

里森画廊

LISSON GALLERY

Press Release

Li Ran: *Like a Stranger*

16 May – 4 July 2026

2/F, 27 Huqiu Road, Shanghai

For his first solo exhibition with Lisson Gallery in Shanghai, Li Ran presents a series of new and recent works that highlight the evolving direction of his painting practice, marked by a deepened focus on material painterliness and pictorial storytelling. Influenced by pre-modernist traditions, including Western European Symbolism, Post-Impressionism, Soviet Revolutionary Romanticism, and modern Chinese satirical cartoons, Li draws inspiration not only from the visual heritage of these movements but also from the multidisciplinary activities of their practitioners, spanning literature, poetry, music, education, publishing, and painting. His own practice is similarly interdisciplinary, extending across installation, performance, writing, video, and painting, and often incorporating archival photographs, staged imagery, vocal imitation, and sound performance.

In this exhibition, Li avoids both the conceptualist reduction of painting to mere image-bearing substrate as well as the framing of ‘painterliness’ as a privileged domain of aesthetics. Instead, he distills interwoven dimensions from a holistic view of his broader artistic output, thereby opening a more expansive field of possibility within his approach to painting—one that neither leans toward an ineffable future fantasy nor settles for facile recombination of his own prior imagery. Collectively, the works engage in a sustained dialogue around the notion of the ‘stranger.’ This figure, whom the artist seeks through his practice, may be discovered externally or ultimately recognized as the artist himself; it may also be that the stranger was present all along. Whether in states of waiting, walking, or performing, the ‘stranger’ persists. The failure to recognize this presence stems not from unfamiliarity, but from an underlying incapacity to trust. For Li, the lens of estrangement thus operates as a mechanism for sustaining self-awareness and critical self-reflection amid his day-to-day routines.

Becoming Wild (2025) draws upon a legend from Li’s childhood. In the 1990s, a man from another town reportedly encountered a ‘wild man’ in the Shennongjia forests of Hubei Province. After the encounter, he chose to remain in the wilderness, living a primitive existence—never cutting his hair, enduring the seasons—while continuing to search for the ‘wild man’. In time, he himself came to be mistaken for the subject he sought. *But Your Senses Have Also Fallen* (2025) depicts three elongated, distorted figures pulling at one another, some tilting forward or backward, others slipping from a bed, as if verging on collapse. The compositional drama conveys not only turbulence but also a question born of the artist’s self-reflection: Could the very painterliness constructed through sensory experience also become a form of familiar illusion? Oscillating between estrangement and sensuous pleasure, the work extends Li Ran’s ongoing inquiry into his identity as a painter and the self-belief that identity entails.

In *Fellow Traveler* (2026), Li responds to the exhibition’s title *Like a Stranger* from a distinct vantage point. Two figures draped in cloaks stride heavily through a hazy space, appearing almost as shadows of one another. One tilts their face downward, their expression evasive, while the other is nearly engulfed in shadow, their features obscured. It is within this fleeting moment of ‘seeing and vanishing’ that Li seeks to capture the uncanny. In the interplay between recognition and loss, the ‘stranger’ emerges not as an unrecognizable other, but as a fellow traveler, who has long accompanied the journey, yet has never been fully acknowledged.

Resisting confinement to a fixed visual language or a dogmatic ontology of painting, Li engages the medium with enduring regard for its inherent demands. Within the pictorial field, he constructs a space of dialogue that feels both intimate and remote. Through tensions between repetition and variation, he suggests that

painting itself constitutes a continual encounter with the “stranger”—an encounter that becomes internalised as a driving force for his evolving practice. In these works, Li moves beyond the mere depiction of solitude; he actively adopts defamiliarization as a stance, one that allows him to maintain self-reflexivity while approaching glimpses of truth with conviction. This ever-present “stranger” may, in the end, be the very source from which Li Ran learns repeatedly how to reflect and restart.

About Li Ran

Li Ran was born in Hubei, China in 1986. He moved from Beijing to Shanghai in 2018. He graduated with a BFA from the Oil Painting Department from the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in 2009. His recent solo exhibitions include Beiqiu Museum of Contemporary Art, Nanjing, China (2025); OCAT Contemporary Art Terminal (OCAT), Xi'an, China (2015). Li's single-channel video work was screened at the Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen, Denmark; M+ Museum, Hong Kong, China; Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA), Beijing, China; Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London and The Jewish Museum, New York. He has exhibited in group shows at Institute of Contemporary Arts at Times Museum, Guangzhou, China (2026, 2019); Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong, China (2026, 2023); Art No Bounds, Hangzhou, China (2025); NYU Shanghai, Shanghai, China (2024); TANK Shanghai, China (2024); Start Museum, Shanghai, China (2024); Iris Art Museum, Suzhou, China (2024); X Museum, Beijing, China (2024); Duolun Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, China (2023); By Art Matters, Hangzhou, China (2023); Duolun Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, China (2023); Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA), Beijing and Shanghai, China (2023, 2017, 2013); Art Sonje Center, Seoul, Korea (2022); He Art Museum, Shunde, China (2022); Sifang Museum, Nanjing, China (2021); OCAT Contemporary Art Terminal, Shanghai, China (2021, 2019, 2014, 2013); Inside-Out Art Museum, Beijing, China (2020); HOW Museum, Shanghai, China (2019); Centre Pompidou, Paris, France (2017); Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD), Manila, Philippines (2016); OCAT Contemporary Art Terminal, Shenzhen, China (2016, 2013, 2012, 2011); NTU Center For Contemporary Art Singapore (CCA), Singapore (2015); Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, USA (2014); Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), Berlin, Germany (2013); basis door actuele kunst (BAK), Utrecht, Netherlands (2013); Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH), Houston, USA (2012) and other venues. His works were featured in Montreal Biennale (2014); Biennale of Moving Images, Geneva (2014); 4th Moscow International Biennale for Young Art (2014); 2nd CAFAM Biennial, Beijing (2014), 4th 'Former West' Project, Berlin (2013), 9th Gwangju Biennial (2012), and 7th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale (2012). Li was awarded the 'Best Artist Award' at the Moscow International Youth Art Biennial in 2014 and was nominated for the 'Future Generation Award' by the Pinchuk Arts Center in 2017.

About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 70 international artists across spaces in London, New York, Los Angeles and Shanghai. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists and others of that generation, from Carmen Herrera and Olga de Amaral to Hélio Oiticica and Lee Ufan. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Liu Xiaodong, Otobong Nkanga, Pedro Reyes, Sean Scully, Hiroshi Sugimoto and Wael Shawky. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists including Dana Awartani, Cory Arcangel, Garrett Bradley, Ryan Gander, Josh Kline, Hugh Hayden, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost and Cheyney Thompson.

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