Interview of Li Hui by Jerome Sans  
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Jerome: When did you start making art? What impelled you to pursue the path of art?

Li Hui: Actually I started learning art at a young age, but the start of my art education began after my acceptance to the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts. At that time I was focused on the genre of sculpture. As for the question about what impelled me to pursue in art, having developed a fondness for it since I was young, it naturally became a devotion that I dedicate myself to.

Jerome: How did you realize that you are more suitable for contemporary art rather than traditional art?

Li Hui: This is interesting, because when I attended school I was learning about traditional sculpture. My school was actually quite deeply focused on tradition; however, because of that the students became very curious about contemporary art. It was not even called contemporary art then; it was referred to as post-modern art. A powerful desire sprung from that sense of curiosity and prompted me to explore things beyond what we were taught at art school.

Jerome: When was your first contact with contemporary art? What attracted you to it?

Li Hui: I think it was probably during the time when I was making my graduation project. I decided to abandon the approach that I was most skilled at, and went with something that I thought was the most unique. I will later talk more about my creative approach.

Jerome: Were you influenced by anything; for example, did you see anything that provoked you to make the change?

Li Hui: I think perhaps there were two signs. First, I came into contact with architectural works by Japanese architect, Tadao Ando. Another piece that impacted me was visual work by Bill Viola. I saw their works around the time before my graduation project. They both strongly affected me, and incited me to come up with a new way to express my work.

Jerome: Where did you come across those works?

Li Hui: Ando's I saw in a book, and Viola I came across during a video art seminar.

Jerome: What kind of work did you make for your graduation piece at the Central
Li Hui: I first opted to use automobiles as the materials for the artwork. I was reading a book about an artist that makes purely conceptual works. One of his artworks was made of two football goals joined together. It was quite inspirational to me. I thought of joining two car heads together to create a sense of lack of direction, particularly when the car is set in motion.

Jerome: Do you think that the internal impression of your art is one that belongs to the era of the 20th century 1970's?

Li Hui: I think the route I've chosen is quite important, because unlike the generation of artists that my teachers belong in, which was quite assertive and expected in opting for different ideological ways of expression, I feel that our generation did not go through such an ideological time. This is why we are more self-oriented and more assertive in wanting to differentiate from the older generation artists. This kind of assertiveness comes naturally, and the way we differentiate ourselves from them is perhaps through the different issues that we are concerned with.

Jerome: What are your thoughts on China's current state of extreme capitalism? I think both you and I have gone through similar experiences with things now being readily available and nearly almost anything could be purchased.

Li Hui: I was born in 1977, and things have continuously been changing since the day I was born. The entire society is constantly changing too, but the changes are not drastic; instead, it happens gradually bit by bit. We have all been through it. In other words, the living environment that I am in has been changing nonstop, and the changing pace also seems to be speeding up. Because I am an insider contained within the situation, therefore, I am unable to clearly tell the influence that these changes have caused me. This is the way my life is, but these changes must have somehow had certain impacts on me. Perhaps it is a sense of uneasiness or uncertainty inside. No matter what the impact may be, there is bound to be some affects caused. However, this is not something that people would think about on a daily basis.

Jerome: Do you think that these changes have influenced the way you create art?

Li Hui: Yes. I feel that subconsciously it has. I think with this kind of particular art form, it will always target a specific object or reflect upon a realistic issue. As we are situated within a state of constant change; therefore, we might inversely be more concerned about issues pertaining to eternity, such as issues with no distinct correlation to any particular time era. Issues such as time, fear, or greed are example of concerns that are not particular to any given era. They have existed and still exist in any given time.
Jerome: I think your art is quite constructive in regards to issues of eternity. There is a clash between the past, present, and future and it also possesses a sense of futurism. It is quite science-fiction in a way.

Li Hui: Viewing from a micro-perspective, each person holds a different view about the world we are in. From a more macro-view, I think perhaps this is a unique perspective particular to the East. Amidst chaos, a sense of calm would be called upon. There is a sense of contrast. For example, if something is thought of to be small, it is perhaps small in comparison to something that it large. What is considered to be calm is perhaps thought of to be calmness amidst chaos. Things are thought of in comparison to conjure a sense of precision and truth. I also hope to use this approach in treating art; therefore, there is a sense of clash, and it is perhaps a way to deal with matters of more "comprehensive" nature.

Jerome: You often use ancient elements in your art; is this because you want to use them to make a strong contrast with modern matters?

Li Hui: By doing so, I feel that a sense of ease and comfort is created, and others are able to come up with their own impressions when they see my art.

Jerome: We often see wars, warriors, mushroom clouds in your artworks. Are you trying to convey this world is very fragile, and we are scattered around like cattle and nobody is protected?

Li Hui: These elements have indeed occurred many times in my artworks. Actually from the position as an artist, I am not leaning toward any side; I am neutral. These could be considered as spectacles, and I am just using them to motivate people to raise questions. The questions about these works have actually all come from the viewers themselves.

