

PAINTERS WITHOUT BORDERS



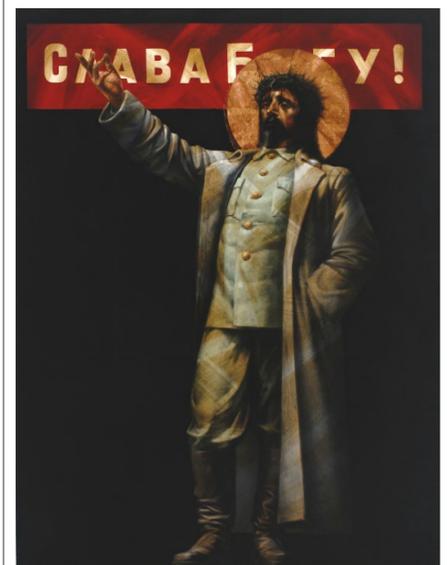
In 1994, Mark Tansey, moved by the artwork of young Chinese painters who had recently arrived to New York, organized an exhibition of their work titled *Transformations*. Over twenty years later, Tansey and Peter Drake have co-curated *Figurative Diaspora*, which presents paintings by five Chinese artists, three of whom participated in *Transformations*, alongside work by five Russian artists, all of whom create “unofficial,” subversive, non-state-sanctioned art, thus tracing the influences of art across borders.



PETER DRAKE *Figurative Diaspora*, at the New York Academy of Art in early 2018, was in some ways motivated by the *Transformations* exhibition that Mark Tansey put together back in 1994. It was hosted in his apartment and consisted of four Chinese Socialist Realist artists: Liu Xiaodong, Chen Danqing, Yu Hong, and Ni Jun. In *Figurative Diaspora* there is a notion that while a visual language was marginalized in the United States and Western Europe, it was also migrating across cultures, still being preserved to a degree in the East. There, reanimated as propaganda, this language was kept alive.

Vitaly, you were the one who originally introduced Mark to these artists, so maybe you can explain how you first encountered their work.

VITALY KOMAR At that time, Alexander Melamid and I published a call to artists in *Artforum* magazine. We asked for proposals of what to do with Soviet communist-era monuments or Socialist monuments to Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin. Russia started to destroy these monuments in the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Artists from countries including Germany, China,



and Russia responded to this. Our studio became a kind of meeting place.

PD When you saw work by the Chinese artists, did you immediately recognize traces of the education that you had received in Russia?

VK Yes. Moscow represented a traditional Western academy for China in the same way that Rome did for Russian artists in the nineteenth century, when Russian artists were moving to Rome to study the Renaissance and Baroque periods.

PD Mark, were you and Vitaly friends at that point?

MARK TANSEY Yes, we had met. I very much admired Komar and Melamid’s work and how they had internalized critical content in the Socialist Realist form.

PD Were you ever in a studio of theirs at the time?

MT The first time I visited their studio was for one of the evening meetings Vitaly mentioned earlier. That’s where I first saw slides of Chen Danqing’s pictures and was introduced to him.

PD Danqing was living in the States for about twenty years, wasn’t he?

XINWANG He came in 1982.

MT I remember a very striking painting by Danqing, of a field worker listening to a radio announce the death of Chairman Mao. It struck me.

JANE DEBEVOISE It’s an interesting early work of his that was shown at the Guggenheim Museum in 1998 in the exhibition *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China*.

MT I was intrigued by the idea of presenting the unrepresentable, of visualizing the auditory. That goes beyond realism, it gets to realization, it’s where things come together.

PD In your essay for the *Transformations* booklet, you said, “Chen’s work served as an introduction to me to the works of Liu Xiaodong, Yu Hong, and Ni Jun. And this transformational edge in his work led me to appreciate the importance of understanding their work in terms of extending temporal transformations of their culture rather than the narrow temporal postures of mine.” You were seeing it through a very particular point of view and it took you a while to adjust.

MT It was common at that time to view contemporary art as existing in a singular, formal present. But apprehending the art of Chen Danqing or Komar and Melamid involved multiple times, multiple styles, and multiple relations between form and content.

PD Mark, I remember going to that show in your apartment and needing you to guide me on understanding why Yu Hong’s work was progressive because when I saw it, I thought it was just pictures of women. There was nothing about it that struck me as progressive until you put it in the context of Socialist Realist work, and then suddenly it felt extremely unusual but also refreshing, even potentially dangerous.

MT Her painting involved self-representation with a sensitive exuberance that was well beyond the agenda of Socialist Realism.

PD Xin, do you know if the Chinese artists were puzzled by the American reactions to their work? I’ve heard that Chen Danqing was disappointed that the level of success he had achieved in China was so different from what he was achieving in America.

XW I wouldn’t even say he *had* an American reception, because there was a lack of any mainstream recognition of these artists at the time, before contemporary Chinese art started appearing in major museum exhibitions in the 1990s and subsequently as an art-market phenomenon in the mid-2000s. I don’t know what kind of feedback they got from the *Transformations* exhibition because that was a more intimate crowd of people who probably understood them on some level. After moving back to China, Chen Danqing published several extremely popular memoirs and essays about his time in New York, and one of these chapters was dedicated to his friendship with Mark. In this essay and others, he wrote candidly about his frustrations but also offered insightful observations about anachronisms of the New York art world, its hierarchies, and how it functioned to distinguish the “mainstream” and the peripheral practices—a category as much stylistic and temporal as historical. He was so amazed that Mark took an interest in the realist works by him and other Chinese artists and offered to reflect on their practices in an exhibition context.

PD Yu Hong and Liu Xiaodong have had phenomenal success as artists. Was any part of that due to *Transformations*? Did a kind of bump happen afterward?

JDB Yu Hong and Liu Xiaodong’s acceptance and celebration have grown significantly since the 1990s, but I feel their audience is still mostly Chinese. Mainland Chinese are wealthier than they were in the 1990s, and some have embraced these

academically trained artists, particularly those who work with fairly anodyne subject matter—beautiful women, for example, or nostalgic scenes of an old Shanghai. But Liu Xiaodong is different; he often works with dystopic Beijing scenes—gritty city streets and displaced people. His painting skills are so good, it would be hard for Western and Chinese audiences not to take note, but even so, in general I’d say he’s not as widely recognized in the West as he is in China.

PD Even though he’s represented by a powerful American gallery, his audience is still mostly Chinese based.

JDB Yes, that’s my feeling. The big change in visibility around these artists—at least in the last ten to fifteen years, and particularly for those who retain a closer connection to the Socialist Realist tradition—is that Chinese audiences have grown significantly. And now these audiences not only have the means to collect, they also understand the grammar and the tradition. They see where it’s coming from. They respect the academic training and recognize

the controversial aspects of what the artists are doing to disturb or subvert it. They see the critique, while Westerners disregard it or don’t understand the context from which it emerges. I suspect that in the ’80s and ’90s, when these artists arrived in New York, some of them might have felt somewhat frustrated, as many had already been highly recognized in China. That may have been discouraging, but in some ways it was good because many went back to China and did great things there. For example, Ai Weiwei was more or less working in obscurity when he lived in New York in the ’80s. It wasn’t until he went back to China in the ’90s that his career as an artist and instigator began to take off.

VK When I came to the United States, I tried to understand the echoes of the past, the realistic and academic art in the West. In Russia during the first years of the revolution an academic system of education was destroyed as a bourgeois tradition. It was rebuilt in the beginning of the ’30s. Simultaneously, Germany established a totalitarian

academy of art. The Bauhaus was destroyed and instead National Socialists started to rebuild the tradition of “the hero.”

I understood the history of twentieth-century art as not just the history of Cubism, abstract art, and Abstract Expressionism but also of totalitarian art, which was occurring in Spain and Italy as well. Chinese and Tibetan art were proto-abstract geometry. Abstract Expressionism couldn’t be popular [in China] because Chinese hieroglyphs are by concept, by origin, the same as Abstract Expressionism. That’s why Chinese artists themselves were attracted by the realistic depiction of nature, and to poetry, and sometimes combined the two. That’s one way to understand why the tradition of realism was so popular and is still popular in China.

In Russia, there was a different reason for the explosion of academic art. The height of Russian art was during the end of nineteenth-century symbolism. It was famous, even in Europe. The idea of depicting another, imaginary world was reflected in the communist idea of building another world, a new world, an ideal society on this earth. It was a great illusion, which ended tragically in Russia. It was a tragic lesson to all humanity because sometimes it’s very dangerous to turn a fairy tale into reality.

PD Part of what you’re known for, especially when you were collaborating with Alexander, was an ironic repurposing of the grammar of Soviet Socialist Realism. That’s been a thread through your work—using this language, repurposing tropes from the ’50s, from the film world, from illustration, from art history, and turning them on their heads. Mark, was that something you found in the work by the Chinese artists?

MT Danqing’s work in particular involved cross-cultural juxtaposing and repurposing of images of different times. What the artists had in common was an emerging sense of self-reflection and self-authorship.

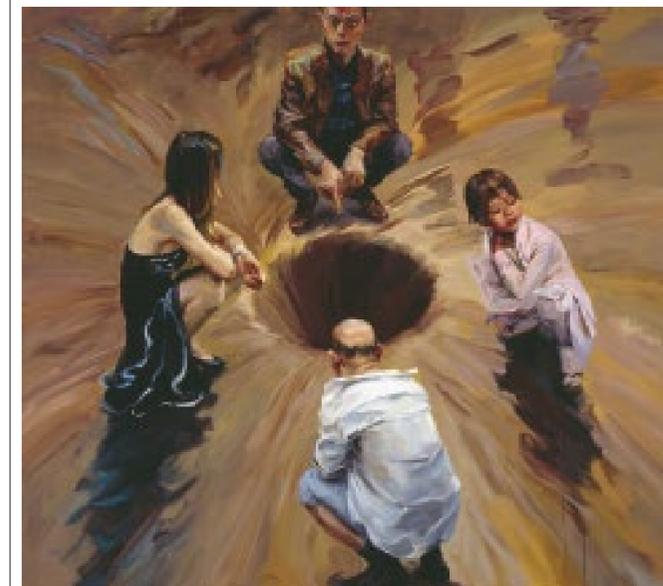
PD But always with authenticity, right? They weren’t indulging in some of the notions of a bankrupted culture that a lot of ’80s postmodern artists were.

MT There was a vitality that stood out against the narrow presence of the ’80s commodity critique. I don’t know how to put it simply. I noticed a quality, a depth, a complexity in the work. I saw that in Komar and Melamid’s work as well as in the Chinese artists’ work.

PD From the New York Academy of Art’s point of view, our interest in *Figurative Diaspora* is this notion that a certain language, while it was marginalized in the US and Western Europe, could be migrating across cultures, being preserved and reenlivened, even though it was being repurposed for propaganda. This language was kept alive, which explains why artists from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing have a phenomenal skill set. You look through a book of drawings of student work and you can just be blown away by the facility. I don’t know if you could go to any academy in America and find that level of talent. It has disappeared inside of two generations.

MT We have an American history of the avant-garde, where abstraction supplanted representation. In the late 1970s and early ’80s there was a return to figuration, but even so, it’s fascinating to see other things happening in different cultures, to see the flows of official and nonofficial and academic versus avant-garde.

VK Early on in postmodernism, at the beginning of the ’80s, the *New York Times* ran the headline



Previous spread:
Mark Tansey, *Landscape*, 1994, oil on canvas, 71 ½ x 144 inches (181.6 x 365.8 cm) © Mark Tansey

Opposite (top): Chen Danqing, *Tears Flooding the Autumnal Field*, 1976, oil on canvas, 64 ¾ x 92 ½ inches (164 x 235 cm) © Chen Danqing

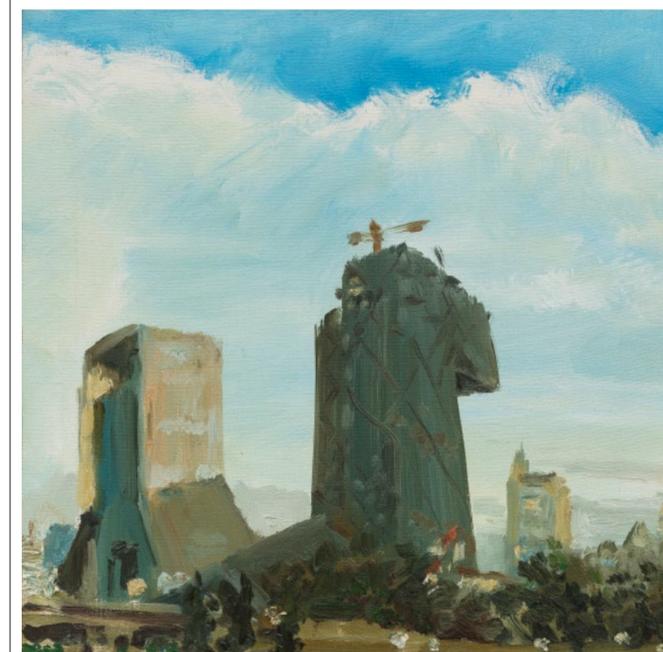
Opposite (bottom): Komar and Melamid, *AntiChrist (Glory to God)*, 1990–91, oil on canvas, 72 x 54 ½ inches (182.9 x 137.5 cm). Collection of Neil K. Rector © Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid

Left:
Yu Hong, *Resolution*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 70 ¾ x 78 ¾ inches (180 x 200 cm). Private Collection © Yu Hong

Below:
Ni Jun, *China Central Television under Construction*, 2008, oil on canvas, 17 ¾ x 17 ¾ inches (45 x 45 cm) © Ni Jun

Following spread, left:
Liu Xiaodong, *My Hometown*, 2014, oil on linen, 30 x 38 inches (76.2 x 96.5 cm). Arthur Zeckendorf Collection © Liu Xiaodong

Following spread, right:
Erik Bulatov, *Red Horizon*, 1971–2000, colored pencil on paper, 11 x 12 ¼ inches (27.9 x 31.1 cm). Collection of Neil K. Rector © Erik Bulatov



“Today’s Avant-Garde Artists Have Lost the Power to Shock,” above an article by Hilton Kramer. The avant-garde had lost the element of surprise.

MT Yes, it had become academic.

PD It became mainstream.

JDB The continuation of figuration and realism and their pervasiveness outside the Euro-American sphere is something that fascinates me. It proposes a certain kind of resistance to the mainstream as we have developed it, this hegemonic view of what is and what is not art. There is a Euro-American modernism, and then there is modernity, and then there is the socialist modernity. We don’t seem to adequately acknowledge that modernity comes in different packages, and that socialist modernity is just as relevant to world culture as Euro-American modernity yet is almost never embraced, almost never validated in Euro-American institutions. Whatever we think about totalitarianism, there is something within the wreckage of Mao’s socialism that still resonates in the minds and hearts of many artists in China. Acknowledging that may make their artwork by people like Yu Hong or Liu Xiaodong more legible and clarify their desire to continue to communicate broadly. It may be interesting to think through realism and figuration in a broader, more ideological sense, as well as an artistic sense.

PD Part of that must be how the avant-garde positioned itself in the culture, wanting to be exclusive and not for the masses. To a certain degree there was a kind of intellectual elitism that was not interested in speaking to the average person. The notion of communication to a broader audience, whether it’s through Socialist Realism or any other form of realism, is sort of antithetical to the avant-garde.

VK In Russia, the avant-garde ended in the late 1920s, when it lost the ability to attract official power within the government. From the beginning, they’d said the masses did not understand the abstract art of Kazimir Malevich and the others. At a certain point, even Malevich started to paint realistically.

PD De Chirico changes also, a little earlier.

VK There was a tendency to change in search of the “new.” Paradoxically, realism became new for a short time at in the end of the ‘20s, beginning of the ‘30s. Nowadays we have an entirely new situation, where all kinds of art coexist. Just to take a walk in Chelsea and you will see video art, realist art, photographs, abstract expressionism, abstract geometry, surrealism, etc. That means our criteria of what’s good in art have opened up. We have become tolerant of many contradictions.

PD But that also creates a critical crisis.

VK Sometimes crisis is the period before you go back to health.

PD Jane, it’s interesting that in contemporary Chinese art, particularly with the artists who were in *Transformations*, there remains a strong attachment to realism. Where does this attachment come from?

JDB We just had a show of contemporary Chinese art at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. It’s interesting to note that the curators of this show made a choice to omit painting, at least for the most part. Among the paintings that *were* included were works by Yu Hong, Liu Xiaodong, and a few others, but the core of the exhibition relied on other media—installation, performance, and video. We should remember, however, that many of the artists in that exhibition started out as painters and have retained the skills you mentioned. They are academically trained artists from the Central Academy



in Beijing, or the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, for instance. Behind the conceptual art that the Guggenheim curators decided to present are amazing realist painting-and-drawing skills.

After June 4, 1989, and through much of the 1990s in China, public museums, which were almost entirely state run, were prohibited from displaying so-called avant-garde art, exemplified by much of the work that you saw at the Guggenheim. Artists like Yu Hong and Liu Xiaodong, both students and young teachers at the Central Academy in the late 1980s and ‘90s, may have wanted to continue to exhibit their work publicly, to continue their conversation with the public. In one of his essays Vitaly used the term “official conceptualism,” which I thought was lovely. Is that what we have here?

PD Wasn’t it also true that Yu Hong was taking some chances with her own career?

JDB Yes, but she stayed with a more traditional-looking vocabulary and she perfected it. As did Liu Xiaodong. They were truth-tellers in the sense that they were showing a Beijing that was not bright, shiny, and red, required characteristics of politically acceptable art during the strident Maoist years. That willingness to tell the truth was controversial within a mainstream context. For example, one work by Liu Xiaodong in the recent Guggenheim show showed two boys, *liúmáng* or hoodlums, burning a rat—marginalized, unemployed guys hanging around, doing nothing, being bored, and burning a rat. That was the flip side of the new economy that was beginning to surge. People were going to be left behind. Liu Xiaodong communicated this new reality in a language that was at once legible and unsettling.

PD That’s one of the aspects I was attracted to in Lu Liang’s work too. He does these incredibly bleak pictures of ghost cities and strange vistas, on an enormous scale, you feel like you’re stepping into reality in a strange way. All the skill sets are there. He’s using everything he’s learned and deploying it to make a very dark statement. But they’re still incredibly beautiful, hauntingly so.

JDB That duality is embedded in the work of a lot of artists who want to maintain a certain kind of visibility, or work within the system, and yet at the same time feel deeply about the social problems in China.

PD In America, earlier generations of conceptual artists have now become deeply embedded in academic life and there seems to be little interest in technical training. It’s a very strange moment. These are people who took chances with their creative lives, saw themselves as progressive, but then institutionalized their beliefs. You go around the country now and even foundation programs are being done away with. And there’s very little room for that training in the larger art marketplace. It’s an entirely different sort of institutional culture.

XW At the same time, it feels like a familiar story, where progressive and democratizing goals almost inevitably become institutionalized. I think what Jane has just laid out about China specifically is important because it’s not just about preserving something—a tradition or a genre—it’s also about expanding and transvaluing it into something completely different, often in response to changing times and cultural/political climates.

PD That’s the most important thing. Part of what’s frightening about traditional atelier practice is that the drawings that come out of it frequently look very similar. But in China at the moment, you don’t actually see this salon sensibility of just repeating the past, you see really great figurative work, and it’s looking to the future. It’s taking advantage of all these linguistic skills but deploying them in ways that haven’t been seen before. It’s fascinating and exciting.

JDB It’s interesting to consider the community of Chinese artists who came to New York around the time of Mark’s *Transformations* exhibition, a community that included both Ai Weiwei and Liu Xiaodong. On one hand, they came from a similar milieu and were friendly colleagues in New York, yet there’s a divide in terms of their approach toward the system. Vitaly, when people from Russia first came to the United States, did that same sense of community pervade?

VK I guess it depends on how long you stayed in New York.

HEIDI ELBERS Vitaly, Chinese artists exhibited in Moscow when you were studying. Do you remember what kind of art was shown?

VK It was Chinese Socialist Realism.

HE In the ‘60s?

VK In the ‘60s it was different. It was a more provocative time.

XW Mark, you were very tuned in to unpacking something about these Chinese artists, and you mentioned the conceptual and perceptual in our previous conversations. That seems to be the duality where irony or ironic meanings would manifest. Interestingly enough, however, in these Chinese artists’ works, there is not the same kind of irony that you practice or subscribe to in your work.

MT I’m not sure to what degree irony overlaps with humor or satire. There is an outward aggression in humor that can be alleviated by laughter. But Vitaly had said recently that irony is “related to the idea of self-reflection.” That’s what I saw vividly, in multiple senses, in the work of the Chinese artists.

VK Sometimes I feel that my self-irony is very close to self-destruction. Because in purifying yourself you’re also losing part of yourself.

PD There’s a certain kind of “disenchanted idealism that uses irony to sort of attack one’s previous faith. Mark, do you feel that the word “irony” implies a lack of faith, or a lack of authenticity?

MT It seems inadequate to try to put a tight definition on it. Satirical artwork, humor, visualizing irony—there are relationships that are volatile, beautiful, and funny at times, but how they come together is quite explosive, an enigma.

VK “Explosive” is a good term.

PD That’s funny, because I remember back when critics felt your art depended on one-liners, so you started to embed text in your work.

MT I realized that text as texture can become picture.

PD They didn’t see the complexity of the work. They weren’t willing to invest themselves in decoding its complexity.

MT At that time, even though a lot of attention was certainly given to representational artists, the critique of representation had it that representational meanings were “single coded,” “single messaged,” and “totalizing.” But if you go beyond that reductive thinking it becomes apparent that there is inherent complexity in how the perceptual and the conceptual interact with the making of a representational picture. That’s the vitality of the figurative, you’re not redesigning anything—you’re

re-presenting, metaphorically. It’s about the interaction of seeing, thinking, and making. And when I see people doing it with verve, it’s a pleasure. It can be dangerous, satirical, ironic, critical, insightful, revelatory. . . .

VK Also sometimes sarcastic.

MT Its many reflective modes show the adequacy of representation as a form of signification.

HE Peter and Mark, you have been working toward the *Figurative Diaspora* exhibition for quite a while. Can you talk about your thought process?

PD At the start we wanted to focus on technical sophistication, but over ten or fifteen years, the proposition changed dramatically, and now it’s something more like traditional skills and contemporary discourse. The artists in both *Transformations* and *Figurative Diaspora* have made an enormous effort to acquire an incredibly difficult set of skills, and they’re trying to do something progressive, something that hasn’t been seen before. Part of what makes their work so interesting is that the language has morphed as it has moved along. Some of the tropes from Soviet Socialist Realism still show up—you’ll see figures portrayed from below, or lit with artificial light. But those devices are used in different ways now, and it feels like there’s a real connection between all three cultures.



TRANSFORMATIONS: NEW YORK, 1994

In 1994 Mark Tansey hosted the exhibition *Transformations* in his apartment which featured four Chinese artists living in New York at the time: Chen Danqing, Ni Jun, Yu Hong, and Liu Xiaodong. Long before any awareness from critics and discourse, they recognized the potency and bandwidths of realism—marginalized by Conceptualism then as well as now—in each other's drastically different practices, informed by radically different cultural, pedagogical, and temporal parameters. It is serendipitous that Tansey and the Chinese artists were connected by Vitaly Komar, part of the Soviet artist duo Komar and Melamid, not least due to the legacy of Soviet brand of Socialist Realism that continued to loom large in art academies in China. *Thank You For Your Love 1994*, a forthcoming publication edited by Xin Wang with contributions from Cindy Qi Xingyi, will delve deep into the circumstances and confluences of *Transformations*, a singular event that speaks volumes to the constellation of contemporaneous experiments as well as anachronistic connections in the increasingly globalized art world in 1990s New York.

This transformational edge in his work led me to appreciate the importance of understanding their work in terms of extending temporal transformations of their culture rather than the narrow temporal postures of mine.

Mark Tansey

When I first saw one of Chen Danqing's large triptychs several years ago in his studio on 42nd street I was deeply struck and puzzled. The Socialist Realist grammar taken to the hilt was combined with recent familiar vanguard conventions of *appropriation* and *juxtaposition* normally associated with the 1980s postures of neutralized meaning. My immediate reflex was toward quick judgment. However, it didn't take me long to take my temporal blinders off and realize that I wasn't looking at these paintings—they were looking at me. Two thousand years of ink painting, about forty years of Socialist Realism, and three years of cultural surge since Tiananmen Square were grinning at my temporal chauvinism. The triptych panel on the far right, based on Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin*, showed me that Chen's hand was closer to Caravaggio than any I'd ever seen. In the panel on the left, a wounded girl being lifted from Tiananmen Square shows his Socialist Realism at its source. And in the center panel one sees any of us at a New York club in our glorious precision obsolescence. What holds the pictures together is the similarity of gesture, the figural dynamics, and the Socialist Realist voice. But the edge between each panel is a cultural temporal maelstrom.

Chen's work served as an introduction to me to the works of Liu Xiaodong, Yu Hong, and Ni Jun. And this transformational edge in his work led me to appreciate the importance of understanding their work in terms of extending temporal transformations of their culture rather than the narrow temporal postures of mine.

In Liu Xiaodong's art, painted just after Tiananmen Square, one can follow a transition of increasingly robust individuation away from the restrictions and uniformity of Socialist Realism. The work of Yu Hong, "who expands Eastern attitudes of women's liberation" by painting women, including herself, makes readily apparent a transition from her Socialist Realist to an exuberant celebration of the human body. Ni Jun goes directly to gesture grammars of power and political transactions, which may be the most fundamental site of cultural transformation.

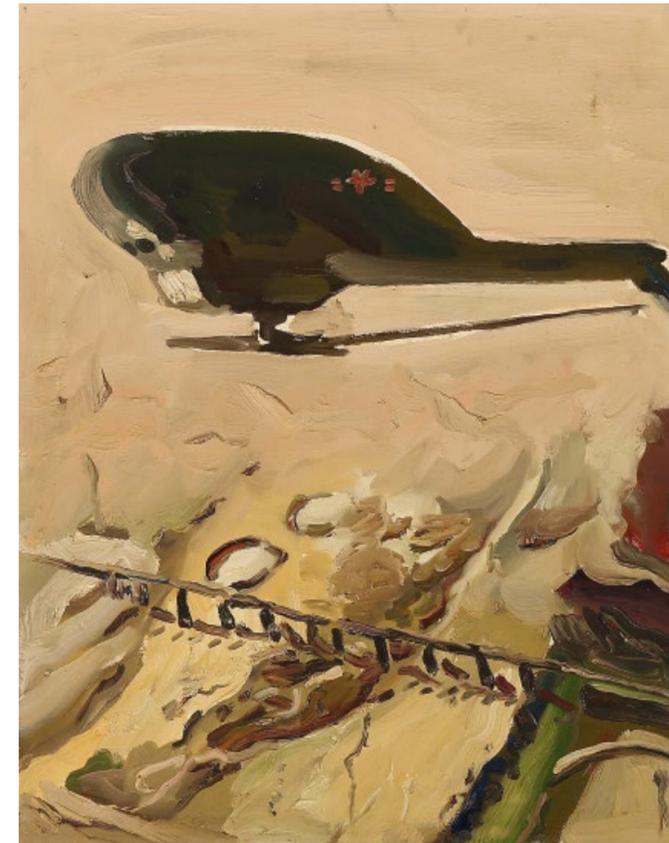
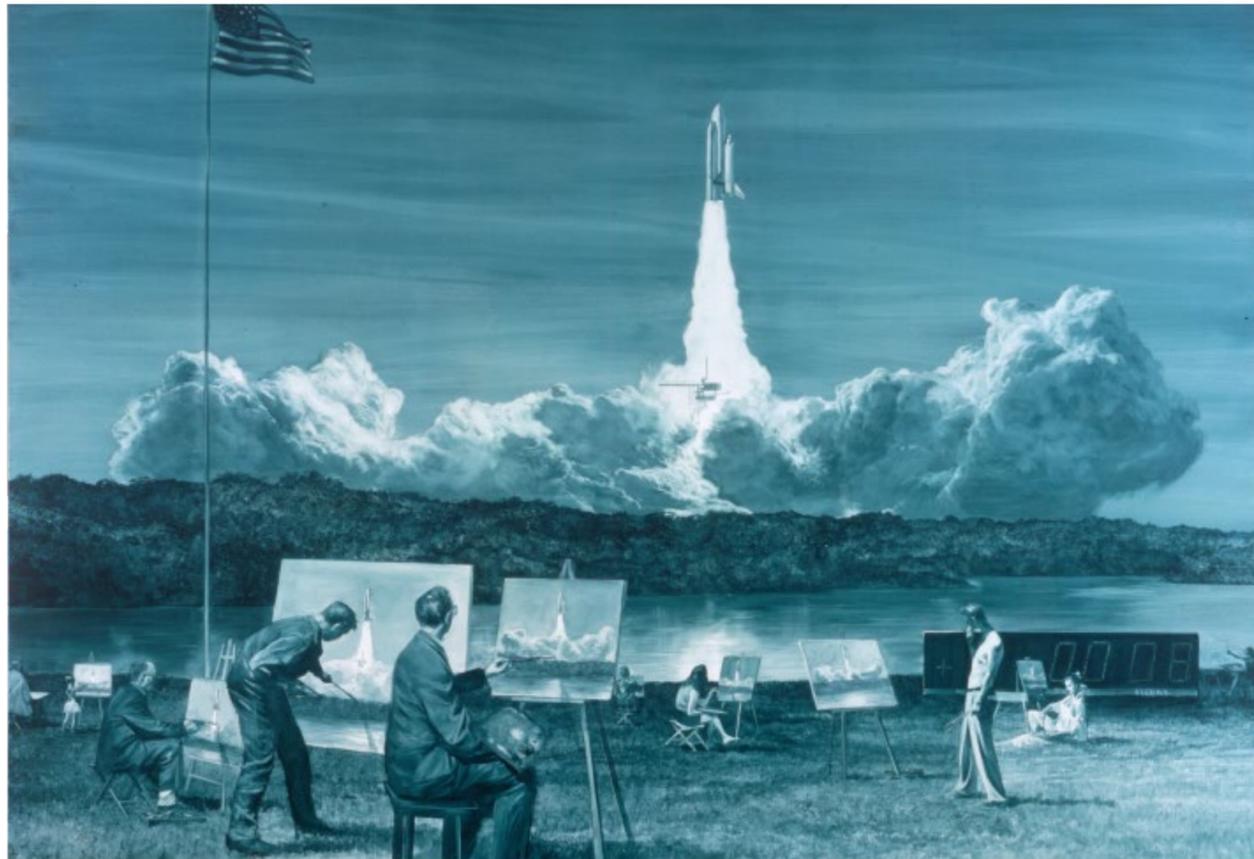
It's my hope that this private showing will add to a progressive international discourse based on the renewed vitality and complexity of the pictorial language we have in common.

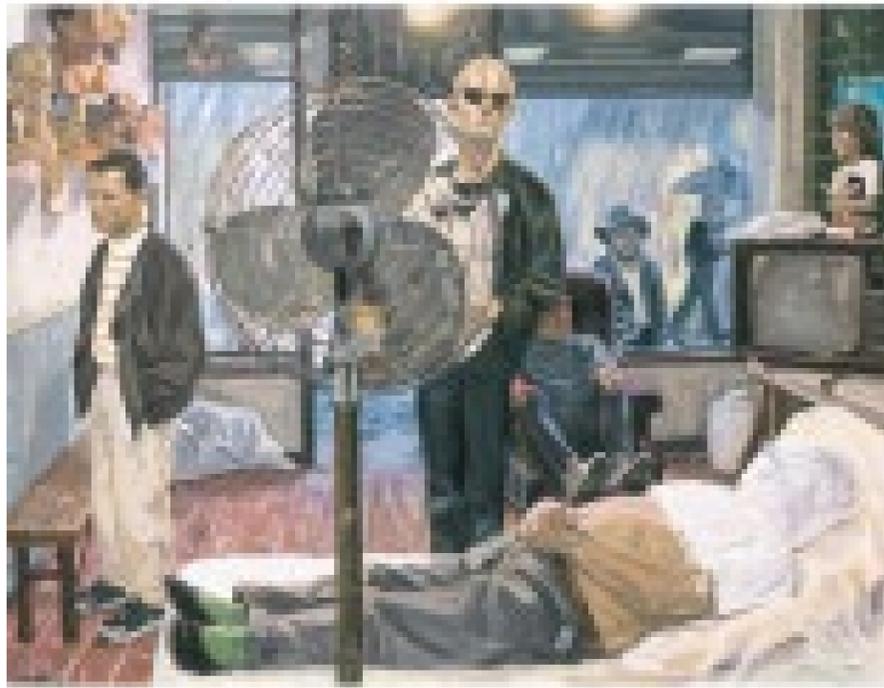
—Mark Tansey, 1994

Opposite:
Mark Tansey, *Action Painting II*, 1984, oil on canvas, 76 × 110 inches (193 × 279.4 cm)
© Mark Tansey

Left:
Ni Jun, *North Korea*, 1991, oil on canvas, 31 ½ × 26 ¼ inches (80 × 68 cm) © Ni Jun

Right:
Yu Hong, *A Girl At Leisure*, 1993, oil on canvas, 47 ¼ × 35 ¼ inches (120 × 89 cm)
© Yu Hong





Left:
Liu Xiaodong, *The Heavy Rain*, 1993, oil on canvas, 56 3/8 x 72 1/8 inches (143 x 183 cm) © Liu Xiaodong

Below:
Ai Weiwei at John Ahearn's Studio (1993). Photos by Liu Xiaodong

Opposite:
Chen Danqing, *Leather Shoes and Leather Boots*, 1987, oil on canvas, 22 1/8 x 27 3/8 inches (56 x 70 cm) © Chen Danqing

My experiences tell me that artists here are open-minded and they communicate with each other no matter what race or nationality.

Chen Danqing



Sitting at a bar on the Lower West Side one night in the early 1990s, Mark Tansey took a look at photos of my paintings that had been given to him by a mutual friend and simply said, “When you have time, we need to have a longer conversation.”

On a brutally cold day a week later, Mark traveled to my place by subway. When he arrived, he sat down and was quiet for a while, but we eventually ended up talking until midnight.

To use an old Chinese term, Mark is a *shu-sheng* (scholar). He contemplates while discussing, sometimes smiles, but just for a second, and soon returns to pondering. He seldom talks about himself, never interrupts, but is both forthright and cautious. If he speaks for longer than he deems appropriate, he will stop himself: “Oh, I think I’ve said too much. What do you think?”

Sometimes he is just shy.

Mark’s personality seems to contrast with the irony-tinged content of his paintings: a cow is led to an oil painting; a TV host extends a microphone to a sphinx statue for an interview; a group of painters sit in front of their easels and sketch mushroom clouds; two literati scuffle on the edge of a precipice composed of words. I saw the last piece at the Whitney Biennial in 1985 but did not know that one of the two literati depicted was Jacques Derrida. What does that mean? At the time, I thought I could see through everything but I still didn’t understand. There must be some implication or intention. Clearly, the artist had taken ignorance and knowledge into consideration; in other words, our knowledge becomes useless in front of these paintings.

Our early correspondence was quite formal. Mark mailed me handwritten notes a few times

to make appointments or reschedule our meetings. Living in the contemporary era and in the same city, he wrote letters instead of making phone calls—such a long-absent, old-fashioned gesture. However, talking to Mark face-to-face sometimes confused me, so much so that I often got lost in language, even in Chinese. He patiently instructed me in words such as “structure,” “deconstruction,” “metaphor,” “rhetoric,” etc., by referencing the English-Chinese dictionary I would bring with me. But I would get confused again when the words mixed together in his long sentences. Sometimes when we discussed my paintings, I would respond, “I don’t get it.” He would reply seriously, “Yes you do. You have it in your paintings already. I can see that.”

After long conversations with Mark, I would feel exhausted and intrigued. That said, I often wondered if a three-person conversation might be more interesting than just he and I trying to understand one another. He would often apologetically remark, “I wish I could speak Chinese.” As time passed, however, I realized that we did understand each other, and that Mark wanted a confidant. He needed a listener, someone with whom he could talk to about the possibilities of painting and so-called conceptual art—of not giving up on canvas while also indulging in conceptualism. He appreciated having a sounding board to explore his thoughts on the matter. He repeatedly emphasized that his success was only one of a very few exceptions among the postmodern paintings of the 80s. As to his recognition among major art museums and collections, he simply felt that he was lucky. He would speak of the word “lucky” in a self-deprecating tone, but with remarkable anger when talking about “avant-garde art.” With his eyes glaring down at a corner, as if avant-garde art was lying



there, Mark would say, “I hate it. I hate their attitude of, ‘You’re all wrong and we’re correct.’” He would also make a kick in his leather shoes, reminiscent of the domineering gestures made by avant-garde artists.

To this day, he often speaks contemptuously of the “mainstream.” I would comment, “You’re on that mainstream list yourself,” to which he would reply, “No, no, I’d rather not be.”

Mark always stands in a nonmainstream position and views the mainstream as a foe that he knows well. He respects non-Western mainstream art, however. He once asked me timidly about the issue of space in landscape paintings of the Song dynasty. He assumed that I knew much more than he, but I could only tell him that the concept of “space” did not exist yet in Song-dynasty China. Another time he took me to a party during which he listened intently, like a college student, to artists from the former Soviet Union. Mark also visited one Whitney Biennial that had received a bad review from the *New York Times*. After seeing the installations by young artists, he commented, “Well, yes, it was strident, but the *New York Times* writers just want to remain in the glory days of Abstract Expressionism to ensure the steady victory of holding the authority in their hands. The kids should have fun playing their own games. Vitality, that’s the most important thing!”

In early 1994, I brought a few young peers from Beijing to pay Mark a visit. He had decided to hang our paintings in his home (for which he had cleared out a large room). He prepared good wine and food and gathered dozens of people, including his gallerist and the professor and art critic Arthur Danto. It was a snowy day, and Mark seemed more excited about this event than about preparing his own show. He even asked me twice, “Would your

friends feel uncomfortable about having their paintings hung in my place?” His worry reminded me that Westerners are often extremely serious, even with casual events.

Mark wanted to make the event special. A few days later I went to pick up the paintings. We sat in his kitchen smoking. He had a cigar and, with a hint of sentimentality, he said, “The paintings had to outshow ‘the mainstream!’” He then said, “Mainstream means that some things get to be exhibited, but others don’t.” I laughed. “Is that funny? No, that’s their political game and it’s not interesting to me at all.”

Mark wanted to reach out to galleries for me, but made the suggestion in a roundabout manner. Out of stubbornness or laziness, or maybe both, I had not tried to reach out to galleries for about eight years. I worked on my own. Mark could see through this and tactfully suggested, “I totally understand you. But things just need to be shown. Let them have a look and decide.” Of course, Mark knew more about galleries’ strategies than I did. But he was a friend with whom I wanted only simple discussions, with no worldly business involved. I promised I would comply with his suggestion but never called him back.

Almost half a year passed. Eventually, Mark called me, and with his clumsy self-deprecating tone said, “I’m sorry, okay? I don’t contact people that often. I know it’s bad.”

The thing is—it was my bad. I should have apologized but I didn’t. I invited him to my place and he came without bringing the note with my new address and phone number on it. He wandered around the building, finally went home to call me, and apologized several times. The next day he came back with a pack of beers. I feel Westerners drink beer like water.

Over time, I have heard voices questioning the cultural centralism and hegemony of the West. I’ve also seen earnest efforts in the United States to advocate for and support non-Western and non-white art. The “loudness” of these efforts makes me uncomfortable, however. Perhaps we are just fine without them, but these activities make us see the “center” and smell the “hegemony.” This is probably what Mark was referring to when he talked about the “political game.” Nonetheless, my experiences tell me that artists here are open-minded and they communicate with each other no matter what race or nationality. Jean Renoir, the French film director and son of the Impressionist painter, called himself “a citizen of the world of films” in the last chapter, “An End to Nationalism,” of his memoir *My Life and My Films*. He wrote, “If a French farmer should find himself dining at the same table as a French financier, those two Frenchmen would have nothing to say to each other. . . . But if a French farmer meets a Chinese farmer they will find any amount to talk about.” Is this postulate true? Very possibly. Renoir’s comment was based on his experiences after he had moved to Hollywood and developed close relationships with American directors. Notably, his observation mirrors the situation between Mark and me. With regards to language, we may only understand partially, but we indeed fully comprehend each other.

—Chen Danqing, 1998

Translated from the Chinese by Qianfan Gu

1. Jean Renoir, “An End to Nationalism,” in *My Life and My Films* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2000), pp. 279–80.