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## Review of Liu Wei's "Trilogy" – Part I

Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai.

March 20 to May 3, 2011

June 9, 2011

by [Chris Moore](#)

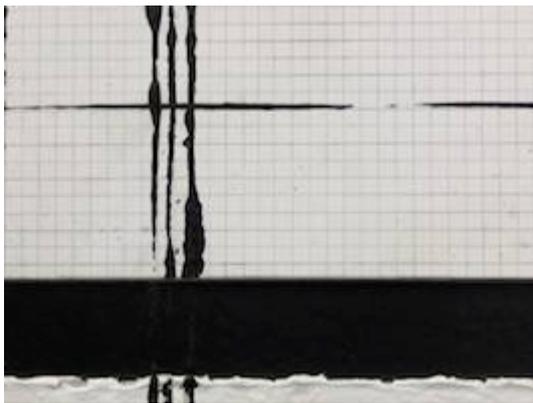
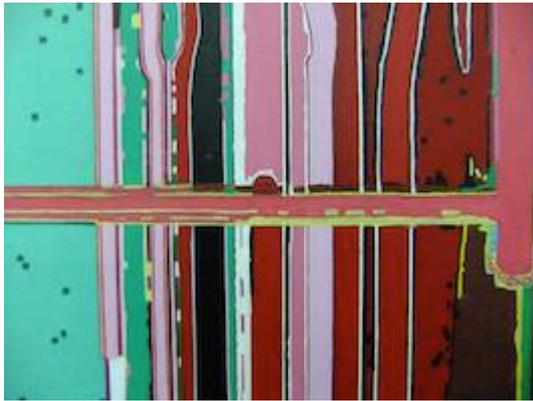
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Liu Wei's "Trilogy" at [Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai](#)

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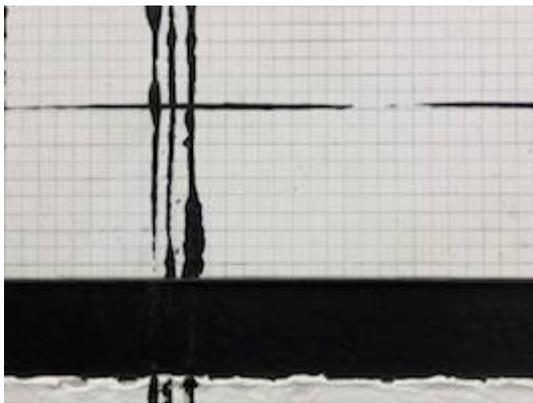
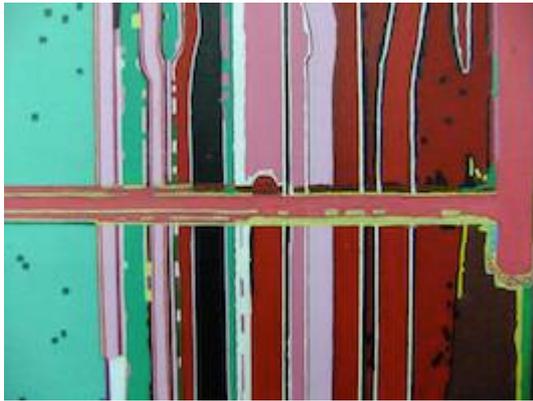
Part I – [Read Part II of this review here](#)

How should we understand Liu Wei, one of the pre-eminent new generation artists in China, and his vast "Trilogy" at the Minsheng Art Museum? It is increasingly common for successful mid-career artists to make encompassing statements as to their achievements or future program. Examples include Qiu Zhijie, Yang Fudong, Madeln, Zhang Huan and, repeatedly, Ai Weiwei.



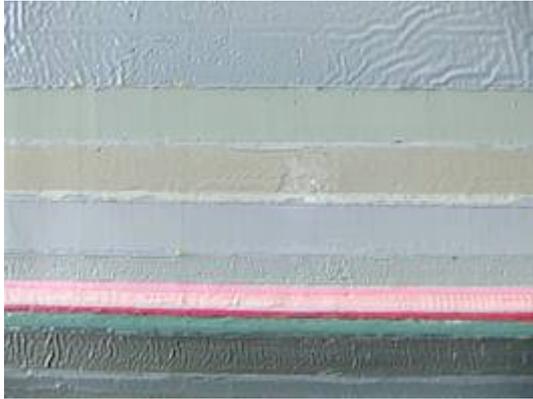
Non-Chinese examples are harder to identify, though one might be tempted to include exhibitions like Matthew Barney's "Prayer Sheet with the Wound and the Nail" at the Schaulager in Basel last year. In these examples the use of a grand multi-themed exhibition becomes an almost novelistic continuation of existing contemplations. Liu Wei's "Trilogy" is in many ways a summation of his practice to date, with arguments refined and restated. His combination of different formal aspects of art and architecture, domestic or religious spaces, uses enigma purposefully to question the architectures and belief systems that surround us in everyday life and in particular modern China's political schizophrenia, the chaining together of a utopian but frequently unsuccessful and violent socialism with a pragmatic and financially successful but frequently empty materialism.

