a painter like me, it is absolutely necessary to take the easel on-site.

PT: So there is this concept of the site.

LX: Site is key. When you move things on-site, you can solve so many problems immediately. Cultural differences and the foreignness of a particular society seem to disappear.

PT: So when you are there on-site, you work from transient impressions and perceptions?

LX: Transient impressions are first; second is the truth of the site itself. Say I took a photograph of the two foreign ladies eating at the table next to us, and then brought the photo back to my studio to paint—that would be entirely meaningless. But if I brought my easel into the restaurant and painted them here, that would mean something entirely different. The painting would not merely be a composition but a record of a real encounter with them. This way of working gets me beyond my deeply held fears, like I just said, of going to a foreign cultural realm and no longer being an artist. Every artist aspires to transcend national boundaries, and so I use this method to conquer myself.



PT: How do you handle your relationship with your subjects?

LX: For me, painting people is no different from painting objects; both are still life. I do not need too much exchange, relying instead entirely on my eyes and feelings. I do not have any expectations of my subjects; anyone is fine.

PT: But there are also exceptions, like in EIGHTEEN ARHATS, where you asked your subjects to inscribe their names, ages, and hometowns directly onto the canvas. I think the relationship between you and them, in this project at least, was quite subtle.

LX: The painted and the painter are the same. For that project, I felt that the canvas needed their



LIU XIAODONG, *HE'S FAMILY*, 2009, oil on canvas, 114 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 102 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> /  
*ER IST FAMILIE*, Öl auf Leinwand, 290 x 260 cm.





writing, so I asked them to add it. In the end, I want my subjects to enter into my world in their own way and not merely stand there being painted by me. I am no different from them: me working the canvas with my paintbrush, them working the ground with their hoes; it is very close. Think about it: eagerly cultivating the land and eagerly applying paint—both have the same kind of beauty, and this is the beauty I hope to convey. I like to watch people laboring—planting crops, changing light bulbs, repairing machines. I enjoy watching this. People are beautiful when they work.

LIU XIAODONG, ZHANG'S FAMILY, 2009,  
oil on canvas, 114  $\frac{1}{8}$  x 102  $\frac{1}{8}$  /  
ZHANGS FAMILIE, Öl auf Leinwand, 290 x 260 cm.

PT: Today's museum and gallery audiences come from every possible background. Do you find that conveying meaning becomes more difficult in such a complex environment?

LX: Yes. But if you research any artist, you will find that they are naturally conveying their own experience of life. People are so different from one another—different life environments, different person-



alities, different experiences. I place a lot of emphasis on where an artist grew up, because their art is always connected to their environment. Artists all want to be geniuses, but do not forget that artists are also laborers, and that they carry around their memories of every environment they have experienced.

PT: The artist is a by-product of society?

LX: Yes, a by-product of society, and not a solitary genius. If you look at works by artists from the first world next to those of artists from the third world, you can see the differences instantly, because the works contain the artists' experiences of their environments. And so even today the notion of painting people and scenes directly still holds a lot of excitement for me.

PT: You have recently produced several cycles of work about western China.

LX: Yes, and I am not sure exactly why; perhaps this region holds some unspoken allure for me.

PT: But why not, for example, the South?

LX: I like western China because I feel like a laborer there.

PT: It also seems to me that you have chosen places in western China such as Tibet, Xinjiang, and Gansu that retain an air of subversion and tension. These are special places in the context of Chinese politics. And the second you go there as a Han Chinese, you encounter friction and tension—perhaps not of the ideological sort, but nonetheless in these relatively unstable environments perhaps it is more possible to develop new concepts.

LX: Perhaps.

PT: The 2009 Gansu cycle—when you traveled to Yan Guan Town, in this remote region, to paint a Muslim family and a Christian family—was particularly interesting because no one thinks of there being Christians in that part of China.

