

A Game as a Pretense of Being

by Demetrio Paparoni

contrasts

The significance of Li Tianbing's images is not determined solely by the formal construction of the scene and by the stated symbolism, but also by the identity of the places and the features of the subjects represented. Recalling the artist's childhood, taken together the works emphasize the socio-cultural context of China in the 1970s. In Li Tianbing's art, the reference to his childhood is tied to the collective condition of his generation. As for him, he says he deals with the theme of the one-child policy as well as how young people related to their peers, which changed the way of perceiving relationships within the family in China starting in the '70s.

The identity of a society is strongly conditioned by the manner in which it structures (or allows to organize) its nuclear families. In the West, for example, society was radically transformed in the second half of the 19th century when the Industrial Revolution and the migration from the countryside to the cities changed the concept of the family. With many youths departing from their parents for the cities, these new generations began to acquire an autonomy that was unthinkable in the patriarchal family, conceived of as a single cell in which everyone had a specific role to perform within a well-defined hierarchical structure.

As we know, the history of the twentieth century in the West was marked by great socio-political revolutions, but also by the birth of psychoanalysis, which made man conscious of the fact that there is nothing casual in his behavior, which is mainly determined instead by experiences in childhood and adolescence. The freedom that modern artists conquered in the West at that time allowed them to develop an art freed from obligations and conditioning of content and language. This freedom of expression was nothing more than one aspect of a social transformation that was also ascribable to the new family structure of society.

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The concept of family continued to evolve rapidly over time, going hand in hand with the social transformations and the changes in the various ideological and political ideas. Whether or not these changes were due to free choice, or were dictated by enforcement, the fact remains that an analysis of a society cannot be separated from an analysis of its family structures. This is also what we refer to in the West when talking about the revolution of the so-called "generation of '68", whose way of thinking still continues to affect the behavior of today. As the artist and theorist Peter Halley has pointed out, the hippy idealism of '68, which was tied to LSD, free love, a different relationship with nature and a different way of thinking about education and hierarchical relations, coincides with the idealism of those who at that time were carrying out the first experiments in telematic communication. In fact, in those very years, there was widespread excitement in U.S. military circles about the technological development of Internet communication. Unquestionably, one of the effects of the hippie idealism of '68 in the West was to affirm a different conception of the couple, which would inevitably have repercussions on the idea of the family in general. In short, when the vision of the world changes, the vision of the family also changes. At the very least it is open to discussion.

For Westerners who grew up between the '50s and the '70s, China was Mao Zedong, the peasants' uprising, the Long March, communist leaders' tunics like those of the common people, the Cultural Revolution, the Gang of Four ... In terms of modern and contemporary art as we know it, China had very little to say, and certainly nothing to teach, about experimentation. Then suddenly, in the '90s, more than a decade after the economic reform that had improved the lives of most Chinese families, we discovered the existence of such artists as Ai Weiwei, Cai Guo-Qiang, Fang Lijun, Yang Shaobin, Yue Minjun, Zhang Huan, Zhang Xiaogang, Wang Guangyi, Wang Jin, and Wang Xingeei (and others followed, and then still others). The interest in this first group of artists coincided with the interest in the narrative they put to use, which was tied to their status as Chinese intellectuals of a new era.

Despite the success these artists began to meet with, very few of us in the West in the '90s had a clear idea of what it meant to live in Beijing or Shanghai, much less in the

outlying areas of such a vast country. We were somewhat familiar with Hong Kong and Taiwan, but not with the art of those places. For those in the art world, it was through the work of the artists just mentioned that China has very gradually become a less mysterious place. And since one of the revealing elements of the soul of a people is the way it organizes the family, there emerged an interest in the art of Zhang Xiaogang – one of the leaders, in the '80s, of the so-called School of Sichuan. Zhang Xiaogang's paintings drew inspiration from old photographs and explored the themes of personal identity in the context of the family in a China that was rapidly changing. Chinese artists had suddenly become aware that the twentieth century had been a century of experimentation for art. And thus while many Chinese artists felt the need to clarify their ideas about the West to understand themselves, Westerners' curiosity about China was mainly anthropological. One of the strengths of the artists of this first generation – later conveyed to those who came after them – was the desire to create art that was at once contemporary, Chinese, and referable to one's own experience.

