

From the Archive: Liang Shaoji Looks into the Void

Zoe Zhang Bing Features 08 October 2021 ArtReview Asia

On the opening of his latest solo exhibition at Shanghai's Power Station of Art, a look back at the Chinese artist's most memorable works (from *ArtReview Asia's* Spring 2015 issue)



Snow Cover No. 1 (detail), 2013, silk, cocoons, paper cup, plastic cup, metal, board, 17 x 122 x 244 cm. Courtesy the artist and Shanghart, Shanghai, Singapore & Beijing

Last October, when Liang Shaoji's exhibition *Back to Origin* was on show at Shanghart Gallery in Shanghai, I was coincidentally reading *Catching the Big Fish* (2006), David Lynch's book on meditation and creativity. In it, the American film director says: 'Ideas are like fish... if you want to catch the big fish, you've got to go deeper.' Over the past 25 years, Liang has spent his life living in a temple on Mount Tiantai in central Zhejiang Province, leading a life as simple as a monk's: reading, meditating and searching for spiritual enlightenment. But he has also devoted himself to the study and practice of silkworm farming. And rooted in this real-life – as opposed to artistic – discipline, his art (which often deploys silkworms as a medium) manages both to describe a relationship between mankind and nature, and to reflect a cultural and historical understanding of 'life' through a personal perspective.

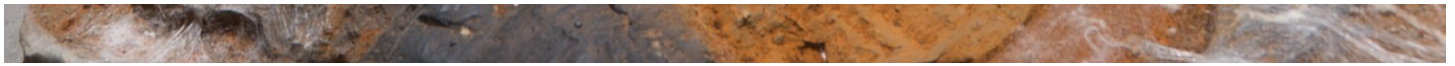
Lynch was born in 1946, in Montana, USA; Liang was born in 1945, in Shanghai, China. Despite their similar ages, the two artists' lives are as distant as their birthplaces: as with parallel lines, there are no obvious intersections. And yet, just as Lynch's movies generally come across as not easy to access for the uninitiated, any true understanding of Liang's work requires some insight into traditional Eastern philosophies. Still, Lynch is widely hailed as a wizard of filmmaking, just as, in the Chinese contemporary art scene, Liang has a similar reputation: often described as the 'holy hermit' or 'reclusive master'.



Destiny, 2012–14, silk cocoon, iron plate, iron powder, oil barrel, polyurethane colophony, acrylic, yellow ground, 180 x 1250 x 350 cm. Courtesy the artist and Shanghart, Shanghai, Singapore & Beijing

In his younger years, Liang studied traditional weaving techniques and design, and was subsequently influenced by Marin Varbanov, a Bulgarian textile artist who studied at the Central Academy of Art and Design in Beijing (graduating in 1959) and who combined Western and Chinese techniques to introduce modern art tapestry to China. During the 1980s Varbanov, together with his Chinese followers, established the ‘Soft Sculpture’ movement. Since 1988, deploying a combination of biology, sociology, traditional eremitic culture and Zen philosophy, Liang has managed to integrate silk spinning with contemporary artforms like installation, performance, video and sound art. More precisely, Liang’s art practice has centred on silk farming and the silkworm – a creature normally seen as the symbol of rebirth and reincarnation. From its living habits to its life cycle, Liang knows everything there is to know about the creature and has even developed a unique technique that allows him to ‘direct’ silkworms to spin silk on and around a variety of surfaces and objects, rather than producing their usual cocoons. Through the manipulation of sound, music, light, temperature, manmade materials and smell, he manages to guide, alter and even transform the paths by which silkworms spin, and create the sculptural forms he envisages by twining and piling up their threads.





Destiny (detail), 2012–14, silk cocoon, iron plate, iron powder, oil barrel, polyurethane colophony, acrylic, yellow ground, 180 x 1250 x 350 cm. Courtesy the artist and Shanghart, Shanghai, Singapore & Beijing

Destiny (2012–14), a monumental installation, features rusty iron hoops, muddy oil drums and broken iron plates. It seems like a fragment of a huge disaster, a portrait of doomsday. In contrast to the overwhelmingly giant and weighty industrial products, the white silk wrapped around them and corpses of silkworm moths are light and ephemeral. In *Snow Cover* (2014), silkworms are placed either in everyday objects such as wine bottles, coffee boxes, plastic cups, poster papers, high-heeled shoes and electronic components, or in relics of ancient architecture, stone carving, broken porcelain and withered twigs. The silkworms spin continuously so that the silk wraps around the objects, making them look almost snow-capped. Walking among the works, viewers feel as if they have entered a cemetery in which time and space are stationary, and where the past and present are juxtaposed. The world we're familiar with seems to have faded away. And so has the warmth of life. What's left is only the vestige of fragility, struggle, entanglement, suffering and death.



