

LEO XU PROJECTS

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COS



IN
SHANGHAI

Leo XU

Interview by Iona Whittaker
Photography by Noah Sheldon

More than Beijing or Hong Kong, Shanghai is the creative epicentre of Asia's booming art economy. But even the bustling megacity has its serene quarters. In a residential pocket of Shanghai's monied French Concession, the 32-year-old gallerist Leo Xu goes about the business of advancing contemporary art in China. Whether he's placing climbable art in a shopping mall or allowing artists to mess with his website, he promotes work that has something contemporary art gallerists aren't always known for: a healthy sense of humour. Leo eschews the term 'gallery', claiming he's doing so much more than running an ATM for art. We converse on such subjects as we descend from his office on the third floor at Leo Xu Projects and step into the damp, fragrant afternoon for a fast-paced tour of the neighbourhood.

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Iona: I love your shoes. The vivid blue panels on your brogues match the print of your shirt. What are they?

Leo: I designed them.

I: You designed them?

L: Yes. I'm not a shoe fanatic, but I have friends who design shoes, and I've also had the chance to work with a couple of brands, so my collection has been growing recently.

I: What is more important to you in shoes: comfort or style?

L: Shoes have to be comfortable and walkable. I'm a volleyball player in my secret life.

I: Really? I didn't know that. Where shall we go?

L: Let's turn left out of the gallery towards Wukang Road. I really love these old lane houses and the beautiful London plane trees overhead.

I: There's a certain kind of gentrification going on in this particular area, the French Concession. I guess you and your gallery are part of it. How do you feel about that?

L: It's exciting! On one hand it's a little bit sad to see history disappear, but on the other hand it's great to witness this kind of upgrade on a scale that you don't find in New York or London. It's like building a new model of the city for the 21st century. I think this also explains why Spike Jonze shot his latest film, *Her*, here in Shanghai – because it already looks like a city from the future. That's what struck me when I walked out of the cinema in Pudong after seeing *Star Trek* and saw all these gigantic buildings like the IFC tower. Shanghai just looks like a sci-fi city, and it's becoming more and more interesting.

I: That probably means you have to adapt a lot.

L: You have to adapt, but I also think you have to actively explore and engage with the past. When I moved back here after living in Beijing for a couple of years, I felt there was something in Shanghai that I really missed out on in terms of public discourse. Shanghai is a fusion city, a mixture of East and West. Look at how these art deco buildings live in total harmony with the ones built by the Chinese, who were a minority in the French Concession.

I: How did you get to open a gallery?

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L: I studied as an artist and I worked as a photographer, but I got bored. At some point I got the opportunity to work with the artist Xu Bing, and through him I encountered a number of curators. I found curating a very interesting and ground-breaking discipline. It's so all-encompassing, the way it combines scenography, management, administration, sociability, knowledge of art history and working with artists, pushing the limits of different disciplines and blurring boundaries. I worked for galleries in Beijing and abroad for a while, and then I opened my own gallery in 2011.

I: What's the story behind your space? It's quite linear but also intimate.

L: Before I moved in, it had been the office of a company. It looked quite shabby, but I thought it had the right dimensions for presenting something visually. It has long walls and a very interesting central staircase. It reminded me of a smaller-scale version of the Neues Museum in Berlin.

I: I often prefer smaller galleries. In Beijing, for example, you sometimes feel as if you're drowning in these huge spaces, and artists have had to make giant works just for the sake of filling them.

L: I worked for James Cohan Gallery and Chambers Fine Art before, so I've dealt with those two different kinds of spaces – an old warehouse converted into a huge white box and a very delicate art deco house. I felt I had had enough, and I find Shanghai to be really inspiring as a city. I felt the need for a gallery as a laboratory – or a headquarters – rather than as a huge warehouse. I want it to be an engine, a motor for putting my curatorial input across the city. I don't think my artists produce work just to fit into a white cube. They make work to fit into the city.

I: It's as if you're infiltrating, in a way.

L: We work a lot with public spaces – we show works in the open air or in shopping malls – but also on iPhones and iPads and on printed matter. Last year the Argentine artist Leandro Erlich spectacularly infiltrated a shopping centre in downtown Shanghai with the life-sized facade of a traditional Shanghai shikumen-style house on the floor and a mirror suspended overhead. Shoppers could clamber over the model and see themselves reflected in the mirror as if they were climbing the

facade, hanging from windows or being suspended upside down. I like my artists and the gallery to engage in the development of the new Shanghai. I like the idea of intervention. Have you seen my website?