LX: Yes, and the Christians and Muslims live on the same street, something that seems so unlikely. I think that in these chaotic and complex locations, anything is possible. And I want to find something that is unthinkable, something that exceeds our imagination. You might even say that it is enough just to be in a place like this, that you do not even need to paint, merely to prove that you lived there for six months, and that is enough. But I am a painter, so I use paint-

ing to prove that I spent time there. This place was richer and more complex than anything an artist or novelist could imagine. And living there, even for as little as a month or two, has an indelible influence on who you are. My painting is merely a record of this experience. And so I try to produce ever more materials, things like journals, sketches, and documentary films. I feel that this is a way of letting more people experience what I did, because they will never go there themselves. There is an upper class that rarely even goes to the supermarket.

PT: I want to ask a last question about color, which is perhaps the hardest thing to grasp for those of us who aren't painters. How do you understand the colors you choose to work with?

LX: The first thing about my understanding of color is that I never rule out a particular shade. I will dare to use any color at all. There are a lot of painters who refuse to work with certain colors, but I do not have any concept of which color is beautiful or unattractive, I just have a power of perception. I feel that when colors come together they take on life and voice, but this is a very abstract sense. When colors fail to take on these relationships and look like mud, then I get uncomfortable. It is like Chinese jade: It is difficult to say what color jade is, and there are some pieces that you can look right through, like water. And then there are roof tiles, gray and impenetrable. Simply speaking, I hope that my colors can be seen through. It is tough to think of a more precise metaphor. Of course, there are also artists who try quite hard to paint colors like those of a roof tile, but that is something else, like the difference between Pop art and more traditional art. Pop art takes things you never believed were art and turns them into art—and what can you do?

PT: You don't like that?

LX: I can accept it, but in my heart I know what is jade and what is a roof tile, and the difference between the two.

PT: So you are a poet, not an essayist?

LX: Yes, I am a poet. But I think that poetry is the most difficult of all, because a poet might write his entire life without anyone remembering a single sentence. A lifetime!

(Translation: Philip Tinari)



# DIE WIRKLICHKEIT DER MALEREI IST NICHT DIE DER REALITÄT.

PHILIP TINARI: Als Erstes möchte ich die wahrscheinlich grundsätzlichste Frage stellen: Wie siehst du den Bezug zwischen Malerei und Wirklichkeit?

LIU XIAODONG: Ich glaube, die Malerei ist gänzlich in einem System der Realität verankert und dass die Wirklichkeit dieser Realität die Malerei antreibt. Dieser Stimulus ist ausserordentlich wichtig und dennoch sind Malerei und Realität zwei verschiedene Systeme dieser Wirklichkeit. Denn die Wirklichkeit der Malerei ist nicht die der Realität, aber die Wirklichkeit dieser Realität bringt ständig neue Entwicklungen in der Wirklichkeit der Malerei hervor.

PT: Wenn ich mir die Entwicklung deines Schaffens in den vergangenen dreissig Jahren anschau, scheint nach dem Jahr 2000 eine ganz grundsätzliche Veränderung stattgefunden zu haben. Von da an hast du grossformatige Arbeiten gemalt, zu denen auch Projekte gehören, die vor Ort entstanden sind, wie etwa *HOT BED* (Heisses Bett, 2005), mit Prostituierten in Bangkok, das *THREE GORGES PROJECT* (Drei Schluchten-Projekt, 2003–2004) oder

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*THE 18 ARHATS* (2004–2005) das Soldaten in China und Taiwan zeigt.

LX: Das stimmt. Meiner Meinung nach ist Kunst manchmal genau wie Sport; Wettbewerb spielt eine grosse Rolle. Während in der zeitgenössischen Kunst grossformatige Installationen, Videos und andere Kunstformen die Aufmerksamkeit auf sich ziehen,



ist Malerei so alt, dass sie am Rennen einer Biennale oder anderer Grossausstellungen kaum mehr mithalten kann. Eigentlich sind viele menschliche Aktivitäten genau wie im Sport mit Konkurrenz verbunden. Die Menschen wetteifern darum, dass ihre Stimme gehört wird. Ich liebe die Malerei, doch die herkömmliche Malerei gelangt kaum noch in diesen Einflussbereich. Ich musste also neue Wege finden, damit die Menschen die Möglichkeiten, die die Malerei immer noch bereithält, entdecken. Ich habe soziale Konflikte zu meinem Thema gemacht, weil sie eine grosse Kraft ausstrahlen und zahlreiche dringliche Geschichten hervorbringen. Meine Art zu erzählen ist immer noch die Malerei, und ich arbeite an jenen Orten, die überraschend stark, sensibel und

