

Artist Li Qing: living in Hangzhou for 20 years, recording the change of landscape outside the window

by Huang Xirui
June 15, 2022

Li Qing, a post-80s artist, grew up in Huzhou, Zhejiang Province, and has been in Hangzhou for more than 20 years since he was a high school student at the China Academy of Art. He has been recording this era in a different way by “fun” creation. He collects old wooden windows from all over the country, and paints old buildings, internet buildings, lighthouses, and the daily life of contemporary urbanites through the window frames; “paintings within paintings” are framed paintings, with one painting over the other, in dialogue with each other.

The series “Let’s Find the Difference” allows everyone to find the difference between the two paintings, which is intriguing and fun. He also lets the two paintings “paint themselves” before they dry, which seems to “ruin” the two paintings, but actually creates a new work.

Not only painting, he also likes photography and video art, and has taken many pictures of old houses in Hangzhou to record a kind of life that will soon pass away. In Li Qing’s case, he weaves his works into a Borgesian labyrinth of intertwined space and time.

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Section 01: The window is part of the painting



Portrait of the artist Li Qing

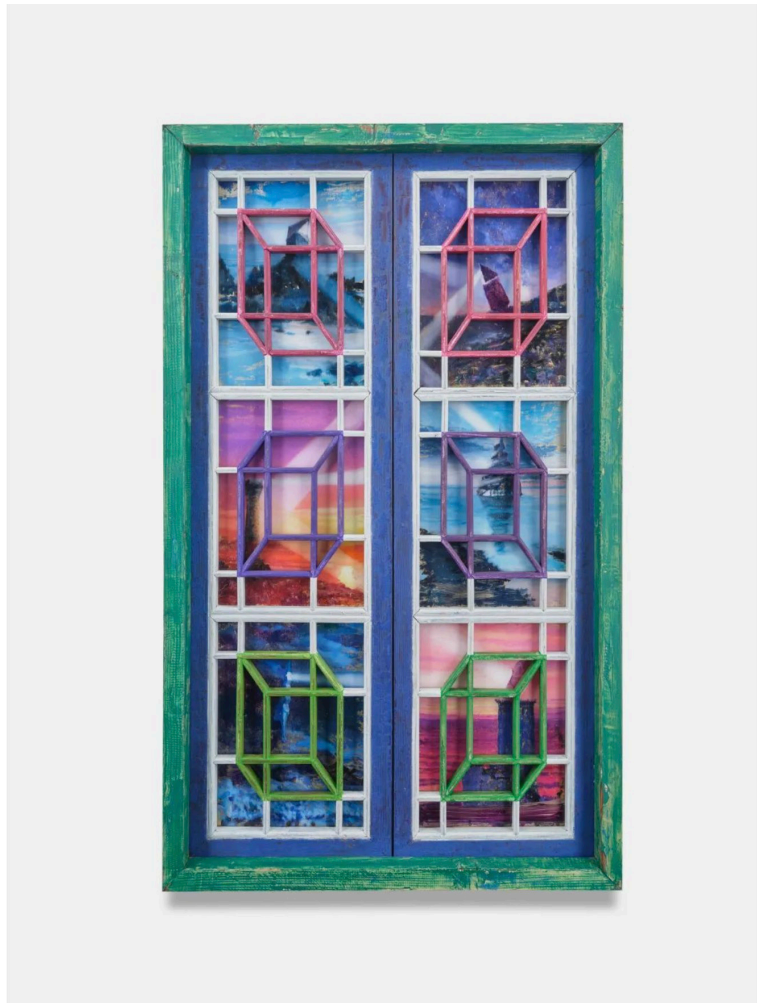
At the recently concluded Basel Fair in Hong Kong, two new works from the “Windows” series by artist Li Qing were unveiled. Behind his iconic window panes is a towering “lighthouse”.

“When we look at the lighthouse, we are always imagining the distance and the other shore, trying to go farther When I first thought of painting the lighthouse, I thought it expressed a kind of contemporary psychology, that we always want to use reason to build a utopian world in the distance. So lighthouses are very idealistic in my opinion.” Li Qing recalls the original intention of painting the lighthouse.

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Li Qing, *Six Lighthouses*, 2021, Photography: Kitmin Lee

In one of them, the six lighthouses are of different shapes, and the prototype of the tower comes from the modernist Bauhaus style. The light between the lighthouses interconnects and forms polygons.