I: Oh, yes. It plays a trick on you, faking electromagnetic interference and the sound of a vibrating phone, so that you automatically check your pocket.

L: Right. The Dutch artist Gabriel Lester, who used to live in Shanghai, hacked the site. The inspiration is the buzzing of phones, which makes people nervous and panicky. I love the idea because both Gabriel and I are workaholics – we're always on the phone. It's fun for us to see how people react to our prank.

I: Is it this kind of work that leads you to call your gallery Leo Xu Projects rather than, say, Leo Xu Gallery?

L: Yes. I think the most important aspect of this gallery is that we're a thinking brain. Many people take galleries to be ATMs for art. (laughs) I think what makes us special is that we're a good partner for artists. We challenge them and we help them.

I: What do your artists need help with?

L: We work with a lot of young artists from Asia, so we're aware of their age crisis. (laughs) They're upset by their scarce visibility around the world. Mid-career artists are anxious about the next step, and the more established artists are very aware of their price issues. I always tell people that we're creating a constellation. One day when we look back on all our work with artists, it will form a big, organic picture. Sometimes they cross paths and you can see the spark.

I: Are there specific tendencies you're talking about at the moment with your friends and colleagues and artists?

L: Many of my artists are talking about and working with the concept of *shanzhai* – fake consumer goods. We live in a big city that is a huge market for *shanzhai* products. If there's a Starbucks here, you'll see a 'Starbanks' or whatever across the street. People ride around on Apple-branded scooters, even though Apple doesn't make scooters. But through the *shanzhai* process something gets reinvented, and it makes things much more democratic, much more accessible for people.

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I: You're wearing a beautifully crisp white shirt covered with a print of hexagons in royal blue. Do you have a tailor close by?

L: Not really. I have my stylist. (laughs) I have friends who work in fashion. It's good to have friends in fashion!

I: We're passing a number of small shops and boutiques. Are there any that you particularly like?

L: Actually, I like the newsstands. I enjoy talking to the owners about magazine sales and what titles are popular. Some offer interesting foreign titles that are not supposed to be available or distributed locally; some sell manga and other stuff. Some vendors have their own profound and peculiar understanding of publication and press, which I love to hear about. And I love seeing all the kitsch cover designs.

I: How about shops in this area you don't like and wish weren't there?

L: Oh yes, these touristy boutiques that sell Chinese designs – classic *qipao* dresses made for Westerners. They're everywhere in the French Concession.

I: Is there anything particular that you notice as we walk along?

L: Misinformation. Shanghai is composed of many different people and numerous languages and dialects – it's more complicated than people think. Love, affection, prejudice, hatred – this causes a lot of interesting misunderstandings. I love the idea of Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*. You can truly feel lost here, and I love being lost.

I: Are you a morning person or an evening person?

L: I'm an evening person.

I: I know this feeling in cities – at night, everything is quieter.

L: At night I think I turn into some other person. I find inspiration and am stimulated to write. I'm good at communicating and reaching people, and then when you work with me on email, you cannot tell where I am! People in New York think I'm there because I answer emails right away, but I have the same with people in Europe. So they're kind of confused.

I: You must need very little sleep.

L: Yes.

I: Where can you be found most often when not at home or at the gallery?

L: Out on the streets. After many years of being a photographer, I'm still addicted to the habit of walking the streets. Nowadays, I'm more and more interested in visiting different places – seeing the design of the spaces and knowing about the people and their stories. I go to DVD shops, bookstores, design boutiques, teahouses, residential buildings and factories, measuring every inch. I'm a scanner. I want to stay within the city, alone with everybody.

