

Biography

LI RAN (b. 1986 in Hubei, China) currently lives and works in Beijing. He graduated from Sichuan Fine Arts Institute with a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts, and he is both the initiator and participant of the Company project. Li has held solo exhibitions at Magican Space, Beijing; Aike-Dellarco Gallery, Shanghai; Goethe-Institut Open Space, Shanghai; and also participated in group exhibitions at Meulensteen, New York; and OTA Fine Arts, Tokyo. His works have also been featured in the 9th Gwangju Biennial, Gwangju; 7th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale, Shenzhen; and "Former West: Documents, Constellations, Projects" at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin.

Current & Forthcoming

LI RAN's work *Beyond Geography* will show at the exhibition "Former West: Notes from Berlin" at BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, until 6 October 2013.



Will the specter of modernism ever take its leave? Far from announcing the completion, if not the exhaustion, of the modern project, postmodernism and its varied inflections — antimodernism, the altermodern, the off-modern — seem to have only preserved modernism as a ghostly afterlife that rebounds, poltergeist-like, with each successive attempt at exorcising it. Modernism returns, time and again, even in places where its claim to a prior presence is at best tenuous: to what extent can one, for instance, speak of a Chinese or an African modernism? Across time and space, histories and geographies, modernism haunts.

For the Chinese artist Li Ran, however, no anxieties are harbored towards this lingering ghost. His project is neither that of a ritual purge nor a steadfast recovery, but rather of a skittish flirtation with the null object he takes modernism to be. Working across performance, video and installation, Li invokes the names of such masters as Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso and Mondrian in a register that is ostensibly parodic, except that the target here is not so much ridiculed as merely taken as a device for play. For Li, the histories and reference points of Western modernism are instituted, arbitrary markings against which he choreographs his schizo-modern dance. His curiosity towards the modernist legacy, in this sense, lies not so much in the referent as in the critical distances at play. He operates in the gaps that open up with each incursion and recursion of the modern project, in the spaces of dismeasure that are also spaces of freedom, experimentation and fiction-making.

Li's *Another "The Other Story"* (2013) is an installation that takes its title from the 1989 exhibition "The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Postwar Britain" curated by Rasheed Araeen. While Araeen's show has since been criticized for failing to transcend the Eurocentric logic of art historical canonicity precisely because the exhibition attempted to correct it, Li's work deftly skirts the problematic by way of a critical remove that allows him to check rather than be undermined by the anxieties of influence. The installation consists of the oil paintings that Li's artist father made in the '70s, accompanied by photographs and textual documents recreated by Li from memory, which together reveal the man's admiration of the European canon. In one note, it is written: "About Art, the Soviet's way is too simple, the American's way is too common... if you want to learn western Art, you better go to Europe." The naiveté of tone is striking, but more startling is the fact that Li takes no pains to make an issue of it. Li presents his father as merely a fan, as just *another* modern artist, as opposed to *the* other modern artist whose very appellation invokes the canon to which it is other. The proposition here is curious, if not radical in its simplicity: the only way to get over our postcolonial hangover is precisely to get *over* it, to re-understand our relationship with the West through notions of distance and discontinuity rather than those of disavowal and disruption.

We see this logic at its most developed in Li's performance and video pieces, which often involve the artist playing a myriad of characters. His signature move is that of remake and dub. In *Another Modern Artist* (2013), a video presented as part of the aforementioned installation, for instance, he plays a Chinese modern artist coming to grips with his Western influences. Notably, the natural voice of the protagonist has been dubbed over by a baroque, overly inflected voice reminiscent of those heard in imported foreign films dubbed in Mandarin. The grain of the voice here is peculiar, seeming to defy cultural designation. It belongs to neither of the cultures it mediates; it is the mark of their incommensurability. This vocalic eccentricity is pushed further in *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (2012), a performance installation

Author

HO RUI AN is an artist and writer working at the intersection of contemporary art, cinema, theory and fiction writing. Based in London and Singapore, he is the Singapore desk editor for *ArtAsiaPacific* and has recently contributed to the forthcoming Yang Fudong monograph edited by Philippe Pirotte. In 2011, his first novel, *Several Islands*, was published by the Substation, Singapore.



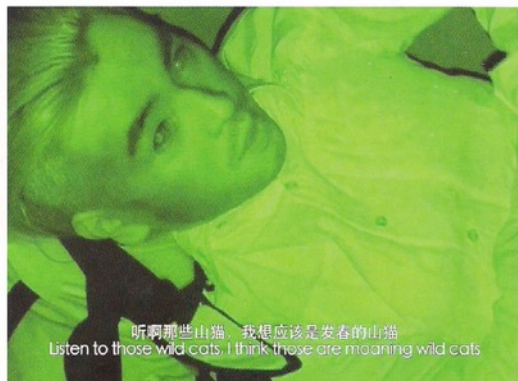
which takes its title from the mountain from which Cézanne drew much of his inspiration. In the performance, the artist, groomed, suited and cloaked in an air of mock formality, sits at a table and reads a dubbing script into a condenser microphone. The text is a tissue of quotes drawn from numerous theoretical writings by various Western thinkers from Barthes to Žižek, and the gamut of tones the artist adopts to play a variety of characters attests to his rather astounding facility at voice acting. But the feat performed here is not mimicry but ventriloquism. The artist speaks, but the voice that emanates from him does not seem to belong to him, traveling like an unruly vector knowing neither origin nor destination.

Some of Li's works are more consciously parodic. Such is the case with *Beyond Geography* (2012), a mockumentary of the famous *Discovery* series by the BBC that features Li's usual stilted dubbing. In it, Li plays an intrepid travel host who ventures into the wilderness in search of a certain ancient Shynna Babahajarro tribe. In an amusing mix of Indiana Jones-style gallantry and touristic zeal, the host treks through the punishing terrain, sampling river water and evading imagined cannibals along the way, before finally discovering the secret tribe and gamely joining in their rituals. But there's a catch: the filming is all done against an empty blue screen studio, thus stripping down the entire documentary to its bare staging. Documentary, in one stroke, becomes theater. In one telling sequence, the host points to the empty walls as he speaks effusively about the invisible cave paintings, comparing them to works by Picasso, Gauguin and Pollock. It is an echo of the primitivist thinking that informed modernist discourse, which through its fetishization of cultural contact obscured the power differentials at play. But as with most of Li's works, the role of parody here is not simply to mock its subject but to toy with it at arm's length. There is no urgency to correct a wrong. The misunderstood, the mistranslated and the miscast are all a part of a charade that transforms any incongruity into the basis for humor.

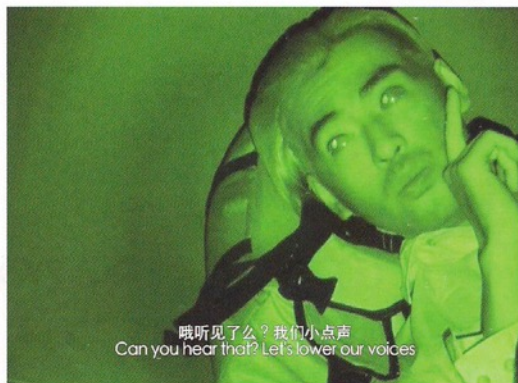
Indeed, humor is the single thread running through Li's recent works, often serving as a way to release accumulated tensions. In the first part of the two-part video installation *I Want To Talk To You, But Not To All of You* (2012), we see the artist, stripped of all his personas, engaged in what appears to be a serious conversation with curator Biljana Ciric. The conversation covers a range of issues concerning the Chinese and international art world, especially the failures of communication across different cultural, linguistic and discursive frames of reference. The solemnity of the black-and-white recording is hefty, but this is all quickly dispelled in the second part of the video which remixes and dubs the first part such that it reads as a conversation between a man and his psychiatrist, refiguring the failed transmissions spoken of and enacted earlier as phantoms (by the man's account) and hallucinations (by the psychiatrist's). Parody here punctures the bloatedness of artistic speak, but its mode of release is not a laughing *at* but a laughing *to* — a projectile across a space of discontinuity towards a distant and unplaceable other. The joke *is* the loss in transmission.



这里的蚊子真让人受不了
There're so many mosquitoes here, it's unbearable



听啊那些山猫。我想应该是发春的山猫
Listen to those wild cats. I think those are moaning wild cats



哦听见了么？我们小点声
Can you hear that? Let's lower our voices