

Vanity Fair On Art, Portrait of An Artist: *Li Qing*, by Fabien Fryns, P93, November, 2016

VANITY FAIR



PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST

LI Qing

By FABIEN FRYNS

The day after seeing Li Qing's work on my gallery director's computer screen in Beijing in 2005, I found myself in his studio. A two-hour plane ride took me to Hangzhou, home to the China Academy of Art, from which Li graduated in 2006. At the time, he was working on a series entitled *Finding Differences*, which consisted of painting two seemingly identical pictures sharing time, space and size, but purposely introducing a number of differences in the iconography. When both canvases are displayed side by side, the viewer is drawn into identifying the differences between both pictures.

The differences that the artist designed for every pair of paintings (the number of which is listed in the title of the paintings to give viewers a clue) often arose from the irreproducible nature of experience and memory. The source images varied widely and included references to Li's personal life, but also from mass media including newspapers, the internet and television, and would range from everyday, ordinary daily experiences to world events.

Li was born in 1981 in Zhejiang province, just south of Shanghai. The sell-out success of his first exhibition of his work in my Beijing gallery in 2006 quickly established Li as a leading figure of the new generation of post-1980s Chinese contemporary artists, as his work entered prestigious collections such as those of Charles Saatchi and Frank Cohen, and won the praise of his acclaimed peer Zeng Fanzhi when he visited the show.

Today, Li lives and works in Shanghai, and even though he has extended his practice to include installations, photography and video, his work continues to question the fundamentals of pictorial language. A few years ago, I have to admit that I felt that Li might have been a little lost in his ways. Now, at the age of 35, happily married and a proud father, his years of searching and exploring have culminated in a series of extraordinary new monumental installations.

The latest of these is an as-yet untitled and unfinished large-scale wooden reproduction of a section of the popular goldfish pavilion of Hangzhou Zoo. As visitors make their way through a 20m-long, garden-like domed porch, they will be surrounded by images exploring China's ever-changing urban landscape. For anyone who has visited the country, it will be no wonder that this is a recurring theme among artists today. Displayed in no particular chronological order, visitors will see images of the old and new China, the influence of Western architecture and brands, religious images of all sorts and traditional Eastern practices such as t'ai chi, all mixed together.

The juxtaposition of old and new will culminate in what will undoubtedly be his most accomplished work to date when it is finished next year. Says Li: "The world of the past is always relegated to decline and amorphousness; some things have left us, some things linger. Is that which lingers longer more real?" □

WINDOW ON THE SOUL
The artist Li Qing, working on the installation *Rural Church* in his Shanghai studio, on May 14, 2016

PHOTOGRAPH BY PATRICK WACK

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www.vanityfair.com | VANITY FAIR ON ART | 93