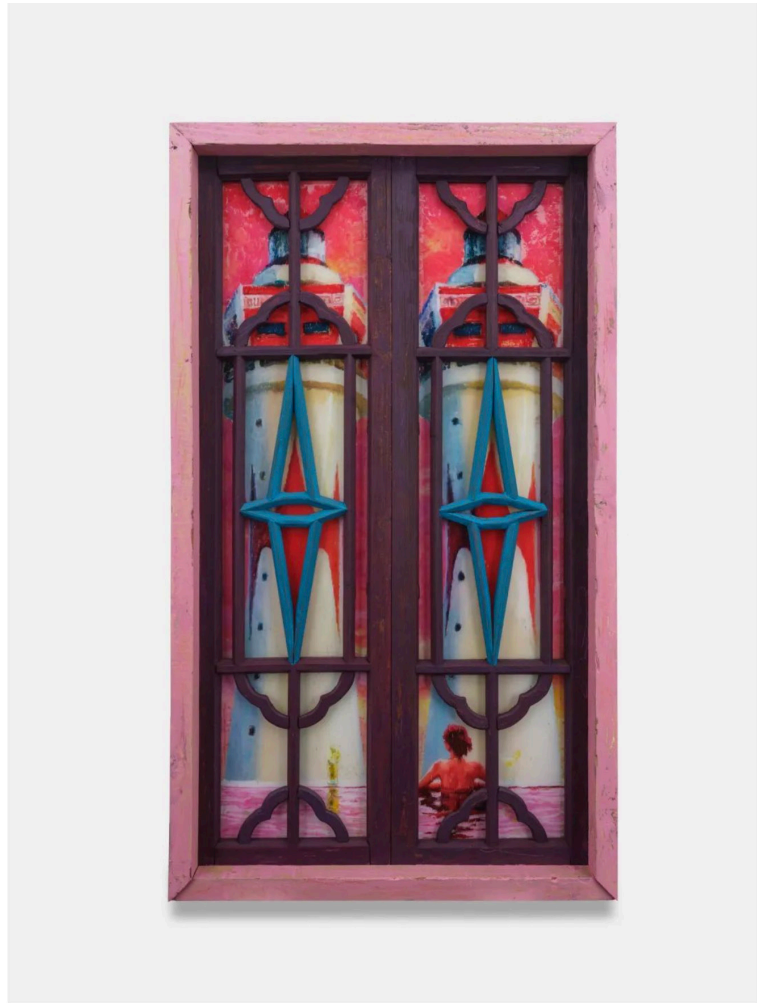
What is special is the pattern of the window panes, with six different colored cubes visible at a glance. Li Qing explained that the hollowed-out patterns are from the old windows, and he re-colored them to emphasize the “shapes”.

The shape of the lighthouse, the beam of light, and the window’s own pattern are superimposed on each other, and the shape has a “reverberation” effect, layer by layer, which is interesting to watch.

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Li Qing, *Neighbor's Window-Twin Lighthouses Hotel*, 2022
Photography: Kitmin Lee

In another painting, Li Qing has created a fictional “twin lighthouse” hotel, with two twin lighthouses in pink and white, the shape of which is a reference to a real scene in the South China Sea, showing an androgynous shape.

At the bottom right of the picture, there is a woman's back, leaning on the pink dense pool, watching the lighthouse in front of her, all enveloped in a leisurely consumerist atmosphere. Unbeknownst to her, the viewer in front of the painting, in front of the window, is spying on her.

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Li Qing, *Seascape*, Installation view, 2017 New York Frieze exhibition Frame unit

From 2011 to now, Li Qing has been making “windows” for more than ten years.

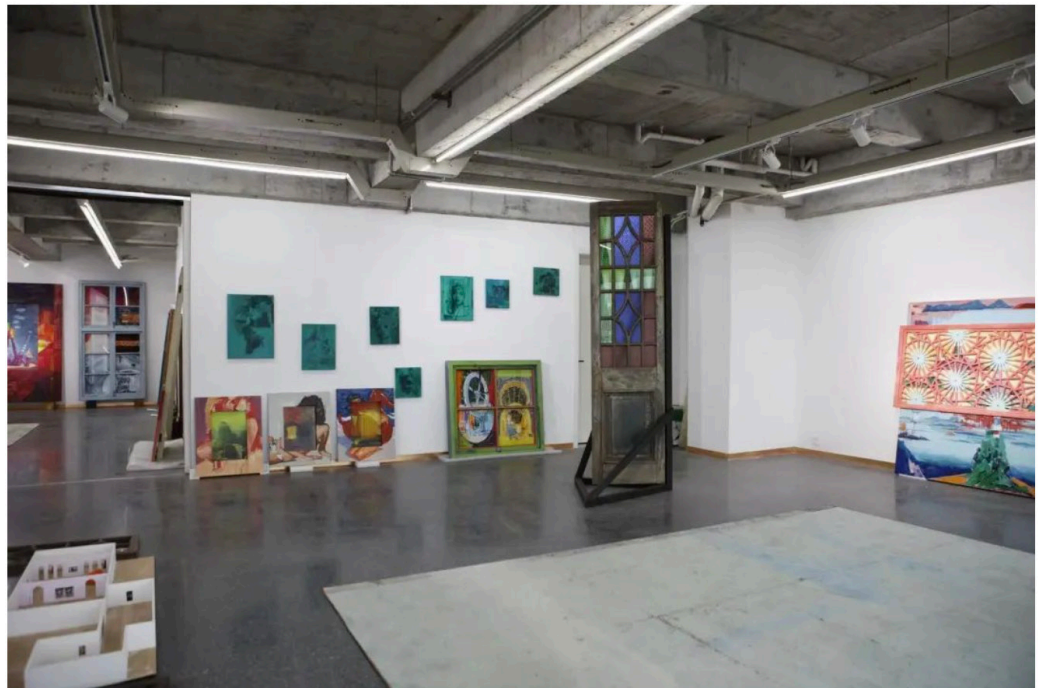
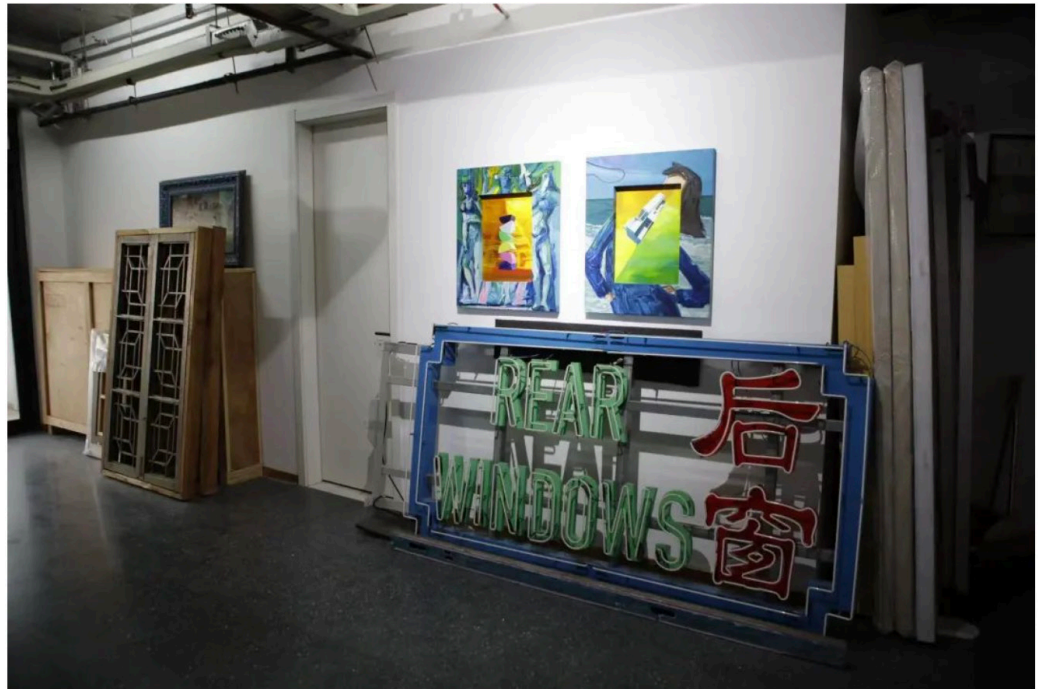
From the beginning of the regular four-square frame, to the splicing and re-creation, the form and content of the “windows” are getting richer and heavier. “The window pane is in front of the painting, and its presence is very strong, forming a special sense of form and abstraction.” Li Qing told us.