Snow Cover - Faint Aroma, 2014, silk, cocoons, china, vine, board, 28 x 52 x 82 cm. Courtesy the artist and Shanghart, Shanghai, Singapore & Beijing

It somehow dragged me back to a typical David Lynch movie, *Mulholland Drive* (2001), in which reality and dream, truth and illusion, the spiritual and the physical, are intertwined, tearing each other apart, where men wander around the multiple dimensions of time and space, and look forward to the redemption of the soul as their life approaches its end. In today's China, after the prevalence of idealism during the 1980s, the market-economy boom during the 90s and the so-called globalisation that has taken off in the twenty-first century, all the old rules have been broken, and values such as sincerity, honesty and mutual trust have been sabotaged. As a result, it seems as if Chinese people have become easily irritated, twisted and fretful. In Liang's work, fragile bodies are intertwined with cold metal wires, architectural relics that look like detritus from earthquakes or industrial waste. Has the silkworm become a symbol, indicating the violence, cruelty and sorrow of life? In his introduction to the exhibition, Liang wrote that by resorting to the silkworm, he wanted to fulfil his wish of 'returning home', or in other words, going 'back to origin'. In this regard, does his work also allude to the sense of helplessness, distress and suffering felt searching for the path to 'go back to the origin' in darkness?



Liang Shaoji with *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being / Nature Series No 79*, 2003, photographed in 2002 as a work in progress. Courtesy the artist and Shanghart, Shanghai, Singapore & Beijing

Time and life constitute the core of Liang's work. According to the artist, time imbues space with life. Silk is the vestige of a silkworm's life, the accumulation of power before silkworm metamorphoses into moth, and the index between the existent and existence. Objects wrapped by the silk are the sculpture of time, life and nature. In other words, they are examples of destiny. The influence of Chinese traditional philosophies and the doctrine of the Buddhist Tiantai school, especially its core doctrine *zhiguan* (cessation and insight), can be clearly perceived in Liang's work. In Sanskrit, 'cessation and insight' can be translated as 'void and stillness'. 'Stillness' means the nurturing of quietude and tranquillity, and 'void' refers to the nurturing of viewing and intelligence. The artist mentioned that he once talked to the abbot of Guoqing Temple on Mount Tiantai, asking for the direction by which he might obtain a deeper meaning of 'cessation and insight'. The abbot gave him the *Lotus Sutra*, one of the most popular and influential Mahāyāna sūtras, the basis upon which the Tiantai and Nichiren schools of Buddhism were established, and told him to 'read it and then you'd realise "cessation and insight" doesn't deny movement'. It was at that point that he was enlightened: 'cessation and insight' actually implied movement in stillness. Only by taking time could one see and read the world with rapt attention. Liang's work constantly pursues the mystery of life's origins, hoping that a comprehensive dissection will remove the surface of traditional culture that covers the contemporary era and allow one to probe deeper beneath its skin.



Babies/Nature Series No. 15, 1995, red industrial silk, cocoons, 2 x 6 x 3cm each. Courtesy the artist and Shanghart, Shanghai, Singapore & Beijing

Mending Sky (2011) is an example of that. It makes viewers feel upset and uneasy. The single-channel videowork features silkworms crawling on broken mirrors and spinning. In Stephen Bayley's *Ugly: The Aesthetics of Everything* (2011), the author puts forward the bold question: who drew the conclusion that nature is beautiful? The title, *Mending Sky*, originated from the Chinese myth of the Goddess Nüwa mending the sky. Such a legend is obviously enlightening, encouraging people to pursue the spirit of heroism and to make sacrifices for the sake of the integrity of nature and the beauty of the world. But the result is probably destructive. When people put on the headset and listen to the sound of silkworms crawling, spinning and wiggling on broken glass, it is the piercing sense of pain given out by glass cutting silkworms that comes across, rather than the beautiful sky view reflected in the glass. The beautiful natural scene shown in this work is somewhat sarcastic. Indeed, when power is hidden beneath a pleasing appearance, how might we define beauty and ugliness? As there is no blood or wound seen on the corpses of the silkworms, do our souls tremble? Lynch wrote: 'In stories, in the worlds that we can go into, there's suffering, confusion, darkness, tension and anger. There are murders; there's all kinds of stuff. But the filmmaker doesn't have to be suffering to show suffering... You can show the human condition, show conflicts and contrasts, but you don't have to go through that yourself. You are the orchestrator of it, but you're not in it. Let your characters do the suffering.' In Liang's work, the silkworm has taken the place of the artist himself and becomes the witness, sufferer and martyr of life.



