



*In the works, he ruthlessly exposed the decadent nature of the nobility, the hypocrisy of the monk,*

## LI RAN

AIKE-DELLARCO GALLERY, HONG KONG

Chinese writer Wang Xiaobo once wrote that history has a fatigued umbilical cord—his aversion to one-dimensional historicity demonstrated by the novels he filled with history that never happened. Chinese artist Li Ran also casts doubt on historicity by stirring up a multiplicity of possible narratives that certain historical settings can harbor. In his video installation *Another The Other Story*, about 30 images on a robust wooden table rest beneath the canopy of a glass case. These photographs, presented by Aike-Dellarco Gallery at Art Basel Hong Kong (May 23–26, 2013), are a constellation of objects choreographed by a fictional narrative about the artist's father and early Chinese modernist artists that stems from these artifacts. The photographic images are selected from an archive of modernist paintings by Li's father, depicting diverse scenes: from coastal landscapes to quiet village alleys, gloomy naked young women to still lifes of crabs and clay bowls. Short texts accompanying the pictures reveal little. The texts are the product of Li Ran's imagination regarding social conditions and his father's personal trajectory in China back in the 1980s and 90s, as evoked by the images; if there are any representational relations between the images and the text, they emerge as if from a tarot reading wherein crossed destinies and imagery are bound together by random sensory data. The line "Be it in the garden or be it in the rain, reality is no more than decoration" is juxtaposed with images wherein gardens, office chairs, or preserved fish are visible. Readymade texts interpolate into the artist's script: "The moon disappears, covered by hazy clouds, the birds disappear in unclear heights ..." lyrics from a Mandopop song of the late 70s.

Two paintings on the walls are relics of Li's father's experiments merging Dunhuang murals and modernist paintings—renderings in which flying Apsaras, strewn with streamers, are delineated on small canvases. In the video *Another Modern Artist*, Li Ran plays a painter with all the dramatic flair of German expressionist cinema. The video's narrations are like a mixtape derived from

the letters between Chinese painter Xu Beihong and poet Xu Zhimo (where aesthetics, technique, and Paul Cézanne are discussed), excerpts from Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," and Li Yu's instructional title *Art History of the West*—all attempts, paralleling one another, to attempt to construct a dialogue with quotes. A projector in the corner focuses its light on a blurry image where the faces of the artist and his father amalgamate.

Li's deliberate blurring between historic and imaginary narratives recalls Simon Fujiwara's archaeological excavation on the dialectics between intimate and public histories, between lived events and fictional discourses. As both archival materials and texts lacking sequential structure, chronologies are tenuous in *Another The Other Story*—making manifest Li's obsession with staging a chaos of linguistic and visual narratives. At an art fair, where a suspension of historical narratives is reified by presupposed neutrality in the white-box-style spaces, Li's approach of fragmenting and seaming fictional histories finds the right place. Similar (language) chaos can be found in his earlier performance/installation *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (2012) in Beijing, whose voice-acting resembled the standardized dubbing of national television in China. The artist interlaced poorly translated Chinese editions of Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* and Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* while imitating a panoply of voices: an old man, a poet, a rapist, and a rapist's victim. Random words such as *vegetables* and *rooms* are blended in his narration to agitate a "lost in translation" syndrome—an epidemic in the Chinese art world.

While drawing inspiration from Rasheed Araeen's 1989 exhibition *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, Li's video eschews exploring the repressed aesthetics of others through a postcolonial lens, offering instead a form of role-played alterity expressed through textual fabrications and stilted bodily movements. His foregrounding of the practice of acting is almost turned into a performative contradiction in its

ABOVE: Li Ran, video still from *Another The Other Story*–*Another Modern Artist*, 2013, single-channel, sound, HD video, 7:05 minutes [courtesy of the artist]

othering of Li's artistic practice. With an attempt to investigate the role of the artist by externalizing himself from the identity of the profession, an extimacy distances Li from the figure of the artist as an unknown other. This otherness—just like what Giorgio Agamben characterizes as “gesture”—“supports” and “endures” with the possible imaginary histories that may emerge from the assemblage of images and objects. By a distancing gesture with respect to the originary point of his own identity, Li orchestrates an event like a Bunraku (*Ningyo joruri*) play—wherein puppets are controlled and narrated by the puppeteers and chanters who, although veiled in dark costumes, remain visible onstage—inducing “effected,” “effective,” and “vocal” gestures that are respectively related to the motions and speech of the puppet, the puppeteer, and the vociferator, constructing a spectacle formed by three gestural strata.

Li animates the puppets of identities and histories, not only by playing the role of an “artist” in the video, but also through tugging the strings of possible histories from the debris of his father's personal past. Li's “puppetry” summons Walter Benjamin's metaphorical use of a puppet in describing historical materialism. The German philosopher sees the “puppet” as being controlled by a dwarf named theology. The puppet's real identity—historicism, an “eternal picture of the past”—is contrasted with the multitude of images and narratives in Li Ran's installation. Through suturing together objects abandoned by time, Li attempts to expose a pool of unhappened historic events no less hermetic than Bunraku's puppeteers. The unmasking of possible, yet fictional, events brings forth a temporal disorientation—a sudden pause formed by the “tensions” within the artist's constellations of intimate and public histories.

—Venus Lau