

Mimicry and Return

By Su Wei

*Ah, the village, yes, the village.
There are no real enemies here,
And all along the little road are peonies, flaming red,
And chrysanthemums in full bloom.
Well then, let us walk on the village road.*

This brilliant piece of monologue appears at the end of the video piece, "From Truck Driver to the Political Commissar of the Mounted Troops" (2012), by the artist Li Ran (born 1986 in Hubei province). Along both stretches of the village road, one sees flowers blooming naturally, without an object of reference or the pursuit of meaning. Simply walking and encountering completed the entire meaning. Here, language and time are safe in their own domains, and yet they represent and intermesh with one another. Li Ran's poetic lines refract the temporality which was of concern to the artist at the time of creation, along with the related question of modernity. In this work, a mimicry of a Soviet film, "The Fate of a Man," Li Ran plays the role of a Soviet soldier: he imitates to a tee the affected and artificial style of acting under Communist ideology, and enacts the story of a Soviet soldier reminiscing on the past and yearning for the future. The video clearly betrays traces of the present at certain points — with digital-video-style angles like casual shots and follow shots, he mimics the modes of expression in mass culture and satirizes the soldier's obsession with the past as well as his nostalgic mood (which in fact are ours). The artist attempts to open up the temporality of modernity, break down its power of control over our bodies and experience, and thereby call into question the interpretive power of time. This work highlights the discussion of modernity which is extremely important in Li Ran's artistic practice. This not only links up the paradox of our experience, judgement, and knowledge of the present with rational ideas and social significance but is also connected with the question of working in contemporary art today.

From "Mont-Sainte-Victoire" onwards, Li Ran has undergone a series of breakthroughs in the past two years. His practice has gradually moved towards the core issues of contemporary art — facing all manners of transformations in relationships and borders, and continually proposing solutions and interpretations of art itself.

Li Ran's practice offers challenges to the work of criticism. He uses mimicry, reproduction, and satire to mold a strong expressive mode and style. This often means that the normal train of thought in contemporary art criticism towards the conventions of cultural and social criticism is unable to truly see his practice for what it is. On the other hand, since changes began in his practice, the discussion of

“subjectivity” has become the sharpest and prickliest dimension in his works. With the increasing depth and precision of his work, the issue of “subjectivity” seems to dissolve within what the works discuss, broach, and attempt to observe and excavate anew, so that our observations appear to have reached the end of the metaphoric tunnel and have lost the spiritual guidance that used to support reflections on his creation. On the surface level, this presents an immense difficulty for criticism by cutting off effective elaboration and explication, yet it is precisely this point that offers a useful point of reference for art criticism: the return to the context of the work of the artist is, in the end, the most basic task being faced prior to upholding a sense of distance, and this return, on an essential level, is a return to art itself.

Therefore, between Li Ran’s practice and art criticism exists this particular type of non-dependent and mutually propelling relationship. The horizon before them is in many respects parallel and mutually reinforcing. Compared to the romantic imagination of art itself (which keeps appearing in various fields such as contemporary painting), Li Ran’s work takes place on an even more introspective level.

The performance piece, “Mont-Sainte-Victoire” (2012), is Li Ran’s first attempt at using “mimicry” as a technique. In mixing reflections on art historical tradition, the art system as well as the cultural context, the work subtly uses a few strokes of rhetoric to portray basic issues like “coexistence,” “fate,” and so forth, all of which are intimately related to contemporary art practice. And in the video piece, “Beyond Geography,” he even uses simple and dramatic means to fashion a contested context of “fate” while on a certain degree he already transcends the fairly abstract topic of “fate” itself. This work mimics the videography of *Discovery*, a well-known geographical adventure program; in it, Li Ran plays the role of a program host and on purpose fashions a fake “documentation” on film with a simmering adventure. We are all familiar with the techniques such programs use to control the audience’s emotions and thoughts: the meticulous creation of a sense of presence, of doubt, of the process of unveiling secrets, the mood-inducing voice-over — all of which were appropriated by Li Ran in his performance with his own voiceover, to which he occasionally adds a few lines of art-related discourse. In this fabricated “encounter,” when we seek out the traces of the artist in the roles he mimics and the things mimicked, we end up stuck in our own modes of experiences and confined in the labyrinth of content. The artist, disguised under mimicry on the surface, constantly repeats the opinions and yearnings of others, and such repetitions are frequently blurry to the point of self-contradiction — in the instant of repetition, such historical narration suddenly reveals ruptures and constantly dissolves itself. All repeated narrative could emerge again under dramatically new, progressive, and non-derivative guises in Li Ran’s simulated context, part-real and part-fake. And precisely because of such repetitions, art can transcend the (unrepeatable) significance of things as well as the monopoly of the structures and systems, and revert back to the care of art itself.

Mimicry, as well as the mimicry of “mimicry,” is the main technique in Li Ran’s recent practice. What should not be forgotten is that Li Ran refuses to fashion a recognizable aesthetic style through mimicry, but rather, the act of mimicry allows individuality to permeate into the deepest recess of creation itself, thereby examining the zone between narrative and truth, language and time, experience and imagination. In the series of paintings “William Hogarth — Before and After,” Li Ran seemingly appears to mimic sections of Hogarth’s satire of court life. This follows through from “Mont-Sainte-Victoire” to borrow from the magic lanterns used in paintings throughout art history. William Hogarth, adept at creating and mimicking the various anecdotes of the court, had a distinctive satiric style of painting. Attempting to forego narrative, Li Ran appropriates and mimics Hogarth’s mimicry, and attempts to approach the reality of things through the portrayal of sections of the painting. At the same time, the act of mimicry strips out the completeness and sense of beauty in what is originally a fabricated reality, in order to allow art itself to stand out.

His recently created piece, “Pretty Knowledge” (2012), is a dual-channel video work which takes after a segment of a video, popular on the internet, of a certain French seer who relates his predictions for the future. In one, he directly uses the video documentation of this “seer” predicting various major events due to happen after 1980; in the other video, Li Ran himself plays the role of this seer and re-enacts his predictions with an imitation French, mimicking his French intonation and body language. In this performance piece of mimicry and of the repetition of a historical prediction of the future, the artist constructs a timeline without a sense of direction, one that mixes the past, the present, and the future. The truthfulness of the original video itself comes under suspicion, and perhaps comes to fabricate knowledge through the fabrication of time. And such knowledge through the filters of the media, of identity, and of political discourse appears sacrosanct, legitimate, and comforting in terms of our modern fear in the face of infinity. Through mimicry, Li Ran expands the vulgarity, deceit, and political conspiracies of this modern kind of “pretty” knowledge. More importantly and concretely in the art world and context, such modes of formation of knowledge and experience still exist to a large extent, and plays various roles within a diverse range of practices and domains. “Pretty Knowledge” is an act of derision towards the lack of introspection and of referentiality, and towards the interest in and commercial discussion of self-reproduction in the discourse of art. The work clearly reflects on the breadth and depth of Li Ran’s practice, contributing to the peculiar significance of his solo exhibition at Shanghai’s AIKE-Dellarco Gallery.

“Art is a kind of chance encounter,” Li Ran frequently says when describing his own work. Chance encounters represent the flexibility and tactics of work, as well as an admiration of something outside rules and order. We can understand this as a kind of return, a return to art itself which is outside the system and unconfined to aesthetic absolutes; a return to a certain introspection and reflection with regards to the perception of the context of the field; a return to creation imbued with contemporary significance, to a clear creative stance in the face of any value.