

ArtReview Asia



Charles Lim

Venice Biennale. Oh Buoy



Liu Wei

by Edward Sanderson



The Chinese artist's latest show didn't feature many representations of the body, but that's where you come in

Encountering Liu Wei's output en masse in *COLORS*, his solo exhibition at the Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing, there is a weight (or perhaps I should say, density) of intention evident in the staged interactions between the forms and materials of the individual works, and their arrangement in the specific space of UCCA's foyer and main hall. That is to say that on entering the spaces, it is very clear that you (as the audience) have been expected by the artist – his pieces themselves in their forms and arrangements (and in one set of works, literally) reflect the audience's presence as we meander within the collection. The various environments and vistas are purposefully designed with that expectation – consequently on arriving at an artwork, it's as if you encounter a vacuum left behind by an audience whose role you subsequently fulfil.

This concern with the body can be seen to reach back over the whole of Liu's career. Early on, during the late 1990s, he became well known for his involvement with the Post-Sense Sensibility group in China, and was included in the infamous exhibition *Post-Sense Sensibility: Alien Bodies and Delusion* (curated by Wu Meichun and fellow artist Qiu Zhijie in Beijing in January 1999). That exhibition's controversial focus on the body (human or otherwise) arguably played a part in the government's move in 2001 to pass specific legislation against 'obscenity' in art, one of the major periodic impositions of control that have punctuated contemporary art history in China.

Compared to some of the other artists' works in that show, Liu's piece – *Hard to Restrain* (1999), a multichannel video of naked human bodies scurrying around like ants – was a relatively restrained response to the show's focus. Over the years since then, Liu's work has developed significantly, and *Hard to Restrain* has little formal connection to his current practice, but it might be possible to see a focus on the body as being somehow consistent, with the current works making existential space for the body rather than presenting the body in psychological anxiety, as the early video appears to do.

Of course that reading is somewhat banal – all exhibitions and installations are designed to a greater or lesser extent for bodies. But Liu's current installation at UCCA reaches a pitch of organisation that tips over into a narrative experience of the artworks; it establishes a progressive exploration of the arrangements within the rooms in which the pieces are presented. The works' relationships with each other and with the audience become highly systematic constructions by the artist. As he says: "One of the major aspects of this exhibition is that it pertains to the relationship between the individual and the community. The works are independent in a way, but on the other hand they are closely related to each other... each work will have an aspect that relates it to the other works." This is a relationship with reality to which Liu ascribes the word 'project', as a way of understanding his activity of artmaking.

"This is [the Chinese word] *gongcheng*, which is often translated into English as 'project', but needs to include the understanding of a program, or construction of some sort; this exhibition is like a program with a goal, and each work is a part of that program."

The goal being, in this case, the form of the exhibition that we end up seeing in UCCA, and this goal is absolute and approaches perfection – it all hangs on a thread for the artist – and from this tense, progressive relationship between the works a narrative emerges.

"This program incorporates a very strong narrative in its progression. The exhibition is like various attempts: a number of variations on a somewhat stable theme that take place within this room. There cannot be more or less; the exhibition is precise – it has to be like this."

That said, the narrative at UCCA begins with an unsettling proposition by the artist. The entrance to the building houses the installation *Love It, Bite It No.3* (2014), a set of Liu's sagging architectural

structures constructed out of leathery dog-chew material. These structures represent forms of classical architecture and are interpreted by the artist as providing an 'index' for the show: these dog-chew pieces provide the context for the exhibition's contents taken as a whole, and that context is one of subversion, irony and uncertainty.

"In a pet shop, sometimes you see the dog chews built like a house. [In this way] someone's intention has been grafted onto the dog chew material, almost by mistake, almost unwillingly or unproductively. There is an analogy between this and the relationship between my intentions with the artworks and the audience's experience of them; it's as if there is something missing in the delivery of them... In fact, I don't care very much about the forms of the dog chews; what I care about is a certain feeling, or a certain textuality of these things. In the same way perhaps a dog would care more about the smell and the

texture of the dog chew than its form."

Yet it is very difficult to see past the visible structures in front of us. These architectural models are insistent in their evident forms, the buildings appear to be based on significant governmental or religious architectural structures that embody and manifest power structures in the world. But Liu counterpoises this assumed formal and symbolic meaning of the structures with the practical meaning of the material they are made from – the dog-chew material. These structures are holding two distinct meanings in balance; to appreciate this means that we are called upon to criticise our understanding of Liu's work as a whole.

This index, then, recognises a gap between the intentions of the artist and the understandings of the audience, but also an urge by the artist to address the relation between the works and reality, the works as being intimately connected with a reality mediated by material.

Liu Wei's works have settled into a set of typologies from which the artist draws to construct his exhibitions. There are the



above *Puzzle*, 2014 (installation view),
glass, aluminium alloy, dimensions variable

facing page *Love It, Bite It No.3*, 2014 (installation view),
oxhide, wood, steel, dimensions variable





aforementioned works using the dog-chew material, and within the main hall of UCCA there are areas featuring tall freestanding scaffolding structures covered in coats of heavy canvas; also simple shapes cut from layered books appear among these canvas pieces, and later, more complex shapes and arrangements of the same books occur as a standalone installation; at times metal bars are used to delineate structures and spaces; and interspersed throughout are paintings representing abstracted cityscapes. Missing from the current UCCA exhibition, but appearing in other exhibitions over the past few years, are Liu's wooden structures. These appear to develop from the series *Outcast* (2007–10), in which an enclosed space was created from old windows and doorframes. Subsequently the frames reappeared in cut and reassembled form, as geometric and crystalline structures in the *Merely a Mistake* (2009–12) series. The canvas works can be seen to develop from these, as if the wooden constructions have been given a canvas skin, softening their contours and creating new forms in the folding and fastenings of this heavy cloth.