Unsurprisingly, "Trilogy" is composed of three main installations, "The Golden Section," "Merely a Mistake," and "Power," but echoed by three minor interlinking tableaux. (1) In the foyer hangs a huge "landscape" of parallel bands of moulded paint opposite a cityscape carved out of school notebooks, echoing Liu's 2007 piece "Love It, Bite It," a degenerate city of parliament buildings made out of tanned ox hide and pigskin. (2) This city of commercial skyscrapers also has a parliament, China's Great Hall of the People, but where the one ends and the other begins remains unclear: do the towers overshadow the parliament or does the parliament underpin the towers? Behind the paper-towers is a huge landscape, "Meditation No. 2" (2010), the first of a new series, its horizontality and also emptiness contrasting not only with the verticality of the megalopolis but also Liu's famously busy "Purple Air" series of about 60 paintings, the last of which is included in the show.



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These landscapes are one of Trilogy's Leitmotifs and there are essentially three steps to understanding them. Firstly they are modernist critiques, aping the Western horizontal/landscape tradition, as "Purple Air" did China's vertical/Literati tradition. Secondly, and related, is a homage to Gerhard Richter's squeegee paintings. Richter's figurative work was so influential to the development of post-1990 art, including artists like Zhang Xiao Gang—but categorically not his abstract works. Liu redresses this imbalance, this selective appreciation. Like Richter's, Liu's "paintings" are essentially manufactured. The paint is sculpted and moulded into a two-dimensional "landscape" with a sunrise/sunset horizon, the liminal moment between darkness/light /darkness. Really nothing could be more two-dimensional than a flat landscape painting and yet, Liu's landscape is also a sculpture. Thirdly, the paintings engage with photography and light (again, a nod to Richter). Sufficient horizontal movement will blur a viewer's perspective into an empty landscape such as Liu's, regardless of how complex the motionless view is – seeing things faster does not necessarily mean better. Thus Liu's landscapes affect the form of the genre while simultaneously undermining it, emptying it of content. Note that word "perspective." These "paintings" are all about how we look, not only at art but everything. And how we interpret what we see.

Meanwhile a sort of relief-colossus of packing cases itself towers over the scene, one arm stretching over the title to the exhibition and entrance to the "Golden Section."

And like his counterpart in Classical Rhodes he will succumb to collapse, to deconstruction.



*"It is as if personal space...has been bisected by modernism."*



Inside, a series of household furniture items common to the post-1980s period in China are aligned in the middle of the room, including a desk, a low armoire and a wardrobe, all of which stand on a black metal dais and are geometrically interrupted by grid-like solids composed of the same metal (a base metal rather than a "golden" section). It is as if personal space (these are domestic items of furniture) has been bisected by modernism. It recalls Monika Sosnowska's spatial transections, such as her spectacular "Untitled" (2007) commissioned for the Boros Collection in Berlin, but applied to everyday anthropomorphic storage spaces (desks, wardrobes) as opposed to a slicing intervention in a building space. While these items occupy the centre of the space, it is the edges that draw most attention. A rambling network of deconstructed wooden crates has overtaken the room. A couple of small crates against the wall create steps to climb up to the wall, allowing one to stand literally nose-to-wall, and a large black and white grid painting, which could be the backing board for an old screen-printing frame, a grid flecked with traces of ink. On one wall is the title of this first part of Trilogy, the "Golden Section." (3) If one stands exactly in the middle of the room, facing the furniture, a unity is achieved whereby the furniture aligns with the painting behind them. Perspective remains not so much elusive but constructed, physically and historically.

