

**The Transformation of a Small Stone
An Approach to the Works of Li Gang**

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It is truly an unexpected rarity — highly unusual, indeed — for a very young artist to pursue several paths at once, on both a formal as well as a conceptual level. Born in 1986 in Dali, Li Gang seems to be searching for answers to aesthetic questions that will, above all, surprise him and thus be convincing; at the same time, he takes each one as far as it will go. And it seems as if he has to aim for something completely different, to move in a new direction each time, to start questioning things as soon as he has realized the visual idea he has imagined. Just avoid inflating it to the point of irritation or obliteration! Don't repeat it! Because then it loses its desired effect. And then the art is on the wrong track. All of the above is a severely abbreviated way to articulate the maxim that very likely lies behind Li Gang's art. And behind that are the experiences and thoughts Li had after arriving in Beijing at the age of twenty. As a schoolboy learning the art of painting from a young teacher, his themes had to do with the usual things that happened around him every day — in brief: his everyday life. Dissatisfied with the traditional modes of expression that he used in the beginning, he finally began looking for a different, more personal form, which would not only help him explain the life he saw in front of him, but also provide him with information about understanding art. Pencil drawings were interesting, because he was fascinated by what one could create and achieve with such a simple tool. The artist not only shows what he sees, but also emphasizes what he feels and senses when he sees something, while at the same time, he gains a sense of self-confidence and a new attitude toward the world and other people. All in all, it is a way to balance out one's own possibilities in terms of how one reacts to one's own surroundings.

Ultimately graduating first in his class from the Yunnan Dali Academy in Dali, Li grew bored with drawing and switched to painting, using paints he himself made out of cooking oil. Having just arrived in Beijing to study experimental art at the Central Academy of Fine Art, with the goal of becoming an artist, he realized that art had to be more than just copying given situations. Setting high standards for himself, he began to look for a different understanding of art, which would go beyond mere imitation, reproduction, or copying. Painting a glass surface, he deliberately ignored the attraction of color. Limiting himself to grays, he not only emphasized the object-like qualities of everyday items, but also managed to express the subjective aspect of the state he found himself in at the time. Aside from the confusion he felt at the time, it seemed as if he were in a fog, because he had not yet figured out how to cross over the threshold to art.

On the path to an image, Li works only in one medium. He is at home in several simultaneously, in a way that inevitably makes us wonder where this journey we are taking with him will lead us in the coming decades. For those of us who tend to look at eastern art with the eye of the westerner, some of his previous works of art

seem to touch upon the requisites of Land Art, while others bears a certain resemblance to Conceptual Art. However, from the viewpoint of the Chinese artist, whose productivity has been influenced by materials and situations in his life, rather than by art movements and other artists, these kinds of comparisons are more of a hindrance, due to the extreme limitations they place on the visual process. In Lucerne, in our long talk that went on until late into the night, Li also indirectly encouraged his conversation partner to approach his art first with the eye and the heart, and then with the senses and intellect. At first, it seemed as if the leap from one group of works to the next was completely reckless, and so abrupt that there did not appear to be any sort of transition or bridge, nothing to mediate between the diverse visual spheres that collide against each other with an almost continental-sized impact. Nevertheless, between what he produced yesterday and what he is working on today, there are secret relationships stemming from the mind and spirit of an artist who questions himself. However, they first have to be sought and found. Here, Li's remarkable sense of time plays a relatively large role.

All in all, it seems impossible to predict which themes Li will address in the future, how and in what way he will realize them, and what sort of materials he will use in the process. Initially, it seems as if this artist, who has his very first show in Europe, is not in any danger of repeating himself over and over. He must be putting himself under enormous pressure to be creative. Yet, everything that he creates seems to be done with incredible ease and naturalness. Nothing is strained. Everything appears to be wrung from the indifferent river of time, developed step-by-step out of the potential of the moment. A slow process, in which one thing gradually leads to the next.

It was two years ago that this author first saw some of Li's work at the home of performance artist He Yunchang. On the high walls of the spacious living room — where we drank a great deal of tea, smoked far too many cigarettes, and discussed the way that art, existence, and life interweave — hung a 180 x 120 cm painting. It stood out because it was so different. Never before had this author seen anything like it. The painting draws its entire presence from the luminescence or shine of a cone of light at its center. This gives the whole thing a sculptural effect, as if the light has been caught in something, and is now glowing outward from inside of it, like a solitary star in the distant heavens. One can almost hear the ticking of the universal clock here. The strange effect of the light emanating from the darkness causes a sense of amazement in the guest, and it only increases when Li reveals its little secret, telling what the picture is made of, and how he came to create an image on black acrylic with transparent packing tape. By covering the entire surface with short strips of transparent tape, layering it here and there, so that light and shapes gradually formed out of the shadows, he produced another, entirely different, sculptural-looking construct. However, the subject of the picture cannot be immediately identified. It takes a little time before one can connect a specific form to whatever it is that has been released from the darkness and turned into light. Gradually, one realizes that it is nothing more than a useless rock. Enlarged, it resembles a distant planet outlined in light, and it is hard to grasp that we are

simply looking at a very small piece of stone that has been picked up somewhere. Apparently, Li turned it around and around in his hand, curiously wondering how the object might possibly be poeticized, made into something special. Taking the stony something, he illuminated it, not just from one side, but from several, creating a series and allowing us to see the complexity of its irregular form, as well as its alien character, oscillating between light and shadow. It looks like a precious gem, charged with an aura of great rarity. Its beauty consists precisely of the fact that it never looks the same, but alters its appearance again and again. The strong light contends with the shadows in the same way that existence competes with the void, and it increases as the layers of transparent packing tape thicken or pile up.

