

Liu Ye

The Book and the Flower

October 29–December 19, 2020
34 East 69th Street, New York



Liu Ye, *Book Painting No. 21 (Karl Blossfeldt, The Complete Published Work, Taschen GMBH, 2017)*, 2018. © Liu Ye

David Zwirner is pleased to present an exhibition of new work by the Chinese artist Liu Ye, on view at the gallery's 34 East 69th Street location, in New York. The show marks the artist's debut solo presentation with the gallery.

Liu Ye is known for deeply meditative paintings that investigate ways of seeing in his nuanced approach to the painted image. His carefully balanced, methodical compositions subtly combine figuration and abstraction and reference a diverse range of aesthetic, literary, art historical, and cultural sources, resulting in illustrated canvases that appear to transcend time and place in their evocation of distinct conceptual and emotional registers of meaning. On view will be a selection of new works from the artist's *Flower*, *Book Painting*, and *Banned Book* series, which together demonstrate the artist's singular output.

Among the works on view will be *Flower No. 3* (2013–2020), which depicts two roses resting in a vase on a table and recalls the historical genres of Chinese flower painting and European still lifes, evoking their distinct representations of the metaphorical significance of painted flowers. In the precise, planar divisions of the canvas, the work moreover relates to precedents in twentieth-century modernist abstraction. The resultant image, presented as if blanketed in shadow, awakens a contemplative sense of temporal transience and layered meaning that is reflected in the overall exhibition.

Increasingly, Liu has made books the basis of his craft, and included in the exhibition will be a selection of recent works from his *Book Painting* series. Begun in 2013, this body of work depicts close-up views of books, a strategy that Liu uses to emphasize the object's formal qualities while also invoking an atmosphere of meditation. Intimately scaled, these paintings are manifestations of Liu's appreciation of the book as an object, as well as his love of history and literature—his father was a children's book author who introduced him to Western writers at a young age, fueling his curiosity and imagination. Liu creates the works through a slow and meticulous process in which he builds layer upon layer of paint, resulting in glaze-like surfaces that call to mind the richness and detail of Early Netherlandish painting mixed with the conceptual and structural rigor of his modernist forebears.

Reflecting his deep knowledge of art history and diverse pictorial traditions, his sensitive treatment of the books further references illuminated manuscripts of the European Middle Ages and the eloquent blend of text and

calligraphic visual forms found in Chinese hanging and handscrolls. They moreover point to technologies of mechanical and photographic reproduction and notions of translation—of printed and photographic imagery into the realm of painting. As both aesthetic and discursive objects, the paintings continue this long—though often under-acknowledged—relationship between the literary and visual arts.

As Zhu Zhu notes of Liu's *Book Paintings*, "From being one of many image-forms to being the main subject of a painted surface—the book as painted by Liu Ye has gone through a 'blowing up' process in the mode of Michelangelo Antonioni. What has ceaselessly been magnified is art history; it is the Other; it is quiet contemplation. What has ceaselessly been reduced is the personal self with its desires and emotional stirrings. It is precisely the change in proportion between the former and latter that makes discoveries increasingly possible. They lie not only between representation and abstraction, but also in the dialogue between the written work and photography. Without realizing it, Liu Ye seems to have brought about on canvas what Walter Benjamin dreamed of doing: to write a book consisting wholly of quotations. What is more, he has done it while bringing new life to the domain of painting."¹

Featured in the exhibition will be several paintings depicting page spreads from Karl Blossfeldt's 1936 volume *Urformen der Kunst (Art Forms in Nature)*, featuring the photographer's detailed imagery classifying flowers and plant life; a work that re-creates a page from Valdimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955); and a painting of blank pages in a red, blue, and yellow Bauhaus catalogue that visually references Piet Mondrian's constructivism and Barnett Newman's iconic "zip" paintings. Another work depicts the conceptual artist On Kawara's two-volume book *One Million Years*, which lists two million years, past and future, respectively, that together attest to the elusive passage of time.

A recent work from the artist's *Banned Book* series will also be included in the show. Begun in 2006, these works are informed by Liu's experience growing up in China during the Cultural Revolution, in which art and literature were strictly controlled by the state. The work features a young woman posed similarly to the girl in Balthus's painting *The Blanchard Children* (1937; Musée national Picasso, Paris). Liu worked on the composition over the course of two years, skillfully employing light and shadow to contend with surface and depth. The female figure in the work imagines the unseen hiding within the written word, providing his own version of Nabokov's heroine.

Liu Ye was born in Beijing in 1964. He studied mural painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts and industrial design at the School of Arts and Crafts, both in Beijing, before studying at the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin. The artist spent six years living and studying in Europe, which included a six-month residency in 1998 at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam.

Liu Ye: Storytelling opened at the Prada Rong Zhai, Shanghai, in 2018, and traveled to the Fondazione Prada, Milan, where it is currently on view through January 10, 2021. Other solo museum presentations include those held at Mondriaanhuis, Amersfoort, The Netherlands (2016), and Kunstmuseum Bern, Switzerland (2007).

His work has also been featured in significant international group exhibitions, including *Hello World: Revising a Collection*, Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin (2018); *The World in 2015*, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2015); *Focus Beijing: De Heus-Zomer Collection*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (2014); *Re-View: Opening Exhibition of Long Museum West Bund*, Long Museum, Shanghai (2014); *In Time, 2012 Chinese Oil Painting Biennale*, National Art Museum of China, Beijing (2012); *Future Pass: From Asia to the World*, 54th Venice Biennale (2011; traveled to Wereldmuseum, Rotterdam; National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, Taichung; and Today Art Museum, Beijing); *Chinamania*, Arken Museum of Modern Art, Ishøj, Denmark (2009); and *Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection*, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, University of California, Berkeley (2008; traveled to Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts). In 2017, Liu's work was included in the 57th Venice Biennale as part of *Viva Arte Viva*, curated by Christine Macel, director of the 2017 Venice Biennale and chief curator at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

¹ Zhu Zhu, "Reading at the Limit," in *Liu Ye: The Book Paintings* (New York: David Zwirner Books, forthcoming).

Work by Liu is held in numerous public collections, including the Long Museum, Shanghai; M+ Sigg Collection, Hong Kong; Shanghai Art Museum; Today Art Museum, Beijing; and the Yuz Museum, Shanghai. Liu lives and works in Beijing.

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