Beds/Nature Series No. 10, 1993, charred copper, silk, cocoons, 800 x 200 x 10 cm. Courtesy the artist and Shanghart, Shanghai, Singapore & Beijing

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben was a big influence on Liang's desire 'to keep his eyes firmly on our current era, and to write about the obscurity we are currently experiencing'. According to Liang, the 'obscurity' doesn't mean a 'hopeless abyss. On the contrary, obscurity is light, the kind that attempts to reach us but finally fails to'. In Liang's recent catalogue, he establishes a link between Agamben's notion of 'obscurity' and the 'void and stillness' advocated by the Tiantai school of Buddhism. In his practice and exploration of philosophies, religions, social studies, history and human civilisations, the two converge, accompanying the artist as he goes forward along his journey in art. Apart from being an artist, it is more appropriate to define Liang as a silkworm farmer, a Zen practitioner meditating on the relationship between himself and the work as well as the interplay between life and its origin. The magnificence and modesty lying in 'void and stillness' and the warmth and lustre of the 'obscure light' imbue Liang with the courage and strength to carry on the lonely journey in the exploration of art. In the context of Asian cultures, the silkworm is taken as a poetic symbol – symbolising ephemeral beauty and the devotion of life. In the meantime, cocooning is a metaphor for *samsara*, the repeating cycle of birth, life and death. Liang Shaoji has devoted most of his time to the silkworm, to art and to his vision. He is the witness of life, maker of art, and sufferer of the spiritual.

From the Spring 2015 issue of ArtReview Asia

PSA Collection Series: Liang Shaoji – A Silky Entanglement, is on view at Power Station of Art, Shanghai, 29 September 2021 – 20 February 2022

Zoe Zhang Bing Features 08 October 2021 ArtReview Asia

Related articles

What Does the 'Global South' Even Mean?

Oliver Basciano Features

Sancintya Mohini Simpson: Branches We Hold Onto

Mark Rappolt Features

WangShui: How to Dematerialise Identity

Emily McDermott Features

Cai Guo-Qiang on Social Realities and His Ongoing Conversations With the Universe

ArtReview Asia Features

"One Day This Boy...": How David Wojnarowicz Gave Me Life

Khashayar J. Khabushani Features

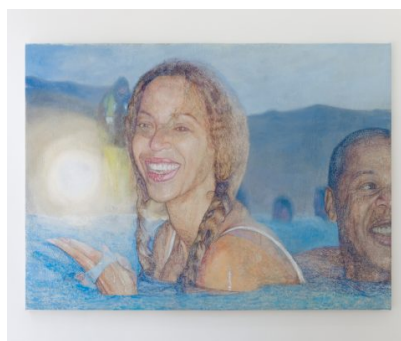
Most recent



James Chronister Doesn't Paint Landscapes

Claudia Ross Reviews ArtReview 24 August 2023

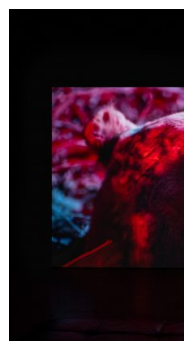
The artist's multimedia process of manipulation – on show at Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles – destabilises any cohesive understanding of the artistic tradition



Hamishi Farah Paints Beyoncé and Roberto Cavalli

Tom Morton Reviews ArtReview 23 August 2023

A message about nation-states and independence can be found where you least expect it



The Art of 'A Little'

Jenny Wu Reviews 23 August 2023

A new show at Hong Kong intends to survey an 'glitched' bodies of disparate social con

Follow us on social media



Sign up to the ArtReview newsletters

Your email

Your name

Country ▾

Subscribe

- ☐ ArtReview
- ☐ ArtReview Asia
- ☐ ArtReview Events