

THE WORK PROVIDES A CHANNEL

Gao Lei in conversation with Elisabeth Condon



Building No.35, #103, 2006-8, 150 cm x 150 cm. Digital photograph from the Photographs series (2006-8)

GAO LEI. August 3, 2014. Hongquiao Studio, Beijing. Preparing his exhibition Windowsky for Taipei MoCA [September 6 – November 2, 2014]. Beijing artist Gao Lei presented a selection of works made between 2006 and 2013 to structure the following conversation. Our discussion began with the digital photograph *Building No. 35 - #103*.

Elisabeth Condon: How did you make this image?

Gao Lei: Sometimes people think this is traditional photography. I used a small, standard home use digital camera and took over 100 photos and composited them together. It took me several hours to shoot it; the light you're seeing isn't real.

What you're seeing is a big building in Wangfujing. They started using this room around 1900. It was first used as a dorm for the French missionaries before the Japanese came and kicked them out, then by members of the Cultural Revolution, and then as a dorm for factory workers. After that it was used as a dormitory for migrant workers. So many different people have lived in it.

Throughout the years as different people moved in they would renovate it by covering things up, adding new layers, and all of the details you see had been covered up. In 2005/06 they wanted to tear the building down but there were a few people still living in it who didn't want to leave even though they'd been offered a lot of money, about half a million RMB. They wouldn't leave, though. In 2006 there was a mysterious fire in the building, which was likely intentional, and after the fire a lot of layers of "renovation" were burned away exposing what you see.

Back then it was pretty terrifying if they wanted to demolish your building, and there weren't many laws in place protecting the welfare of the people if they didn't want it. I rented a studio for the first time in 2009 and also experienced demolition in the process. There was an incident a while ago where a number of artists were injured and this black box is my experience with that.



Gao Lei, A305, 2010, Fiberglass sculpture, nano-foam particles, glass, wood block, structural steel, blast engine, steel light, gravity drop. 300 x 300 x 230 cm



Gao Lei, *A305 (interior)*, 2010, installation, mixed media, 300 x 300 x 230 cm

[Gao activated the fan mechanism inside a large box besides Building No. 35 - #103.]

Those are tiny little bits of Styrofoam floating around. If it's left on it develops a lot of static electricity in time, and the little bits of floating Styrofoam stick to the elephant's legs and they look like they're covered in ice. The longer the exhibition lasts, the better the effect. By the end of the exhibition you can't see the original form. The basic shapes you'll see, but not any details. It's unrecognizable as the same if you see it on the first and last day. Just like many things in their original state end up covered up in the end.

What is the effect of making this piece on your memory of the experience?

It's a piece I made afterwards but I don't tell everyone the story. Karen Smith, for example, wrote about this piece and didn't know the story. She connected it to the metaphor 'elephant in the room,' an appropriate connection that makes a lot of sense in its implications of collective silence, but reached that conclusion without knowing the story.

In the midst of the decay and history of Building No. 35 - #103 there's a point of focus and light source in the window. The window is a way out. In A35 there's a transformation in the experience of viewing the work with the Styrofoam coating the environment. Decay is balanced with light. Is the balance between pain and transcendence important to the work?

The work provides a channel from the limited to the limitless. It's a little bit like nirvana, the whole idea of restarting, and after that, the experience of reaching an extreme, an edge, or almost an end, then coming back and starting over. There's a cyclical nature to it. In a way the light source is an exit, but the cyclical, indirect nature of it is more important. There is no direct way out.

Building No. 35 - #103 is from 2006 and *A35* is from 09-2010. From then still nothing has changed: I'm still in the cycle.

Art can be a way of expressing discontent or disagreements or anxiety over things. It's different from writing an essay because you can make messages clear for the people you want it to be clear for, and not clear for the people you don't want it to be clear to. It's a safer way of talking

about certain topics than actually talking about them.

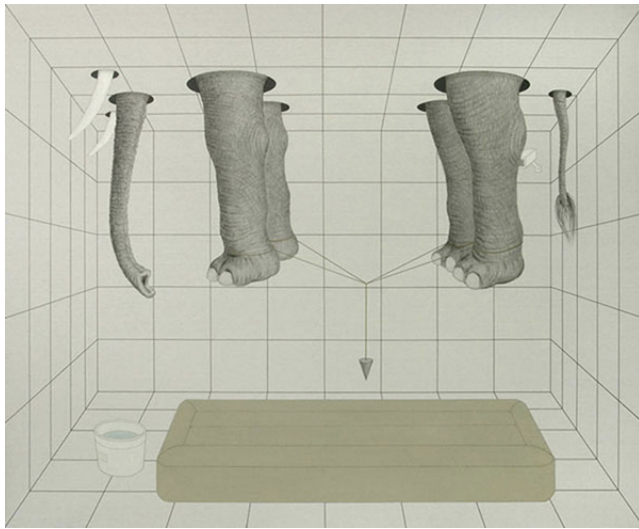
Art is never about enjoyment or pleasure, it is about thinking. It's less about using art to create a Utopia or other constructs, and more about helping me realize and address the world around me. You could also think of the pieces of work like diseases, and making them a curing process.

What is the biggest difference between being an artist and not?

The biggest difference between being an artist and not is that as an artist you're no longer part of a system or a piece of it. If anything you'd be breaking the system, rather than a part of it, like a virus, or a problem that helps other people see where their problems are coming from.

There's very little color, as if color can only speak to basic conditions.

Yes, the most basic conditions. My creative process is driven by painting and drawing but the final product is not necessarily. Painting or drawing replaces the actual materials that would need to be used to create a dimensional work. Before a work existed, there was a drawing [to conceive the idea].



A305, oil and mixed media on canvas, 200 cm x 200 cm

When I painted (a work similar to A305, above) I hadn't been informed of the demolition yet, I was just in my new studio, happy and making a lot of work. Now I think of it a bit like a prophecy.



A302 from the Light Box series (2006-8).

[Reviewing work from the Light Box series.] This was one part of the studio that got knocked down. All of these photographs are related in some way to each other. This hose was actually the hose we used to get water. Our water had been cut off so we used this hose to get water from a water truck that would come by to get water into our studios.

Do you consider yourself a Chinese artist? Many articles about your work are in Chinese online.

I don't really think so much about my status as an artist or what I am. For me it's about using my work to realize issues or things happening around me, to address the world. Everyone everywhere has different problems to deal with, so for me to think of what category I'm in doesn't make sense.

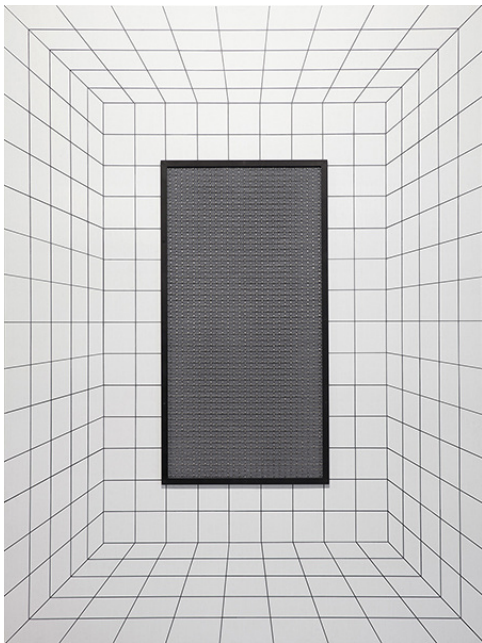


Roll, 2014. Shanghai Gallery of Art, Present-ing Recital Louder Than Paint (6.28.14-8.26.14).

Can you talk about your new work, Roll, which I saw at the Shanghai Gallery of Art?

When you saw this it had already started coming down. It used to be off the ground, but by the time you saw it, it had already fallen. If you saw it now it would be even lower. The whole thing won't fall down but you'll see it accumulating at the bottom as it gets lower. The name of it is *Roll*, which in Chinese is *Gun*, which means something a bit like fuck off. It's a way of releasing some frustration or pressure.

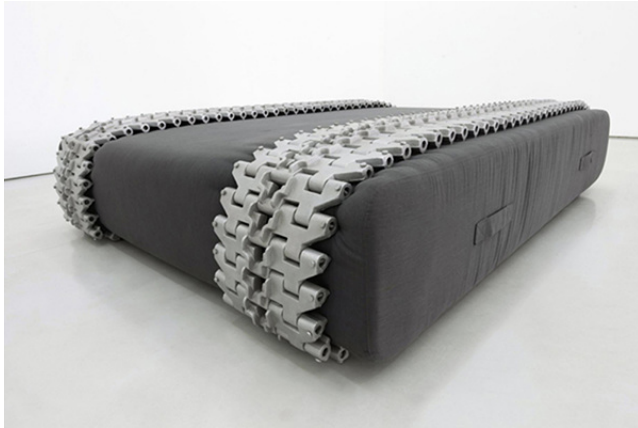
Do you have the pictures of the other two paintings shown with this? Before I talk about these, I'd like to ask how you feel about them. When you stand in front of the painting, do you get any sort of dizziness or optical illusion effect, a feeling you're actually entering the space? The two paintings are in the same line of thinking. The installation [Roll] feels more like it really has a voice. There's a specific energy that's gotten out.



R-312 (2014)

In the painting R-312 the energy is stored inside as opposed to released. There's a distortion of the space. The metal grid actually isn't flat, it's rounded—it took a huge amount of energy to get it stuck flat to the surface. If it were to come undone it could really hurt someone. On the surface it feels very calm or relaxed, but there's a lot of aggressive, pent up energy there.

Now I want to show you work from an exhibition [Carrier, 2013, White Space, Beijing].



C-45, 2013, from Carrier. Sponge cushion, linen, bulldozer track 262x200x59 cm.

If you look at the painting the elephant was originally in, there's a mattress there, but it was also the last thing left in the studio. When we were lying on the bed taking our shifts, we were both working and resting at the same time. The only thing we could hear were the tractors in the middle of the night, so I used the image of tractor wheels.



63.09kg, sponge, 180 x 180 x 45 cm

[Turning to the disk form of 63.09kg.] Is this foam?

Yes. When it was in the exhibition almost no one touched it so most people didn't realize it was foam, and thought it was a very heavy sculpture. The weight written here, 63.09kg, refers to the time I checked my weight, and weighed in as this. Usually I weigh more. This is the national average for guys my age and this is a memory of when I hit the average weight.



DETAIL, Specimen, 2011, installation: specimen, concrete, glass, raw rice, stainless steel, transparent resin, readymade, electric motor, fiberglass sculpture 760x200x200 cm

For example, in *Specimen*, I used the cheapest rice you can find in China, but it will also last the longest without going bad, probably because of chemicals or preservatives. This glass is from the [Beigao] studio—there are some materials and elements I may never get rid of.



W-005, 2013, wooden sleigh, hinges, glass, rubber hammer and rice, at the end of the exhibition.

This is also from *Carrier*. The interesting thing here too is also the change in the piece. The picture [above right] was at the end of the work's duration. Originally all the rice was contained inside the glass box [above left] but the rice slowly enlarged from the humidity and started sliding out from the pressure of growing. A lot of my work uses change as part of the process. Though I knew the rice would come out from soaking up the moisture, it wasn't a gradual process, it just exploded one night while the gallery was closed and we left it. I cleaned it up a little, but otherwise left it pretty much as is.

Does it matter if we know the work is changing over time, or is it fine to access at any time?

What's important is that I know the work will change. The pieces are very representative [in that] I don't always want to show people the same face. Likewise I don't like the idea of pieces that sit there never changing. But it doesn't matter if the audience knows that they change.



K10127, mosaics, floor drain, wood, water cannons



J-96, billiards ball, steel, acrylic, 30 x 30 x 30 cm

This is the tile piece. There was also the billiard balls piece. There were so many large installations around it a lot of people never noticed it, but they're together. A lot of people thought the tile piece was actually hooked up and that water would come out of it. The most important thing here is the representation of the space between the two objects, a distance between safety and danger.



Z-029, 2013, Rolling gates, leather, radiators, pipes, cranks, drill, safe, 660x62x400 cm

The roll up with the blood [Z-029, 2013] really shocks me.

The idea is from far away it looks like blood but it's actually a cowhide. A lot of people thought there was an actual rolling door in the gallery, but it's the installation. There's actually no space behind the door, it's just a wall. And the safe I bought from a second hand store but there was no

key, and I don't know what's inside. So it's similar to the door with nothing behind it. There's a not knowing what's inside the space.

The relationship to animals throughout your work is evident. Do you love animals?

Because only with animals can people be people.



iPhone image: Gao Lei in the studio

Gao Lei, born Hunan, China in 1980, is at the forefront of shifting trends in contemporary art in China. He belongs to the Post-80s generation, which has adjusted to the global information society's diversity in values and individual reasoning rather than ideology or collective conviction. Through his works of paintings, photography, installation and mixed media, the artist freely traverses across the boundaries of virtual world and reality, creating a new site for communication and critical mechanism. His works explore how the systems of power characterize and regulate the social environment. Recent solo exhibitions include *Windowsky*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei (2014), *Arrario Gallery*, Shanghai (2014) and *Carrier*, White Space, Beijing (2013). Recent group exhibitions include *Present-ing Recital Louder Than Paint*, Shanghai Gallery of Art, Shanghai, China, *Criss-Cross: Artworks of Young Chinese Contemporary Artists from the Long Collection*, Long Museum, Shanghai, China, *Memo II*, White Space Beijing, China (all 2014), *Asia Code Zero*, SOMA Museum, Seoul, Korea and *Future Master*, Winshare Art Museum, Chengdu, China (2013). See more of his work at [Arario Gallery](#), [gaolei.name](#), and on [artsy.net](#).

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