

**The Value of Painting as That of Cabbage and Thieves
On Li Dafang**

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At which point could we say that the art of an artist has reached maturity? And what does maturity mean in art's terms? Forceful strokes? Perfect presentation? In-depth exploration of a subject matter? A signature stylistic quality? Conceptual consistency? Aesthetic identity? Material recurrence? A steady way of working? A positive review? Museum shows and market recognition? The confident air surrounding an artist? Or even, the inclusion in the writing of an art history? These are tough questions for art critics. But sometimes when we spot it, we know it. We are always thrilled to realize that the work of an artist has reached maturity.

This is often less a safe bet than a risky professional calculation. There are too many things to tint our judgments and decisions. Our historical outlook? Our professional qualification? Our mood? This is by no means giving importance to the work of an art critic but really reminding us of the daunting responsibility of such a job. We are not out to verify an artist's work, but perhaps to put our own learning and practice in context and more importantly to view an artist's work in a context that is much more complex than the physical confines of a studio or an exhibition space. Like an art critic, an artist works in active relations to a vast diversity of things, his upbringing, his schooling, his professional training and interests, his temperament, his way of working, his worldview, and many more and should be considered accordingly. In the 1980s, both German philosopher Hans Belting and American art critic Arthur Danto proposed the end of art or art history, an explosive philosophical take on art that made it impossible for artists and artworks to search for their success within the set value system of the existing art history. It puts art in a forever fluid and open state of being in a labyrinth of relationships rather than a linear logic of a singular art history.

Li Dafang is an artist that belongs to his studio, where he paints hour after hour, day after day. It's no understatement to say that Li is disciplined and steadfast. He's developed a daily routine for work that he happily and faithfully adheres to. This mode of production with long studio hours and intense concentration, proves relevant and effective in Li Dafang's work rather than obsolete. It's manual, persistent, time-consuming, and process-based. More importantly, the level-headedness of such a way of working gives form to a highly distinctive visual language that is impossible to replicate. He painstakingly applies each single stroke, line, dot onto the canvas. Numerous of them make up a tree, woods, a bush, the surroundings, a blur. The inexhaustible variation of his strokes rather than their uniformity is a unique and winning appeal. They cover the full spread of his canvases. We can almost say that Li's paintings are full of paintings. The diligent artist leaves no space uncovered. They are grey, misty, smooth, technically competent, well-made, handsome, and quietly overwhelming, if nothing else. It's sufficient just to admire the technical sophistication and aesthetic elegance of Li's paintings.

Li Dafang's paintings are specifically regional. They are related to the geography of the artist. I can't imagine an artist from or living in south China would paint something like these. His paintings breathe in the dry dust and cool climate of north China and absorb the geographical, social and cultural temperament integral to this part of China. The realistic landscapes and imagery of his paintings are unmistakably northern: plantations, cityscapes, roads, spreads of fields, open lands, the deep color of the earth, stocky looks of buildings and industrial leftovers. They are removed from the metropolitan side of a contemporary city, but definitely familiar sights to those who travel frequently to a city's forgotten corners and its meeting points with the rural area or witness transitory moments of urban and economic developments. They are the lesser places and points of time, safely residing in the space between the real and the fictional inside of Li's paintings. A great deal of visual potency and sensation of Li Dafang's paintings is set in this particular point of place and time.

Li Dafang is unwavering about what he paints and how he paints them. Neither is he apologetic towards returning again and again to the same type of visual and material environments. He repeats many motifs in the majority of his paintings. Forest, for example, has become something of a signature which for the artist himself, set the stage for the rest of what goes into a canvas. Trees are a staple in Li's works. He drives around

Beijing aimlessly, mostly to the outskirts, wastelands, deserted factories, sites of demolition, roadside constructions, where real life unfolds quietly in the aftermath of dramaticality or traumaticity. Houses have been pulled down. Factories have been shut down. Roadsides have been deserted. Construction sites have been occupied. There is no way to gauge the intensity of what has happened in these places, these scenes, a factory space of disheveled and unmanned machinery, for example, offer the pervert attraction of being formally theatrical and attractive. He takes photographs of these places he goes to and recollects childhood memories, all of which would contrive to leave marks on or find their ways into the content of his paintings. There is however, no guarantee of consistency in his representation. Li's work is derived from and dependent on the reality, his experience and his acute perception of it. As much as his paintings conform to the technical means of realism and give convincing illusions of the reality, there are visual tricks the artist plays consistently to give away his deliberate disregard for authenticity and coherence of his plots: improbable props, abrupt insertions of sweeps of bright colors, nonexistent creatures, wrong proportions, a misty coat over the surfaces of his paintings as if shielded from a transparent plastic sheet, and an overstated sense of isolation in time and place. They refer closely to an absurd reality yet fiercely reinvent the courses of their narratives and their reappearances on canvas until the specificity of their references, and emotions is drastically reduced.