einem Bunker. Hätte ich in Beijing einige kleine Bilder gemalt und sie dort aufgehängt, wäre die Ausstellung bedeutungslos gewesen. Im Bunker gab es ja nicht mal Beleuchtung. Die Malerei musste dort unbedingt mit dem Ort in Verbindung treten, so wie eine Pflanze, die dort gewachsen ist, nicht wie eine, die man aus dem Gewächshaus holt. Darum beschloss ich, an Ort und Stelle zu malen. Nur so konnte etwas Sinnvolles entstehen.

PT: Wenn ich mich recht erinnere, wurde das Projekt «Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art» von Cai Guoqiang initiiert. In gewissem Sinne hat diese Erfahrung doch auch dein Schaffen verändert?

LX: Ja. Zuvor hatte ich in Taiwan unterrichtet, das war eine Art Übergangsphase. Die Kunstausbildung

LIU XIAODONG, *EAT FIRST*, 2008, oil on canvas, 98 3/4 x 393 3/4" /  
ISS ZUERST, Öl auf Leinwand, 250 x 1000 cm.



unvermeidlich sind. Dies macht es mir möglich an den gesellschaftlichen, aber auch an den Veränderungen in der Kunstwelt teilzuhaben.

PT: Welches war der erste Ort, der dich wirklich berührt hat?

LX: Kinmen in Taiwan. Die Ausstellung fand nicht in einem gewöhnlichen Museum statt, sondern in

in Taiwan ist geprägt vom amerikanischen Modell und zweitrangig auch vom japanischen und europäischen. Die Dozenten hatten alle im Ausland studiert, das ist ganz anders als auf dem Festland, wo die Ausbildung auf einer sehr starken Realismus-Tradition basiert, die man sich durch lange Übung erarbeiten muss. Ich habe unter den Augen der Umstehenden



gemalt, als wäre es eine Performance, die zeigt, wie man aus abstraktem Farbmateriale gegenständliche Menschen formt. Es waren keine Diskussionen nötig; diese Art figurativer Malerei lässt sich auch schwer diskutieren. Für mich war das sehr interessant, denn zuvor hatte ich immer allein im Atelier gearbeitet und war ängstlich darauf bedacht, dass niemand hereinkam. Ich wollte die Bilder immer erst dann zeigen, wenn sie ihre endgültige Gestalt angenommen hatten. Doch dort im Bunker konnte ich nicht anders als malen, während die Leute zuschauten, und während dieses Vorgangs kamen natürlich auch eine Menge Details zum Vorschein, die noch nicht so perfekt waren.

PT: Eine Arbeit von dir wird selten erwähnt, doch sie passt sehr gut zu dem, was du eben angesprochen hast. Du hast sie 2006 in der inzwischen verschwundenen Beijinger Galerie Xin Bejing gezeigt, in einem Kornspeicher aus der Ming Dynastie, an der zweiten Ringstrasse. Du maltest die Bilder junger Modelle direkt an die Wand – und am Ende der Ausstellung hast du sie weiss übermalt.

LX: Stimmt, ich habe auf die Wand gemalt und die Gemälde nach der Ausstellung zerstört. Diese Arbeit stand im damaligen Kontext: 2006 sind die Preise auf dem Kunstmarkt förmlich explodiert.

PT: Einschliesslich der Preise für deine Werke.

LX: Ich war auch verblüfft. Aber als Künstler frage ich mich: Warum male ich überhaupt?

PT: Ich weiss noch genau, wie du damals am Abend der Finissage mit ein paar Besuchern hineingegangen bist und das Werk – das plötzlich so kostbar war – übermalt hast. Es war die Nacht als dein *THREE GORGES* Gemälde zu einem Rekordpreis verkauft worden war. Und anschliessend waren alle zu einem kostspieligen Peking-Enten-Essen eingeladen, es war sehr theatralisch.