Li Tianbing was born in 1974, two years before the end of the Cultural Revolution. He is the second generation of Chinese artists, who rightfully lay claim to a place on the global art scene. From the modernist perspective of the avant-gardes, in art the generations usually draw closer to each other decade after decade and are not bound to the anagraphic age of the authors. Li Tianbing's generation has had the opportunity to access a wider choice of language, while continuing to move within that *evolutionist* logic typical of Modernism: artists' works exist inasmuch as they are a reflection of the art of those who came before them. According to this logic, one might say that Li Tianbing's paintings are the result of the work of Zhang Xiaogang on the one hand, and that of Gerhard Richter on the other. This does not mean that Li Tianbing formally and conceptually repeats the work of these painters, who moreover are formally and conceptually very different from each other. Zhang Xiaogang himself has said, for example, that he has never dealt with the one-child policy in his paintings, proof that Zhang Xiaogang and Li Tianbing address topics that are parallel but different. Just as, paradoxically, the use of the photo as a common starting point for formal reflection assumes little importance. Even in the late nineteenth century, in Paris, Edgar Degas and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec made use of the photo for the formal construction of their

paintings, but this does not mean that the art of Gerhard Richter is indebted to that of Degas or Toulouse-Lautrec.

In the cycle of paintings Li Tianbing has made since 2007, portraying a child in a real urban environment and landscape, first alone and then together with brothers and imaginary playmates, he focuses on the importance of family structure in the formation of the individual. We also find the theme of the mask: showing ourselves not for what we are, but for what others want to see in us; looking in the mirror and not recognizing ourselves; seeing each other differently than others see us. Yue Minjun has addressed this same theme by recalling the spiritual essence of the silly man found in the philosophy of Lao Zhuang: his figures hide behind a laugh their sense of helplessness or surrender in the face of society's problems. Li Tianbing instead freezes the identity of the subjects in the pretense of being represented by playing a game. Even though using a photographic painting technique, Li Tianbing blurs the boundaries between what is real and what is not by altering the colors and assigning to each figure a symbolic color that changes to the same tonalities we are used to seeing in computer images. The color blue symbolizes capitalism, purple nostalgia, green represents ghosts, light blue sadness, and red stands for blood and revolution. As in the Chinese tradition, a large group of children represents prosperity and good fortune. They are paintings that on the one hand intend to see and show what is beyond appearance and on the other to represent a specific historic-social condition through symbolic references, in many cases cryptic and hidden. The existential drama inherent in these paintings is evident from the fact that children mimic war scenes by playing with tightly gripped fake guns and rifles. In *Bataille devant la Propaganda* (2010), eleven children seem to be defending a military position. The scene is a realistic, predominantly black and white rendering that looks like old photos, but is also unrealistic because of the red coloration of the four children who define the context of the narrative precisely through the symbolism of color. Behind them the buildings are covered with Chinese writing, reproducing propagandistic messages typical of the 1970s mixed with advertising signs. Some of the children are aiming their weapons towards those who are looking at the painting. In this work, as in others, Li Tianbing includes writing within the representation. This practice comes from traditional Chinese painting, which had poems placed in a corner of

the painting, detached from the narrative, yet complementing it at the same time. In Li Tianbing's paintings, the texts are taken from newspapers or the Internet and are often deliberately disconnected from the narrative, showing how we can listen to, see and read things that creep into our lives despite ourselves. This theme, so dear to some French philosophers of the 1960s and '70s - from Guy Debord to Jean Baudrillard, from Roland Barthes to Paul Virilio -, is also found in Pop Art, which was, we should remember, an art of social commentary. A common denominator in this series of paintings by Tianbing is the attraction that war holds for children. A scene similar to that of *Bataille devant Propaganda* is repeated in other paintings, such as *Bataille Verte sur les Champs*, also from 2010, in which the scene is rural instead and some of the children are colored green. Coloring some of the subjects differently emphasizes the different nature of the painting insofar as it changes the atmosphere of the scene each time.

A comparison of the paintings in this series shows that it is not the *place* that determines the representation, but the *mental state* of the child. At the same time it is easy to consider that the forest evokes imagery of ghosts (referred to by the color green), while the city is the natural setting of the great revolutionary upheavals (evoked by red). Also imbued with the symbolism of colors is *Autoportrait devant le Tableau d'affichage* (again 2010), in which the artist portrays himself in front of a wall covered with short messages. The painting is essentially black and white and the scene is made wintry by the snow and the child's clothing, but the place could be in any city or town in the China of the 1970s. According to the artist, the wall behind him is a common bulletin board on which he substituted ads of various kinds with phrases from the media in present-day China and the rest of the world. Again, in reiterating the context of his childhood, Li Tianbing deals with the power of language to emphasize how the means of communication changes, but not the strategies of persuasion.

