

REALITIES OF SCALE

Lu Zhengyuan in conversation with Elisabeth Condon



Lu Zhengyuan, Life Trilogy, 2012. Oil on canvas in resin frame, 68.5 x 88.5 cm (27 x 34-7/8 inches). Courtesy Klein-Sun Gallery, New York, NY

LU ZHENGYUAN. August 2, 2014. Beijing Studio. For my visit to his Beijing studio, artist Lu Zhengyuan prepared a comprehensive PDF history of his work to ground its conceptual evolution from social-realist sculpture to conceptual experimentation. Shifting between screen and print images and actual works, recurrent themes of risk, entropy, and replication emerged. Lu challenges definitions of real and fake in a world proliferate with symbols.

Lu Zhengyuan: *[Showing a photographic image from 2012 similar to Life Trilogy, above.]* One of these is a real banana and the other a fake banana. That goes for the other fruits as well. I just painted both bananas together. On the surface they're both fake because they're both actually painted, but the real one ends up basically rotting while the other stays intact.

[Showing a photographic image of him pouring liquid by a road.] And in this work, I dumped perfume or cologne bottles by the side of the road to spread the fragrance...

Elisabeth Condon: To make Beijing a beautiful flower. *[laughter]*

In another work, I fabricated fake slogans you see everywhere in Beijing with the classic yellow letters and font and the red fabric, except these are completely meaningless. They don't say anything, I didn't look at the keyboard, just typed, and this is what came out. It's completely senseless...and these are silkscreens of prostitutes, like the sex ads you get in your door. I blew them up really big.

[We view an image of Lu boiling a photograph in a pan on the stove.]

I'm actually boiling a picture of myself. It's a reference to *The Journey to the West*, the story of the Monkey King, a moment in the story where monkey king was en route to fight the heavens and had been locked into a furnace intended to kill him, the Eighth Trigram (so named by a Taoist monk). He burned inside for 72 days and once he emerged, he had acquired one of his famous attributes, fiery eyes, and was also immune to smoke and fire. This work references the moment when the fire was supposed to kill him but actually made him stronger.

You speak frequently about risk, about the feeling of danger in your work.

I think art should bring a sense of excitement or thrill [刺激]. There's a word in Chinese that is similar to torture but it's a little lighter, bringing a sense of pain or suffering [actual translation of word is "stimulation" but it usually has a dark tone to it]. Art can help make life a little bit less calm and placid.



Large Glass Material, 2012. Oil on canvas, 100cm x 100cm x 6

In my old studio, I'd hung a piece of glass from the rafters. Everyone who came to visit had to walk under the glass to enter the rest of the studio. It added a little bit of danger.



Lu Zhengyuan, egg paintings, 2008, 20 x 20 cm each (@8 x 8 inches), Marella Gallery, Beijing

These are eggs. There are over 600 paintings that are the exact same egg painted by hand. It's related to the sense of repetition found in Warhol. My expectation for myself is to make every single one as exactly the same, as perfectly identical, as possible. I wanted to make my work like shopping in a contemporary fashion. It's not necessarily related to the consumption aspect, but the repetition of what's available. It's less about the purchase and more about shopping being similar to visiting the gallery, where every painting is the same: you go shopping and every single bag is the same.



Lu Zhengyuan, DETAIL, Rumor, 2008, oil on canvas, 40 x 50 cm

In "Rumor," I painted the first painting on the far right, then had someone else paint a copy of the original, then someone else painted the painting of my painting, so there's a progression as the work develops.

Like the western game "Telephone"...



Lu Zhengyuan, *Untitled Series (Paints)*, 2010

In these paintings, gravity invites paint to make the shape. I'm adding layers of paint until the paint can hold up on its own and keep the structure.