Jerome: Has your art been influenced by digital games, science-fiction, animations, etc.? These things don't seem real, but through your art, you have repositioned them to a different level.

Li Hui: Movies and death metal music are all elements that I surround myself in. These are substances that I am drawn to. However, I must go back to the issue I was talk about earlier. For example, if I present a nuclear explosion mushroom cloud to be something beautiful, a complex outlook is already proposed. This is a very subjective way for an artist to deal with these matters.

Jerome: I've also realized these things, and also how the world has somehow become addicted to violence. The world is surrounded by violence, and we have become aloof and accustomed interesting. Are your trying to convey this sense of beauty in violence or are you trying to depict the world?
Li Hui: It is about the world. I mentioned previously that as an artist my position is neutral. I am taking an objective stance.

Jerome: Indeed there is a lot of violence around us. I am not saying that is a bad thing; it is just the simple truth. Regardless of being in the West or in China, violence is everywhere.

Li Hui: I've been living in an ever-changing environment since little, and sometimes I am fearful of the changes. I would try to adjust to the changes, or other times, I might just stand still and observe the changes. This way, the changes might be evolving, but I would remain the same. I've tried both of these approaches before; however, it is for certain that changes are always happening, but I am unsure about where the changes would take me.

Jerome: Is this why you've titled your exhibition in Taiwan "Impalpable"?

Li Hui: What I just talked about could precisely explain why I've titled this exhibition "Impalpable". Another point is that this is an attempt I've made for the exhibition in Taipei; it is a way to explain a realistic problem. However, I hope that my future path will be without any pertinence to any given time era; instead, it should be about issues of eternity. Eternity is actually the origin of all issues.

Jerome: But what is reality? What about this reality that we have been talking about?

Li Hui: I think reality is quite personal. I also just talked about how time is constantly changing, and there are many attributes that are time specific. China is also constantly developing, and there are many realistic problems. These realistic problems are like what you've just mentioned; there are many problems in the world people fighting over resources. I think that is one of the most noticeable issues in this period in time.

Jerome: What are your thoughts on science-fiction?

Li Hui: I think sci-fi is like a gate, with people wondering about what is behind it. This is the sense of excitement that sci-fi has. It helps to open a door for us to see the future. There are a lot of excitements and also a sense of hope. I recall being a kid watching sci-fi, and the life I saw then is the life I am in now.

Jerome: We are in a time when it is getting more difficult to position the self between reality and fantasy.

Li Hui: Referencing to the movie, "Matrix", I think this positioning may not be accurate. In the movie, it dealt with a world that has been digitalized. The core of the
film is based on the digitalization of tangible matters. It is a very thrilling movie with many spectacular actions. I think the story in the film will really happen. From a scientific perspective, it is the only way to immortalize humankind. By turning memories into signals and replicating emotions in any time setting, the body is made obsolete, as everything is turned into data. Talking about positioning, when that day actually comes, it would not matter what is real and what is fictional. Perhaps, reality would not even exist.

Jerome: What do you think are the relationship between your art and technology? I see a lot of LED, lasers and other digital elements in your artworks. They seem to have been used to create a sense of space.

Li Hui: I think in this era, anything goes. In regards to creating art, one could opt for a very traditional approach, or choose to use very unique media and techniques. The key objective is for people to gain a special impression after seeing the artworks and to truly touch people's hearts. This is the most important of all, and it has very little to do with technology or tradition.

Jerome: You've used mushroom clouds and tornados in your artworks; are you trying to portray a battle between nature and technology? What are your thoughts on this sort of conflict? I am bringing this up because there are so many horrific natural disasters happening around the world nowadays.

Li Hui: I think there is an irony between nature and technology. People are constantly evolving, and the formation of nature is due to constant evolutions in nature as well. The evolution for animals is based on the structure of the food chain; however, people have not been following this structure, because human beings have already altered the world. However, we are still in the midst of the progression, and who the ultimate winner will be is still unknown. We will have to live up to the outcome of our actions, and this sense of outcome is what controls us from doing whatever we want; therefore, there is a correlating control between nature and technology.

Jerome: There is a piece by you in the exhibition in Taiwan with mechanical arms tugging and pulling at each other. Upon seeing this work, "Frolicking", it feels like the body has become a part of the machine, as an extension. Perhaps, the body has become an extension of the machine, and a sense of machine mimicking the body is formed. What are your thoughts on the relationship between the machine and the human body? It could be that the body has become a part of the machine, or vice versa.

Li Hui: I think this is very interesting. I've predicted that in the future human beings will be fused together with machines. This is something that will actually happen. I pay very close attention to this kind of information, and currently in the military sectors in Japan and the US, a form of mechanical exoskeleton has been produced to
help people support their own bone structure. It could help to make people stronger, run faster, and be more powerful. I believe this kind of military experiments will be made widely available to help the elderlies and others in need. Once this really happens, I think it might produce some sever problems. First, the fusion of people with machines, especially with such close contact, might cause fatal harm if the machine malfunctions. Another problem is that it could make the weak stronger, which is going against the course of nature. For example, automobiles could be considered a form of exoskeleton, and when cars break down, serious accidents could happen.