A forest of these canvas works has been arranged in the first part of UCCA's main hall, and the whole arrangement, including the clearings within it, is given the title *Enigma* (2014). Liu has said of these canvas works, "There is certain principle of equality; one piece cannot exceed another in any excessive fashion. Among themselves, the canvas works must look even, instead of some standing out from the others. For me, equality and evenness means being 'natural'."

In among these, two 'clearings' provide space for an arrangement of works made from the metal bars, and a set of solids made from the cut books standing on pedestallike structures. Included in the structure of metal bars is a small, round folding table, the mass-produced and practical nature of which marks it out as the only untreated found object in among the otherwise artist-constructed environment. On the wall above, and providing a counterpoint to the arrangement of tall canvas works, is a static projection of a large black rectangle with light spilling out from around its virtual edges. Due to its being projected above the space with the metal rod structures, the lower edge overlaps their shadows, which can be read as supports for the black rectangle – although their shadows and the projected 'shadow' exist in different realities.

The intervention of this table and projection into the forest of artworks can possibly be read as disturbing anomalies in the exhibition. It seems they are important modulators for the installation, upsetting Liu's suggested evenness and perhaps preventing any complacency in their reading by the audience.

What is particularly evident in this exhibition (and which may only be possible with an installation of this size and extent) is the focus on the border relations between the works in different materials, and the creation of 'zones'. As the audience moves beyond the canvas works, the space opens out into two large installations sitting out of reach within areas delineated by waist-high sheet-metal barriers, suggesting the edges of expanses of water in which the installations appear as islands. One of these is a series of mirrored structures titled *Puzzle* (2014) and the other a set of cut-book structures (*Look! Books*, 2014). The titles hint at connections running through the exhibition. As Liu points out for *Enigma* and *Puzzle* in particular: "The Chinese titles [*Enigma*: *mizhongmi* / *Puzzle*: *miju*] show they have a relation to each other: specifically that one has been absorbed by, or is dwelling in, the other – there's a progression involved."

What is particularly evident in this exhibition is the focus on border relations

Beyond the 'islands' stand four floor-to-ceiling sections of wall, from which hang a series of cut and layered sheet-metal works, titled *Crucifixion* (2014). The artist's insistence on the relationship to reality that he proposes the works embody seems to enter problematic areas with the reference to religion in this particular series. The four towering walls provide the supports for this series of flat works that make use of layered silver panels of metal sheeting, supported and framed by thin, dark metal bars. In places the sheets are cut and folded out to create formations that suggest openings-out from a central void. The works are predominantly vertical in shape, and the title *Crucifixion* suggests that this orientation can be read as related to the form of the body, although the body is not explicitly present or represented in the works. The title's reference to Christian religious symbolism makes this a complex work to come to terms with in the context of Liu's installation (and his work in general). The artist relates this to a general understanding of the place of religiosity as an important aspect of his works' position in reality and society.

"Although the image of the Crucifixion is more of a Western tradition, I nevertheless feel it's a necessity for me to include this in society – if not religion proper, at least religiosity. So the title pertains to the somatic and to my own attitude. But the form is also about stretching the shapes out and almost tearing them apart in a seemingly brutal fashion, into an almost crosslike shape."

In the future this emphasis on the works' relationship with the world will remain, and Liu sees "reduction" as being the way to enable this.

"For me reduction is the only method [of production] possible here – I would say it's my major method. Rather than adding things to my works, they are about taking away (or even disintegration), and the forms themselves are always subject to modification by the environment, by the context."

However, one aspect of this "reduction" seems to be that the works have their meanings pared back into mere evocations of forms that avoid direct engagement and statements about social issues (for instance). Coincidentally, just around the corner from UCCA is the show *Unlived by What Is Seen* (curated by artist duo Sun Yuan and Peng Yu together with curator Cui Cancan), which takes social interventions as its *raison d'être*, and Liu Wei's exhibition might be seen to provide a counterpoint to the latter show's very clear engagements with society. Liu's work nevertheless remains satisfied to leave its engagement with society at the level of the interface of form and material for which explicit references to situations he feels would not be appropriate:

"I'm very interested to what degree and on what level art can truly affect life and reality – not as a political event, not as a protest or demonstration, but really simply the question of how to truly integrate art with reality. [This question] could be translated into how to exhibit this work in an interesting way – it could be as simple as that."

Such a statement implies a reverse of the critique of the white cube gallery space as divorced from the world; Liu seems to highlight that the gallery is as 'real' an environment as any, in the sense that social and political relations play themselves out in this space as effectively as outside. One might argue with Liu's faith in the gallery space as a space of change, but it can at least be said that the central role of the audience in Liu's installations – their being cast as active presences in Liu's constructed narratives – places any assumed 'purity' of the white cube into question. **ara**



*above Enigma, 2014 (installation view),
mixed media, dimensions variable*

*preceding pages Puzzle, 2014 (installation view),
glass, aluminium alloy, dimensions variable*

*all images Photos: Dora Tang.
Courtesy Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing*