

New Pictures of the “Ugly Chinaman:” The Art of Liu Xiaodong

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Liu Xiaodong, *Cold Shower Room*, 1989, oil on canvas, 130 x 97 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

1. Reaching Beyond the Screen

Liu Xiaodong’s paintings are “realist” without bearing the slightest “official” touch. They are representative of an open China in which “reality” no longer necessarily goes through an ideological filter. Socialist Realism obliged artists to participate in the process of building a new society, and its art was ideologically coloured by the experience of the working class. The “reality” of Socialist Realism has never been “real” but was only an ideological “screen.” In 1942, in his “Talks on Literature and Art,” Mao laid down that art is supposed to serve the people.¹ Soon, party-driven movements like the “peasant art movement” or the Great Leap Forward—during which one group of peasants produced five hundred paintings in one night—followed. Liu Xiaodong continues

to paint common people but his paintings no longer “symbolize” an extra-aesthetic meaning that is attributed to them from the outside; rather they immediately transmit Chinese reality. Liu reaches “beyond the screen” and paints reality as it is.

Western sinologists visiting China before 1979 had to limit their impressions of China to what could be derived from the stylized social events and politically correct sightseeing tours organized by the Maoist regime. However, whenever they had a chance to get a glimpse of “real” China, they were fascinated by the simplicity of ordinary Chinese people, by their sudden switches from aggressive rudeness to a genuinely polite and generous attitude, by the humour with which they overcome their inconceivable suffering and bear their poverty. Unfortunately, these foreigners could not obtain as much insight into the life of the Chinese as they would have liked to because they were not allowed to talk to people in the streets, in buses, in teahouses, or in waiting rooms. Today this Chinese reality has become accessible to everybody and to see that a Chinese painter has reproduced that reality or even transfigured it can provide an uncanny feeling.

What can we see in these pictures? Awkwardly naked workers with an obvious lack of muscles; youths trying to adopt Western styles without being convincing; prostitutes eating hastily; chickens with their heads chopped off; overweight grandchildren . . .

These pictures radiate a certain roughness or, let us say, a kind of very basic cultural attitude. Let’s put it clearly: These are not pictures of so-called “civilized” people but of people who are moving towards what industrial nations call “development” or “civilization.” Liu’s pictures offer an insight into “real” Chinese life, into “primitive” life perhaps, though, at the same time, they are a far cry from primitivism. While nineteenth century primitivism used to cater to the escapist tendency of

Western people, here a Chinese painter presents us the most human face of a people that is not yet fully “Westernized.” This approach is very different from primitivism. There is no promise of erotic fulfillment in Liu’s paintings; nor does he suggest wild adventures or other cultural fantasies that enabled (and still enable) Westerners to create for themselves an alternative “Oriental” reality. These pictures cannot provide comfort to the “civilized man” discontented with civilization. When Chinese “primitivity” is seen through the eyes of a Chinese painter, China appears—perhaps for the first time—as neither Westernly orientalized nor as Maoistically politicized.²



Liu Xiaodong, *Jia He and Xiao Ming*, 2002, oil on canvas, 162 x 130 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

2. The Ugly Chinaman

There is no complaint in these pictures, and Liu has definitely not subscribed to the tradition of Chinese self-loathing common since the late Ming (16th-17th century) dynasty and made most popular in our time by Bo Yang and his book *The Ugly Chinaman*.³ There is no pride in these pictures either, neither that of communist achievements or that of a five thousand year old culture. Still, everything is present, though not in the form of a materialized, monumental past, but rather as a historical trace that runs like veins through contemporary culture. Among the communist “achievements” we also have to count twenty years of “class hate” during which fundamental human impulses like compassion and pity were condemned as bourgeois humanism and which finally led to the general moral degradation of the entire population. I am here not so much talking about ethics as about the loss of sensitivity, intimacy, and the incapacity to express feelings. We understand best what “Westernization” means for the Chinese of this generation when we read what the mainland philosopher Liu Xiaobo (a leader of the 1980s democracy movement) says about the emotional impact that the songs of the Taiwanese pop-singer Deng Lijun had on him when he first listened to them on the radio:

The words and soliloquies in this type of singing, the tunes that express private, sorrowful, sentimental, and small feelings of life, stirred the depths of my soul. We grew up in a kind of earth-shaking revolutionary slogan, music, and song. In the orthodox communist education we received, we knew nothing but revolution, selfless dedication in the spirit of ‘fear not hardship, fear not death’, the concepts and culture of cold class struggle that lacked any sense of humanity, hatred of others, and the language of violence. We never received an education that was close to life and earthbound, that respected others.⁴



Liu Xiaodong, *Eating Corn*, 2001, oil on canvas, 97 x 76 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

Liu's paintings show us that something human has survived at least within the common population. When the French sinologist Simon Leys traveled through China in the 1970s, he penned impressions that read almost like a description of Liu Xiaodong's works: "Suddenly these workers appeared to me, in their simple human truth, as the most authentic heirs of a civilization that the new mandarins had not yet managed to annihilate. With their natural ease, their wisdom, their mixture of slyness and politeness, their deliciously metaphorical language, these naive and subtle people did not only offer a complete contrast with the one-dimensional cardboard robots by whom they were governed, but they revealed to me the fact that Chinese humanity remains undamaged as if protected by its own simplicity."⁵

3. The Past and the Present

Liu is not a painter of the Chinese past sporting—real or imagined—5,000 years of culture. There is nothing epical in his works like in, for example, the paintings of Chen Danqing. On the other hand, Liu is not a painter of the Chinese future either. There is no evocation of a future Chinese-Pan-Asian consumer community or of a popular culture penetrated by an ominous *kawaii* aesthetics that seems to fascinate, for example, the painter He Sen. Liu is a painter of the present, and the present is ambiguous by definition.

It has been said that Liu's protagonists are static, detached, awkward, and bored, that they are "separated from each other in their own monologue."⁶ I would hold that they have to appear in this slightly surrealist, Delvaux-like fashion because they are captured between past and future. In 1990, a Beijing newspaper wrote that the events of June 1989 had "transformed the whole future history of mankind."⁷ It's hardly possible to define better China's present situation: China is living in a present in which the contact between past and future does not cause a dramatic clash, in which people experience neither frustration nor confusion, but in which a strange and ambiguous reality remains caught between important developments and announces itself as a ponderous presence.

Liu is the painter of this presence that is coming out of the past, a presence in which the future is already there but without having materialized, in which the future is always pending without really arriving, not even in the form of fictionalized expressions. This is why Liu's protagonists are simultaneously attached and detached from reality.

All this is the exact contrary of the "cynical realism" of Fang Lijun or Liu Wei. To categorize Liu as a Cynical Realist merely because he paints social discord is too hasty. Liu Wei's world is a far cry from the world of the cynical new China dominated by the fetishism of material wealth. This scenario is reproduced over and over again, for example, in Wang Shuo's simultaneously cynical and realist literature.⁸ Liu's world, however, is not a heartless world emptied of belief and human virtue.



Liu Xiaodong, *Getting Chickens*, 2003, oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Let me give some concrete examples for how the past and the future form a kind of strange, imbricated present. Liu's "primitive" people continue to live in the same environments in which they have been painted thousands of times by Socialist Realism which means that the communist past slips in here through an aesthetic loophole. A barrage like that of the Three Gorges can be a symbol of capitalist progress and at the same time one of communist progress. The same goes for the sleek glass façade of a department store that is overhung with red banderoles, which could also be interpreted as a communist cultural centre (I am thinking of Liu's painted still from Jia Zhangke's film *Unknown Pleasures*). Past and future (just like East and West) exist through multiple and complex interrelationships that form the present.

Fang Lijun is also a painter of transitions. However, in Fang's paintings the transition adopts monstrous and dramatic forms. Fang's bald-headed monsters look like the worst examples of human species that contemporary Chinese society can offer, they are a living dead that no longer emanates the slightest bit of human charm. These empty and ghostlike creatures have been destroyed inside by the Cultural Revolution or other Maoist calamities and are now free to roam in a new Chinese capitalist world. Only the devil knows what mischief they will produce there. At the same time, like all people who act during periods of transition, these monsters can hardly be accused of anything concrete because transitions create complex contexts.

Also Liu Xiaodong's people look innocent. However, unlike Fang Lijun, Liu does not find anything dramatic to tell about the people he paints. These people are losers and not victims, for them



Liu Xiaodong, *Fat Grandson*, 1996, oil on canvas, 230 x 180 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

the “new Chinese economy” has not brought about any dramatic changes. Being not integrated in the global economic game of consumer society, all they can do is play the game called “Chinese culture.” And they play it very silently. Certainly, some of them stylize themselves on a Western image but they do it badly. Some buy cars and computers but the result is that they look even uglier than the others.

Here we get a further clue about how in contemporary China the imbrications of past and future crystallize in or constitute the present. In a way, Liu paints the most intimate elements that human beings can experience in times of transition: which are

always those things that do not change, the things that will never change because they are cultural and remain widely unaffected by the force of transition. In a way, “Modern China” is a fake world just like that of Jia Zhang-ke’s theme park in the film *The World*. But Liu refuses to paint that fake world; rather he paints “culture.” “Culture” signifies here the most particularly human flavour that a society can offer, it is life as it is experienced by everybody and on an everyday basis. Of course, paradoxically, it is precisely from the stable point of view of these cultural experiences that we can best discern the dynamic process of the transitions: by adopting the point of view of “culture,” we can grasp the transitory character of the transition.

Just like the Chinese filmmakers of the Sixth Generation, Liu is able to capture this aspect of the great Chinese transition because he has recognized the most profound meaning enclosed in the word transition which is: “The more things change the more everything remains the same.” You cannot escape the past, however hard you try, the past *is* in the present as it *will be* in the future. From the outside, transitions look like they advance at a fast pace, but the people who live through them do not necessarily experience transitions in that way. This is true for Liu’s people as much as for the youths in films like *Unknown Pleasures* and *Artisan Pickpocket*. For these people time does not move very fast. One of the results is that “progress” appears to them rather like a game. Liu has recognized this particular flavour of Chinese cultural reality and this is why he can truly be called a realist. It is perhaps the most courageous form of realism that one can think of.

Liu paints a cultural game in which “time” is compressed like in the Bergsonian *durée*. This is why his pictures look, as Ai Weiwei writes, as though they are caught in cinematic still frames.⁹ This “game” or “play” is different from that of Wang Shuo’s cynical hooligan culture, which has only been invented as a form of protest against socialist labour ethics, ending up making fun of all forms of civilization. Liu’s people play another kind of game. Patiently, within their compressed temporal universe, they wait for civilization to come. When it comes it will refine the game of

Chinese culture, it will make it more modern, more capitalist, and more global. In this sense, these people live like they are in a dream, which is the reason why Fan Dian has said that there is a “non cognitive expression of truth” in Liu’s paintings.¹⁰

4. A Discomfort in Non-Civilization?

Liu has been compared to Eric Fischl because both painters are as realist as they are visionary. I agree that both painters belong to a strange sort of “postmodern realism.” I also agree that both painters’ images seem to evolve from some mysterious inner logic. On all other points, however, I find that they are opposed to each other. While Fischl’s narratives “fashion the picture into a kind of dream screen, onto which are projected a continuously evolving series of images,”¹¹ Liu’s strange and distant reality rather sucks us into the picture’s reality which is not simply projected but real and *lived* in the form of culture. Further, Fischl depicts a discomfort in American civilization in which people feel uneasy in their bodies and have communication problems. This kind of civilization simply does not exist in Liu’s world. Nor is Liu’s world one of “discomfort in non-civilization,” a discomfort that can lead to hooliganism, superstition, and anarchy.

The reality, what Fischl lets shine through the so-called American dream is that of a tired and worn out culture. He distorts the American dream of an affluent and superior world by revealing the decadent reality that lies beneath it. It is clear that Liu does just the contrary: he paints the healthy culture that is covered under a thick layer of non-civilization. And, by the way, which “Chinese dream” could he destroy? The one of communism? This dream is dead. The dream of a five-thousand-year-old Chinese civilization? This dream is a virtual past that has too often been interpreted as a nightmare.¹²

Fischl “fashions the picture into a kind of dream screen” and stops there; Liu, however, reaches beyond the screen in order to show a primitive, though not decadent, world in which we can perceive a dream of “real” Chinese culture. In other words, Fischl is cynical while Liu is not. If Liu went ahead distorting the dream of Social Realism, cynicism would be the right answer. Then Liu would be a kind of Chinese Fischl. But this is not the case. Liu “simply” paints a cultural reality that is dreamlike by definition because it is cultural.