Jerome: Is what you just talked about conveyed through "Frolicking"?

Li Hui: Yes. At the one hand, this piece is trying to convey the "emotionless" and "rational" sides with machines, and on the other hand, more importantly, they are "fighting".

Jerome: With your work, "The Gate", is it a metaphor? Is it a materialized metaphor that gives the audience a feeling of being placed inside a panoramic motion picture or being transported to another realm?

Li Hui: I think the element of light gives people a sense of direction. This artwork has been placed in a very good location in this exhibition. As people see the light, they would naturally be drawn to it. It is not merely a feeling of being surrounded; it is also a form of guidance. When people are directed to the gate, they have actually fallen into a trap. At the end, they realize that the gate is not accessible, and perhaps some people might even bump into this so-called "gate". At that time, they could only find other ways around it, and they will realize that they were mistaken initially; even though they were actually guided over to that spot.

Jerome: Where then is the correct directions? Where does this gate lead you to?

Li Hui: The correct way is actually through the wall. This piece is comprised of a gate, wall, and a passage, and the right way is through the wall.

Jerome: Isn't it kind of like entering into a second life; entering into a different way through this gate, and at that world you could create new things. It is like a computer game; if you can't succeed in real life, you could make it happen in another world.

Li Hui: It is about virtuality and reality.

Jerome: What are your thoughts on virtuality? Where would this sense of virtuality lead people to?

Li Hui: People now usually judge a person's life based on real world experiences. The
biggest incentive of virtuality is that in a cyber-world, you could become addicted to cyber games. I don't think it is the games that have caused their addictions; instead, it is the realization of the self that they are addicted to. It is difficult to realize the self in the real world, but in the virtual game world, you could kill people, set things on fire, and have a lot of wives; it is a completely different world. However, I am not really into these cyber games though.

Jerome: Is the intent of this piece to bring the viewers to another world?

Li Hui: There is a sense of transcendence. From this space to another, there is an enticement that is formed by the light and the space. When you pass through the wall comprised of lasers, the inducement from the act of passing through could leave quite a profound impression in people.

Jerome: Is this impression similar to the piece, "V", you showed at UCCA?

Li Hui: I think "V" gives a stronger impression through the light itself and the mirror. Laser and mirror are very interesting. Also the entire space has a sense of transcendence too, because the mirror alters the relationship with the space. When people are passing through the space, they will form some kind of connection with the laser, or when people are standing on the mirror, the would also change the shape of the laser. It is an experience that involves a lot of participation.

Jerome: Is it that special feeling of passing through space?

Li Hui: It would depend on how the viewers see the changes in the space, because when one sees the light, he/she will see a tangible form that is very powerful and also quite simultaneously surreal and real. When you pass through, it is like passing through a wall. I have experience passing through laser beams; it is very magical.

Jerome: How do you explain the "V"? Is it the sense of energy, vitality that you just mentioned?

Li Hui: V stands for victory (smiles).

Jerome: What kind of victory?

Li Hui: I think the shape just happens to be there; it is actually not a flat V. It alters in the given space, and instinctively, it tells me that this artwork should be titled as "V", as it is the simplest and the most meaningful.

Jerome: There are often elements of divinity and religion in your artworks. Are they new tools that you have employed to express your inner spiritual world?
Li Hui: Creativity is unique to humankind. Actually I am not religious, but I understand that in many religions, only God has the power to create, and even people were created. However, we are now replacing God, as we are constantly creating what was unknown before. Like you mentioned, there are constantly new things happening, and they are able to change people's lives. There are often some religious implications in my art, because I use them for their sense of ceremonial imprint. Each person has his/her own take on religion, and has a primal instinct that is probably related to the origin of religion; for example, we might be fearful when standing on high grounds or frighten when surrounded by darkness.

Jerome: Do you think consumerism is a new form of religion?

Li Hui: I think so. It is due to industrialism. For example, iPhone is constantly coming out with new products to lure people into buying. This approach is even leading people to a state of spiritual bliss.

Jerome: There is a sense of irony in this. Those things are rapidly coming and going, and always changing. However, your art is about eternity. How do you address this issue?

Li Hui: There is a saying that makes the analogy between how the sky is eternal, but the moon in the sky is always changing. It is describing that there is eternity in the world and also eternal changes as well. These things all exist. Because there is the ever-changing moon, therefore there is the eternal sky. This is a philosophy of the East.

Jerome: What kind of art will you be presenting in the future?

Li Hui: I might go with more abstract expressions with the form. With the contents, I still hope to deal with issues of eternity. I am not really analyzing why it is eternal, but studying how to let it dwell inside people's hearts, and how to express it for people to directly feel it.

Jerome: Thank you.

Li Hui: Your questions were quite profound.