

UCCA

民生现代美术馆
MINSHENG ART MUSEUM

刘小东： 金城小子

LIU XIAODONG: HOMETOWN BOY

尤伦斯当代艺术中心
一石文化 编

Edited by

Ullens Center for Contemporary Art & ISreading Culture



世纪出版集团 上海人民出版社

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杰罗姆·桑斯及郭晓彦联合策展

Co-curated by Jérôme Sans and Guo Xiaoyan

刘小东:

金城小子



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淮阴师院图书馆 1372355

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刘小东： 金城小子

杰罗姆·桑斯——尤伦斯当代艺术中心馆长

精彩的绘画、大量的日记、一部纪录片——“金城小子”第一次全景地透视了当代中国最重要的艺术家之一刘小东的艺术历程。这个多方位的展览，包括侯孝贤执导的纪录片在内，均是专门为尤伦斯当代艺术中心设计、创作和呈现的。

刘小东的工作方式很像一个电影人。在纸张、画布、视频和电影上，他记录着创作的方式和过程，抓住瞬间的动机、观察和印象，使每个因素都成为最终作品的一部分。他是画家里的导演，画笔下的人物是演员，张望观察的我们就是观众。

17岁那年，刘小东离开了故乡金城，到北京学习艺术。此后，他身处异乡，走过了很多地方，画了很多年的画——有评论家描述它们为“一个民族的精神复合”。而此次的“金城小子”，让艺术家在30年后第一次长时间地重归故里。经济的发展，时代的变迁，改变了故乡的风景和原有的生活方式，也改变了曾经一起长大的伙伴的面容。

刘小东用他的方式在我们脸上描绘了另一双眼睛：让我们在这三个展厅里，看见他曾经的金城、儿时伙伴、一山一水，每一个细节都繁衍开来。这不是基于记忆，而是一种洞察和体悟，用他自己的话来说：“时间是最伟大的艺术。”

LIU XIAODONG: HOMETOWN BOY

Jérôme Sans – Director, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art

Comprised of paintings, extensive diary entries and a documentary film by iconic Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-Hsien, *Hometown Boy* offers the first complete perspective on the artistic practice of Liu Xiaodong, one of China's most respected painters. This multi-faceted exhibition was designed and created specifically for UCCA.

Liu Xiaodong approaches his work much like a filmmaker. On paper and canvas, on video and film, he documents each step of the creative process, recording his methods, motives, observations and impressions, so that each component forms an integral part of the final work. He is the artist-as-director – the people he paints are his actors, and we, the observers, are the audience.

Liu Xiaodong was only seventeen when he left his hometown of Jincheng to study art in Beijing. Despite his travels to exotic and familiar locales and the many portraits painted over the years – one critic describes them as “the psychic composite of a nation” – *Hometown Boy* marks the artist's first extended trip home in three decades. Economic development and the passage of time have changed the landscape of his hometown and altered the lives and faces of the people he grew up with. With his unerring eye for detail, Liu Xiaodong's landscapes of Jincheng and portraits of his boyhood friends are based not on what he remembers, but on what he observes. The result of his homecoming is the body of work that fills these three rooms.

In the words of the artist himself, “Time is the greatest art of all.”

绘画：以反抗溃败的世界

郭晓彦——民生当代艺术研究中心首席运营官、民生现代美术馆副馆长

死亡本身带着凭证同来，
我们将重新开始
争斗／我们将再一次行动
我们将重新展开我们大家

反抗溃败的世界
永无终止的小同志／或者
他们在记忆中燃烧
一次／又一次／又一次

——赫尔曼《不可思议的温情：诗选》

任何一个艺术家和他童年的关系都将会越来越密切。有可能在童年形成几个点，会越来越积攒，然后你会不停地超越它。然而这几点对你是有作用的：你和自然的态度，和人的关系的态度……

——刘小东

一个中国女诗人曾访问刘小东：“四处漂泊的人根在哪里？”小东答：“出生地。”金城是小东的出生地，位于东北辽宁，一个小城市。“金城小子”——这像是典型的中国人叙事：一个人出生在小城，长大成人，经过努力终有成绩。在中文里，“小子”是一个很有意味的词，也就是说，这是一个敢于构想生命探险，并且能够返乡的人。

在1950年代，东北是新中国承载国家迈向现代化的重要战略部署之地，大规模的工厂建制使这里的很多地方都成为以工人阶级为主的城市。小东的父母也曾经是金城造纸厂（一个国营工厂）的工人。最盛时，有几千工人在此工作，由此，金城成为一个围绕着造纸厂而运转的小城。这个工厂的前身是1939年日本人出资建造，由国民政府管理的造纸厂。在如今已很破败的厂区中，还能看出当年的设计、建设中先进、合理的布局理念；这里出产的纸曾经印制了中国人生活中（在“文化大革命”期间）最重要的读物《毛主席语录》的各种版本，以及中国学生的课本。

1980年代初，小东走出这里的时候，这里的生活还是整齐、朴

素的。在这次小东跟伙伴们一起找到的旧照片里可以看到，那时虽然生活清贫，但人们有着朴实和宁静的目光，如那个时代所有中国人的目光——目视前方的希望。此后，这些儿时的同学、伙伴继续在这里生活、劳作，直到生活的不断沦陷以至溃败。现在记忆中整齐划一的中国式工人阶级生活已被由资本经济完全控制的当代生活替代，生活的溃败景色，并非仅仅是曾经的工人阶级当前的生存艰难，而是这个生命安顿之地，这个我们凝望前方的目光曾在此定植之地，这个让生命深处的孤寂能够得以安抚之地，我们称之为“家乡”的地方，无法再有凝聚的精神，荒芜如无法整理的现实。

回到家乡“写生”，面对这个聚集着历史、痛苦、乡情、家族记忆等复杂情绪的地方，面对熟悉却又溃败如常的物是人非，涂抹中，一个艺术家怎样将地老天荒的存在定格？对于一个返乡者，途中的思考能带来怎样继续的前行力量？

“返乡”——对于哲学的思考来说，即是回到生成的本源近处，回到我们本质性的生命此在，使互为依赖的天地人神聚集在无尽的相互关联之中。哲学家海德格尔认为，没有现成的“故乡”与“开端”，只有在无限的寻思与诗的过程中，“故乡”和“开端”初现端倪，又自行隐匿。而两者的晦暗都需要得到呵护，它保持着遮蔽和去蔽之间的平衡，使得寻找和追问继续下去。所以，在一个特定的位置，在自己的曾经出发之处进行的反思和行动，对于一个艺术家有着重要的意义。

我们也关心，对于一个艺术家，如何思考绘画（艺术）和时代、绘画（艺术）与自己的关系呢？小东曾在访谈中说：“我觉得对艺术的选择，题材是第一重要的，因为这个是代表你的政治立场和世界观的东西。我现在也一直在考虑艺术家在这个社会上的角色，为什么你们不生产任何东西，还过得那么好？总得为社会做点事情吧，艺术家能做什么？也许我们的思考能去带动社会的思考。”¹

小东这几年都是将自己的工作置于一个现场，而面对着开启（也意味着消失）的重要时刻和事物。这次，他也是同以往一样，用自

己独特和越来越熟悉的工作方式：选择自己认为重要的题材；组织起一个工作团队跟随自己，这次在家乡工作的时间超过两个多月；记录外来事物带来的每天所思；在现场写生。

“写生”的工作，他已经经过多年，最早开始的一个计划是在金门的一个展览中，他选择两岸当兵的年轻人来写生，用画面讲述这些年轻的士兵（18岁左右）是怎样在一个无法选择的政治冲突的现实中开始构思自己的生活，他们怎样理解政治的社会赋予他们的所谓责任。2003年开始的“三峡”计划可以说是他一个重要的转折点，他开始将目光投向时代变化的关键处，质疑和思考。之后，他的一个一个艺术（写生）计划，都将目光投向这个国家在时代巨变中的事物、人群，投向那些即将消失的余晖，投向那些特殊的地点。