LX: Gewissermassen, aber eben vor dem Hintergrund des damaligen sozialen Kontexts. Die Interaktionen eines Künstlers mit der Gesellschaft gleichen den Bewegungen der Atmung: Die Gesellschaft atmet aus, du atmest ein, du atmest aus und die Gesellschaft ein. Unter den damaligen Bedingungen machte eine solche Handlung Sinn. Wenn man alles und jedes zu einem Spitzenpreis verkaufen kann, ist es bedeutungslos, Künstler zu sein. Dann wird es viel zu ein-

fach. Manchmal ist es besser, wenn die Dinge nicht so leicht von der Hand gehen.

PT: Bleiben wir bei der Beziehung zwischen Künstler und Gesellschaft: Es ist interessant, mit einem Abstand von zwei Jahrzehnten auf die Künstlergruppe zurückzublicken, mit der du dir erstmals einen Namen gemacht hast; das war die «New Generation». Sie entstand 1989, unmittelbar nach den Protesten und deren Niederschlagung und folgte auf die 85er-Bewegung. Die Künstler der 85er-Bewegung waren inspiriert von der westlichen Konzeptkunst, während ihr den figurativen Blick des offiziellen Chinas auf das alltägliche Leben warft. Sie war so subversiv, wie es unter den damaligen, rigorosen Umständen möglich war, trotzdem hat sie sich als tragfähige Struktur erwiesen. Was denkst du, war die New Generation eine Künstlerbewegung oder ein Konstrukt der Kritik?

LX: Ich glaube, es war der Beginn einer Art kollektiven Bewusstseins. Aber an der «New Generation»-Ausstellung im Sommer 1991 habe ich gar nicht teilgenommen.

PT: Wirklich? Trotzdem taucht dein Name immer wieder in diesem Zusammenhang auf.

LX: Damals sind viele Künstler erstmals bekannt geworden, und sie alle wurden als New Generation gesehen. Sobald man mich irgendeiner Gruppierung zuordnen will, suche ich das Weite. Andauernd hatten wir im Kollektiv gelebt, und es war denkbar schwierig, sich einen eigenen Namen zu machen, dorthin wollte ich nicht zurück. Abgesehen davon hat es damals eine Menge Künstler gegeben, die ausserhalb der Malerei gearbeitet haben. Auch nach der 85er-Bewegung gab es Künstler, die in Richtung Installation und neue Medien gearbeitet haben.

PT: Bei der Malerei herrschte noch die akademische Malweise vor.

LX: Genau, bei der Malerei spielte die Maltradition eine wichtige Rolle, weil es dabei um maltechnische Belange ging. Wenn man nicht über gewisse Grundlagen verfügt, ist es schwierig, etwas auszudrücken. Der Bezug zur Maltradition steckt in der langjährigen Übung.

PT: Deine früheste Erfahrung mit realistischem Malen fand wohl in deinen Studienjahren an der Akademie in Beijing statt?



LIU XIAODONG, ARMANDO'S FAMILY, 2009, oil on canvas, 78 7/8 x 98 1/2" /  
ARMANDOS FAMILIE, Öl auf Leinwand, 200 x 250 cm.



LX: Die ersten Studien machte ich früher. Ohne eine gewisse Routine konnte man der Akademie nicht beitreten; die Prüfungen basierten auf dem Arbeiten nach der Natur. Es ging ausschliesslich um die Fertigkeit im realistischen Abbilden; kreatives Arbeiten spielte eine sehr geringe Rolle. Wichtig waren die Fertigkeiten im Zeichnen, Malen und Skizzieren, und schlussendlich die Kreativität, die natürlich am wichtigsten ist.

PT: Ich denke eher an das Zeichnen und Malen auf dem Land, wie es damals üblich war.

LX: Ja, während des Studiums sind wir jedes Jahr zum Malen aufs Land gefahren. Alle Studienfächer drehten sich um die realistische Darstellung.