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Li Qing studio

Windows, where do they come from?

In his studio, windows of all sizes and types, sourced from all over the country, are placed all over the place.

The earliest batch of windows he found were from the demolition sites in Hangzhou. Slowly, the collection channels have also increased, there are always friends to inform him, "I have old windows over there, do you need?" Sometimes a trip to search is almost enough to paint for a year or two.

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Li Qing says he likes to “sit there and look at my windows every day” and then imagine what kind of scenes they are suitable for behind.



Li Qing, *Window - Lighthouse*, 2011

For the earliest window paintings, Li Qing used the simplest, four-pane old windows.

This 2011 painting, “Window-Lighthouse,” has a simple image: a lighthouse shoots out a beam of light on a dark night by the sea. The special feature is that a slit has been opened in the middle of the window and filled with paint. Viewed from the side, the images are in different planes, but continuous.

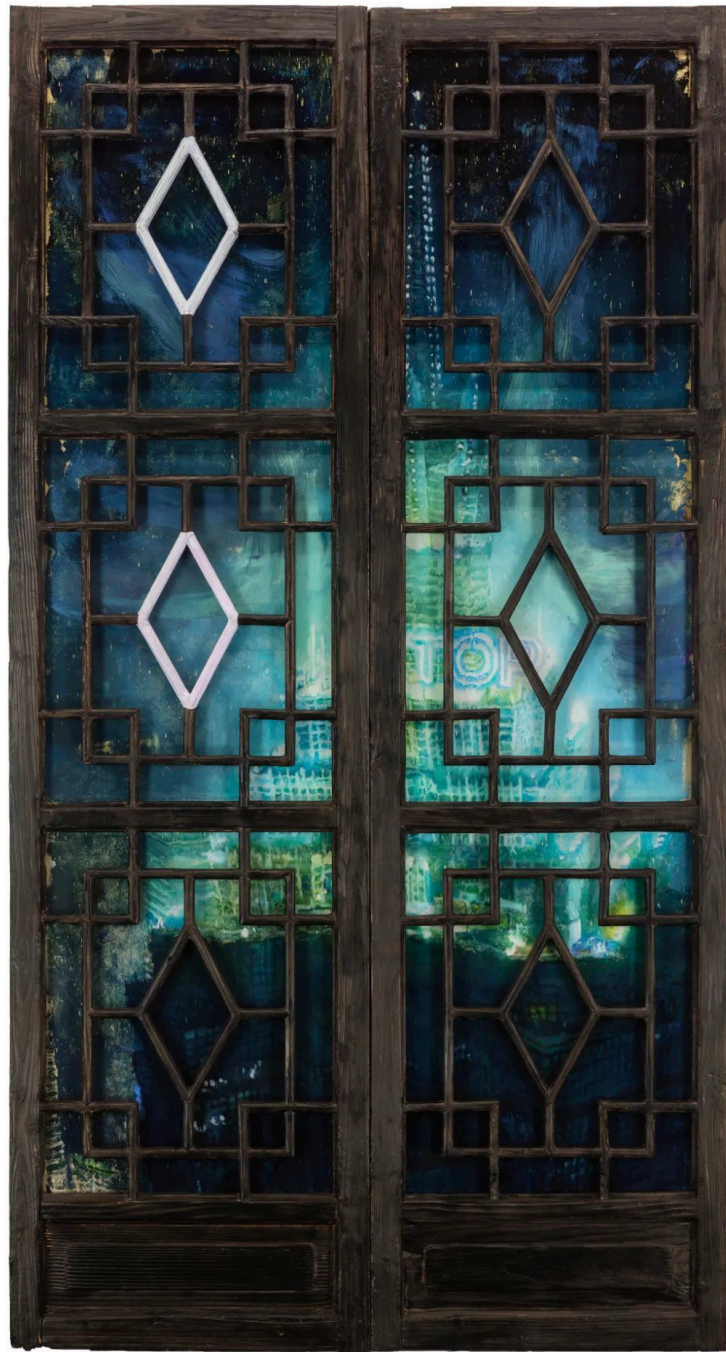
In Li Qing’s opinion, pushing open the window is like “unveiling the secret of painting”.

Gradually, the window and the picture become more and more complicated.

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Li Qing, *Back Window - (S)TOP*, 2020

In 2020, Li Qing first used a more complex pattern of openwork window panes. In “(S)top”, the spire of the Jinmao Tower in Shanghai is depicted with the neon letters “Top” added on top.

Li Qing says, “You can understand that there is another “S” letter here, which is just blocked by the pillar in the middle of the window. It’s like a double-meaning play on words: when something reaches the top, it may stop.”

In Li Qing’s view, the whole “Window” series is a kind of inquiry into the essence of painting, adding Western perspective as an entity to the painting.

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“When the viewer stands in front of the old windows, it will evoke the imagination of the past time and space - and this imagination, in turn, is misaligned with the contemporary architecture painted in the ‘windows’.”

Section 02: More and more complicated “frame with- in a frame, painting within a painting”



Li Qing, *Curved and Straight*, 2017-2018

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Li Qing, *Frontdesk*, 2021

From 2021 to 2022, he begins work on his new series “Framed Paintings”, which, as the name suggests, is a series of paintings within a “frame” that is itself a painting.

In this year’s new works, Li Qing focuses more on the new architecture in China in recent years and the new aesthetic trends in architectural aesthetics, continuing his reflection on contemporary consumerism and aesthetic traditions.

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Li Qing, *Our massive Egg*, 2021

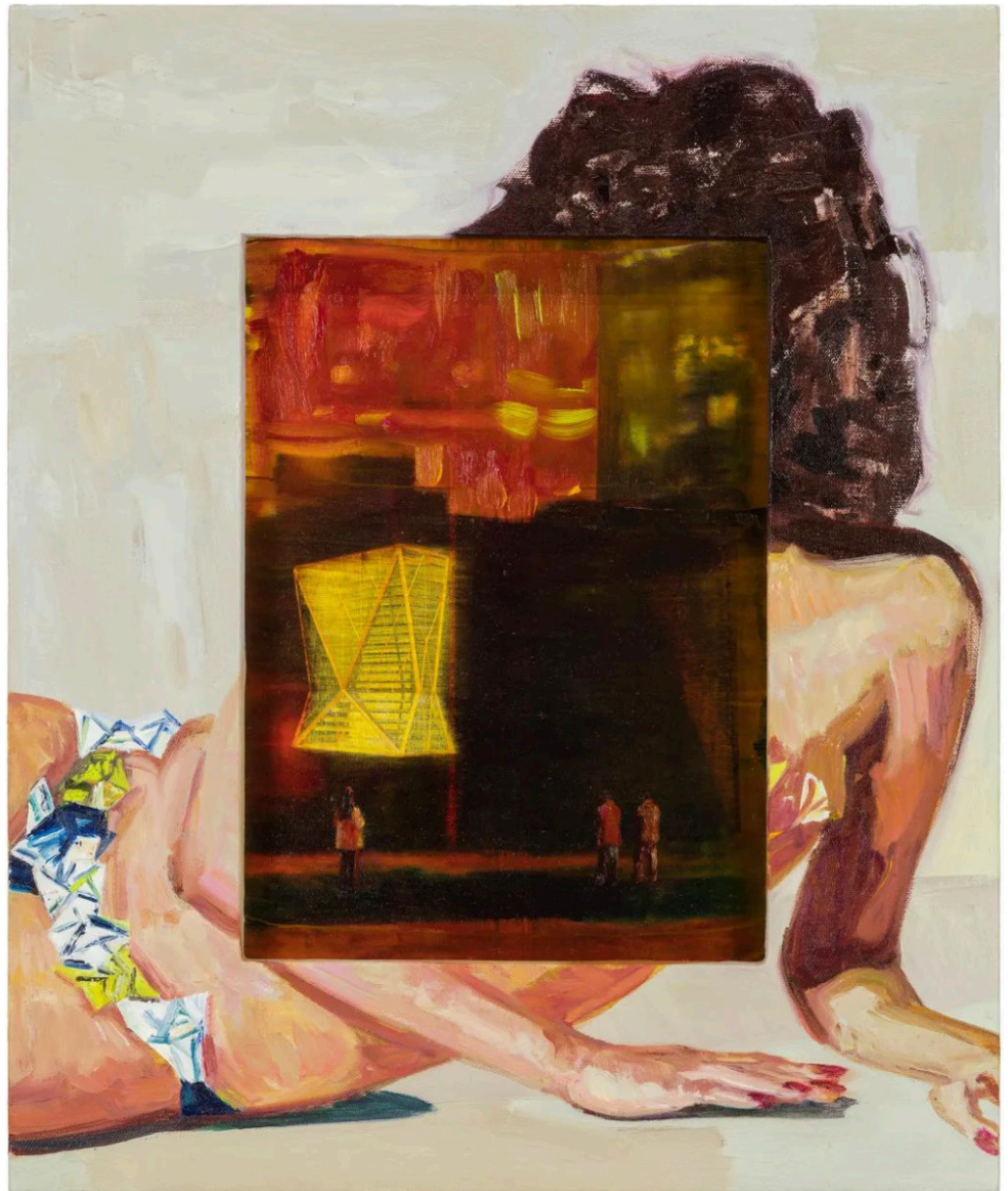
Li Qing chose a number of buildings that are popular on the internet, which are very recognizable. He has taken this geometric shape with great visual impact to the extreme.