Continuing, we encounter one of Liu's signature "Purple Air" paintings, the very last one in fact, before we enter the major tableaux of the show, "Merely a mistake." At once familiar and baffling,

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the principal hall of the Minsheng Museum has been converted into a Natural History Museum exhibit for religious dinosaurs. The wooden cathedral forms are skeletal animations of architectural models; their stone geometry converted and compacted as if by an obsessive-compulsive carpenter. The word "trilogy" in the West and for Christians everywhere describes the Christian divine power as three separate but indivisible parts - god, Jesus and the holy ghost. Yet while Trilogy evokes these notions, in no way is it about Christianity, nor about the status of Christianity in China. Instead one must consider these temples to "divine" power as a more elastic metaphor, one recording our needy search for transcendence, one that in the West was the impetus for scholars to search for the divine law, which in turn became natural law, but that in Taoist China had a different history, as argued by the renowned sinologist Joseph Needham:

*It was not that the Tao, the cosmic order of things, did not work according to system and rule, but that the tendency of the Taoists was to regard it as inscrutable. It would not, perhaps, be going too far to say that this was the one reason why, when the care of Chinese science over the centuries was consigned to them, this science remained on a mainly empirical level. (4)*

Liu Wei is not critiquing such East/West arguments but using them as metaphor to question how we base positive belief upon uncertain knowledge, that is, the inscrutable. Of course, one is tempted to go further and acknowledge the absurdity of being cryptic, for when we talk about what cannot be understood, we are limiting inquiry, putting certain topics beyond discussion. And maybe, like the old Taoists, we are wrong.

Liu's cathedrals – for what else are we to call them? Certainly they are not traditional Chinese temples – induce both awe and pity. One marvels at their complexity while recoiling at their monstrous redundancy. The recycling of timber, the Rorschach Test-effects of the joinery, the Sisyphean *mise-en-abyme* of human endeavour, idolisation and self-flagellation, evidences a conceptual and material exhaustion. I found myself minded of the cathedral being built by Justo Gallego. Near Madrid, for the past 50 years, the strictly Catholic Gallego has worked, almost alone, to build a cathedral. It is far from finished, stable or necessarily beautiful, and he is 85 years old, but every day he continues to build. Even the most convinced atheist must appreciate the fulgent obsession that drives his Herculean work, yet simultaneously question the vast expenditure of effort required to build yet another cathedral. In Liu's version, it would seem that a Frankenstein monk has taken an almost viral approach to construction, where construction justifies itself, regardless the anachronism of its expression. But if art museums are the cathedrals of the present, as Liu appears to suggest, how absurdly obsessed are we? Deicide seems only to create room for new, if different gods. Again, Liu does not question the gods themselves – such thin material – but our self-indulgent and deluded belief in them.

## Notes

1. Probably partly dictated by the layout of the Minsheng Art Museum.
2. Significantly, the tanned ox hide and pigskin were the same materials used to make "dog chews," making for a rather cynical comment on politics and digestion.
3. Joseph Needham, "Human Law and the Laws of Nature," *The Shorter Science & Civilization in China*, An abridgement by Coin A. Ronan of Joseph Needham's original text, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 292.
4. The Golden Section, symbolised by  $\Phi$  (an irrational mathematical constant, like  $\pi$ .), has fascinated Western mathematicians for over 2,000 years. In his treatise *Elements*, the Greek mathematician Euclid first defined the Golden Section as follows: "A straight line is said to have been cut in extreme and mean ratio when, as the whole line is to the greater segment, so is the greater to the less." In the 15th century, the Golden Section began to be described as divine. Luca Pacioli, a Franciscan monk, who is credited with linking the Golden Section to god (*De Divina Proportione*, 1509), is also sometimes called the Father of Accounting because he was the first to describe Double-Entry Book Keeping, otherwise known as the "Venetian method." And about here we could easily trip over Liu's installation whilst we spin Dan Brown mysteries, because Pacioli was also friends with both Leon Battista Alberti and Leonardo da Vinci. Alberti's *On Painting*, of 1435, explained how optics could serve geometry in rendering "realistic" representational space, inflicting the Cyclopes tyranny of perspective upon generations of Western art to come, and da Vinci is of course famous (among everything else) for his studies of proportion (and now also breathless pulp fiction). Evidently it is intended that "Trilogy" might lead us to contemplate all sorts of historical references and possibly relevant

connections (Marco Polo came was Venetian), but that is not the point. Like many leading artists in China, Liu is questioning the nature of truth, historical or otherwise, in the so-called modern world. It's a matter of perspective.