PT: Die verbreitetste Kritik an der «New Generation» ist, dass die Künstler versuchten, die Darstellung des

«Grossartigen», wie es in der sozialistischen Kunstausbildung vermittelt wurde, umzuwandeln in eine Darstellung des «Individuellen». Wenn ich deine Bilder anschau, sehe ich allerdings auch, wie deine Malerei innerhalb des sozialistischen Realismus neue visuelle Möglichkeiten sucht. Zum Beispiel aussergewöhnliche Menschen oder Orte, die ein bestimmtes Phänomen sichtbar machen. Sicher spielt auch der Zufall eine Rolle, vieles mag aus persönlichen Begegnungen stammen, aus dem Umfeld, in dem du dich bewegt hast.

LX: Ja, das waren alles reale Eindrücke. Die Geschichte der Malerei ist lang, doch ich habe beim Malen immer nach Dingen gesucht, die noch nicht gemalt worden waren – diese haben mich am meisten interessiert. So male ich zum Beispiel mehr Männer





LIU XIAODONG, JINCHENG AIRPORT, 2010,  
oil on canvas, 118 1/8 x 157 1/2" /  
FLUGHAFEN JINCHENG, Öl auf Leinwand, 300 x 400 cm.

als Frauen. Der einfache Grund dafür ist, dass weibliche Formen in der Kunstgeschichte überwiegen; darum habe ich mich entschieden, Männer zu malen. In der traditionellen Malerei gibt es viele Dinge, die man nicht mehr malen kann, und ich habe immer am liebsten das gemalt, was es zuvor in den Bildern nicht gab. Dies bedeutet, dass meine Arbeit gleichzeitig eine Achtung und eine Unzufriedenheit gegenüber der Geschichte der Malerei reflektiert, und was noch viel wichtiger ist: das Leben zum Ausdruck bringt und nicht bloss Methodenforschung betreibt. Wir sind mit so vielen unlösbaren Problemen konfrontiert, die wir nur in der Kunst zum Ausdruck bringen können. Ich setze die Malerei ein, um diese

Schwierigkeiten sichtbar zu machen, das ist die Art und Weise, wie ich auf mein reales Leben am meisten Einfluss nehmen kann.

PT: Wenn du für ein Projekt einen dir unbekannten Ort aufsuchst, wie zum Beispiel im letzten Sommer Österreich, oder zuvor Rom, gibt es da spezifische Unterschiede oder Herausforderungen im Vergleich zu China?

LX: Ja natürlich. Vertrautes zu malen macht mehr Sinn; etwas zu malen, was man nicht gut kennt, ist sehr schwer. Wenn ich in ein neues Land komme, mit dessen gesellschaftlichem Hintergrund ich nicht vertraut bin, wird das Malen zu einer ganz anderen Erfahrung. Ich glaube, das Wichtigste ist, sich zu überwinden. Als Maler kann ich heute zwar in China arbeiten, doch was, wenn mich mein Schicksal zwingen würde, in Amerika zu leben? Das ist eine der grundlegendsten Ängste. Als Mathematiker hätte ich dieses Problem nicht, auch in den USA bliebe



ich Mathematiker. Für einen Künstler oder einen Schriftsteller hingegen ist das sehr schwierig. Was kann deine Kunst noch aussagen, wenn du deinen eigenen Boden verlässt, das vertraute politische und gesellschaftliche Umfeld? Ich bin oft auf Reisen, in den USA, Europa oder Afrika, und frage mich immer wieder, ob ich noch Künstler sein könnte, wenn ich dort leben müsste.

PT: Wie gehst du bei der Recherche vor, wenn du für ein Projekt einen neuen Ort aufsuchst? Zum Beispiel für deine kommende Reise nach Hotan in Xinjiang, wirst du dir irgendwelche Informationen beschaffen?

