

Li Qing

Gazing toward Aleph (眺望阿莱夫)

Oct 17, 2026 — Mar 16, 2027 | L1, Courtyard 18, Yangyun Mansions, Shanghai, China

“Modernism is temporal; postmodernism is spatial.”

—Fredric Jameson

'Gazing toward Aleph: Li Qing Solo Exhibition' primarily presents artist Li Qing's major series from recent years—*Window*, *Dark Magazines*, and *Images of Mutual Undoing and Unity*—as well as the multi-channel video *Rules of Water*. The geographical landscapes involved in the exhibition include the Grand Waterworks and Western Mansions in the Qing imperial garden Yuanmingyuan; the Chinese scenic sites in *Dark Magazines*; and several groups of “monumental” landmark buildings spanning the entire twentieth century in the *Window* series. The exhibition seeks to trace the production of meaning in historical dimensions and geographical space, and to examine “time-space compression” and the global condition produced by developed capitalist relations of production. Classic questions concerning intrinsic spatiotemporal relations—such as the “spatialization of time,” “spatial dialectics,” and the “Third Space” that Edward Soja designates through Borges's “Aleph”—are both the theoretical starting point for the curating of this exhibition and the real field in which artist Li Qing creatively presents cultural media and the global landscape. It is at once a century-wide scan of the postmodern society of the spectacle and geopolitics, and an artistic response to Marxist spatial critical theories after 1974.

Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, published in 1974, was the first theoretical work to systematically discuss social space. It criticized the static, containerized view of space in traditional social and political theory and proposed three dimensions that a new study of space needed to address: material space, mental space, and social space. The concrete, perceptible material space existing in “spatial practices” forms, through conceptualization and intellectual construction, the mental space of the “representation of space.” The thoroughly open and imaginative social space is different from the previous two yet contains both, emerging as a “representational space.” The three break with binary structure and form a “triple dialectics of space,” in which three modes of cognition—“perceived,” “conceived,” and “lived”—interweave and are dialectically combined.

If Li Qing's *Images of Mutual Undoing and Unity* embodies a mirrored image “dialectics” based on the merging and separation of materials—that is, by imprinting and separating an oil-painting image to form an antithesis originating from itself—then the *Dark Magazines* exhibited in this exhibition embodies an image “dialectics” concerning the reversal and substitution of the positive and negative sides of silk-embroidery images. Li Qing uses the reverse side of silk gifts—cultural specialties of Hangzhou from the planned-economy era—as the front. The originally brilliantly colored front image of the silk product is hidden as the back, while the monochrome warp and weft of the back—the “negative” of the front image—is displayed. They are presented as book covers for a series of international art publications. This operation, from mirror separation to positive-negative reversal, is an advancing process in Li Qing's series of binary-transformational image dialectics. The material images in the *Images of Mutual Undoing and Unity* series are relations of surface mapping from interface to interface. Between the positive and negative images of *Dark Magazines*, however, it becomes a relation of visibility and concealment between the obverse and reverse of a spatial image. Whether the above image space employs “mapping” or “visibility/concealment,” both serve as artist Li Qing's “spatial rhetoric,” transforming material and physical space into a space of duality not only in quantity but also in levels of meaning. In such relations of “mapping” and “visibility/concealment,” what is opened is precisely the “second space” of mental culture in Lefebvre's sense.

The images in Li Qing's *Dark Magazines* are not only reversed; they are also mounted over various international art publications and cultural magazines and, as “covers,” are endowed with a meaning that appears functional but is in fact still aesthetic. In the *Window* series, which takes old windows as its basic structure, the readymade old windows and the magazines in *Dark Magazines* have similar value. Their inclusion in the works can be seen as artist Li Qing introducing a third element into an originally binary structure, directly opening a “Third Space” richer in meaning, akin to Soja's spatial theory. Born in the Bronx, New York, the postmodern urban geographer Edward Soja, in his famous “spatial trilogy,” examined the theories of Foucault, Jameson, and Lefebvre and, through cultural pluralism and a method of rethinking possibilities beyond binary structures, proposed the landmark concept of the “Third Space” originating in *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. “In Thirdspace, my goal, in a word, is to encourage you to think in different ways about the meanings and significance of space... I am not asking you to abandon your old, familiar ways of thinking about spatiality, but to interrogate them with new methods, in order to open and expand the domain and critical sensibilities of your previously established spatial or geographical imagination.”

During the French Second Empire, from 1853 to 1870, Georges-Eugène Haussmann, appointed by Napoleon III as prefect of the Seine and urban planner, carried out a large-scale urban renovation of Paris. This was the beginning of the “dialectical” movement by which the modern metropolis constantly renews and displays itself. It also initiated the rise of landmark architecture led by power and capital, integrating function and aesthetics, utility and luxury. The class blueprint led by the state and finance was also a spatial restructuring project carried out through “creative destruction” and “mutual destruction and identity.” Power and capital ultimately replaced Balzac's romantic fantasy of Paris. In the twentieth century, China likewise launched multiple rounds of vast programs to modernize its cities, urban areas, and even the entire countryside. The old objects Li Qing uses in his *Window* series—old architectural windows that were originally material remnants of modern Chinese history—were, in the course of China's twentieth-century modernization and urbanization, first regarded as superfluous things to be demolished and discarded, or as things awaiting “elimination.” At the end of the twentieth century, after the high-modernization process had come to an end, old architectural components, including old windows, were widely reinvested with new aesthetic meaning. In contemporary architectural planning and design, such windows and architectural structures, like old furniture, were reintegrated into modern and contemporary public and private spaces as decorations that reintroduce a sense of history into dehistoricized contemporary architectural space, and as props for emotional nostalgia.

When Li Qing uses them, he does so neither in the sense of the first process of modernity—as things to be discarded and renewed—nor in the second stage, after China’s high urbanization process was completed, as historical decoration and cultural symbol. Li Qing introduces these old windows, which possess a genuine texture of history, into his art not merely to provide a material and technical “enframing” for his paintings, but to present the old windows themselves as the subject of his spatial painting installations. In this series, one cannot simply say whether the paintings within these old windows are accessories to the window-frame structure, or whether the window-frame structure is the background and framework of the paintings; rather, the two together construct an imagistic space of “window” that encompasses both the “metaphysical” and the “physical.” These “window” works, as directly suggested by their phenomenological being, are spatiotemporal apparatuses capable of opening a new space of thought beyond “first space” and “second space,” entrances for observing a more interesting ternary dialectical structure, and precisely windows for gazing toward the “Third Space” in Soja’s sense—that is, Borges’s “Aleph.”

Consider the architecture and landscapes Li Qing paints within old Chinese window grids: whether the Bird’s Nest of the Beijing Olympics, the glass pyramid of the Louvre in Paris, Tatlin’s Monument to the Third International, the Gate of Suzhou, or the Harbin Grand Theatre. Especially upon entering the contemporary era, the visual style of such monumental buildings will, in a shocking manner, embody an omnipotent aesthetic style and visual symbol dominated by contemporary material science and architectural technique. Soviet architect Vladimir Tatlin planned to build the headquarters and monument of the Communist International in Petrograd after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution—what we today call the Monument to the Third International—which inaugurated the beginning of the twentieth century’s spectacular architectural-industrial fantasy. This monument, called by Viktor Shklovsky “a monument made of iron, glass, and revolution,” was ultimately not realized due to the constraints of historical reality, but the idea carried by its model had already loaded “iron” and “glass”—the “material” of the twentieth century’s iconic industrial materials—into “revolution,” the twentieth century’s iconic historical “dynamic” and “form,” as a symbol of the twentieth century’s spiraling modernity.

The landmark buildings described above appear in Li Qing’s *Window* series in a mode of temporal-spatial juxtaposition, mapping precisely a “cognitive mapping” by an artist with historical self-awareness of the cities and landscapes in which he has been and is now situated. This “cognitive mapping” in Jameson’s sense is carried out through architectural images that serve as markers of important historical stages. Whether ancient or modern, landmark buildings and landscapes often appear as representations of the highest level of the social relations of production and productive forces in a given period. By presenting these key representations simultaneously in montage-like juxtaposition, Li Qing reconstructs the space of meaning among them and summons latent, never-revealed intrinsic relations of time and space.