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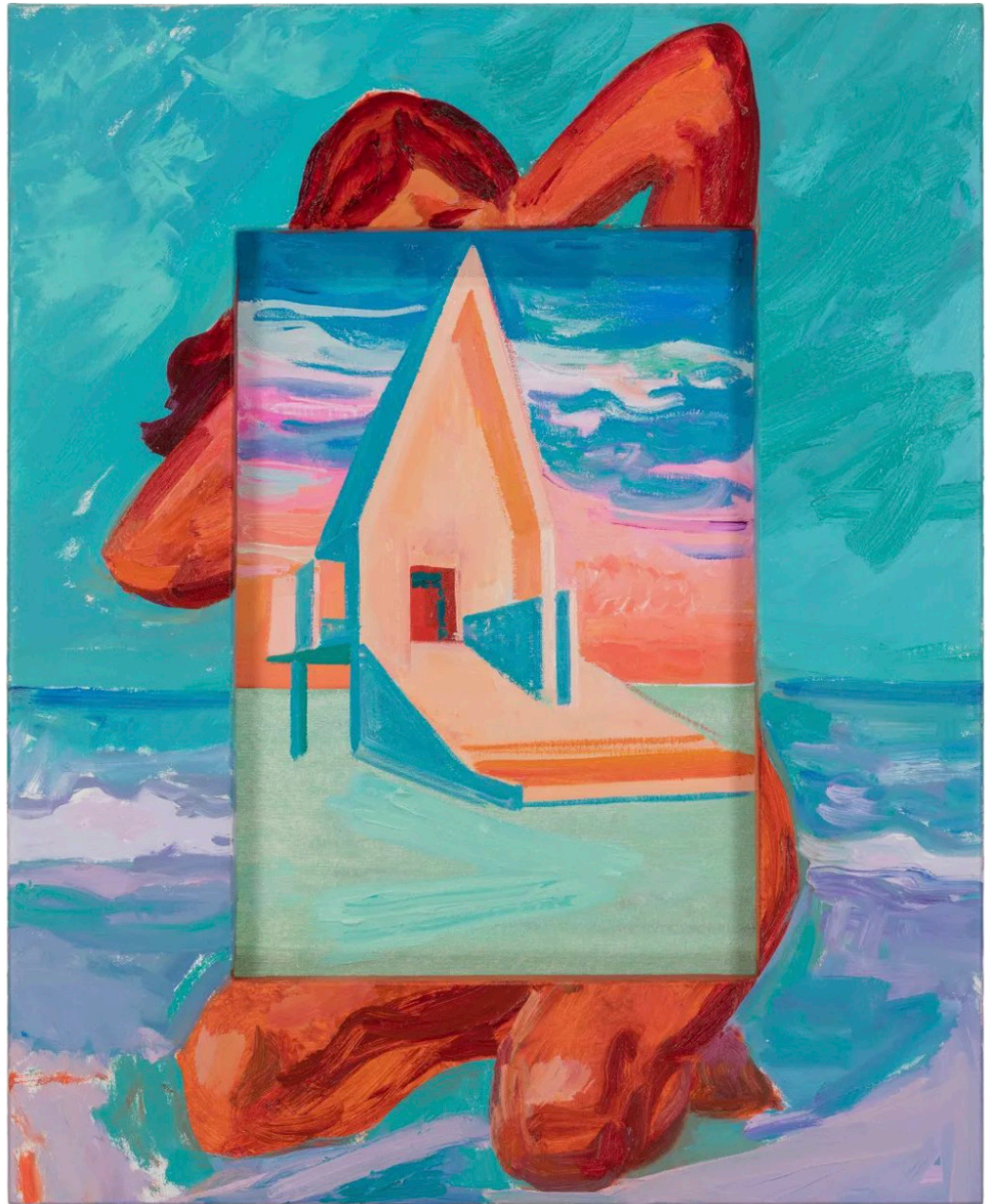
Li Qing, *Suspended Bank*, 2022

The *Suspended Bank*, a bank floating in mid-air, is actually the CITIC Bank Building in Hangzhou, designed by Norman Foster, a new landmark building in Hangzhou in the past few years.

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Li Qing, *Anaya*, 2021

The small auditorium in the picture of *Anaya* is a must-see place for young people who travel in groups to Qinhuangdao for leisure and most like to take pictures on social media. The images on the outside of these frames, which are probably taken from commercial advertisements and illustrations of publications, all present a secular and consumerist atmosphere.