The basis of this and other paintings is the idea that human vision changes over the course of history and that artistic representation plays an important role in determining how the world is perceived. It follows that for Li Tianbing art can change the perception of the world, just as the perception of the world can change art. This philosophy does not necessarily contrast with the post-historical one, according to which ideologies are

dead and the interpretations of the world associated with them are fading away (as demonstrated, moreover, by the recent history of China, which sees an overlapping of Maoist theses with those of advanced economic and capitalist systems).

Li Tianbing has repeatedly said that his paintings originate from the observation of five black and white photos that his father took when he was a child, from the memory of propagandistic comic books, and from the places of his childhood, which he has difficulty recognizing when he goes back there now because of how much they have changed. He has also remarked that he goes to less contaminated places in China to acquire the images to work on. This concern shows that his painting refers to a world where one can only attempt to piece together the surroundings. And since the reality these paintings show us has no comparison with today's experience, it is clear that we have before us a surreal figuration.

A surreal figuration is not necessarily also surrealist however. The distinction between the two adjectives must be clarified. Gerhard Richter and Zhang Xiaogang, for example, have defined themselves as "surrealists" – an inaccurate term if one recalls the theories expressed by André Breton in the by now famous *Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924. In their case it is more correct to speak of a representation that goes beyond reality since it is filtered by the influence of the mass media rather than by that of the unconscious. Neither Gerhard Richter nor Zhang Xiaogang is surrealists. If anything, the opposite is true since their work does not offer images of dreamlike or paranoid visions dictated by the unconscious.

This premise helps to bring into focus the dissimilar way that different generations have built surreal visions by representing images that appear to be real. As we have said, Gerhard Richter and Li Tianbing build their figurations from photography. But while Gerhard Richter outlines the figures and landscape in his paintings with the help of a projector, Li Tianbing goes so far as to stretch the canvas on the ground to limit the overall view and make room for the unpredictability of the result. In other words, Gerhard Richter's painting excludes afterthought; that of Li Tianbing, instead, finds in

afterthought the possibility of discovering things that he did not know before starting to paint the picture.

Referring to his works of the '60s, Gerhard Richter has explained that starting from an image to reproduce it without distorting reality is a strategy he uses for circumventing the process of awareness. Li Tianbing does just the opposite. His works start from a preparatory drawing that refers to personal photos or those he found, looked for or took when constructing the scene, but which are then modified and take on identity and meaning as they are created. The finished painting is the point of arrival of an empirical process that refers to the author's experience. This explains the path that led him to paint himself first alone, then with groups of children, and then again, since 2010, to overlap real images with others that were created with the imagination. In these most recent paintings, in particular, he shows how overlaying images from different contexts creates narratives that go beyond the starting images. Speaking in mathematical terms, it is as if he says that with superimpositions one plus one is not two, but rather opens a range of different and mobile results. The indeterminacy of the result in these works leads to a narrative not perfectly defined, with the effect – explains the artist himself – that each painting is adapted to the memory of his childhood more than those with clear narrative contours.

Becoming aware of the world means going beyond its external image, penetrating - where possible - the hidden meaning of things. As much as it may seem to be objective, the photographic pictorial representation that Tianbing uses offers us intimate views. Exactly the opposite of what has been done since the '60s and '70s by Gerhard Richter in Europe and Chuck Close in the U.S., who decided to paint with the same objectivity as a camera but without respecting the visual mechanics. This applies particularly to Chuck Close, who in making an enlarged *copy* of the photo of a face in the foreground focalizes certain parts of the image that were initially out of focus, while blurring certain details in the photos that were initially in focus. Despite this, the painting proves to be realistic just the same.

Replacing the representation of the image with its presentation has acquired such importance for Gerhard Richter and Chuck Close that they have come to scorn all those images that lend themselves to being interpreted or contain a hidden meaning. Certainly Tianbing Li has measured himself against their lesson, but he has arrived at other conclusions. He builds a narrative by combining fragments of reality to images that come from a parallel world created in childhood. This is exactly what Gerhard Richter and Chuck Close have avoided doing – we might even say fought against - with the same tenacity as the minimalists. These artists have not worked on memory, which instead is at the basis Li Tianbing’s work. Indeed for him, the very act of thinking is remembering.

Those in the West today who want to recognize the distinctive mark of the context of Chinese art that Tianbing Li belongs to - despite living in France - cannot help but consider the ethical motivations for which an artist decides to confront his own native culture. Modern Chinese culture has seen many intellectuals committed to asserting languages and themes that do not adhere to predefined models. Whatever road they take, whatever results it leads to, enriching the vocabulary and shattering the rules of grammar to test the potentials is like a way of expanding one’s area of awareness. The inherent idea of this large family of artists that Li Tianbing belongs to has been, and still is, that every man must become the architect of his own life.

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