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Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Creativity

Liu Wei discusses his ideas about freedom, perception and art interpretation



In light of Liu Wei's recent solo exhibition at Long March Space in Beijing, *randian* sought out the artist in his studio located on the outskirts of Beijing to discuss media, social intervention, consumerist culture and creativity in a post-industrial world.

Liang Shuhan: Oil was the initial medium you learned and began to work with. Later, you transitioned into multi-media art using different materials and formats. Is there a reason you moved from the singular to the plural?

Liu Wei: It was a natural transition. When we were in school, there was only oil paint; the mediums we have now didn't exist. But I couldn't remain frozen on the easel and in painting, because society was transitioning, so this progression was inevitable.

Another reason is that our school (China Academy of Art) was a very progressive place. As soon as I entered the [CAA] affiliated middle school, I heard people talking about Andy Warhol. That's why it wasn't likely for me to assume that drawing was the "be all and end all" of artistic expression. I realized that drawing didn't count for everything at an early age. Our academy had an excellent library; you could find the best magazines of the time there. So I came in contact with a lot of things and didn't remain fixed in the second dimension.

LSH: Many of your works have a hint of the political in them. For example in your current exhibit at Long March Space you've used army green materials. In addition, your works "Love It, Bite It" and "Do Not Touch" easily cause onlookers to associate them with political matters. Is this a method of using art to create a link, or rather, using art as a connection?

LW: You could say there's a connection. We encounter politics in everyday life, so it's impossible to separate life from politics. On an important level, politics must exist, that's why my works do relate to them. As for what methods I've used to connect the two, I cannot say because superficial connections have no meaning. Expressing the political leanings I may hold is meaningless. Whether art can truly affect politics, I can't draw a

conclusion, but I feel there is a way. At present it's not a clear-cut, obvious way, and it won't be a slogan we can shout; slogans are devices that politicians use. Art takes a different approach, one that is at the forefront in terms of innovation, one that leads the way.

Also, action itself is political. You can't say, "Now I will create a political work," and you can't separate art from politics because the act of creating the work is in itself political and simultaneously artistic. Conversely, you can't say, "this is art," in an attempt to define something. The two are created simultaneously. Sometimes, art is defined suddenly; at some point in time, in some location in space, something becomes art. Politics works this way too; you can't just slap a label on something and tell people it is politics. Something acquires its political nature under the right circumstances.

LSH: In all the different mediums you work in, is there a fixed theme, or a relatively constant train of thought, that runs throughout your works?

LW: Overall yes, there is. It's the reality of self — confronting this reality, understanding this reality, how to recognize reality. Reality is very superficial, and full of deception. Many things are not as they appear. You have to try to truly understand every action. It's easy to explain, for example, many people air their opinions on the internet, saying, "This country is doing such and such" or commenting on some incident or another. How then should we understand the incidents in question? To truly understand such things, we must try to recognize where the root of the matter lies. Everything in life is like this, you have to recognize what something truly is, or else the results won't be good. This includes political movements, the more extreme anything is, the worse it is. It's essential that we see things clearly, and create an individual reality with our eyes open.

LSH: Do you mean we need to actively reflect on things?

LW: I don't mean reflect; I mean recognize what something truly is. Reflection is another topic altogether. Of course, reflection is necessary too. For example, creation — creativity is not about making something new, because objects are material. True creativity lies in contemplating your existence and that which lies within all of humanity. At this stage, what this means is that you continuously rethink, subvert, and constantly reinterpret. That is where our true creativity lies. It's not about making something that no one has ever seen, or creating a new wave of thought that has no basis whatsoever; those methods are unreliable, they're not things we need to be doing. What we need to do is continuously subvert, contemplate, and innovate the past, ourselves, and that which exists in the hearts of everyone. For me, that's where my creativity and my imagination lie.

LSH: Could you discuss the relationship between feeling and objectivity with regards to your early series: "Post-Perception" to your more recent "Antimatter"? The current concept of art has evolved from the Western definitions of the 60s and 70s. At that time, it could be said that something was purely art, without any materialism, but now there is more emphasis on the production level when talking about art.

LW: Not so. Everyone takes into account the material, but we still need to focus on the spiritual; it's the most important part. Matter embodies and hosts the spiritual. I didn't want "reason" to exist in the material. "Antimatter" is another concept which could have many layers in meaning, or it could simply mean anti-matter. I wanted to mix the scientific and the spiritual, then brutally fuse the two. I felt that this approach was interesting. As for the relationship between the physical and intuition, I think material objects possess many perceptions. Our perception of the entire world comes from material objects that we can touch and feel.

Art is not about discussing a principle. When I create a piece, I'm not attempting to get anyone to take note of something: I'm not trying to impart some wisdom to my audience, and I'm not making an effort to lead them to a certain conclusion. These are not my goals; I don't have the obligation or the ability to do these things. The only goal of my work is to place my true and present perceptions out into the world, to make a start. When I finish a piece, that's when its life truly begins. After that, it's up to other people — audience, critics — to take something from what I've made. It could spark their inspiration, because we are all part of the process. This is how I understand and express reality. When someone looks at my work, they can have their own opinion, methods, and innovations, because it's a process. I'm not attempting to make anyone understand me. My hope is that my

works will be a fountainhead; I lay my perceptions down, and there appears a fountainhead. I don't wish to use any existing knowledge or phrases to define my works; that would be meaningless. If the content of a piece can be clearly explained, then I didn't need to make it; I could simply describe it with words.

To me, the most simple, most direct method is the most beautiful; this is art. If something can be expressed with words, then words are enough; we don't need any images because they would be superfluous.

Anyways, I am, after all, a visual artist. My method is using imagistic logic to decompose the world, which includes the thought process. I don't deal in words or language, except that words themselves are images to me.

LSH: Your works often utilize industrial products that are mass produced and standardized. For example, the pieces on view in "Trilogy" used televisions, washing machines and natural gas tanks. But you didn't simply take industrial products and use them in your works, rather, you either mutated their intended functions, or nullified those functions altogether. So, what thoughts do you have on ready-made objects?

LW: My immediate personal feelings have a few different facets. Firstly, I don't need to make anything brand new; it's more than enough for me to use my hands to make something and express myself through a pre-existing object. I'm not willing to add to the amount of "new" things out there. Secondly, the materials I use are always relatively inexpensive. I don't need anything custom-made because those are classist objects, and I don't accept their value because I have my own aesthetic valuation. People on every level of society should be able to experience the objects that I make.

But this includes my aesthetic sense of beauty. Why don't I create many things from scratch? Because the things I create are a result of my aesthetics, and even my aesthetics must be removed. I have been taught that my aesthetics are my privilege and birthright, and anything privileged is problematic. If the work is not comprehensible to every viewer, it must descend to the lowest level of discourse, then it becomes meaningful, then it finally becomes immersed in reality, and is no longer for the privileged few and the wealthy to use as their ornaments.

Of course, the work doesn't always end up like this, but it commences with this intention. We should experience art together; we can't just allow those with culture, power, and knowledge to understand it. It must be understood with each person's subjective perception. Everyone must take part in a work of art for it to have true meaning, to become a work. Otherwise it's just an ornament, meaningless.

With regards to objects, I don't require specificity. I'm expressing the authentic spirit of an entire society, the spirit of society as a whole. An object may look simple, but in fact, this simplicity is the most difficult to reach. There are different ways to judge if art is beautiful. Take, for example, a painting — a work that everyone thinks is beautiful. It is beautiful because it captures the spirit of an era; this beauty is recognized and built by all of us, collectively — it is not static.

LSH: What do you plan to do in the future?

LW: I might do a shoot, not a film, just a shoot. Originally I wanted to go very large, very ambitious in scope, but now I think it's completely unnecessary because the playing field has been flattened. Early on, I did video installations, but I stopped because when I saw the works of Bruce Nauman and Bill Viola, I realized there was no longer any room to progress. They'd already played around with film materials and camera modification so much that there wasn't any more room for anyone else to play. On the other hand, if I wanted to create something with a narrative, then I couldn't possibly compare with commercial films. The entire playing field has been flattened because of technological advancement. Sometimes if you compare an online video to a blockbuster film, you find the online video stronger than the blockbuster — the playing field has been completely leveled. Now the possibilities are more numerous, the space is more expansive, there is a greater degree of freedom.

Art is a pursuit of freedom; you don't want to smother yourself. When you've lost your freedom, it's over.