LX: Nein. Falls mir jemand Bücher vorschlägt, werde ich sie lesen. Ansonsten aber sehe ich mir gar nichts an, sondern gehe direkt hin. Zu Hotan haben mir Freunde einige Bücher empfohlen, die ich auch gelesen habe. Aber von Österreich etwa habe ich mir nicht mal eine Landkarte angeschaut. Es reicht, wenn ich hingehe, dann stellen sich die Erfahrungen ganz unmittelbar ein. Schliesslich lebe ich mit meinen Augen. Der unmittelbare Eindruck ist ganz wichtig.

PT: Deine Arbeiten wurden weltweit in Ausstellungen gezeigt. Dir ist sicher aufgefallen, dass der Weg, den du gehst, im globalen Umfeld der Kunst ziemlich einzigartig ist.

LX: Ja. Darüber habe ich mir auch Gedanken gemacht. Ich halte zwar an einer Ausdrucksweise fest, die jeder schon kennt, doch vor dem heutigen Hintergrund erhält das eine neue Bedeutung. Was ich mache, mag an die Impressionisten erinnern, die vor hundert Jahren mit der Leinwand ins Freie gegangen sind. Heute bezeichnet man solche Maler gering-schätzig als «Parkmaler». In dieser Hinsicht ist mein Weg auch recht gefährlich, denn wenn ich nicht aufpasse, werde ich selbst ein Parkmaler.

PT: Deine Arbeitsweise unterscheidet sich auch stark von der analytischen Malerei der zweiten Hälfte des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts, wie etwa eines Gerhard Richter.

LX: Absolut. Für mich ist Richter ein Maler der ganz anderen Art; man könnte ihn auch als abstrakten Maler verstehen, weil er Formen und Figuren benutzt, um etwas anderes zu malen. Natürlich ist er aussergewöhnlich. Aber meine Ansprüche an die Malerei sind ganz andere. Ich möchte, dass die Far-

ben und das Dargestellte von Leben erfüllt sind, und das kann ich nur unmittelbar an Ort und Stelle erreichen. Würde ich nach einer Photographie malen: Auch wenn sie zeigt, wie die dargestellten Personen tatsächlich aussieht, es wäre wirkungslos. Zum Beispiel, als ich in Rom Photos machte und nach diesen malen wollte: Nichts geschah. Das war Schwachsinn, total falsch. Für einen Maler wie mich ist es unerlässlich, mit der Staffelei vor Ort zu sein.

PT: Der Ort des Geschehens als Konzept?

LX: Der Ort ist entscheidend. Wenn ich meine Sachen an den Ort bringe, lösen sich viele Probleme von selbst. Kulturelle Differenzen und die Fremdheit der spezifischen Gesellschaft scheinen zu verschwinden.

PT: Dann arbeitest du ausgehend von changierenden Eindrücken und Wahrnehmungen?

LX: Flüchtige Eindrücke sind das eine, das andere ist die Realität eines Ortes. Angenommen ich würde jetzt die beiden jungen Ausländerinnen beim Essen photographieren und brächte das Bild dann zum Malen in mein Atelier – das würde absolut keinen Sinn machen. Wenn ich aber die Staffelei direkt hier hinstelle und die beiden an Ort und Stelle male, dann bedeutet das etwas ganz anderes. Das Gemälde wäre nicht nur eine Komposition, sondern das Zeugnis einer tatsächlichen Begegnung. Dieser Vorgang vermag jene Angst, von der ich vorhin gesprochen habe, aufzuheben. Die Frage, ob ich in einer fremden Umgebung überhaupt noch Künstler sein könnte? Jeder Künstler strebt danach, nationale Grenzen zu überwinden, und ich benutze diese Methode, um mich selbst zu überwinden.

PT: Wie handhabst du die Beziehung zu den Modellen deiner Bilder?

LX: Für mich spielt es keine Rolle, ob ich Menschen oder Gegenstände male; beides sind Stilleben. Ich brauche nicht viel Austausch, ich verlasse mich gänzlich auf meine Augen und Gefühle. Im Grunde habe ich keine Ansprüche an mein Gegenüber, es könnte irgendwer sein.

