

ARTCO Monthly & Investment FRAME-SETTING AND FRAME-BREAKING IN LI QING' S PAINTINGS

Article by Yan Xiaoxiao
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Li Qing, *Find differences (There are 6 differences in the two paintings)*, 2006 - Oil on canvas - 190 x 275 cm / © Li Qing - Courtesy of the Artist Studio

Born in 1981, the artist Li Qing shares similar traits and life trajectories with other Chinese artists of his generation: embarking on the journey as an artist, just as contemporary art in China was entering a fascinating and heterogeneous period post-millennium; and gone through the upheavals of the local art scene and industry, driven by seismic shifts happening across Chinese society while encountering various unexpected historical turning points, and a rumination of the great forces and tensions that interweaves family, country, urban and rural areas, social progress, and the individuals in their respective lives, which all more or less, implicitly or explicitly, emerges in the artworks of theirs.

Born in Huzhou, Zhejiang province, Li Qing has lived in the city of Hangzhou from his time at the Affiliated High School of China Academy of Arts. This city in the south of the Yangtze River has struck a certain balance between rapid development and the poetics of mediocrity, and has also provided Li Qing with a homebase that has allowed him to both gain ground and retreat into. Although his works have been exhibited in major cities in China and the rest of the world, Li's creative attitude always exudes a temperament inspired by Hangzhou, which is both distinct and subtle.

An Image Reality that Merges and Diverges

A significant imprint has emerged early on from Li Qing's artistic foundation. The artist's early series usually take form in diptych, oil on canvas, such as *Finding Differences* and *Images of Mutual Undoing and Unity*, in which the former ongoing series can be traced back to 2005. Although there are less new additions to the series compared to the early days, the intensity existing in the works still holds ground. In addition, Li's

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creative techniques put into practice for 17 years cannot be simply attributed to an act of self-repetition—not to mention that conscious self-repetition is also a way to progress creation—at the same time, through other recently developed compositions a recurring meaning is attained, moreover interweaved and entwined to produce a polyphony amongst Li's body of work.

Painting has always been Li Qing's main, but by no means only, creative medium. Extended periods of formal training has paved the path for painting to become an intuitive way for the artist to bring in physical and emotional experiences to create images. As an artist, Li Qing's relationship to images is not limited to representation, construction or expression based on reality, but also internalized as a reflection on the relationship between people and images, images and reality. From his early paintings onwards, Li has shown a strong awareness of how images define our perception of reality, the fragmentation of reality in images, and the contradictions that exist behind images. This has also induced him to think about how artists strive to incorporate the possible potential of the world into paintings, expressed through their subjectivity.



Li Qing, *Images of Mutual Undoing and Unity-Leslie Cheung*, 2007 - Oil on canvas - 170 x 127 cm / © Li Qing - Courtesy of the Artist Studio

To this end, the idea of “editing” images is introduced in his works, whether it is the gamified strategy of spotting differences between two pictures in the *Finding Differences* series, or in *Images of Mutual Undoing and Unity*, where mirror images that are symmetrical is used to render and create another image that is related and similar, but also seems to be in conflict with one another, have united the reproduction and editing of images and the relationships created in its wake, to reveal the images and the underlying conditions behind images, and the existing tensions and connections, while at the same time destroys, alters and re-constructs the viewer's understanding of these images.

In the *Images of Mutual Undoing and Unity* series, additional elements of time and action have been included. For example, in one of the most well-known painting of this series which depicts Hong Kong actor Leslie Cheung, and the Huadan (a lively, vivacious young female character in Peking Opera) character of Cheng Dieyi he played in *Farewell My Concubine*, a diptych is created by rubbing and blending these two portrait paintings together while the oil paints are still wet. This results in two images that are largely similar, but neither of them could be said to have been “painted” by the artist. The subject of the paintings does not constitute a key theme of this series,

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but it is in fact the potential state and relationship between the image and the image revealed, divergent creations produced within the process of “unity” that faces the viewer directly. This is what Li Qing strives to reach for through his works. In this way, he opens up and reorganizes these images that are now open to interpretation, showing the possibility of change through the relationship between images rather than fixated on a single picture, thus providing a perspective to rediscover reality. The fact that Li has continued the *Finding Differences* series for the past 17 years also highlights how the artist constantly attempts to experiment with the possibility of scalable volumes, and the themes of intrinsic change.

