

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

David Diao
Put to the Test

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Ground Floor

Across David Diao's sprawling, allusive body of work, color is a constant—wielded in service of his paintings' conceptual rigor and as the source of their visceral appeal. This focused survey is the first to center on the artist's elegantly brazen way with color, charting the range of perceptual, semantic, and symbolic uses to which it has been put over fifty years.

The earliest work on view dates to the 1970s and typifies the era's process-based abstraction, distilling the material properties of color through a visible economy of means. Foundational paintings such as *1971–A* were made using discarded cardboard tubes, found near Diao's Soho studio when the neighborhood still housed a thriving textile industry. Running an electrical conduit through their centers (to use as a handle), Diao converted the tubes into ad hoc squeegees, which spread the paint in even, near-mechanical swathes that he calls "lightweight extensions of my reach." By outsourcing compositional decisions to this makeshift tool—which dictated the width of the canvas, the span of each hue, and the paint's skittering application—Diao distanced both his hand and his taste, leaving color as "the only subjective element remaining" to signal the artist's presence behind the picture.

In the wake of post-painterly experiments such as these, Diao cycled through various hard-edged styles, unsatisfied with a purely formal approach but unsure of what came next. Following an extended hiatus from art, he reemerged with works like *Glissement* (1984)—paintings that motivate abstraction through explicit reference to the history of modernism. The work appropriates Kazimir Malevich's iconic 1915 photograph of his Suprematist installation at the famed *0, 10* exhibition—an image that, as Diao notes, "appears in every textbook on abstract art." Skewed red squares representing Malevich's twenty-one canvases seem to float atop Diao's own, backed by a separate layer of geometries that depict the same works in grayscale from an altered perspective. The painting's title—French for "slippage"—alludes to the method behind the work: Diao projected the Malevich photograph and traced the works' outlines, then shifted the projector off-register to trace them again, creating a spatial ambiguity that gestures toward conflicts that animated modernism at its birth. For Diao, that historical tether to the outside world was a breakthrough. "Since 1985, if not earlier, I have sought to question that abstract painting has no referent other than itself," he has said. "Almost all my work has a backstory."

Works from the 1990s thus thicken color with layers of reference, exploring the extra-aesthetic meanings of what Fred Moten would call "social chromatism." Diao's *Yellow Peril* series are lemony monochromes that treat color's racial implications, titled after a slur for the nebulous threat that Asian immigrants were said to pose. The paintings skewer that noxious stereotype by dwelling further on cliché, translating the titular phrase into six languages in a font closely tied to their respective national identities. Color operates as a visual shorthand for the state most succinctly in the form of a flag, and another suite of recent paintings adopts that distinctive tricolor format. Yet Diao's contrasting solids correspond to no known region or polity, disrupting the flag's rallying function through his rogue use of off-key color.

That injection of color as a jolt or a lure extends to Diao's paintings with silkscreened imagery, through which the artist inserts himself into a modernist lineage from which he was otherwise barred. *Lying 1* (2000), for instance, depicts Diao lounging in front of an expansive painting—his own artwork in the original photograph swapped out for a Jackson Pollock drip, its staid black-and-white palette redone in searing hues atop a turquoise ground. Fields of bright acrylic recur in Diao's paintings dedicated to Gerrit Rietveld, whose storied *De Stijl* designs are literally deconstructed across planes of vibrant color,

meticulously laid on with a palette knife and burnished to an even glow. An ongoing series titled *Polish Constructivism* continues in this vein, reworking a 1929 composition by avant-gardist Władysław Strzemiński—elevating a lesser-known strain of abstraction to question the canon, who it admits and who is excluded. Diao’s aquas and purples signal his distance from the austere high modernism his work channels, transforming that (often spartan) art historical legacy into something both contemporary and personal.

David Diao (b. 1943, Chengdu, China) lives and works in New York. His work is currently on view at the Brooklyn Museum in *Toward Joy: New Frameworks for American Art*. Institutional solo exhibitions have been held at the Gund Gallery at Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio (2017); Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2015); The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut (2014); The Glass House, New Canaan, Connecticut (2014); École National d’Art de Dijon, France (1992); and Musée d’Art Moderne, Saint-Étienne, France (1989). Notable group exhibitions include 80WSE Gallery, New York University (2024); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2023); M+, Hong Kong (2021); Le Consortium, Dijon (2019); Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (2014); and the 2014 Whitney Biennial.

Diao’s work is in the collections of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Blanton Museum of Art, Austin; Brooklyn Museum, New York; Le Consortium, Dijon; Fonds national d’art contemporain, Paris; Fonds régional d’art contemporain, Brittany, France; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; M+ Collection, Hong Kong; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Taipei Fine Arts Museum; Vancouver Art Gallery; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, among others.