PT: Aber es gibt auch Ausnahmen, etwa in der Arbeit EIGHTEEN ARHATS, wo du die Modelle ihren Namen, ihr Alter und ihre Heimatstadt auf die Leinwand schreiben lässt. Meiner Meinung nach war dies, wenigstens bei diesem Projekt, eine sehr subtile Beziehung.



LX: Das Gemalte und der Maler sind dasselbe. Bei diesem Projekt schien es mir wichtig, ihre Unterschriften auf der Leinwand zu haben. Im Allgemeinen möchte ich, dass mein Gegenüber auf seine Weise in meine Welt eintritt und daran teilhat, nicht nur bloss dasteht und gemalt wird. Ich bin nicht anders als sie: ich arbeite mit meinem Pinsel auf der Leinwand und sie mit der Hacke auf dem Feld. Das ist ganz ähnlich. Wenn du dir vorstellst, dass du ganz aufmerksam ein Feld bearbeitest oder ganz aufmerksam malst – die Ästhetik ist dieselbe. Und diese Ästhetik ist es, die ich zum Ausdruck bringen will. Es gefällt mir, Leuten beim Arbeiten zuzuschauen, beim Pflügen, beim Wechseln einer Glühbirne, beim Reparieren von Maschinen. Dabei zuzuschauen, ist ein Genuss; Menschen sind schön, wenn sie arbeiten.

PT: Heutzutage stammen die Museums- und Galeriebesucher aus allen möglichen sozialen Kontexten. Glaubst, dass es schwieriger wird, in einem derart komplexen Umfeld eine Bedeutung zu transportieren?

LX: So ist es. Bei jedem Künstler, mit dem man sich näher beschäftigt, kann man sehen, dass er ganz spontan sein eigenes Verständnis des Lebens vermittelt. Das ist von Mensch zu Mensch völlig unterschiedlich, je nach Umgebung, Charakter und Erfahrung. Darum ist es mir immer sehr wichtig, zu wissen, wo ein Künstler aufgewachsen ist, denn seine Kunst steht zweifellos in Bezug zu seinem Umfeld. Jeder Künstler möchte ein Genie sein, doch man darf nicht vergessen, dass er im Grunde auch Arbeiter ist, der die Erinnerung an die Umgebung, in der er sich bewegt, in sich trägt.

PT: Er ist ein Nebenprodukt der Gesellschaft?

LX: Genau, und kein singuläres Genie. Wenn du Arbeiten von Künstlern aus der Dritten Welt neben solchen aus der Ersten betrachtest, dann sind die Differenzen augenfällig: Ihre Lebensumstände manifestieren sich in den Arbeiten. Aus diesem Grund ist das direkte Malen von Menschen und Gegenständen aufregend geblieben.

PT: Mehrere deiner neuesten Werkgruppen beschäftigen sich mit dem Westen Chinas.

LX: Ja, ich kann auch nicht konkret sagen, warum, vielleicht hält diese Region etwas Unausgesprochenes für mich bereit.

PT: Warum gehst du nicht in den Süden?

LX: Ich mag Westchina, weil ich mich dort wie ein Arbeiter fühle.

PT: Mir scheint, die von dir dort ausgewählten Regionen wie Tibet, Xinjiang oder Gansu stehen unter einer Art von Spannung – Subversion. Innerhalb der chinesischen Politlandschaft sind dies Ausnahmorte. Wenn du sie als Han-Chinese aufsuchst, wirst du mit Brüchen und Spannungen konfrontiert. Nicht dass es viel mit Ideologie zu tun hätte, aber wahrscheinlich ist es in relativ instabilen Gesellschaftsstrukturen einfacher, neue Konzepte zu entwickeln.

LX: Das kann sein.

PT: Die Serie aus Gansu von 2009 finde ich in dieser Hinsicht besonders spannend: Du fuhrst in diese abgelegene Region, um eine muslimische und eine christliche Familie zu malen – verblüfft hat mich die Tatsache, dass in Gansu Christen leben.