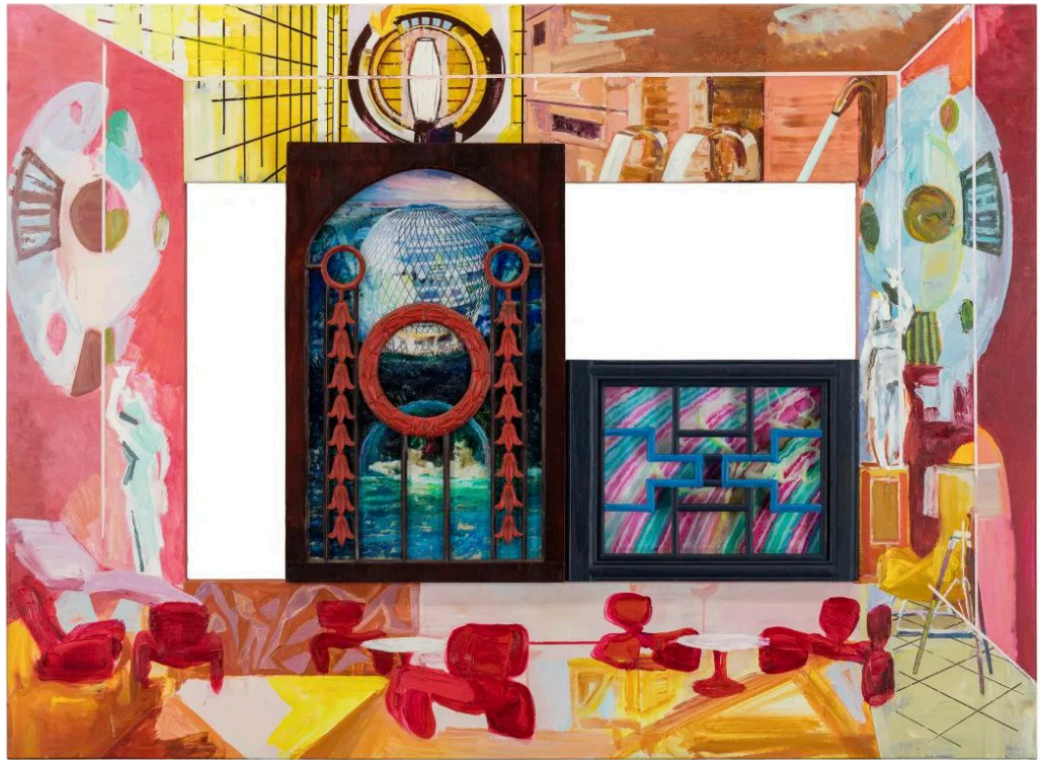
The images of women on the beach and the social figures in the “dome” are very reflective of the emerging lifestyles of current urbanites, especially the middle class.

In “Framed Paintings”, the characters, the environment and the architecture are all arranged in a single image, and Li Qing sees “Framed Paintings” in this way: “People ‘possess’ the architecture with the purpose of consumption. ‘Architecture Nowadays, architecture and this lifestyle shape each other, and when I paint these buildings and people, I actually do so with a sense of flirtation and playfulness.”

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Li Qing, *Spa Wanderlust 2021*, 2021

Li Qing has further transformed the “frame painting” and “window” series into a combination of both frame painting and window frame in the “painting”, in which the plane is constantly broken.

In *Spa Wanderlust 2021*, a series of aesthetic elements from contemporary design home and space design are presented on the surrounding borders, combined with scenes from the science fiction film *Wanderlust 2001*.

Li Qing has created a dialogue between the futuristic technological elements and the metal faucets commonly found in spa pavilions. In the “window” in the middle, the spherical building is filled with Netflix style, a man and a woman are immersed in the hot spring pool, and the neon lights in the small window on the right are ambiguously flashing the word “Spa”.

The whole scene is both a satire of consumerism and an exploration of contemporary and future aesthetics.

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Section 03: A career as artist based out of Hangzhou



Li Qing, *BLOW-UP*, Almine Rech - London, February 5 - March 7, 2020 - © Li Qing - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

Born in 1981, Li Qing grew up in Huzhou, Zhejiang Province, the home of painting and calligraphy, and has been living and working in Hangzhou since graduating from China Academy of Art.

In addition to painting oil paintings, Li Qing also does photography, recording “Hangzhou houses” as if they were archives.

Through the houses, he especially wants to understand what has happened to the aesthetics of the people who have transformed from peasants to citizens in the process of rapid development.

“The styles of those Hangzhou houses may be a mixture of many different regions and eras, from Bauhaus style, traditional Chinese style, a particularly flashy modern style like glass curtain wall, to classical Western Greco-Roman pillarheads and even round vaults. This aesthetic evolution is of particular interest to me.”

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Li Qing, *Hangzhou House No. 49 and 50*, 2019

Firstly, the timing was very special, he had to wait until all the houses were demolished and only one was left, “when it was alone”.

Secondly, the weather requirements are also very demanding, no sun, no rain, only in cloudy days, so that the color and state of the house itself can be captured very faithfully.

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Artist childhood photo

Li Qing's mom and dad are both teachers who love literature and art, and have been cultivating his cultivation of art since he was a child.