Windows and Frames

The foundations of Li Qing's observations and thinking about the reality of images can be traced back to his earliest works, and later developed into more complex aesthetic strategies. In the evolution of the aforementioned two series, with time passing the types of images Li Qing referenced have only become more diverse. The Internet, news imagery, and the contemporary spaces of daily life in China and consumerism, and middle-class lifestyles are emblematic of the varied types and differing quantities of “objects” in a rapidly developing society, which also carries the cultural and aesthetic critique of a visual artist. This foundation of images wanders between figuration and abstraction in form, and Li's exploration of the relationship between images, which was a more layered process in his previous period, has gradually shifted from producing a diptych-like juxtaposition, to the act of structuring and reorganizing now being situated within the image itself.



Li Qing, *Six Lighthouses*, 2021 - Antique wooden window, oil paint, plexiglass - 156.5 x 93 x 9.5 cm
/ © Li Qing - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

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In 2011, Li Qing incorporated the use of ready-made vintage window frames that elevated his paintings into a new phase. This new body of work, simply titled the *Window Series*, is presented as a three-dimensional painting and installation, which explores how varied concepts of painting and forms can interact and be transformed. As both an object and an image, the window stands in as a hidden metaphor for western painting, intuitively expressing the idea of the frames of a “viewfinder”, and also builds a framework for the viewer to project their sense of vision and imagination. Li’s use of old window frames has undergone a gradual process of change, from the simplest square wooden frame, to the symmetrical and complex structures built by hollowed-out panes, and until now where the window frame has been liberated from its role as a frame for paintings, and is transformed into an element of the painting and no longer restricted to established forms.

One of the earliest works in this series, *Window. Lighthouse* in 2011, behind the four old windows reveals the powerful lighthouse beams on the hillside of the coast not far away in the dark night. The most interesting thing about this work is that one side of the window is slightly opened to create a small section of an almost vertical panel, as Li Qing is not satisfied with creating a painting in the classic sense. He uses the refracted light beams and landscape scenery to elevate the conceptuality of the painting beyond the two-dimensional, which diverts away from the traditional way of viewing, and thus opens up numerous unconventional possibilities. At the same time, the lighthouse, as a metaphor for a distant utopia, also continued to appear later on in the series, including recent works such as *Six Lighthouses* (2021), *Neighboring Window. Twin Lighthouse Hotel* (2022), etc., referring to an ideal state that many are unable to reach.

The development of the *Window Series* marks a transformation towards maturity in Li Qing’s nearly ten-year creative process. The artist seems to have further opened up and evolved beyond a certain archetypal conceptual framework, producing variations that are complex and heterogeneous, and gradually sufficient to evolve amongst themselves. Among them, different ways of seeing emerge that complement one another. On the one hand, the image itself holds rich and layered meanings. Li Qing’s interest in old objects allows the old window frames to bring mottled colors and textures to the image that reflect traces of time, and also creates space for the viewer to occupy and look out into the image, where the landmark buildings and urban scenes depicted in the paintings face the viewer through the “window” frames. The old window frame becomes an interface, separating and connecting a different time and space, with tension rising between the differences of today and another era and society, highlighting the absurdity and paradox generated in the change of contemporary urban landscape.

On the other hand, visual elements of a dizzying array are constantly changing, the “landscape” shown outside the window consisting of concrete, abstract and diverse images, sometimes even fantastical, as in *Rear Window. (S) TOP* (2020), which includes just the right amount of lighting, obfuscation and metaphors, the window frame itself also becomes a component of the picture, including the geometric structure on the hollowed out pane. In *Six Lighthouses*, the window frames simply bridges the pane and the geometry on the canvas within the scope of the window frame (such as the direction of light beams of the lighthouse); or through the different forms of old window frames that splices the content of the images behind them, as the shapes and forms of the window frames become more and more irregular, the visual elements on view also be-

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come more and more complex. Some works, such as *Curved and Straight* (2017-2018) and *Foreground* (2021), which seem to contain montages of images, and can be seen as an evolution of the “window paintings”. The “frame-setting” which was the starting point of the series has now developed into various formats for “frame-breaking”, which has established a multi-dimensional structure that is in line with Li Qing’s earlier experiments surrounding the relationship of images that was promoted with scale, but condensed within his body of work that consists of a variety of frameworks.

Another dimension of window is now being developed in Li Qing’s recent “Frame Painting” series in the past two years. *Rear Window. Colored Stones* (2021) contains multi-layered geometric propositions from the window frames to the image; *Spa Odyssey 2021* (2021) which stems from a rather complicated foundation of a window-shaped painting, further develops into the periphery, with the painting itself expanding into another layer of “frame”. Simultaneously, and within these increasingly complex arrangements, Li Qing now takes a different approach to developing a typical form of framed paintings: a rectangular space is “created” in the center of the picture, revealing another layer of the image. While in the former space consists of scenes of flashy characters in pose, the latter mostly depicts landmark buildings or concrete geometric shapes in a high chroma palette, such as the major works of the late architect Zaha Hadid, or the colorful geometric sculptures of British artist Anne Morris.



Li Qing, *Zaha's Ball (Galaxy SOHO, Beijing)*, 2022 - Oil on canvas - 69 x 56 x 2.5 cm / © Li Qing - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

These “fashionable” architectural or sculptural images, as well as the surrounding characters, even if incomplete, do not prove to be difficult for the viewers to complete the scene in their heads. These elements of the “frame paintings” allude playfully to contemporary urban middle-class culture, which deeply affects our visualization of social aesthetics. The two paintings inside and outside often create coherence in

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shape, further reminding us in form, to what extent we have been invisibly constrained by the ideology of aesthetics. Other works, such as *Our Dome Arena* (2022) and *Easter Egg Suite* (2022), follows the stylistic typology of collage types, the oval egg-shape, which is a common form in contemporary visual culture is on full display, revealing with a sense of ironic humor that there is something almost nonsensical and rootless that exists among these visual symbols, and continues to erode the subjectivity of the aesthetic experience among people in today's world.



Li Qing, *Our Giant Egg (Oriental Weiye Plaza)*, 2022 - Oil on canvas - 69 x 56 x 3 cm / © Li Qing - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

Variation and Fluidity

Through the various ways of viewing Li Qing's works mentioned earlier, we can see how even though painting is the main medium, conceptualisation is Li Qing's key driver for creation. Neither being highly recognizable nor the appreciation of the painting is a first priority, instead, what comes through is an experience not directly related to the essence of painting. These candid experiences often appear in the form of summoning the viewer and kindling their direct participation. For example, when we come across *Finding Differences*, we can't help but follow what is being written into the titles of the work (such as "these two images are different in six places"), and the mentality brought about by such familiar games kickstarts the act of inspection and recognition; when *Images of Mutual Undoing and Unity* is shown, the photos of the painting before the merger are usually displayed alongside, which arouses the interest of the audience to go back and forth to try and identify traces of the original; the *Window Series* and *Frame Paintings* act on our awareness of the visual experiences of social aesthetics. One of the key elements of these stimulated interactions is its instinctive nature, which

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stems from our subconscious and is spontaneous. Li Qing's works have subtly shifted the traditional viewing relationship between the viewer and the painting. New works from these two series will be shown in the beginning of November, at Li Qing's solo exhibition "Outline" at Almine Rech Shanghai.

The multiple "framing-setting" and "frame-breaking" of Li Qing contains the fluidity of a certain idea alternating back and forth between forms, just as his practice was grounded in the search for the potential of images by exploring the differences between two images or the same subject in his early works, his recent works further extrapolates the possibility of differing logics of fabrication on the very same foundation. It is worth noting that Li's works spanning different periods all conceals an incompleteness that the artist has deliberately created. The blurring effect of the final produced image in the series *Images of Mutual Undoing and Unity* also echoes breaking the whole image in the *Window Series* and *Frame Painting* to some extent. While inspiring our imagination, this is also a repeated counterattack, urging us to fully realize and reflect on the alienation of our personal aesthetic experiences.



Li Qing, *Pop Stone (Gray)*, 2022 - Oil on canvas - 69 x 56 x 2.5 cm / © Li Qing - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech