Catalog essay by PHILIP TINARI for David Diao's "Da hen Li House" exhibition at Couryard Gallery, Beijing, March 2008

DAVID DIAO'S
DA HEN LI HOUSE CYCLE

The first painting I ever saw by David Diao was hanging in a second-floor gallery at the Guangdong Museum of Art. It was November 2005 and his first time showing in the country he had left fifty-six years earlier, in a sprawling Guangzhou Triennial (the most serious contemporary art exhibition to take place in an official Chinse museum) devoted to the urban urgencies of the Pearl River Delta. He knew the curators—Hou Hanru and Hans-Ulrich Obrist—from an earlier moment, the Paris of the 1990s that he often visited and from which that duo had generated the traveling Asian contemporary circus known as *Cities on the Move*. This was the *Cities on the Move* reunion tour, a decade later, with many of the artists, Chinese and otherwise, who had since become staples of the "biennial circuit." And there, hanging unassumingly on this gallery wall, was a blue silkscreened painting of a map: "Endangered Species: Modern Houses in New Canaan Connecticut." To the right of the map, a listing, architect by architect, with yellow and red markings to signify which of these gems of aestheticized progress was "under threat," and which had been "already demolished."

I had an aesthetic moment there, standing in that awkward gallery in a museum building built to fit a mutated modernism, in an institution belonging to a state hellbent on demolition and reconstruction and deeply structured by its own teleologies of progress, in an exhibition trying to articulate a meaningful response to all of this at a moment when the messianic globalism of the 1990s was just beginning to seem passé. This blue painting, its precise appropriated mapping of a suburb sanctified by the interventions of the masters, its textual accents in yellow and red, its smooth palimpsest of a surface: this was the signal image that, for me at least, refracted the entire project of the triennial, the museum, the Chinese state. This one canvas lent the possibility of a cosmopolitan hermeneutics to an exhibition that otherwise ran the risk of simple celebration of the PRC and its hyper-urbanization in its moment of "post-planning." The knowledge that someone saw a parallel, however oblique, between the moralistic, rarefied preservationism of the American northeast and the corrupt, chaotic exigencies of the Chinese south marked a new sophistication and depth for the critical conversation surrounding the situation of the moment.

In this cycle of paintings Diao moves into a new architectural register, tackling the Da Hen Li House in Chengdu where he was born and raised until age six. The conceit is elegant and simple: Diao left his birth home as a young boy, never to see it again. No photos or plans remained. The house and its grounds were transformed into a Communist office complex, then

torn down before he could get back to revisit. Using his memory and those of his assorted aunts and uncles, and calibrated by the fixed dimensions of the tennis court that was the house's special feature, he conjectured his former reality back into existence. The resulting twenty-four canvases brim with subtle references to the intertwined languages of architecture, painting, and Chinese, as well as to this project of reconstruction through imagination.

The cycle begins with a historical exposition in the form of a timeline, placing the house's construction and destruction into the larger story of Diao's life and career. After this opening salvo come a number of canvases based on the drawings made by his relatives—here the enlarged back of an envelope, pasted to the canvas in a subtle homage to the act of mounting traditional Chinese paintings; there the silkscreened, not-to-scale rendering of his civil-engineer uncle. Then there are several meditations on the tennis court, its straight lines and right angles evoking both abstract painting and modern architecture. Some contain hand-scrawled text giving the basics of the historical story as filtered through Jung Chang's *Wild Swans*. The fact that Diao's father died on a tennis court a world away in New York lends an added poignancy to this otherwise rote metric device; and the implicit significance of the court's presence in terms of the (upper) class position and (Western-leaning) cultural orientation it signifies need not even be spoken—this nonchalance itself a knowing nod to the hierarchies embedded in every so-called "standard" unit, and thus to the project of institutional critique with which he has been associated.

One particularly stirring vertical canvas creates a grid out of canceled envelopes bearing the address of the house, the only textual documentation that confirms its erstwhile existence. Inside this yellowed envelope Diao found several property documents, including a seal-stamped deed, which is reproduced in another of these documentary paintings. But the envelope painting does its work not only in rehashing this lone shred of proof as a defense against madness, but in its formal resonance with the grid of Manhattan and even the elevation of a skyscraper, forms which had long since replaced the Sichuan town mansion as Diao's real home. One isolated gem presents a stylized gingko leaf, referring to the trees that surrounded the house but also to Ellsworth Kelly's leaf drawings.

Finally there are the text paintings: two each to render the characters "to construct" and "to destroy," one of the "construct" canvases showing with numbered strokes how to "construct the character to construct." Another two canvases label the site of his home according to its various incarnations—one proclaiming "Da Hen Li" in vinyl stick-on characters produced in New York's Chinatown, highlighting the discrepancy between the painted surface and the tacked-on signifier, another proclaiming "*Sichuan Daily*" in that newspaper's official calligraphic typeface and the colors of the PRC flag. These are complemented by two final works in which Diao's own Chinese characters tell stories, contained by the grids of calligraphy practice notebooks. The stories are simple and expository: "I lived in this house until I was six," begins one, in

characters that look like they might have been written by a six-year-old. Diao makes no secret of his relative illiteracy in Mandarin, itself a direct product of the same historical forces that appropriated the Da Hen Li House. The cycle ends with a drill, interrupted mid-sentence like any good fractured narrative. The sentence, repeated one and one half times, reads "A Chinese who has no Chinese language education." The sentence structure is reversed in Chinese, such that the repeated clause reads "who has taken no Chinese." It is cut off mid-sentence but hints at an infinite repetition, like some modernist flourish meant to go on and on, a Greenbergian trajectory extending infinitely, bravely forward. Here again the materiality of the characters themselves—the visual composition of the typeface with which Diao etches out these words—is itself proof of their textual truth, a sort of rebuttal to the art/language divide with which he has worked for so long, made possible by the unique signifying properties of Chinese characters.

David Diao's position is bookended by Chineseness and architecture, themes which he had until now not chosen to explore together. The thumbnail biographies give us two parallel, somehow equally poignant details: how Diao was born in Chengdu and left under duress at age six when the People's Republic was founded, how he now spends his free time tending to a home by Marcel Breuer. Between those two points came a painting career on the embers of the New York School, played out against the vicissitudes of a larger art-historical context strangely parallel to those he faced in leaving China—conceptualism eclipsing Greenbergian abstract painting just as the Communists eclipsed the Nationalists. Perhaps coming up against the ends of these two systems has endowed him with a sensitivity to the undersides of the narratives written by their replacements, as well as a healthy skepticism about the linear schematics (Alfred Barr's birth of modern painting chart, his own progression of homes and studios) with which we simplify history. Diao said in a 1996 interview that he tends to "use [himself] as an instance of a more general condition, and to "locate [himself] as complicitous and thoroughly implicated in the very formations that [he] addresses." In the Da Hen Li cycle paintings, he is able to do this in a manner no longer simply intellectual and theoretical but now personal and evocative. In this inherently futile act of seeking to reclaim a bygone space and time, Diao places his typical pictorial wit and skepticism into a new context of historical pathos. In exploring the physical building that was literally the site of and container for his Chinese identity, these works by Diao reconcile two of his most prominent interests.

Philip Tinari
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