

LISSON GALLERY

Press Release

Liu Xiaodong *Shaanbei*

May 4 – June 10, 2023
504 West 24th Street, New York

Lisson Gallery is pleased to present *Shaanbei*, a new body of work by Liu Xiaodong, one of the artist's most ambitious and personally significant projects to date. Featuring large-scale paintings, works on paper, diary entries and a documentary, the exhibition expands Liu's stature as one of China's foremost artists.

Based in Beijing, Liu Xiaodong frequently travels the world to capture the subjects of his extraordinary paintings of modern life. As a student at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in the 1980s, Liu would take regular trips to various locations within the expansive Shaanbei region of China, home to many of his professors, keeping diaries and sketches of the mountainous area surrounding the city of Yan'an and the rural lands far outside the city. The final stop on The Long March – Mao Zedong's retreat and rise to power – and the effective birthplace of the People's Republic of China, the Shaanbei province remains a site of considerable historical and political significance. Liu's return to the region 30 years later in 2018 signaled a revisitation to the foundations of his paintings practice, and allowed him to examine a changing civic landscape. *Shaanbei* explores the region from both a geopolitical and art historical point of view, while marking the artist's continuation of his vocation as a painter of modern life.

Liu Xiaodong's work is the result of direct observation of places of social change. In the *Shaanbei* series, Liu's subjects are youths left to their own devices, idle adults and nostalgic elders all extant in a transitioning society. In his traditional observational style and with characteristic attention to detail, Liu captures the experience of a new generation driving the politics of tomorrow. In *Brawl* 打架 (2018), *Borrowing Money* (2019), *Brawler* (2022) and *Irredeemable Loafers* (2023) the artist assembles his subjects – six minors aged between 12-16, set in front of two distinct backgrounds; rural and modern Shaanbei. The kids appear aimless, passing the time in a hillside, wearing what might be counterfeit branded leisurewear. The paintings reference a woodblock print by preeminent Chinese modernist Wang Shikuo, *Reforming Loafers* (1947), reprimanding the perceived laziness of a younger generation. In contrast, Liu's group of centennials might be subject to similar social and political pressures, but are also further unmoored in a sea of false hopes, cell phones and Western consumer clobber.

The Roar (2021) features senior citizens chanting commendations for the communist regime. Liu has stated, 'My only goal is to confront people and see them as they really are' and the artist's immersive method of individual and collective portraiture results in works that have participatory and performative dimensions. The scale of the works matches that of filmmaking, a pursuit Liu is well versed in, having previously worked as an actor in Wang Xiaoshuai's acclaimed *The Days* (1993), as well as producer and subject of award-winning documentaries about his own practice. A new, 40-minute documentary chronicling the artist's process creating the *Shaanbei* series, is shown in the center of the gallery. The film features Liu interacting with the subjects of his paintings and is another example of his diaristic practice while working towards major projects.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully-illustrated catalogue, featuring new essays by Xiaoyu Weng, Curator at the Art Gallery of Ontario; Hou Hanru, curator and former Artistic Director of MAXXI, Rome; and Barry Schwabsky, art historian, critic and poet.

About the artist

Liu Xiaodong is a painter of modern life, whose large-scale works serve as a kind of history painting for the emerging world. Liu locates the human dimension to such global issues as population displacement, environmental crisis and economic upheaval, but through carefully orchestrated compositions, he walks the line between artifice and reality. A leading figure among the Chinese Neo-Realist painters to emerge in the 1990s, his adherence to figurative painting amounts to a conceptual stance within a contemporary art context where photographic media dominate. His undertaking 'to see people as they really are' was galvanised after graduating from the Central Academy of Fine Arts and, alert to the legacy of Chinese Socialist Realism, his compositions are painted with loose, casual brushstrokes and layered with meaning. While he works from life and often *en plein air*, he chooses sitters to supply ancillary narratives to landscapes or situations. From recent location-specific series, such as *Transgender/Gay* in Berlin, featuring portraits of the transgender woman Sasha Maria which were featured in Liu's first comprehensive retrospective 'Slow Homecoming' in Düsseldorf, to his London series *Half Street* (2013), as well as *The Hotan Project* (2012-13) in the Xinjiang province of China, Liu has also created an automated painting machine entitled *Weight of Insomnia* (2016), which translates a digital video feed of traffic streams and human movement in real time into a new body of paintings tracing time, memory and behaviour. In *Borders* (2021) at the Dallas Contemporary, Liu embedded himself within Texas region communities, documenting individuals, locations and contemporary societies. He describes a varied world animated and enriched by diversity, where family and collective values stand out as primordial communal means for peace and fraternity. In so doing, Liu re-assesses painting in the age of internet and algorithm and implicitly invokes the present condition, in which humans and other objects reciprocally co-create the world as we know it.

Liu Xiaodong lives and works in Beijing but has undertaken projects in Japan, Italy, the UK, the US, Cuba and Austria, and closer to home, in Jincheng, in the north-eastern province of Liaoning, China, where he was born in 1963. He has a BFA and an MFA in painting from the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing (1988, 1995), where he now holds tenure as professor. He continued his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts, University of Complutense, Madrid, Spain (1998–99). His work has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions at venues including the Dallas Contemporary (2021); UCCA Edge, Shanghai (2021); Louisiana Museum, Denmark (2019); NRW-Forum & Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Düsseldorf, Germany (2018); Chronus Art Centre, Shanghai, China (2016); Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, Italy (2016); Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice, Italy (2015); Shao Zhong Foundation Art Museum, Guangzhou, China (2014); Minsheng Museum, Shanghai, China (2014); Seattle Art Museum, WA, USA (2013); Today Art Museum, Beijing, China (2013); Kunsthaus Graz, Austria (2012); Xinjiang Arts Centre, Urumqi, China (2012); and Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, China (2010). His work has also been included in numerous group exhibitions including Qatar Museums Gallery, Doha (2016), Gwangju Biennale (2014), Shanghai Biennale (2000, 2010), the 15th Biennale of Sydney, Australia (2006) and the Venice Biennale, Italy (2013, 1997).

About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 60 international artists across spaces in London, New York, Los Angeles, Shanghai and Beijing. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists as well as others of that generation from Carmen Herrera to the renowned estate of Leon Polk Smith. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller, Tatsuo Miyajima and Sean Scully. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Ryan Gander, Van Hanos, Hugh Hayden, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes, Wael Shawky and Cheyney Thompson.

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