



LI RAN: MENTAL MASTURBATION

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Beyond Geography, 2012, Color, sound, HD video, Dimensions variable

THE YOUNG ARTIST Li Ran (born 1986) is able to eloquently delineate nearly every facet of his burgeoning artistic practice. This should come as no surprise: in the last two years, his work, through the lens of video, has come to hinge almost entirely on the spoken word and the collation of written text. Li's most basic account of his art employs the language of architecture: an artwork is a room, a room that should not shut the door on its audience or corner them into forced, unilateral interpretation. Nor should the door remain completely open, the room easily probed "like a whore." Rather, it should remain considerably and pensively half-open, allowing viewers to enter and exit its domain at their will but not without resistance. This virtual-minded analogy is fitting inasmuch as Li's practice increasingly hinges on the exploration of the nonreality within reality.

This exploration was first revealed in Li Ran's long and lumbering *Mont Saint-Victoire*. Based on a performance given at the opening of his 2011 solo exhibition at Magician Space in Beijing, the 33-minute video stumbles throughout a seemingly illogical, furcated dialogue between a number of imagined characters, all meticulously impersonated by a bespectacled, throwback Li seated before a microphone. On the whole, the phrases and concepts articulated therein— from "This is a constantly alienating, nonfictional world within a contradicting argument, a world that could remain in the transposition between vegetables and fruits" to "It isn't a dream, but we are the objects inside someone else's dream"— weave together to construct an anteroom to the great chamber that is his Art, intimidating in the isolation they affect in the viewer. In detail, however, each carefully constructed phrase can be seen as an indicative confession, and thus may serve as a key to opening the door beyond— and furthermore, to maneuvering the intellectual architecture within. But just how real is that intellectual architecture?

Li Ran's affinity for imitation functions as an initial blueprint of this dubious artistic framework, loudly superimposed over form and content. In *Mont Saint-Victoire* alone, the personalities of dozens of different characters he adopts, from the withered meekness of an old man and the husky righteousness of a left wing youth to an aged rapist and his victim, are all filtered through the splendid exaggeration of voiceover film actors from 1970s and 80s China. For viewers (listeners) familiar with the soundscapes of the scant imported films and television series of the time, Li's imitations are inevitable invitations to close one's eyes and contextualize each character within one's own personal perceptual histories. Together with the dialogue's intentional rhetorical failures, this induction of a constructed reality from the past (film and television) into another constructed reality (the video, which itself is a reproduction of yet another reality) is Modernism par excellence. It is a self-inflicted fissure in the feasibility of the artwork, and thus of art itself— a driving force of Li's practice.

Or, at the very least, Li Ran aims to remind us of one of contemporary art's incomplete tasks: the everlasting tenets of Modernism. It would seem that in his eyes, contemporary art fails to achieve full consciousness of its historical place and right, no matter how much it feigns such awareness. His suspicion is particularly relevant in China, where artists have rushed to catapult themselves ahead in the annals of art history— even if these annals, amidst the foil and folly of other histories, never had the chance to sincerely address what Modernism means to.

In one of Li Ran's newer works, *Beyond Geography*, this issue is more frankly addressed, as the artist dramatizes his role as imitator to the point of sheer parody. Head to toe in the garb of the typical Discovery Channel adventurer-explorer, the artist dashes suavely through the uncharted jungle habitat of a primitive tribe. While on his search for this mysterious society of hunter-gatherers— narrating every step of the way, like any good host, although here in a completely unintelligible language masked by, again, Li's own voice in laughably accurate mimicry of the dubbed Discovery Channel protagonist familiar to Chinese ears— he daringly gulps fresh water from a river, expertly admires exotic vegetation, and whimpers in fear of the dark sounds of the night (screaming, even, as he trips on a human skull). Yet all this takes place in an empty, bare blue television studio, with nothing for the eye to actually behold except the ridiculous visages of the savage tribesmen when Li "discovers" them. As Li ritually accepts the traditional warpaint of his new friends, the viewer begins to understand this comic adventure into the imaginary realm is as backwards as our fundamental understanding of human creativity. When, near the end of the video, Li with the sternest of faces likens the tribe's (invisible) cave paintings to the masterpieces of Picasso and Mondrian, the parody is complete: the artist is condescending protagonist; the caveman is artist. But of course, art has evolved beyond the horses of Chauvet... or has it?

Ultimately, the representation of what we see is no less complex than the representation of what we think, imagine, or predict. In the title work of Li Ran's 2012 solo exhibition "Pretty Knowledge," this uncomfortable reality is confronted head-on. Again playing the part of parodist, Li emulates a viral video of a French clairvoyant in 1980 predicting the happenings of the next 32 years (viral internet content being a new entertainment phenomenon that perhaps serves to disclose the laziness of the collective mind— or its efficiency). His take on the smug (and suspect; no one but Nostradamus could be so accurate, and besides, Final Cut Pro can swiftly make any video look like it was filmed decades back) know-it-all attitude of the clairvoyant is undercut, again, by an imitation of French so ignorant that it resembles not one word of the actual language. The humor of such connerie is amplified this time by Li Ran's omission of any voiceover; any meaning to be gleaned from this babble relies entirely on subtitles, i.e. creativity's most reliable tool, the written word. Elsewhere, it is invalidated by the awareness that while the original clairvoyant discussed the future, Li in fact discusses the past— thereby equating the two, casting them under the same dubious light. The work is yet another cry for a serious evaluation of Modernity, and is seconded in the exhibition space by *Before-After*, four small reproductions of details of William Hogarth's 1736 pre-Modernist painting of essentially the same name. A fine coat here, a barmaid's dress there, and a flash of creamy thigh: Li transplants, with an entirely Postmodern sleight of hand, the juicy semiotics of a context almost 300 years past. Unsurprisingly, the canvases are not all that "pretty."

These and many other works that cannot be delineated here form only one small corner of Li Ran's artistic architecture. Should we choose to heave ourselves deeper into its chasms, let us first return to Mont Saint-Victoire, and be warned. A cursory listen suggests that there is a dialogue taking place, but the more attention one pays, the more obfuscatory their exchange seems. For the writer, painter, parodist, and skeptic Li Ran, this is the art world: a lot of posturing, and very little statement of any worth. Allow us to invoke the nasally-inflected counsel offered by the "proud middle-aged man" halfway through this pas de charlatans: "There is no need to discuss this tough philosophical statement any further. Back in Art, what we observe is beyond the definition of the system and global organization. Although it could be sorted and sequenced, this clumsy division, the tedious writing, mingled with the urgent and yet fabricated illusion hidden behind, actually amount to a kind of mental masturbation."

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