

LISSON GALLERY

Press Release

Li Ran: *The Signs are Present*

27 June – 23 August 2025
Los Angeles

Opening: 27 June, 6 – 8pm

Lisson Gallery is pleased to present *The Signs are Present*, the first solo exhibition in Los Angeles by Li Ran. Comprising nine, recent, oil-on-canvas works—including some of the largest paintings the artist has made to date—this exhibition marks a discernable evolution in Li's practice, wherein his focus has shifted toward the material and formal qualities of painting. Known for his cross-disciplinary approach, which spans video, performance, writing, and installation, Li often interrogates systems of ideology, cultural translation, and intellectual history. In this new body of work, he deliberately tempers the satirical and conceptual strategies that defined his earlier projects—where appropriation and narrative construction played central roles—in favor of a quieter, more ambiguous visual language. Here, narrative intent becomes more elusive, embedded subtly rather than explicitly articulated.

This body of work is also marked by a cohesive and contemplative painterly language—non-polemical, free of antagonism, and unburdened by historical hierarchies of authority or precedence. Li offers viewers a personal and introspective point of entry: his daily studio ritual of opening the Bible and engaging with spiritual reflection. However, he asserts that this practice is not intended to invoke mysticism. Instead, it underscores an enduring capacity to engage with personal experience, manipulates visual and rhetorical motifs, and draws upon cultural references, without being constrained by dominant historical interpretations.

Yet, despite this shift toward introspection and formal cohesion, narrative traces persist. Through symbolic elements, or 'signs' such as the scattered belongings of a deceased false teacher in *The Empty Tomb* (2024), or the ritualistic gestures surrounding cremation in *They Swear, Dance, Alongside Miracle* (2024), an underlying, unspoken storyline continues to course through Li Ran's paintings, offering viewers interpretive depth beneath the surface of painterly abstraction.

Li's inward shift is further echoed in *These Four Walls*, a new text written by the artist that corresponds loosely to the architecture of the exhibition, offering poetic insight into the mental and emotional terrain from which these works emerged.

1
Ripping his draft to shreds, Xu Min just couldn't take it anymore. Hopeless days left him on edge. In the midst of devastation, he dreamed often, swallowing whole his own cigarette ends. Bitter as hell, what had he written anyway? Starting from the second paragraph on page ten—lungs charred, cream-made thyroid glands and dislocated vertebrae clinging to each other, silent gallstones beginning their monologue, not to mention the surging hormones... We once couldn't stand such writing. But now? We've turned reactionary against ourselves. Door closed, pot on the stove, we'd be boiling up some formalist language, carefully sprinkling irony and adding poetry. They don't really belong together, yet somehow, they got picked up in the same pair of chopsticks, gripping both reality and romance. Wanting it all! Exactly, today, we want it all — except conversation. The second we open our mouths, a spooky wind slits our throats. Could this be death? Probably not. Let's just call it a dream.

2
*12pm sharp.
I lower my head.
See that black, shapeless lump.*

*You know my name,
and everything.
Come cut me loose from my past,
and make it quick.*

3

The attic on Huayuan Road still has its double-pane wooden windows, at least two sizes smaller than the ones they make nowadays. A few dusty potted plants often sat on the sill. Lao Gao used to say, “you can’t see outside with the lights on.” He insisted on turning them off, and as the room went dark, the faint blue of the sky crept back in. He’d put on sunglasses and rummage through the drawer until he found those little cards. On them were the pencil-written lines: “We will all die. We will all live. We will all meet in the room with the lights out.”

4

The day of demolition came—I couldn’t stay in this small place in the city any longer. But moving gives me headaches. Someone told me about this Japanese-style moving service, so I gave them a call. It sounded legit, and the price was acceptable. The house owner was supposed to get rid of all the unwanted things, so the movers could efficiently pack, transport, and restore the setup at the new place. It didn’t matter to me whether it’d end up restored...but the throwing away was a thorn to me. For two weeks straight, every conversation with her was like: “Do we still need this?” “Why are we keeping that?” “Just throw it out.” “Let’s buy a new one.” And suddenly, I thought of my parents’ old place. How could their generation throw anything away? Even the plastic bags had to be saved, folded up, tucked into drawers, filling a whole cabinet with garbage bags.

About the artist

Li Ran’s practice ranges across multiple media from installation, performance and writing, to video and painting, with utilization of archival photos, staged photography, vocal mimicry, and sound performance. In recent years, he has been researching stage art and the production of translated foreign films, in the context of modern China. Simultaneously, he has curated a collection of case studies of the 1930s, featuring the work of satirical cartoonists, leftist and romantic authors in a complex social background. These endeavors connect with the diverse circumstances of those “humble intellectuals” in present-day art industry, and serve as a rich and personal response from the artist.

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 from the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in 2009. His recent solo exhibitions include Beiqiu Museum of Contemporary Art, Nanjing, China (2025); OCAT Contemporary Art Terminal (OCAT), Xi'an, China (2015). He has exhibited in group shows at Institute of Contemporary Arts at NYU Shanghai, China (2024); TANK Shanghai, China (2024); Start Museum, Shanghai, China (2024); Iris Art Museum, Suzhou, China (2024); Duolun Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, China (2023); Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong, China (2023); Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA), Beijing and Shanghai, China (2023, 2017, 2013); Art Sonje Center, Seoul, Korea (2022); He Art Museum, Shunde, China (2022); Sifang Museum, Nanjing, China (2021); Centre Pompidou, Paris, France (2017); Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD), Manila, Philippines (2016); NTU Center For Contemporary Art Singapore (CCA), Singapore (2015); Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, USA (2014); Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Haus der Kulturen der Welt), 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); 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.

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