LX: Ja, Christen und Muslims leben an derselben Strasse. Ich glaube, an diesen chaotischen und komplexen Schauplätzen ist alles möglich. Ich suche genau jenes Unvorstellbare, etwas das die eigene Vorstellungskraft übertrifft. Manchmal reicht es, dass ich dort bin, eigentlich müsste man gar nicht malen, sondern nur auf irgendeine Art beweisen, dass man ein halbes Jahr dort gelebt hat. Das wäre schon genug. Weil ich Maler bin, beweise ich die dort verbrachte Zeit mit Malerei. Diese Region war reicher und komplexer als alles, was ein Künstler oder Schriftsteller sich hätte vorstellen können. Und dort zu leben – sei es auch nur für einen Monat oder zwei – hinterlässt einen unauslöschlichen Eindruck. Meine Malerei ist hauptsächlich ein Protokoll dieser Erfahrung. Darum produziere ich nach Möglichkeit auch andere Dinge, zum Beispiel Tagebücher, Skizzen, Filmdokumentationen. So kann ich das Publikum noch besser an meiner Erfahrung teilhaben lassen, weil es diese Erfahrung niemals selber machen wird. Die »Upper class« geht ja nicht mal in den Supermarkt.

PT: Zuletzt möchte ich noch eine Frage zu deinen Farben stellen. Für jemanden, der nicht malt, ist das oft am schwierigsten zu verstehen. Was ist deine Auffassung der Farben, mit denen du arbeitest?

LX: Mein Verständnis von Farbe – was soll ich sagen, erst einmal habe ich keine Tabus; ich traue mich an jede Farbe heran. Viele Künstler haben bestimmte



Farben, die sie niemals benutzen. Ich habe kein Konzept, welche Farbe schön ist oder nicht, ich habe nur die Kraft der Wahrnehmung. Ich fühle das Leben und die Stimme, die Farben annehmen, wenn sie zusammenkommen, aber das ist eine abstrakte Empfindung. Wenn zwischen den Farben kein Klang entsteht und sie aussehen wie Lehm, dann wirkt es auf mich sehr unangenehm. Das ist meine einzige Forderung an die Farbe. Zum Beispiel die Farbe der chinesischen Jade ... schwierig sie zu beschreiben, aber es gibt Stücke, die sind klar wie Wasser. Und dann gibt es Dachziegel, grau und undurchdringlich. Kurz gesagt, ich möchte, dass man durch meine Farben hindurchschauen kann. Es ist schwer, das konkreter zu beschreiben. Natürlich gibt es Künstler, denen es gerade um Farben geht, die so wirken wie Ziegel,

aber das ist etwas anderes, wie der Unterschied zwischen Pop Art und traditioneller Kunst. Die Pop Art machte aus Dingen, die man nicht dafür hielt, Kunst. Und dann?

PT: Heisst das, du magst sie nicht besonders?

LX: Ich kann sie akzeptieren, doch in meinem Herzen weiss ich, was Jade ist und was ein Dachziegel, und ich kenne den Unterschied zwischen beiden.

PT: Dann bist du ein Dichter und nicht ein Essayist?

LX: Ja, ich bin ein Poet. Dichter zu sein ist meiner Meinung nach am schwierigsten. Denn ein Dichter kann ein Leben lang Gedichte schreiben, und am Ende bleibt vielleicht keinem auch nur ein Wort in Erinnerung. Ein Leben lang!

(Aus dem Chinesischen von Eva Lüdi Kong)

LIU XIAODONG, FLORAL BED, 2006, oil on canvas, 35 1/2 x 39 1/2" /  
GEBLÜHMTES BETT, Öl auf Leinwand, 90 x 100 cm.







*LIU XIAODONG, CHAOTIC MESS, 2011,  
oil on canvas, 13 x 15" /  
CHAOTISCHES DURCHEINANDER,  
Öl auf Leinwand, 33 x 38 cm.*

*LIU XIAODONG, MAJIANG PARLOR, 2012,  
oil on canvas, 35 1/2 x 39 1/8" /  
MAH-JONGG ZIMMER,  
Öl auf Leinwand, 90 x 100 cm.*



