

Adrift: Cao Yi, Li Qing, Yi Xin Tong, and Zhao Zhao

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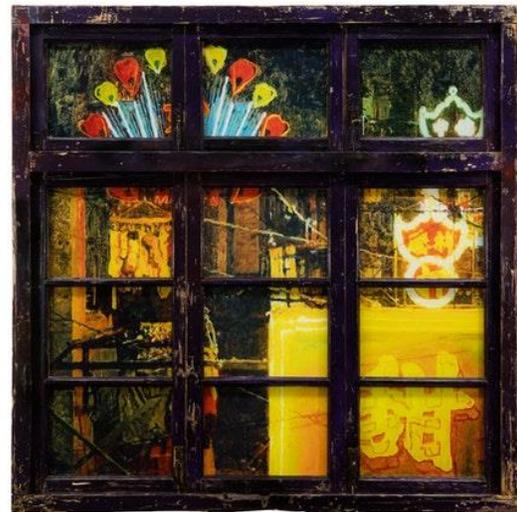


Yi Xin Tong, *Immortal Caverns: New Peacock Pavilion I*, 2015. Archival pigment print, 15 x 21 inches
Courtesy the artist and Chambers Fine Art

Chambers Fine Art’s exhibition *Adrift* highlights four young artists grappling with China’s version of being a millennial. Where, artists from an older generation—such as Ai Weiwei, Song Dong, and Zhang Huan—make work reflective of their era—censures brought on by the Cultural Revolution and the economic and social policies of Deng Xiaoping’s reform policy, while Yi Xin Tong, Li Qing, Cao Yi, and Zhao Zhao are shaped by the one-child policy and the effects of China’s embrace of what Paul Krugman calls the “rapacious crony capitalism” of today. Born in the 1980s, the artists are concerned with the catastrophic consequences of climate change and rapid economic development.

These dilemmas are intimately depicted in Yi Xin Tong’s “Immortal Caverns” series, featuring films, photographs, and sketches of buildings that were once part of a zoo in Mount Lushan (Tong’s hometown), then became the home of squatters. The drawing and photos in *Immortal Caverns: Red Panda Pavilion* (2015) show the architectural details that mesh with the woody space around it: the round design; the natural light radiating from the windows. Clotheslines extending outward, bowls on makeshift desks, bags strewn here and there, a mattress pushed to a wall—all are remnants of previous residents. When Tong visited the park last fall, the building had been scrubbed clean and desolate. In *New Peacock Pavilion*(2015), one bird remains cooped up in a cage by occupants living there at the time (the pavilion has been demolished as of last year), a token of the building’s previous function. In fact, these buildings have an unstable status. They are government buildings for animals converted into human abodes. Tong’s two photos document energy efficient, repurposed homes that are like a palimpsest of its inhabitants. In this way, “Immortal Caverns” conjures associations of reincarnation, of spirits eternally dwelling in these spaces.

Recycling is a running theme in many of the works on display. It is readily apparent in Li Qing’s paintings of blown-up gallery ads seen through wooden windows gleaned from wrecked houses. These ads carry a special significance. For instance, the title of *Blow-Up-Nail House* (2014) refers both to the type of homes that resist but are ultimately bulldozed in order to make way for hyper-urban development, as well as a particular one destroyed in Southwest China’s Chongqing Municipality.



Li Qing, Neighbour’s Window · Sweet, 2016 Wood, metal, oil on plexiglass, paint, aluminum-plastic panel, 58 1/4 x 58 1/4 x 3 inches.

Known as “the most stubborn nail house.” the home garnered local and international media attention. Artist Jiang Zhi even devoted a conceptual performance and photo to it: *Things Would Turn Nails Once They Happened* (2007), which is the image that Li uses in his work. *Blow-Up-Caochangdi* (2014) reproduces and enlarges the 2007 flyer teasing the opening of Chambers Fine Art’s Beijing gallery. Both of these paintings capture a synchronicity happening in China around the mid-aughts. On the one hand, there are the luxury high-rises changing the terrain of major cities. And on the other hand, Chinese art blows up internationally. Li transformed part of the gallery into a bathroom—complete with toilet, sink, and mirror, as well as framing more ads for more exhibitions to say that this art has now been relegated as material comfortable to observe from your own restroom.

A darker tone enters the show with Cao Yi's paintings. As with Li's work, framing and perception are the main concern, for two of his three pieces in the show are part of his "Window" series. *Window No.1* (2016) at first resembles fabrics stitched together, but as one continues to look, one sees it is actually a curtain through which you can just make out the crude shapes of buildings. *Window No.5* (2016) switches the point-of-view—the viewer, standing on a street, sees a bland building with several sets of dark, reflective windows. Keep out, these buildings seem to say.



Zhao Zhao, *Rain*, 2012. Oil on canvas, 59 x 71 inches.

Cao renders dystopian environments, in brilliant, almost playful colors of white and blue. *Window No.5* and *Home* (2014–2015) evoke Hockney if he painted buildings equipped with surveillance cameras, chainlink fences, and one-way windows. Unlike the re-used buildings seen in Tong's "Immortal Caverns," seamlessly blending in with their surroundings, those in Cao's paintings are faceless, featureless, and purely functional. These buildings are cousins to the ones erected by real estate developers on the site

of former nail houses, like the one in Li's painting. They embrace privacy and eschew personality, changing Beijing or Shanghai so that they look like every other city.

Zhao Zhao, Ai Weiwei's former assistant, provides the boldest pieces. They take China's ecological problems as their focus. The semi-abstract *Sky No.14* (2013) and *Sky No. 15* (2013), with their layers of smeared dark blues, convey the dire pollution in the country. They also throw a melancholic mood on the rest of the exhibition. His other piece, *Rain* (2012), is a big painting of himself floating on a black mattress next to a submerged SUV. It derives from a video documenting the flooding that happened on July 21, 2012 in Beijing where Zhao Zhao is literally adrift.

What is striking about these works is each artist responds to what it is to live in China today indirectly, whether it is the presence of the past in the present (as in "Immortal Caverns"); the shifting urban topography of the country in Cao Yi's paintings; or the psychic tumult in Zhou Zhou's "Sky" series that is a result of living with pollution. They remind us, indeed, a country is a product of history, as a person or an artwork, is never fixed, unmoored—at times adrift.