From the very early on, the artist has revealed his grand ambition to carve out a space for theatricality and story-telling, the equivalence to a stage, on the flat surface of his canvases. He recalls his childhood exposure and fixation to drama performances and literature. He paints human figures, he depicts scenarios, he created tensions, he invents dialogues or monologues for his characters, he gives out clues, he designs suspensions, he emulates the effect of long exposures in movie making in his depictions. He's the scriptwriter of all the absurdities in his paintings. Actually he has tight controls over them as well and wouldn't let them run on their free wills. The artist hastened to add, the narratives of his paintings are nothing to trust. They simply make no sense. It's no use trying to piece a story together from what the artist chooses to paint in meticulous details. No one else other than the artist will be able to figure out the puzzles or any logic in his images.

However, the discrepancy between the depicted and the literal in Li Dafang's paintings, although it's often an impossible task to rate the degree of absurdity between these two, is almost imperceptible and securely contained in the sealed off space of his canvases. It's no surprise that Li Dafang is a fervent admirer of Alfred Hitchcock, whose strength lied in his ability to formulate suspensions through the extension of time and the closing up of space in his story-telling. The simultaneous depictions of plain indications and hints of potential danger, about which Hitchcock even spelled out by writing such lines as "Watch your back, there's someone" on the posters for his movies, as well as the unawareness of his protagonists to their immediate jeopardy in the movies, played masterfully on the fear deep down in our Subconsciousness.

But Li Dafang's paintings are far away from instincts. The artist is confidently in charge of bringing together possible elements of theatricality into his disposal despite their obvious incompatibility. The recent addition of wooden stairways and ladder-shaped podiums to support the canvases or enlarged and elaborate wooden frames since 2007 defies easy classification or interpretation. It's another Hitchcock's gesture. Images of staircases often play a central role in Hitchcock's films, if not featured prominently. Hitchcock's stylistic interest in staircases is attributed to the influence of German Expressionism, which often featured heavily stylized and menacing staircases. Yet, the staircases in Li Dafang's painting installations are more stylistic than symbolic, if not purely stylistic at all. They are bulky, artificial, and conspicuous yet bear no responsibility of conveying meaning or implications. As the artist points out, they are rather an embodiment of the artist's attempt to understand and exercise his perception of what is painting and art. "Works with staircases have appeared since 2007, I want to try and explain (them). Initially, I wanted to explore a playful possibility for paintings. The world inside of my work is an independent world. The environments surrounding it change, this world changes also. Combined with stairways, (my paintings) have the possibility to be viewed and appreciated. This conforms to my perception of art. Especially in these last two years, I am looking for a presumption of art, which is specificity. To place sensible or insensible objects next to each other serve a certain special purpose that is touchable (touchable in intellectual terms). It is also related to my understanding of painting. For me, painting is a word, a memory. My thoughts and actions or a certain purpose born out of it, or a certain reason are what I consider painting. This assembly of things could appear

to be rather absurd at times.”