"My dad loved art and photography, and my mom loved reciting and music. They thought it was bad for a boy to stay out and play, so they let me go to a painting class in the first grade. At first, I just drew a goldfish and a chicken."

Later, Li Qing spontaneously fell in love with painting and thought it was pretty cool, so he enrolled in the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou and went on to graduate from the oil painting department at the China Academy of Art.

Li Qing calls himself "a very lucky person" and did not take many difficult detours in his career path.

In 2005, during his first year of graduate studies, he participated in the important triennial exhibition "Future Archaeology" in Nanjing, which received a very good response in the industry. After that he worked with galleries and naturally became a professional artist.

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Li Qing, *Spot the difference number 3 (ten differences)*, 2005



Li Qing, *Spot the difference number 5 (ten differences)*, 2005

At the Triennial, Li Qing's first seven works that received attention were from the series "Spot the difference".

Like the familiar game of "find the difference", Li Qing also hinted at the differences between the two images in the title, allowing the audience to fully observe and participate in the work.

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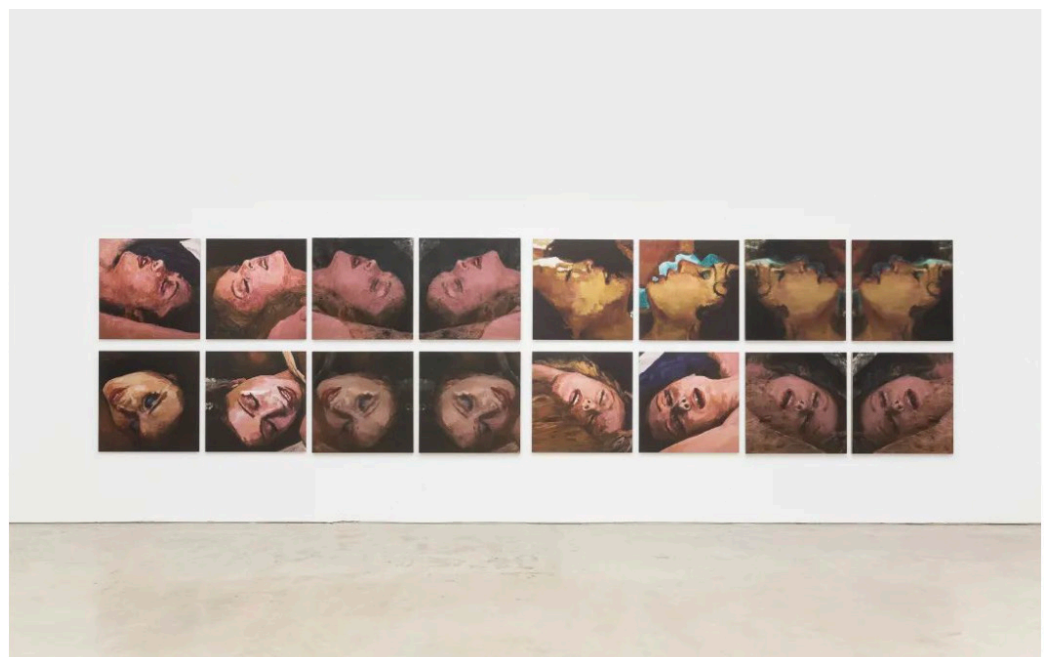


Li Qing, *Spot the difference mirror (nine differences)*, 2005

The source of the photographs varies, from Li Qing's own photos to images from the press. But regardless of the source, neither picture is the "original".

The Mirror, for example, is a record of a discarded dresser by a flower bed under the apartment building where Li Qing used to live. But the traces of use and the people in the mirror are his fiction.

This series seems to be a game, but there is a deep meaning behind it: painting is an art that cannot be copied. "Even if you copy a painting, every brush stroke is different, and there are no two identical paintings in this world."



Li Qing, *Images of Mutual Undoing and Unity · Love*, 2015

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A similar game is played in “Mutually destructive but identical image”. It looks as if the two paintings are “painting themselves”.

When the painting is just finished and the paint is not yet dry, Li Qing puts the two paintings face to face with each other and laminates them together like a topography. When separated, the two works are presented on the right.



Li Qing, *Images of Mutual Undoing and Unity · Leslie Cheung*, 2007

For example, in “Leslie Cheung”, one of the original pictures on the left is his daily photo, and the other is his disguise as Cheng Dieyi in the movie “Farewell My Concubine”, which is equivalent to the superposition and interplay between himself and the role he played.

When the works are exhibited in the exhibition hall, they will appear in a series of four, two of which are original photographs and two of which are “destroyed” works, creating a subtle tension in the space.

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Section 04 : Becoming a “Borgesian” artist



Li Qing, *BLOW-UP*, Almine Rech - London, February 5 - March 7, 2020 - © Li Qing - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

During the interview, Li Qing kept emphasizing that his series of works seem like a labyrinth to himself, they will keep repeating, but with each repetition, the forces also keep superimposing themselves in new works, constantly corroborating each other.

“I want to try to be a Borgesian painter, where all his writing constitutes a labyrinth of time and space, an imagination that refreshes the perception of the way to narrate a story at that time, intertwined with the description of that alienated situation of man after modernization.”