Asked what these pieces were ultimately about, Li shares something more. Fascinated by the effects and characteristics of some tape sticking to a window, he observed how its color changed with every added layer. This effect also reminded him of looking at the surface of a lake with an uneven bed, which also involved a fantastic experience of watching the water change colors. Moreover, he was fascinated by the leap from quantity to quality, and the accompanying question of how it is possible, in this kind of a view, for a very ordinary stone to suddenly transform into something entirely different. Here, too, the existence of a small pebble is similar to his own human life: namely, it is very common and in no way extraordinary. It is only by making a leap that it can reach a new phase. Li's idea to use transparent packing tape to make his picture can be traced back to these kinds of ordinary, everyday observations. According to Li, it is not the material quality of the tape, but its transparency that he is interested in using, because it is this characteristic that makes it seem closer to water and air. As if trying to sum it all up in a visual theory, he finally talks about sunlight, which has to overcome and penetrate several layers of atmosphere before it reaches our eyes. Obviously, even the speed of light can run into delays.

Even if it is not immediately obvious, the listener later speculates that these images are based on very specific memories. When he was younger, Li was teaching two friends how to swim; he held tight to their shoulders, but the strong current of the river tore the three of them apart, and Li could not keep his head above water. After fighting to survive, he finally gave in to the strength of the water. As he was drowning, he felt something he had never experienced before: an ineffable, magical sense of calm. But then many strange hands pulled him out from the center of this calm and dragged him up onto the riverbank, saving his life. This, however, did not make him feel as if he had been rescued from the pit of despair, but rather, it felt like an unwelcome act of violence. Clearly, there was something pleasantly enchanting about the encounter with eternity. This sense of well-being, which correlates with the *unio mystica*, probably cannot be achieved through tons of words, but perhaps it might be done with unusual images, which repeat the unique feeling of this lost sensation. After all, they do convey something of the unbearable lightness of floating in unlimited space.

Even though Li tends to hesitate when talking about things that have happened in his life, these stories seem to have left a considerable mark on his art. Right at the beginning of our conversational marathon in Lucerne, he drew the listener's attention — probably not by accident — by relating two events from his childhood. Once, he went shopping with his father, a former farmer, who dealt in all kinds of things, including wood. On the way, the boy wanted to sit down on a wooden stool, but his father forbade him to touch it at all; later, at home, he told him that the wood came from coffins. In the province where Li grew up, there is a widespread superstition that the negative energy from objects belonging to the dead will be transferred to anyone who touches such items. Doubting the truth of his father's assertion, Li added that, for him, death itself is less frightening than the unknown, which comes after it, and whatever is at the root of the unknown. He is also afraid of the clothing left behind by the dead, because it manifests the presence of the unknown spirit.

Shortly after arriving in Beijing, the unbelieving son took the notion of clothing as a trace of something and used it as a theme in one of his works. As a stranger in the city, far away from the home where he had been familiar with everything since childhood, he felt as if he were being confronted with an impenetrable juggernaut, and had nothing to hold onto at all. In order to familiarize himself with his new surroundings, he selected three sites, which he decided to identify in his own way. He spent an entire day on the campus of the Central Academy of Fine Art, another day in an arts district called 798, and finally, a third day in Chaoyang Park. In these places, he collected refuse discarded by other people, and thus, he not only learned something about the areas he was exploring, but he also distinguished each site by its garbage. Using the refuse he had collected, he made three large hooded jackets and coats for himself. This act of collecting refuse — which, the artist says, symbolizes these places — and then inscribing it on his own body, so to speak, could be interpreted as Li's way of appropriating an unfamiliar area. It is a way of assimilating the city through three representative sites. Since, ultimately, he is not really going to wear the garments, photographs of the pieces become the actual work.

Li's work *Fleeting Time* also clearly shows us how strongly the artist reacts to the external. As conceptual as the work seems at first, the references are nonetheless very specific. What do we see? Canvases that have been washed clean with water, but that still display diffuse traces of paint, and next to each of them a small plastic bag containing bits of dried paint and a small photograph of the painting that was on the canvas before it was erased — a man with a serious expression, and three keys in front of him on a table, for example. He is unsure which of the three keys to life he ought to choose, because he cannot predict what the consequences of his decision will be. Besides the constraints imposed by the new materialism, the painter is also addressing the growing complexity arising from the changes in society. All in all, these pictures are about the symbolic legibility of life today in China. However, because their effect was not as intense as he had hoped for, the artist erased it all again, after having first documented the finished paintings in photographs. By washing the paint off with water, Li seems to express a notion about the passage of time. Asked why, he replies by recalling the

death of his grandfather on his mother's side. It was not until the grandfather was no longer there that Li first realized how important, how close, he had been to him. Things that are absent mobilize much stronger emotions than things that are present. Additionally, they intensify the perception of loss. Therefore, he decided to wash away the images, so that traces of them would remain as references. From here, it is possible to follow a thematic line to a photograph of a tree, in whose fork sawed-off branches have been stacked up to form a wall. They link things that have drifted apart over time. Here, too, Li sees an image from his life. He imagines himself and his brother growing up together, until they finally went their separate ways. The gap left by the separation can be bridged. This is the artist's way of thinking, which is clearly different from the western way. To him, everything is a matter of relationships and standards, which are constantly shifting. And this is why he created square paintings made of tape measures.