除了作为艺术家独有的天赋——对于绘画敏锐的感受力和表达力，选择写生，是否还有另外的意味？“写生”，中国艺术院校中很重要的训练，既是技能的训练，也是一种思维训练，是作为绘画艺术家与这个具有历史意义的工作的联系之处。小东把“写生”理解作为一种态度，也理解作为一种行动。在很多访问中，他都坚称自己是一个画家，甚至认为“写生”之于画家，正是一个思考绘画在本体论意义上书写的过程。当他将画笔对着发生在中国的事件性问题时，他是以一种介入并在场的关注和记录，将自己的绘画变成事件，对历史进行的一种定格：揭示出存在之疏明，留下光晕消失的痕迹。而且，似乎越来越显示出，对于刘小东，写生成为他抗击生活溃败的一种意志，对着那些在一个速朽的时代无法复制的时刻和人物——对着那些他认为具有永恒性的时刻和事物，对着那些带动他的思绪的景象，让它们成为转瞬即逝的时间的“历史遗物”，成为他的选择。

“金城小子”的叙事就绝不是关于寻找往事和回忆的叙事，相反地，作为“它所是”的诗，它寓寄着艺术家的一种构想：生活在一个如此精神黯淡的时刻，痛苦的分担也许是我们重新找到尊严和希望的前提，而我们将如何在连痛苦都无法承担的时代承担痛苦？我们将以怎样的眼界去思考和回应这个时代的问题？在今天，已经丧失了传统形而上学的追根溯源，也许文学文本的还乡更是一种追求过渡性的思考之路——身体和精神的“返乡”正是为了抗击生活的溃败，抵抗日益固化的现实和虚妄的涣散。

绘画（写生）的实质是面对可触感的身体和世界。身体，或者身体的感觉，不仅是这个写作意义的出发点，也是一切写作者丈量意义、世界、伦理和书写的尺度。小东始终认为，与“外部”保持的接触，是世界意义向你敞开的途径，对世界的认识和感受

也总是被“外部”所触发、召唤和激活。写生中蕴含着“未曾完成的状态”和“行动”正是艺术家思考世界和整理自己的可能性源泉。也许，对于艺术家，这样“置身其中”去触及外部的真正作用是“去触及自己，去被触及，在自己之外被触及，不将任何东西据为己有。这就是书写、爱和意义。意义，就是触及”²。这个思想结构标志着一一种居于自我与他者之间的边缘思考的位置和立场，这应是艺术家的思想锚定之地。小东也认为，寻找拯救溃败生活之道，在于找回自己那有痛感的身体及愿意在废墟瓦砾中找寻价值的决心。“我觉得怀疑是一种力量，不满也是一种力量。艺术不仅仅是描绘你满意的一方面，有的时候它其实更深层的动力是你对它不满，你不喜欢这东西，你才去描绘它，并不是你喜欢的景象你才去描绘它。我喜欢描绘非常矛盾的东西。日常生活我喜欢，也喜欢大自然，空气清新，小河流水，漂亮。可是我从来不会去画，没有必要我再去画它，它已经非常完美了。我所关注的东西都是不完美的东西，都是充满着矛盾，充满着发展与被发展的矛盾的东西。”³

在绘画中，踪迹化的身体靠触感和书写有了相同的结构，它们都在一种与外部的关联中增加着事件和意义。观察小东的工作，他的写生是身体与语言、身体与他者之间的接触，是身体的外展和身体的出生：“这是一种在自身外的语言，将要外—铭写的（ex-écrit），将要通过触及，通过落入沉默来加以命名。”⁴可以说，艺术是这样一种言成肉身的工作。对于小东，这个工作必须还原到一种可触感的方式，一种知识、理性、话语等形而上的生命触感。“写生”，正是类似一种捕捉“触感踪迹”，一种将自我与外部世界、与感触联系在一起的行动。绘画中的这些事物，一旦被捕捉到，就会失去，但身体则会变成了一条通道，等待词语播撒。“失去的身体，是书写的热情。书写不能做任何事情，只能失去它的身体。一旦书写触及身体，书写同样失去身体。书写只能抹去它。”⁵“对我来讲，我是个肉体，被我画的人也都是肉体。肉体是有生命力的，我希望把这种生命力的东西传达出去。如何传达这种肉体的生命力是我的课题。这个社会不是左就是右，很少有一种中间状态很有力量。我希望这种个体的人性力量能强大起来。”⁶身体变成事件本身，这就是身体书写的沉默之境。

在金城，小东的写生，面对的更多是记忆，是用画笔回忆那些触摸过的东西，那痛苦不在时存在的东西；他画自己家曾经的小屋，画儿时朋友的家——那里都已叠加了他人的记忆和痛苦；画他们曾经熟悉的游戏之地，虽有暗语，但和其他人感触不同，这些都像是在画自己的肌肤。在这个绘画过程中，你专心聆听被画者的心愿，他们流露出感伤，毕竟生活本身就是创伤，需要我们

去察觉希望，这需要身体本身的热度，而能保持这样的热度，是因为这个艺术家保持了对痛苦敏于感受的能力——跟小东所有的创作一样，画中的人和物绝不是纪念碑式的，只是一个朴实的此刻并占据一切——被画物在我们观看的瞬间返回此刻，而在画之前，它们已是肌肤的记忆。在这里，刘小东的写生似乎是对着具体的人和物，但事实上，艺术家并不能面对一个固定的地点，而总是面对着虚空，面对许诺的落空与溃败——这个世界的黑暗，是按照无可变更的发展逻辑将大多数人排除在外的时代命运。这些绘画将用经过时间的“涂抹”及肉体的触感控制住我们的视线，它们拒斥冷漠的同情心与任何简单的希望，所画的一切都不愿意仅成为没有灵魂的画面，而是站在一个虚空位置的艺术家的讲述人的故事。