These statements deflate any of our laziness to read too many sociological, philosophical or psychological connotations into Li Dafang's paintings. It's irresistible yet limiting. Li Dafang's paintings have departed from the new-generation of figurative painters such as Liu Xiaodong and filmmakers such as Jia Zhangke, who have emerged to the spotlight since the mid 1990s. At that time, there was a collective return of the artistic community to the everyday life, which was extremely dramatic and dynamic on its own terms. What the artists had to do was to sample from and represent such a forceful reality without having to hold any critical or analytical position. The temptation and need to truthfully document and expose a fast-moving, powerful and incredible reality is less urgent these days, as felt by artists like Li Dafang. For Li, what ties his art to himself is less of the subject matters it depicts or its relationship towards the society but more of the possibility of experiencing and reflecting on what painting means to him on an individual level and in a microscopic scale through the act of painting. "I suppose that art is described as having a certain purpose, something small, something specific, that art is practical from an individual point of view yet useless for the others or of not much use, or that art exists in an incomprehensible form. I think this should be the position that art deserves. It is around but there shouldn't be too high an expectation of it. The higher the expectation, the more ambiguous it becomes. It should have such specific value as that of 'cabbage' or 'thieves'." Li Dafang strongly advocates the withdrawal of the expectation of "function" from art. The removal of and attempt to resist such expectations is exemplified in the title of his upcoming solo exhibition in Urs Meile: MAKE WAY! MAKE WAY! "Painting is an aversion to all that glitters".

An expression of attitude rather than a theme, Li Dafang is presenting a series of seven works completed in 2009. There is no radical stylistic rupture or conceptual transitions from his paintings of the last few years but more of a continuation. The detailed brushwork is unmistakably Li Dafang. The foggy quality is enduringly present. The trees are not to be missed. The senseless scenarios are still perplexing. We might even suggest that this latest series of paintings isn't necessarily a step forward from his previous works in terms of their technical or aesthetic proficiency. And Li might just agree with that when it comes to not applying the evolutionary or progressive logic to art.

It's only true to the intension of the artist to describe his paintings as they are than to try and analyze and interpret them. But I question the necessity of my own descriptions at this point of writing. It excites no one to simply repeats what is clearly there because other than that, I can't tell you what each of them means or offer any feasible plots to connect them.

What I propose, instead, is that Li Dafang has reached at the end of working on these paintings with a deeper understanding of his own expectation of painting and the specific value painting could have for himself than these seven paintings ago or rather prior to this period of working. The definition and historic understanding of paintings as an art medium have experienced many turns, overthrows, limits and transcendences in the context of art history. But the transformation of Li's own understanding of painting has its own course and process. Can we even suggest that Li Dafang's paintings are his own tool to understand painting and contemporary art? A self-discovery? As for this aim, Li Dafang's paintings have served the very specific purpose as the artist has wished. "The obstruction for contemporary art is that people have too high an expectation. The talks of 'innovation', 'progression' and 'overthrow' are too highbrow. The same situation is taking place in every field. Innovation is generally considered as the right direction. Thus individuality often becomes laziness or casualness. I want to take the wrong turn, to support 'regression'. It's easier to be bad than to be good. We can't give so much weight to art but we have to carry it along still. So let's press on in an ordinary way." It's not so much about art itself or the means of representation in art as the subject of scrutiny as in modernism, but how the artist discovers and establishes a certain relationship with and perception of art in his own practice. Any of the technical experiments or conceptual reinventions of the medium of painting itself can barely raise any excitement. It's an immense relief that today's artists can finally abandon the ambition to create something new. In the context of art history, no idea has never been tested. No theory has never been challenged. Every stone has been turned around.

It's a vain attempt to allocate Li Dafang's practice or that of any active artists of today into any category of

contemporary art or any position through the chronology of the existing art history. After all, how could we possibly categorize contemporary art today? By its medium? By its subject matters? By its concepts? None of them makes sense. We have long arrived at the end of the narrative of the art history. What Li Dafang's practice offers, together with that of his peers and colleagues all over the world, is many a lively and specific case study. They are not isolated cases, but definitely independent and specific to each of their own contexts. How does an artist develop and formulate his way of working and deepen his understanding of what he does as he goes on? They raise new concerns and challenges in terms of curatorial and critical practices. Maybe it's as important to present and discuss the contexts of the work of an artist as it is to present single or particular pieces of work.

((Narrative Biography of the autor)):

Carol Yinghua Lu (Guangdong, China, 1977) studied English Literature (BA) at the Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou (1995-99) and graduated in the Critical Studies, Malmo Art Academy, Sweden (2004-2005). She was the China researcher for Asia Art Archive (2005-2007). She is the contributing editor for *Frieze* and the founder and co-editor of *Contemporary Art & Investment* magazine as well as a frequent contributor to a number of international art journals such as *e-flux*. Her texts on contemporary art have appeared in many art catalogues, books and magazines.

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