This is why Fischl’s paintings have more in common with the films of the Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao Hsien who shows intimate life in bathrooms, bedrooms and toilets, than those of the Sixth Generation filmmakers Jia Zhangke, Zhang Yuan, and Wang Xiaoshuai. Liu, who prefers to paint streets, building sites, and public baths, developed his work hand in hand with this new realist cinema. These artists should be seen as representatives of a new sort of Chinese primitivism that has managed to separate itself from all forms of Orientalism.

Conclusion

Liu Xiaodong’s paintings belong to a sort of “humanist realism” that can be opposed to the “post-human irrealism” by which the Western world seems to have been invaded. By “post-human irrealism” I mean the “enlightened Hollywood egotism of the Dalai Lama” or other consumerist devices that cunningly and forcefully lead humanity towards a new incontestable and most primordial objective: “self-realization.” Liu’s people, who have not long ago left the sphere of revolutionary communism, have not yet adhered to the new Western civilized and hyperreal imperative of “self-realization.” The protagonist of Liu’s paintings would probably, when asked to “realize themselves,” naively utter: “But I am already real, why should I be realized?”



Liu Xiaodong, *Three Girls Watching TV*, 2001, oil on canvas, 137 x 152 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The Chinese people in Liu's pictures simply are without having to participate in the despair causing drama that we are playing on an everyday basis and which is called "realize your potentials." Here, the "West" could indeed learn something from the "Orient." While the flat images of the Orient that the internet and the media transmit so abundantly still present it as an article of consumption, the new pictures of the "ugly Chinaman" that come to us through contemporary Chinese art and cinema can actually show us something relatively useful: they can show us how ugly we are. (As I am writing this I have on my computer a webpage containing an article on Asian cinema sided by an advertisement for the new Oriental burger "McOriental"). Liu's pictures, documentary as they are, fight against the terror of fantacized realities about the Orient and about ourselves.

Notes

- ¹ See G. Vaughan James, *Soviet Social Realism: Origins and Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), 88.
- ² Gauguin is said to have created the Tahiti of his dreams while recapturing its atmosphere (Ziva Amishai-Maisels: "Gauguin's Early Tahitian Idols" in *The Art Bulletin* 60:2, 1978, 331–341). To do this, he used his South American ancestry to "identify himself as both a 'savage from Peru' and a representative of the conquering Spaniards," (James F. Knapp: "Primitivism and the Modern" in *Boundary 2* 15:1/2, Autumn 1986-Winter 1987, 373). Liu Xiaodong does not need such detours and this is why his images approach us in a very direct way.
- ³ Bo Yang, *The Ugly Chinaman and the Crisis of Chinese Culture* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991).
- ⁴ Sheldon Hsiao-Peng Lu, Postmodernity, Pop-Culture, and the Intellectual: A Report on Post-Tiananmen China" in *Boundary 2* 23:2, Summer 1996, 139–69.
- ⁵ Simon Leys, *Ombres Chinoises* (Paris: Laffont 1976), 80.
- ⁶ Charles Merewether, "A Double Displacement: Liu Xiaodong" in Jean Marc Decrop ed., *Red Flag Collection: Liu Xiaodong* (Hong Kong: Map Book, 2006), 106.
- ⁷ Quoted from Christoph Harbsmeier, "The Notions of Time and of History" in E. Zurcher & C.C. Huang eds., *Time and Space in Chinese Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 61.
- ⁸ See Geremie Barmé, "Wang Shuo and ('Hooligan') Culture" in *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 28, 1992, 23–64.
- ⁹ Ai Weiwei, "A Standpoint without Position" in *Decrop*, 128.
- ¹⁰ Fan Di'an, Liu Xiaodong or "Liu Xiaodong and the Display of Reality" in *Decrop*, 198.
- ¹¹ Richard S. Field on Fischl, "Eric Fischl's Dream Screen" in *American Art* 6:4 1992, 40–49, 40.
- ¹² Bo Yang talks in a polemical way of the "onerous burden that traditional Chinese culture has bequeathed us" and brings forward his theory of Chinese culture contained in a soy paste vat: "Centuries of steeping in the soy paste vat has made Chinese people selfish, egoistical and jealous of others," 39–40.