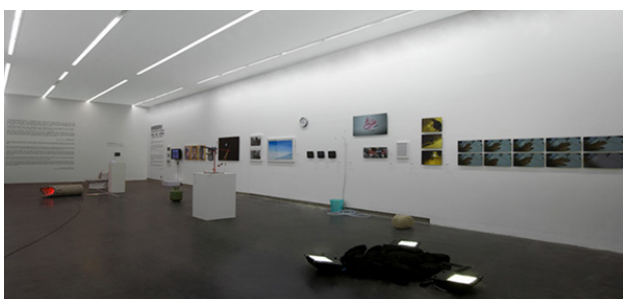
Lu Zhengyuan, *Mental Patients*, 2006. MFA Thesis project, CAFA

***Mental Patients*, your 2006 CAFA MFA project, portrays a literal situation, the struggle of a friend with mental illness. You visited the mental institution to study its effects, to make art that takes part in daily life. After creating this work, you sought other artistic approaches in repetitive and conceptual image-making strategies, including abstract painting. I'm curious about those and if you consider abstraction a risk?**

Sculpture is what I studied; it's my background, what I consider my profession. Painting is removed in that I don't have as close a personal relationship with it, it's not my specialty in the same way sculpture is. In my older sculptures there's an anxiety about them that is focused on craft, whereas the paintings are experimental, contemplative and more relaxed. Moving forward I want to bring the mindset of painting to all of my work, whether sculpture or painting. I wouldn't quite categorize the painting as expressionist, however, more as conceptual. But it's possible that visually it could be interpreted that way.

Does a systematic approach to making include envisioning what the work will look like beforehand?

There's a relationship between percentages of, or amounts, of what I can control or foresee and what I can't. Especially in previous work, I tried to control the outcome, the final look of it in every detail. Particularly with the abstract paintings and what you're seeing in the studio, I changed that ratio to make it less predictable. But I also realize in the process of doing that, because of my personality, what I'm actually doing is controlling myself to not control the paintings, so it's back to square one.



84 Pieces, 2010, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing

The 2010 Ullens exhibition *84 Pieces*, for which you made a work each day for 84 days, represents a major shift in process.

there are three distinct phases in my work. In the earliest phase, which was mostly sculptural, there was usually something directly derivative of the world that I tried to fabricate through the craft of sculpture very carefully, specifically, and detail-oriented. Then there was a shift to the paintings, where it was more the expression of an idea. There was more of a thought process involved so that my work became less concrete or rooted in the real world and more conceptual. The third phase is similar to the second but extends beyond the analytical. There was a moment when I realized that my brain was not as different or as unique from other brains as I'd previously thought. Every day, people eat similar things, we all go online; we all live very similar lives, especially in a modern society. People around the world, even between China and America, are becoming more and more similar, have similar brains, brainpower, and thought processes. Where one sees more differences is in the physical. If a Chinese and an American person both eat the same bread for one year, the American might get this tall and the Chinese might get this tall, because there's physical differences there. So what I'm hoping for in the third phase is that the physical differences or nature of what I am working on will drive the work, as opposed to a conceptual or thought-based process.

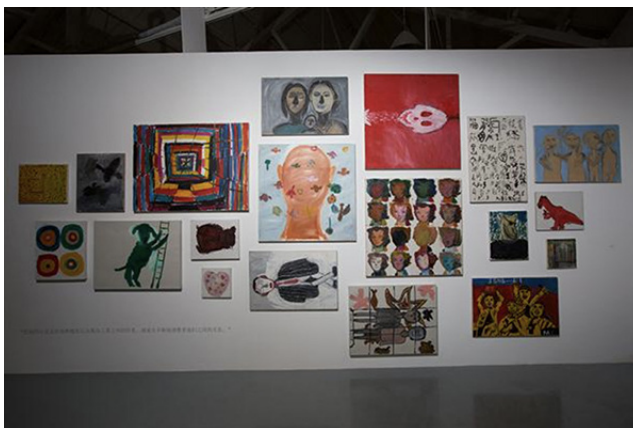


Lu Zhengyuan, *Accidental Message*, 2012, *Shenzhen Sculpture Biennial*

***Accidental Message* recalls Jason Rhoades, Maurizio Catalan appeared in a dream you had, Matthew Barney makes plexiglass frames as you do, Franz West and Sui Jianguo also appear associatively in your work... are any of these artists influences?**

I don't recognize all of those names, but there are two distinct, prominent influences.

The first is the one you mentioned, the dream where I created a collaborative work with Maurizio Catalan [*Can I Hang It on the Cliff*]. The painting series *XXX* (2009) is the second.



Lu Zhengyuan, *XXX*, 2008, *Painting Installation*

[Reading aloud from the XXX text:] Lu Zhengyuan's painting series XXX is about uncovering accident potential. He hired a completely untrained assistant, showed him printed images and media coverage of works by famous artists, to help him develop an impression. Lu then asks the assistant to make copies of the works seen from his own impressions. The reproductions tended to bear a very distinct resemblance to their origins, but we can see certain recognizable features. This raises the question of what really constituted artistic styles – something formulaic, or rather intangible?

For the XXX show, my idea for the structure, originally, was to have two openings. At the first opening there would be none of the works on the walls, just descriptions of the works and of the painters who painted them, but without any solid reference about what the work was or who the painter was. But the descriptions would be very in-depth, so that anyone with some knowledge of art history had an idea of what was being discussed. They might not know the exact piece, which would depend on the person's understanding of art history, but have some understanding of what was being referenced, similar to looking at the painting. At the second opening there would be no more descriptions, just the paintings in the same place where the descriptions used to be. So one then replaces the other.

I have an idea about the relationship between art, art history, and artists, which is that if you take the artists out of that system, what's really important to art history is not the artists themselves but the work that's happening at the time. If it weren't this artist, it would be the next artist, if not A, then B. If you have an apple tree, and the tree is art history and the works are the apples, then I'm trying to remove all the apples and replace them with watermelons. So it's the same tree with watermelons, instead of apples.

In past interviews, you have stated “changing one's perspective, changing one's way of life, can often provide a glimmer of hope,” that “the process [of art] has been entirely dismembered like a sumptuous French banquet that [was] compressed into a hamburger in the end,” or referenced the economist Thomas Friedman's notion of flatness as a source of artistic inspiration. Can we deduce that watermelons are squashed apples?

Whenever there is a question of whether or not A and B have a relationship, that they already have a relationship.

You teach at the Central Academy?

I first came to Beijing as a student and now am a teacher at CAFA. There's something about the long-term relationship with CAFA and the art education process in general (one day a student, the next day a teacher) that has a long-term effect on my work. CAFA is very familiar; in 12+ years in Beijing I've always been at CAFA in one role or another.

In the Harper's Bazaar interview [Qi Chao. Lu Zhengyuan: The Dangerous Journey. Harpers Bazaar, June 2014] there was a mention of educational reforms that made your education possible—what were the educational reforms?

Regarding its art history, China is a very conservative society in many ways. If you look at Chinese art in the past, it was conservative, backwards and closed minded—very rigid, formal, with a lot of craft training, foundation based, focused on strict aesthetic, only beauty, without much emphasis on pure, thought-based process. In terms of reform, Sui Jianguo was teaching at the same time I was studying at CAFA. Now, there's a lot more emphasis put on the thought process and conceptual side of the work, which has become part of the educational system for art. Look at the greatest artists from China: they're all graduates of this educational system, particularly the post-reform educational system, which helps them—and me—focus on the conceptual side of the work not exclusively on the foundations, craft-based side of it as the older generations of artists did.

Do you identify as a particularly Chinese or a global artist?

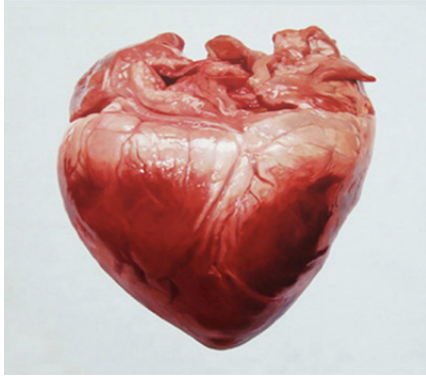
I've never thought about this, I just think I'm an artist. It's entirely possible that if you asked me the same question I'll have a different answer tomorrow.

Shifting topics, what role does the studio play in making work? I imagine the Ullens exhibition, and others where you're working on a large site would impact the working process.

I recently rented a 200-sqm studio in Heiqiao, because this one feels a bit cramped and small. Particularly when working on large installations this studio becomes prohibitive, especially for moving heavy objects to the second floor. There is a physical size restriction this studio imposes

on my installation background.

I read about how people believe mood affects body posture. However one feels at any particular time changes the way one holds oneself. But at the same time, posture affects mood. If feeling unhappy but you force a smile, it will make you happier. (Gesturing toward a large abstract painting) This painting—the reason I painted it so big is because I can, my wall allows a painting that size. That's the relationship the studio has on the work. But as for the effect that the work has on the studio, I have spatial limitations here and want to make larger installation work so I found another studio. It's not uni-directional; studio and process influence each other.



Lu Zhengyuan, 2008, *心Heart*, Oil on canvas, 200X200 (cm)

Would you discuss the heart works?

This painting is the first of my heart works, and represents the rest of them. When I made this I'd never seen a real heart. I painted it in 2009. What I'd seen before was a heart symbol. Throughout history we've developed a vast set of symbols and icons, and the heart is one of many that have come to mean or represent something. The heart symbol means love or affection to everyone, so it's rare that anyone questions what is it that make us connect to that, or where the symbol came from.

The heart paintings are more representative of my internal thought process, regardless whether anyone else shares the same thoughts. I drew a kidney [gestures toward a sketch pad]. Why is it that the heart represents love and affection, and not the kidney or the stomach or any other organ?

Around the same time, related to symbols, I used rodent skin to make a cartoon-like sculpture, similar to a Disney mouse. At a distance what you see is the icon but when you draw closer you realize that the mouse is actually made of rodent skin, a gross, repugnant material. I'm specifically using rat skin, one of the more disgusting rodents. I'm asking why is it that when we see a mouse symbol we think it's fun and cute but when we see a rat it's disgusting?

What I was saying before, about the work's physicality: in today's society it's entirely possible there's another artist in another part of the world thinking the exact same thing as I am, or something very similar, about the same or similar content. I think in the future that manner of connection, or synergy, will proliferate. Two questions arise; one: is that something one wants to prohibit? And if not, maybe that's something we should all be striving for? So for now, I'm exploring the physicality of the work because that's where the differences will lie.

Maybe everything will level out, be the same, flat.

But I think that would be very interesting too. It's a very interesting question.



Lu Zhengyuan and his studio.

Lu Zhengyuan (Lu Zhengyuan was born in Dalian, China in 1982, and received his Master of Fine Arts from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, where he is currently a professor. A multidisciplinary artist interested in the dichotomies and similarities between fake and real, he navigates the spaces in between with trademark humour. His works span an incredible range of mediums and topics.

In 2010, under curatorial instruction by Sui Jianguo, Lu embarked on a project that saw him create one work a day for 84 days. The subsequent series, titled 84 Days, 84 Works, was exhibited at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in 2010 and became a critical talking point for Lu's continued relationship with the methodology of art practice and creation. Later, he ventured into work that dealt more closely with perceptions. His series Subtleties of Creation (2014) feature hyperrealistic paintings of artificial peaches, drawing attention to society's readiness to accept half-truths or fictions.

Solo exhibitions include "Asian Art: Lu Zhengyuan," Long Museum, Shanghai, China (2014); "Meet: Lu Zhengyuan," Phoenix Art Center, Beijing, China (2014); "Superfluous Thing No.2," Hive Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, China (2013); "half-truth," Eli Klein Fine Art, New York, NY (2012); "Refle-Ction: Lu Zhengyuan," White Box Museum of Art, Beijing, China; "84 Days, 84 Works of Art," Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, China (2010); and "Lu Zhengyuan: Solo Exhibition," Primo Marella Gallery, Beijing, China. His work has been exhibited in group exhibitions including "Observer – Creator," Central Academy of Fine Arts Museum, Beijing, China (2015); "TA Era," Times Art Museum, Beijing, China (2015); "Soft Abstraction as Constellation," Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, China (2014); and "The Second China International Forum on Installation Art," Long Museum, Shanghai, China (2014). See more of his work at [Klein-Sun Gallery](#) in New York and [Artist Pension Trust, Global One](#), Beijing/Shanghai.

Following the traveling exhibition My Generation: Young Chinese Artists [Pollack's exhibition selects artists born after 1976. In an [interview with Richard Vine](#) in the August 4, 2014 online edition of Art in America, she summarizes the artists' attitudes as global, individualistic, less interested in traditional motifs or traditions than new media and metaphors that better suit this time.] while based in Shanghai for six months in 2014, I interviewed five artists born after the one-child policy to determine how their thought and aesthetics might determine China's new cultural landscape. A Hanban Confucius Studies China Program's Understanding China Fellowship under the auspices of Dr. Cheng Amien, Ph.D., Dean and Professor, Institute for National Studies, Nanjing University and Shi Kun, Director, Confucius Institute at the University of South Florida Tampa, with assistance from Cherry Zhen Zhu of Artist Pension Trust, made these interviews possible.

- Elisabeth Condon