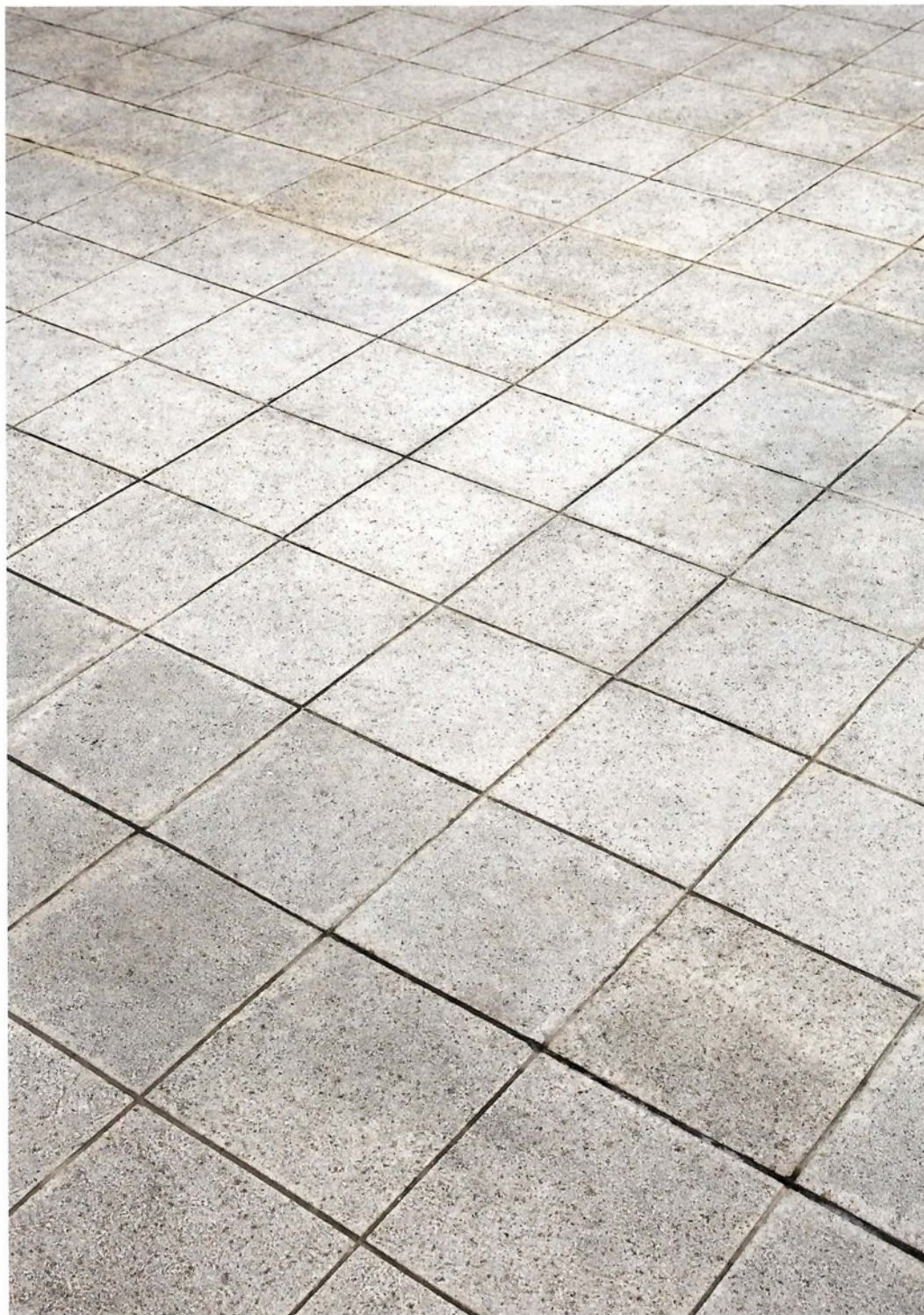
I: You're happy to be in Shanghai, then?

L: I think being in China is one of the biggest luxuries I have ever had, and I have to make the most of it. The country is becoming a new laboratory – it's full of possibilities, good and bad, and it gives you the right to experiment. One should do as much as possible. I'm adventurous. I want to go wild but also keep everything under control.

I: And what are you most wild about at the moment?

L: A preoccupation that I share with my artists, with my architect, writer and filmmaker friends, and with musicians who I work with is this idea of the future city. And the future of Shanghai's sexed-up art scene more specifically. At the moment, this city has at least six art fairs, a handful of super-sized museums, a fast-growing gallery scene and a booming creative community. Where is it all heading?

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Pavement N°4:
SHANGHAI