

LISSON GALLERY

Press Release

Li Ran

Waiting for the Advent

14 September – 28 October 2023

67 Lisson Street, London

For his first solo exhibition in London, Li Ran presents a selection of video works alongside new paintings and texts portraying the psychological state of a group of semi-fictional ‘humble intellectuals’ revolving around him in China. An accompanying booklet presents the artist’s painting sketches and video scripts, as well as an excerpt from a short story called *Godly Sorrow* which is also interspersed with poems. In the short story, the artist – posing, in the first person, as a contemporary Chinese poet – gossips about his writer friends: leaning left or right, some of them displaying unwavering determination and occasional arbitrariness, while others are perpetually hesitant or melancholic. These intricate mental states are also reflected in the video work, *The Most Abstract Paragraphs* (2021-22), featuring two writers from Shanghai who appear to belong to the 1940s or post-Cultural Revolution era. Engaging in ceaseless banter and jests about the perspectives of themselves and others, they test each other, console each other, and grapple with the anguish of their positions, gestures and the perplexing question of where they truly stand as creative individuals set adrift in a historically complex and politically-charged ocean.

The theme of the art industry’s inner workings, formed with seemingly abstract conversations and secret languages known only to insiders, permeates Li Ran’s artistic practice. The paintings, referencing and resonating with the texts and videos, vividly capture the emotions of these intellectuals trapped in their self-made worlds of alienation and distress. Li utilizes a violet tone in the background to establish an ambience of weary anticipation in works such as *Standing in the Haze* or *Waiting for the Advent* (both 2022), the latter title also serving as the exhibition title.

As the artist remarks, “This kind of waiting is not limited to the past few years of the pandemic; it is an enduring ideological illness that has persisted for long and will go on...” Similarly, the artist weaves the poem titled *Standing in the Haze* into his short story:

*In the Age of the Plague
there was a spoon stirring,
Dropped into the jar of salt and pepper,
the star did not fall because of this,
a sneeze in vain.
Luckily, there was a 1984-made screwdriver,
It was a friend’s pinky finger,
dipped in vinegar, wrote down a line of words,
without beginning or end.*

Based on his perception of the surrounding reality, Li Ran repeatedly employs a certain romanticized irony in his works. His narrative paintings, such as *Bad Elements in the Troop*, *Commissioned Thriller Writer*, *Banana Kick* (all 2022-23), tell stories about the reality that surrounds him from endlessly queuing for a PCR test to facing a form of writer’s block that avoids publishing anything meaningful in a bid to avoid censorship. The artist also pushes reality to the fringes, through the more peculiar and fragmented emotions evoked in paintings such as *Who’s More Splittist? Who’s the Heretic?* (2023) and in the video *Night of Patmos* (2017), which also revolves around a literary character marooned from his own bit part in a novel. These

emotions deepen Li Ran's understanding of each specific condition he researches, resulting in a series of profound and spiritual observations on lives lived through fiction and friction.

About the artist

Li Ran's practice ranges across multiple media from video, performance and painting, to installation and writing, using techniques such as mimicry, repetition and satire to blur the boundaries between reality and fiction. In recent years, he has been researching antagonist roles in theatre, stage art, make-up design, the production of foreign films and espionage films produced in China since the 1950s. Based on archival photos, character scenes and dubbed monologues, Li develops subjective and personalised narratives and expands upon themes including politics, ideology and performativity, as well as notions of time and space, through his writing painting, sound, and installation.

Li Ran was born in Hubei, China in 1986. He moved from Beijing to Shanghai in 2018. He graduated with a BFA from the Oil Painting Department at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in 2009. In 2015, Li held a solo exhibition at OCAT Contemporary Art Terminal (OCAT), Xi'an, China. His single-channel video works have been screened at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London and The Jewish Museum, New York. He has exhibited in group shows at the Art Sonje Center, Seoul, Korea (2022); He Art Museum, Shunde, China (2022); Sifang Museum, Nanjing, China (2021); Inside-Out Art Museum, Beijing, China (2020); HOW Museum, Shanghai, China (2019); Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA), Beijing, China (2017); Centre Pompidou, Paris, France (2017); Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD), Manila, Philippines (2016); OCAT Contemporary Art Terminal, Shenzhen, China (2016, 2013, 2012, 2011); NTU Center For Contemporary Art Singapore (CCA), Singapore (2015); Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, USA (2014); Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), Berlin, Germany (2013); basis door actuele kunst (BAK), Utrecht, Netherlands (2013); Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH), Houston, USA (2012) and other venues. His works were featured in Montreal Biennale (2014); Biennale of Moving Images, Geneva (2014); 4th Moscow International Biennale for Young Art (2014); 2nd CAFAM Biennial, Beijing (2014), 4th 'Former West' Project, Berlin (2013), 9th Gwangju Biennial (2012), and 7th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale (2012). Li was awarded the 'Best Artist Award' at the Moscow International Youth Art Biennial in 2014 and was nominated for the 'Future Generation Award' by the Pinchuk Arts Center in 2017.

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 two spaces in London, two in New York, one in Shanghai and Beijing, as well as a forthcoming gallery in Los Angeles, opening 15 April. 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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