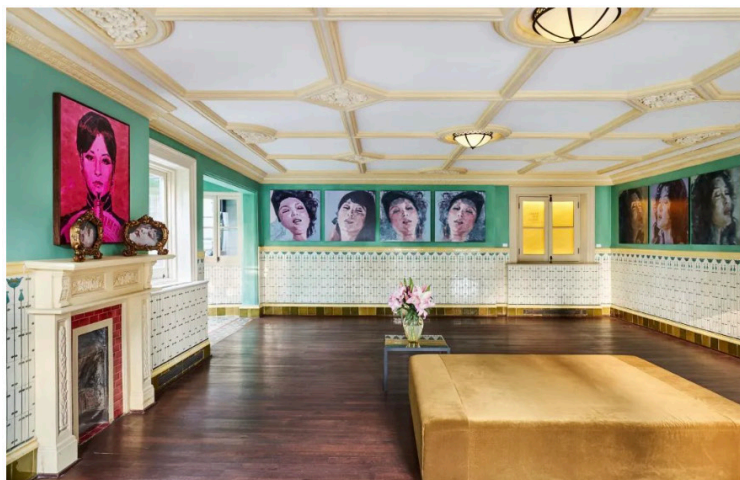
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He also always wanted his works to give the audience a refreshing sensation in terms of time and space and narrative style.



Li Qing, *Rear windows*, Shanghai Prada Rong Zhai, November 7, 2019 to January 9, 2020 / ©Li Qing - Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech - Photography: Zhu Hai

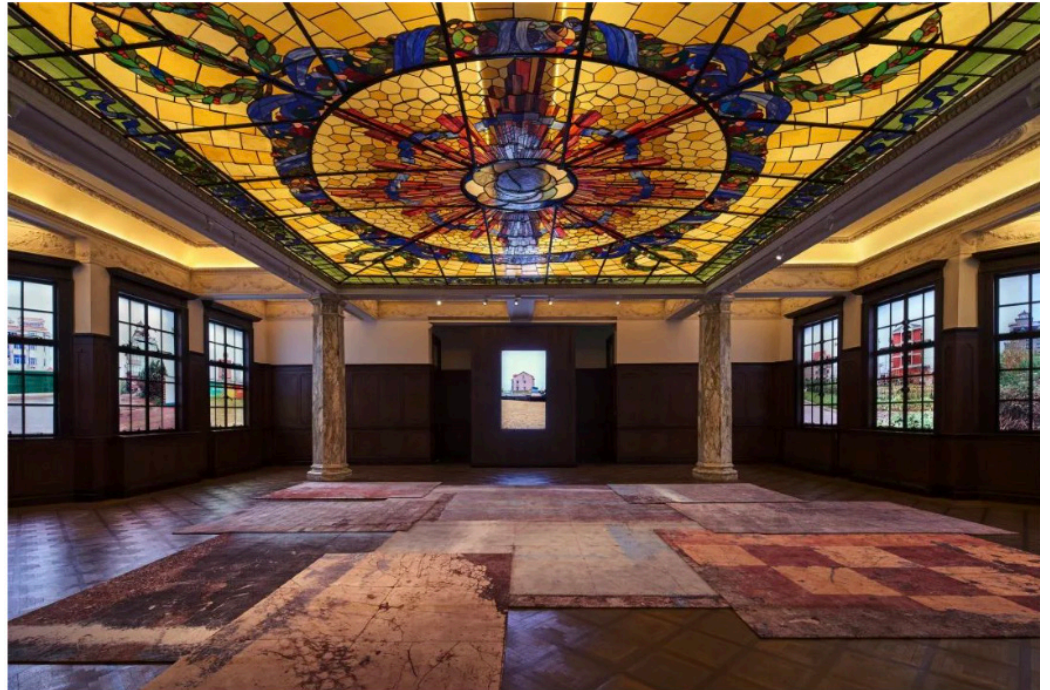
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When we asked Li Qing about the one exhibition that impressed him the most, he did not hesitate to say his solo exhibition at Rong Zhai in Shanghai in 2019. His works seem to be integrated into the architecture and start a dialogue with the history of Shanghai.

“The Rong Zhai itself has a strong character of space, and my work is both antagonistic and harmonious with this space. What I want to do is to use the environment, decoration, history, and story of Rong Residence to fictionalize a new story, so that the two stories, old and new, are intertwined.”



Li Qing, *Carpet, Rear Window* exhibition, Shanghai Rong Zhai, 2019 - Photography: Zhu Hai

In addition to the custom-made “Lost Window” based on the Rong House space, Li Qing is most satisfied with another carpet work in the Ballroom (dance hall).

The image printed on the carpet is the exposed broken tiles and ruins on the ground after the house was demolished in the suburbs of Hangzhou, “a very coarse reality after the demolition”, which reflects a very strong contrast with the atmosphere of the Rong residence.

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Li Qing in his studio

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Li Qing's work status is actually quite like that of a "9 to 5" office worker. After dropping off his children at school in the morning, he goes to the studio and starts his day's work. In his free time, he likes to read books and watch Antonioni's movies, and he also likes to listen to books and music when he is creating.

Li Qing's "Labyrinth of Time and Space" will continue to expand this year, with a possible solo exhibition at the end of the year and several group exhibitions in the works. He especially mentioned that he still has some of his favorite window frames left in Suzhou, but he hasn't gone to get them back yet because of the epidemic.

"Overall, it's still an organized life, I guess." Li Qing's attitude toward work and life in the second half of the year looks optimistic and certain.