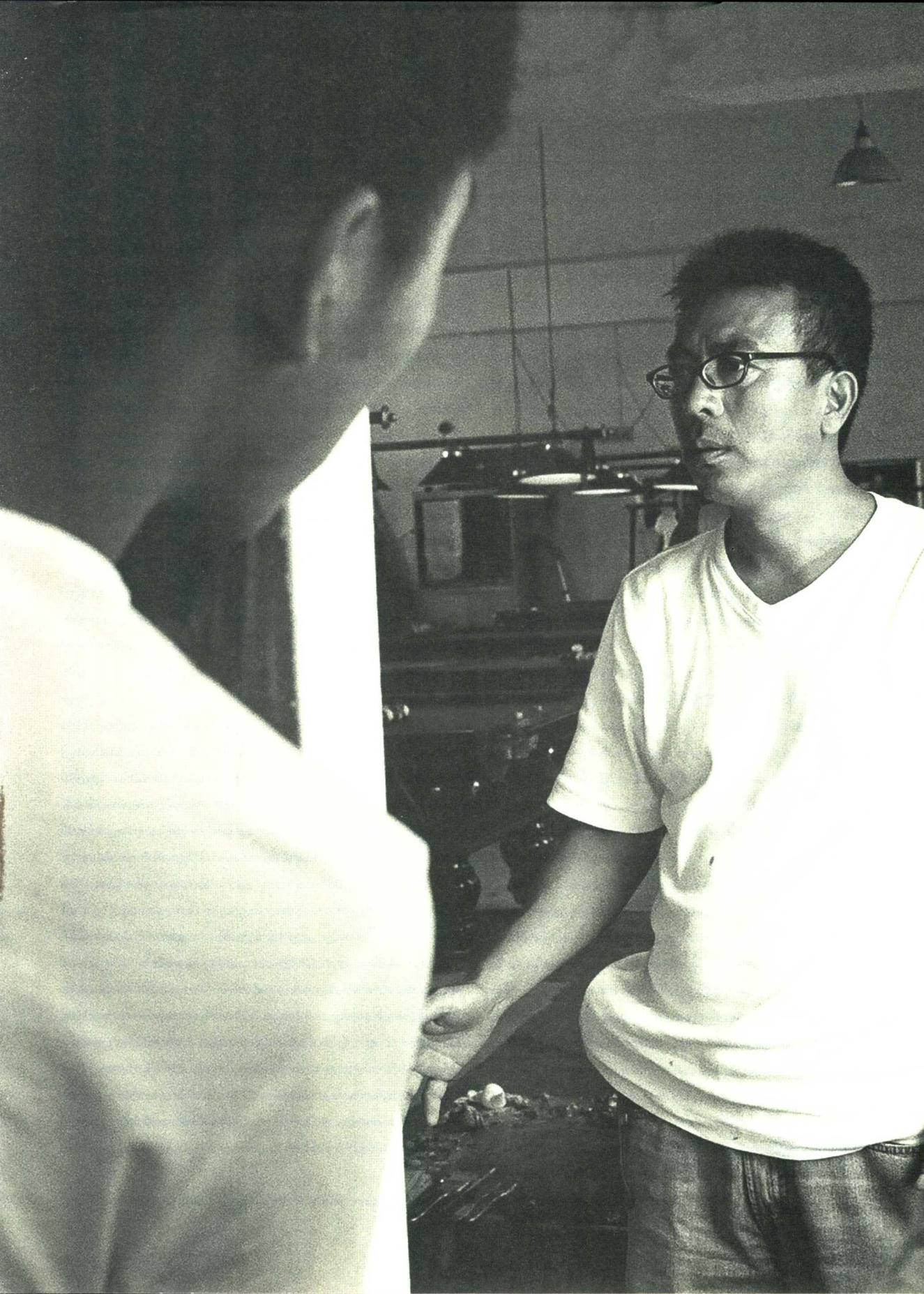
正如小东的作品，一向关注庸碌的生活和人群，他的作品中，在自然、周期、成长、青春、暴力、回忆、技艺、历史中回旋，从物质到精神的母题；他反复描绘这些世俗的空间，那些经常被我们忽略的生活细微处、仪式式的瞬间。在刘小东的笔触下，不仅以令人耳目一新的样子重现，还兼含文化、历史与政治的省察；他总是反复地描绘这些庸碌之处——历史、生活的最后归结是人，人的故事，人的溃败。

在许多的访谈中，刘小东一再说，他的作品看重的是人，说的故事，以人为主，这形成小东对现实的偏爱，影响他对现实超乎一般的关注、想像、仿真与润色。他描绘那些在故事中善于生存的人，为了生存打斗争抗的人，为了生存心怀不满与仇恨的人，为了生存虚度、游戏、吃饭、闲聊的人——假如我们能——回想刘小东作品的每一个细节，其中的人物，和他们的行事，都是人的纠缠、努力和运筹帷幄的叙事。这些对于虚空的反抗多是悲剧性的，而这些思考却都是热度很高的，这些琐碎的时刻，是在小东的画作多有重复的仪式。在“金城小子”中，小东再次以和朋友在一起“吃饭”作为此次创作的收笔——生活严酷的规则性、庸碌性和无法偏离轨道的自我回轮的隐喻，这就是我们这个时代写作的命运视点？

绘画是实在的工作，它从来不隐藏真理的东西，它隐藏什么都不存在的真理。

- 2 让-吕克·南希 (Jean-Luc Nancy), 《一种有限之思》(*A Finite Thinking*), 第 109 页, 引自孔锐才, 《身体、书写与意义的发生——论德里达的触感理论》, 中华学术论坛网站。
- 3 《我们在现实里都是盲人——孙善春 & 刘小东: 刘小东访谈之一》, 2007 年。
- 4 伊安·詹姆斯 (Ian James), 《碎片的需求: 让-吕克·南希哲学导论》(*The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy*), 第 150 页, 引自孔锐才, 《身体、书写与意义的发生——论德里达的触感理论》, 中华学术论坛网站。
- 5 让-吕克·南希, 《一种有限之思》(*A Finite Thinking*), 第 110 页, 引自孔锐才, 《身体、书写与意义的发生——论德里达的触感理论》, 中华学术论坛网站。
- 6 《生命的质感奔腾不息——何予锋 & 刘小东》, 2007 年。

1 《我们在现实里都是盲人——孙善春 & 刘小东: 刘小东访谈之一》, 2007 年。



Painting as an Act of Defiance in a World in Decay

Guo Xiaoyan – Chief Operating Officer, Minsheng Contemporary Art Research Institute & Vice-director, Minsheng Art Museum

*death itself has come with its documentation /
we're going to take up again
the struggle / again we're going to begin
again we're going to begin all of us*

*against the great defeat of the world /
little compañeros who never end / or
who burn like fire in the memory
again / and again / and again*

–Juan Gelman

"They Wait", from *Unthinkable Tenderness: Selected Poems*

I think all artists begin to feel a closer connection to their childhood as they get older. You continue to build on things from your childhood, and you're constantly trying to surpass them. But those things are useful: they influence your attitude toward nature, people and the world...

–Liu Xiaodong

A Chinese female poet once asked Liu Xiaodong, "Where does a drifter have his roots?" His answer: "In the place he was born." For Liu Xiaodong, that place is Jincheng, a small town in the northeast Chinese province of Liaoning. The title of Liu Xiaodong's solo exhibition at UCCA, *Hometown Boy* ("Jincheng Xiaozhi"), reads like a typical Chinese success story: a young man, born and raised in a small town, becomes a big success by dint of his own abilities and hard work. "Xiaozhi", the second word in the title, has interesting connotations in Chinese: it calls up the image of a "hometown boy" who dares to imagine a life of adventure, goes out into world and makes good, then eventually returns to the place he was born.

In the 1950s, northeast China was a region vital to the strategic plans of the new Chinese government, and it would play a critical role in the nation's march toward modernity. With the advent of large-scale manufacturing, the region was soon filled with

thriving factory towns and cities in which the working class was paramount. Both of Liu Xiaodong's parents once worked in Jincheng's state-owned paper mill, which in its heyday employed several thousand workers. For this reason, Jincheng was a town where every aspect of life revolved around the mill. The mill had been built with Japanese investment in 1939 and was, in its previous incarnation, managed by the Chinese Nationalist government headed by Chiang Kai-shek. In its now-dilapidated industrial districts, we can still see how carefully and systematically Jincheng was planned, designed and constructed. The paper produced here was used to print textbooks and various editions of the book that would, during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, become the nation's most essential reading material: *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, otherwise known as *The Little Red Book*.

In the early 1980s, when Liu Xiaodong left his hometown, life in Jincheng was orderly and simple. We can see this in the old photographs he and his friends have collected: although the settings are clearly humble, the subjects appear perfectly sincere, guileless, serene. In their gazes, we find something common to all Chinese people of that time: a sense of hopefulness. Most of Liu Xiaodong's childhood friends and classmates would stay on in Jincheng as factory workers, clinging to their manual jobs until they were finally swept away by the tide of economic change. The absolute uniformity of Chinese working class life has now given way to the absolute dominance of the modern capitalist economy. In this grim landscape of defeat, it is not only the former working class that faces a difficult future, but this peaceful place itself—this place from where we once gazed out at a bright future. This place that offers us a respite from life's loneliness, this place we call our hometown, will never regain its communal spirit, and it suffers from a reality so bleak it defies our understanding.

By going home to paint, sketch, observe and capture the people

and places of his childhood in a setting that mingles history, pain, nostalgia and familial memory, Liu Xiaodong must confront a range of complex emotions and questions. As an artist, how will he capture the timelessness of a place where the landscape is familiar but all of the people have changed? As a hometown boy making his homecoming, what impressions and ideas will he gain, and which will he carry forward into the future?

In a philosophical sense, “going home” means returning to one’s origins, going back to the place from whence one came, re-experiencing that endless interaction of people, place and time. The philosopher Heidegger felt that the concept of a hometown or a true point of origin was misleading and overly romanticized. Origins are murky at best, and the most we can do is continue to search for clues to our origins, knowing that the clues will always remain hidden. For an artist, going back to the specific place he set out from in order to work and reassess his ideas has a very special significance.

We are also interested in how an artist thinks about the relationship between himself and his art, and between his art and the time in which he lives. In an interview, Liu Xiaodong once said: “When it comes to artistic choices, I think that the choice of subject matter is paramount, because it expresses your political standpoint and world view. These days, I’m always thinking about the role of artists in today’s society. Why are artists, who don’t really produce anything useful, so comparatively well off? You’ve got to do something for society, give something back, but what can an artist give? Maybe our ideas can change society and influence the way people think.”¹

In recent years, Liu Xiaodong has focused on painting on-site, in order to capture important things and moments before they disappear. For this exhibition, he has continued with his unique and increasingly comfortable method of painting: choosing a topic he considers important, organizing a team of people to accompany him, and recording every step of his process in sketches, photographs, diary entries, documentary film, and of course, paintings. In this manner, he will spend over two months working in his hometown, painting and sketching “from life.”

Liu Xiaodong has been “painting from life” for many years now.

It is a practice he first began during an exhibition in Jinmen, when he painted portraits of soldiers from both sides of the Taiwan Straits. He wanted to explore, through portraits, what it was like for these young soldiers (whose average age was eighteen) to begin their adult lives in the midst of an insoluble political clash; he also wanted to understand how they viewed their own socio-political responsibilities. Later, in 2003, Liu Xiaodong began a series of paintings about the displaced populations of the Three Gorges region. This marked an important turning point, for he had begun to focus his attention on places and issues that were emblematic of the changing times, and to reassess and question the nature of those changes. From then on, Liu Xiaodong completed one project after another, always using his method of “painting from life” to focus on how the massive changes taking place in China affected different groups of people, transformed the landscape, and caused certain things to disappear or be destroyed.

We may well ask about the significance of Liu Xiaodong’s decision to create the kind of realist paintings that some have termed “life sketches.” Aside from his innate talents – those keen powers of perception and expression that may predispose him to the form – why does he paint the way he does? “Life sketching” is a fundamental component of artistic training in China’s art schools and art academies. Sketching is both a technical and an intellectual form of training: students must learn the concepts as well as the actual technique. It is the link between the artist/painter and the work of painting, a labor that holds great historical significance. Liu Xiaodong views “life sketching” or “painting from life” as both an act and an attitude. In numerous interviews, he has said that he considers himself a painter, first and foremost. For him as a painter, the act of sketching plays a vital ontological role in the process of creating meaning and crafting a narrative. When he applies the tools of his trade to issues and events that are currently taking place in China, he is both observer and participant, observing and documenting things as they happen. This transforms his paintings into “events” marking a certain moment in time or point in history: a patch of darkness, a falling shadow, the last vestige of light. Furthermore, it has become increasingly apparent that for Liu Xiaodong, “painting from life” is a way of fighting back against a world in decay, an act of willpower and defiance. He depicts people and things that cannot be replicated in this increasingly corrupt era,

subjects and objects that possess a sense of timelessness, and settings that inspire him as an artist and as an individual. In a brief period of time, he transforms them into “historical relics.” For Liu Xiaodong, this is a very conscious artistic choice.

Hometown Boy is in no sense a nostalgic narrative or a remembrance of things past; on the contrary, it is a somber ode to the here and now. It is a conceptual and artistic narrative that raises some sobering questions: Living in this spiritually gloomy age, how do we regain our hope and dignity? With so much misfortune to go around, how do we spread the burden so that no one person or group has to shoulder too much? How will we cope with more pain in the future, when we have more pain than we can handle right now? What mindset and values should we use when responding to the problems of today? When so many of our hard-won traditional teachings and values have been lost, maybe the act of “going home” – that homecoming which is so vaunted in poetry and literature – is simply an intermediate step toward a new understanding of the world. Maybe the physical and spiritual act of homecoming is a way of striking back at life’s defeats and disappointments, of resisting stagnation and false hope.

The essence of painting is coming into contact with real people and places, and encountering the world in a physical way. The body, with its five senses and physical sensations, is more than just a starting point for meaning: it is the yardstick with which the artist measures meaning, morality, reality, and the world in general. Liu Xiaodong has always believed in staying in touch with the “outside world,” be it other countries or simply people and places outside his immediate experience or social circle. Maintaining an open channel to the world is important because so often, it is outside factors that activate, inform or trigger our understanding and experience of the world. Liu Xiaodong’s method of going out into the world and “painting from life” is a both a state of mind and a constantly-evolving process; it is a wellspring that feeds his understanding of the world and allows him to explore his own potential. For the artist, perhaps the true purpose of putting himself in the middle of things and going out in search of direct experience is, as Jean-Luc Nancy wrote, “to get in touch with oneself and allow oneself to be touched, to come into contact with things that exist outside of the self, and to appropriate nothing to oneself. In that, there is literature, love

and meaning. Meaning, quite simply, is touch.”ⁱⁱ This conceptual formula symbolizes the ideal position of the artist and should anchor his thinking: somewhere between the self and the other, on the margins but not marginal, observant but engaged. For Liu Xiaodong, the search for redemption amidst the decay is about recapturing the physical self, the body that can touch and be touched, the body that can experience and empathize with pain. He pairs this with a firm determination to sift through the rubble of what was to find value in the things that are. “I think there’s a certain power in being dubious or dissatisfied,” Liu Xiaodong once said in an interview. “Art isn’t just about painting things that make you happy. Sometimes there’s a deeper power in depicting things that you don’t like or that make you unhappy. You don’t like something, so you paint it. It’s not just about painting scenes that are pleasing to you personally. I like depicting things that are complicated and contradictory. I like my life, and the world of nature, and fresh air and running streams and things of beauty. But I’ve never gone out and painted those things. I don’t need to, because they’re perfect as they are. What I’m interested in are imperfect things filled with contradictions.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In painting, the physical sensations of the body and the narrative of the body play a similar compositional role: their interactions with the world add meaning to a work of art. Examining the work of Liu Xiaodong, we find paintings that depict the contact between the human body and the world of language, the physical contact between the self and other, the link between outward physical appearance and physical origin. “This is a language that exists outside of oneself; it is necessarily ex-écrit, and can only be named through a process of touch and silent contemplation.”^{iv}

One could say that the work of an artist is to turn language into flesh and blood. For Liu Xiaodong, this means returning to the physical in order to transform the intellectual, logical and linguistic into something tactile. His practice of “painting from life” is a way of capturing a trace of some physical sensation; it is an act of connecting one’s body, thoughts, and sensations with the outside world. In capturing a person or object in a painting, something may be lost, but the act of painting transforms the body into a conduit through which words and ideas can be channeled onto the canvas. Jean-Luc Nancy wrote, “Physical annihilation is the passion of words. Words alone can do nothing; all they can do