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David Diao

2015.9.19 – 2015.11.15

UCCA

Ullens Center for Contemporary Art
尤伦斯当代艺术中心

David Diao

2015.9.19 – 2015.11.15

Born in Chengdu in 1943, David Diao has produced, over the past five decades, a body of work that speaks to the vagaries of formal aesthetics, art-historical consensus, personal circumstance, and geopolitical succession. This exhibition spans all phases of Diao's career, from his early abstractions of the 1970s to a suite of paintings about his childhood refugee years in Hong Kong, completed just last year.

When he began working as an artist in the New York of the late 1960s, Diao engaged with the complex position of painting in the aftermath of the Abstract Expressionists and the formalist critical debates that followed them. Surprisingly, in the early 1980s he turned from process-based abstraction to a more conceptual way of working that incorporated text, iconography, and narrative subject matter as a means of addressing themes including the legacies of utopian political and artistic movements; the racially inflected tensions of identity politics at the American fin-de-siècle; an ongoing interest in particular figures and ideas—among them notably Barnett Newman and Philip Johnson—from his native New York scene; and the historical poignancy of his own family story in light of China's long twentieth century, as seen through the prism of his demolished childhood home. Diao's uniquely recombinant aesthetic sensibility—manifest in his palette and surfaces as in his historical and biographical interests—suggests a way forward for a kind of painting that is able to raise questions even as it tells stories, and to upset theoretical doctrine even as it gives visual pleasure. This exhibition, his largest and most complete exhibition to date, seeks to present the chronological story of Diao's artistic evolution, and to position his vast output as a field of visual and conceptual adjacencies from which multivalent, unexpected connections can emerge.

"David Diao" is curated by Philip Tinari with Felicia Chen, and designed by Christian Bjone. The exhibition catalogue is published with support from Frank F. Yang Art and Education Foundation, ESLITE GALLERY, and Artron Art (Group) Co., Ltd. Airline sponsorship comes from Air China.

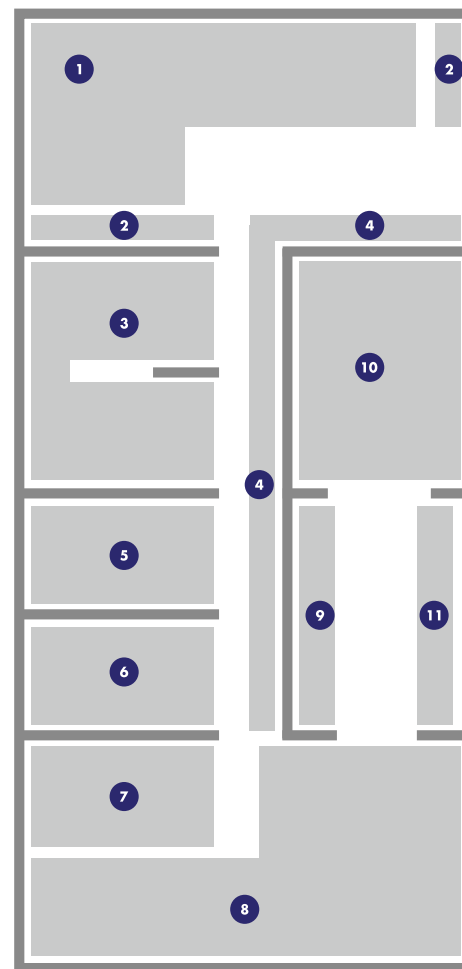
Publication Support



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Floor Plan



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Odd Man Out

Early Works
1960s – 1970s



David Diao's earliest works are best understood in the context of the debates around painting that were unfolding during the years he was making them, the late 1960s and early 1970s. After the postwar triumph of the Abstract Expressionists, painters and critics of the following decades looked for formal breakthroughs, interrogating concepts like composition, mark-

making, and the flatness of the picture plane. Diao came up with a series of responses, making "allover" paintings that had no center, using ordinary objects like squeegees to spread paint, letting the stretcher bars show through his canvas, and in one case even showing an unfinished plaster gallery wall as a work of art.

Here are examples of two key series from that period. The first series uses salvaged cardboard tubes to "scrape, roll, or drag repeated layers of paint across the entire canvas... until something happened to my liking," creating two-sided abstractions that read like open books. "I was determined to go against Clement Greenberg's advice to painters to cut off and crop the painted canvas in order to find the final work. Instead, mine indexes everything that happened on it," Diao has said. The second series, begun after he moved studios and returned to painting with brushes

on the wall, consists of freehand compositions made entirely from geometric forms, and given titles drawn from movies and books, in subtle protest against the reigning practice of eliminating narrative content by naming works "Untitled." These geometric works connect to a twentieth-century European modernist tradition which Diao would continue to explore. These early works reappear later in Diao's career, notably in *Plus* and *Minus* (1991), where positive and negative reviews are silkscreened directly onto the paintings they originally discussed.



◀ David Diao, *Odd Man Out*, 1974, acrylic on canvas, 228.5 x 213.5 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Office Baroque, Brussels.

▲ David Diao, *Wealth of Nations*, 1972, acrylic on canvas, 213.5 x 335.5 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Postmasters Gallery.

Glissement

Breakthrough
1984 – 1986



David Diaó took a brief hiatus from painting during the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period punctuated by his first visit back to Chengdu in 1979 after living abroad for three decades. When he began painting again, he found a path beyond the pure, formal abstractions of his earlier period by

incorporating images and concepts drawn from modern art history. *Glissement* (1984), based on a 1915 photograph of an exhibition by Kazimir Malevich, became a way for Diaó to relate to a canonical image on his own terms by allowing the contours of the paintings in the photograph to slide among

each other. He continued to make many further paintings exploring different aspects of this image in a loose notion of seriality found throughout his work. In the *Little Suprematist Prisons* (1986), Diaó proposes, towards the end of the Cold War, an imaginary link between Russian Suprematism and American Abstract Expressionism,

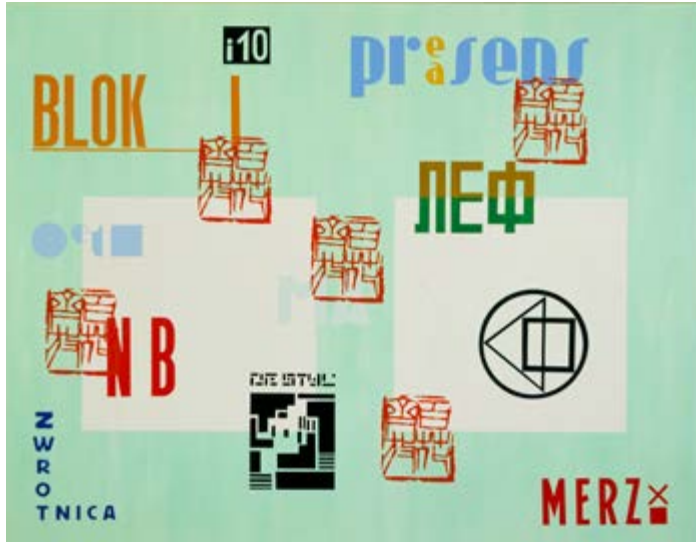
creating a series of compositions that play on Robert Motherwell's *The Little Spanish Prison* (1944) in the style of Malevich and his peers. Key to both bodies of work, and many that follow, is the idea of a slippery history that can be appropriated, commented upon, and remade through the act of painting.



- ▲ Installation view of "David Diaó" (*Little Suprematist Prisons*). Photography by Eric Gregory Powell, courtesy Ullens Center for Contemporary Art.
- ◀ David Diaó, *Glissement*, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 178 x 254 cm. Courtesy the artist and Postmasters Gallery.

Let a 100 Flowers Bloom

Excavating Modernism
1980s



In the 1980s Diao became deeply interested in the contesting visions and versions of modernism that had flourished throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Of particular attraction to him were schools such as De Stijl, the Bauhaus, and Constructivism, for whom advanced aesthetics were part of a larger social vision. Glancing knowingly at their contrasting, sometimes contesting

ideologies, Diao juxtaposed these schools in works such as *Let a 100 Flowers Bloom* (1988) in which the logos of these movements contend for dominance. For Diao, an affection for these schools and their collective, revolutionary politics was also a way of expressing dissatisfaction with a triumphalist American version of art history in which individual genius reigned supreme.

▲ David Diao, *Let a 100 Flowers Bloom*, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 213 x 274 cm. Courtesy Yageo Foundation Collection.



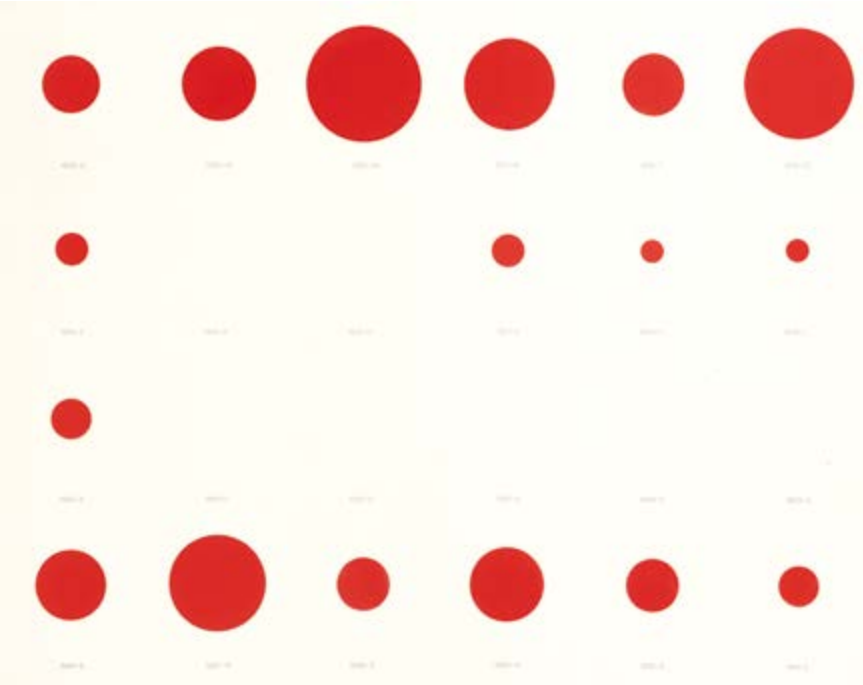
David Diao, *Seal/Zeal*, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 213.5 x 213.5 cm. Courtesy Taipei Fine Arts Museum.



David Diao, *Russian Constructivism*, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 213.5 x 213.5 cm. Courtesy Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain de Saint-Etienne Métropole, Saint Etienne.

Résumé

Self-Analysis and Self-Critique 1990s



As he approached his fiftieth birthday, Diao—a quintessential insider of the New York scene whose career had nonetheless experienced multiple ups and downs—began to think in his work about his position and its relation to the larger dynamics of the art world and its politics. Using strategies of data visualization not yet prevalent, he gave direct form to information not generally discussed in polite

company: his sales records, studio floorplans, visits from curators and collectors, and even his curriculum vitae. He followed this with a series of invitations to imaginary exhibitions that he felt he deserved but knew he would never get—retrospectives at the Museum of Modern Art, Centre Pompidou, and an unspecified location in China. In *Synecdoche* (1993), Diao even goes so far as to edit a catalogue essay



- ◀ David Diao, *Sales 2*, 1991, acrylic and vinyl on canvas, 167.5 x 213.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Postmasters Gallery.
- ▲ David Diao, *Synecdoche*, 1993, collage and silkscreen on canvas, 57 x 96.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Postmasters Gallery.
- ▼ David Diao, *The View from Past 50: 1/2 Full, 1/2 Empty*, 1993, marker on raw canvas, 96.5 x 76 cm. Private Collection.

on the German painter Gerhard Richter by the art historian Benjamin Buchloh so that all mentions and images of Richter's work are replaced with his own. Diao's personal reflections contain a hint of the universal, encapsulating the distinct psychology of the "successful" artist in the face of the ever-expanding machinery of the global art world.

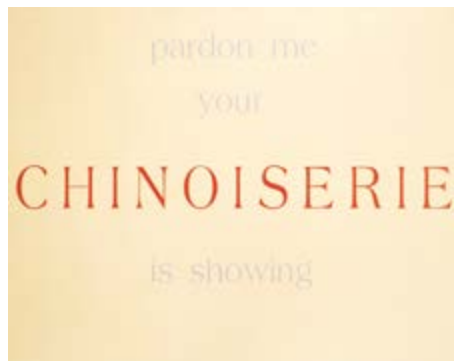


The Bitter Tea of General Yen

Identity Politics
1990s

Having been educated in the United States since age twelve, Diao has always worked within a Western art historical lineage. Indeed, “Chineseness” was never an outright subject or context in Diao’s painting. And yet as discourses of globalization and multiculturalism became ascendant in the 1990s, and as “contemporary Chinese art” gained international visibility, Diao was increasingly forced to reckon with the perception of himself as a Chinese artist. In one particular instance, a well-known French curator remarked after meeting Diao in Paris that “You are not really a Chinese artist”—ironic to Diao as he had never really seen

himself as one to begin with. In further works from this period, Diao contemplated his own relation to his ethnicity, sometimes using the image of Bruce Lee, perhaps the most recognized Asian man in the mainstream American consciousness, as his surrogate on the canvas. By confronting racism directly, Diao was continuing the same project of self-understanding that underlies his autobiographical works. He was also responding to a much larger conversation in the United States about how race, class, and gender inform aesthetic values and art-historical hierarchies.



▲ David Diao, *Pardon Me, Your Chinoiserie is Showing*, 1993, acrylic and vinyl on canvas, 152.5 x 183 cm. Courtesy the artist and Postmasters Gallery.

▶ David Diao, *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, 1994, acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 190.5 x 117 cm. Courtesy the artist and Postmasters Gallery.



Push / Pull

Investigating the New York Avant-Garde
1990s – 2000s



David Diao is perhaps above all a New York artist, and as such has a great fondness for the intricacies of the artists, and the art histories, that the city has produced. He reserves a great combination of respect and trepidation for the genealogy of modern art put forth by MoMA's founding director Alfred Barr, a provisional flowchart of influence that hardened into orthodoxy. He regards fondly the overwhelming critical influence once held

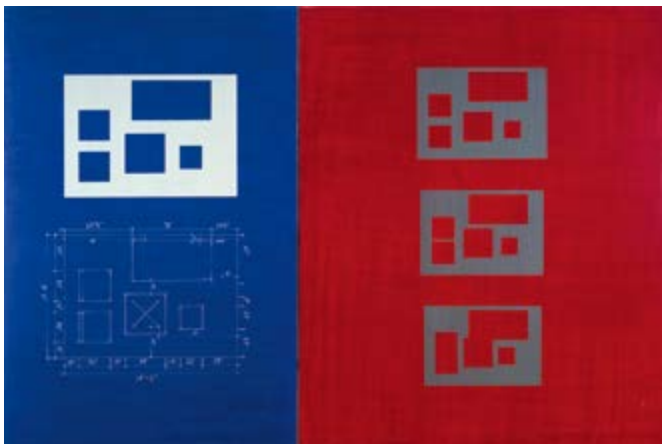
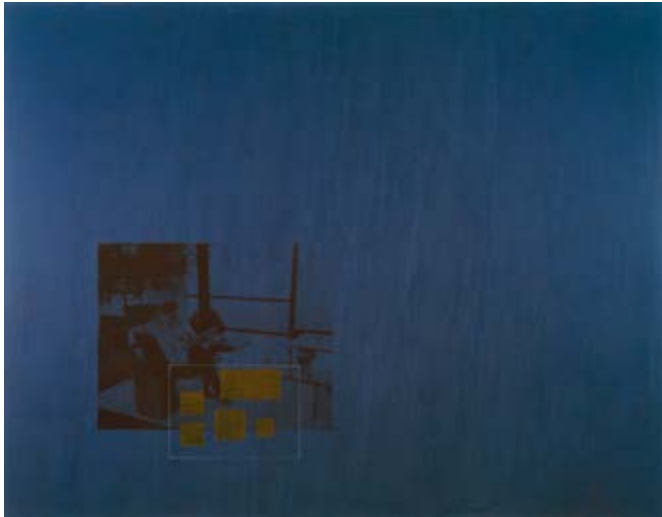
by the dueling critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, a tension he makes clear in the painting *Push / Pull*. He retains an abashed fondness for the Abstract Expressionists and the mythologies surrounding them, driving artists of his own later generation to purchase plots in the cemetery where many of them rest.



- ◀ David Diao, *Geo and Non-Geo*, 1990, acrylic and vinyl on canvas, 198 x 366 cm. Courtesy Main Trend Gallery.
- ▶ David Diao, *Push / Pull*, 1989, acrylic on canvas, 274.5 x 213.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Postmasters Gallery.

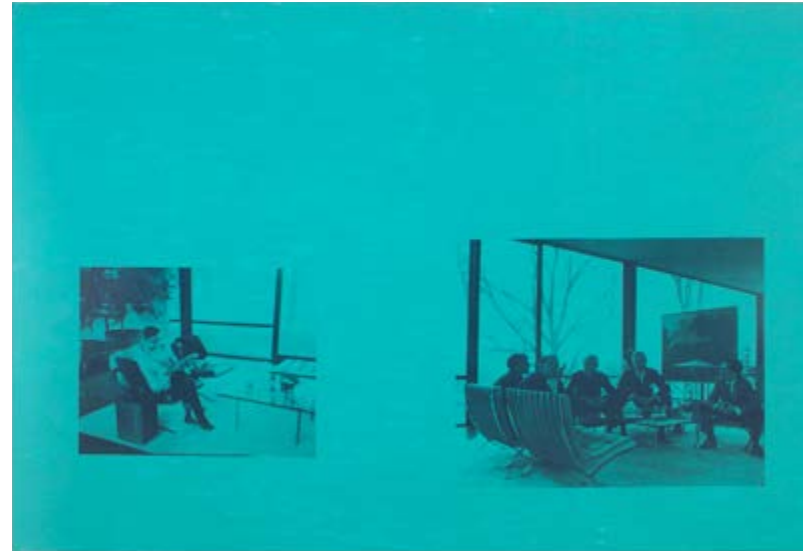
Sitting in Perfect Arrangement

Philip Johnson and the Glass House
2000s



Diao's ongoing passion for modernist architecture led him to create a group of works around the greatest American icon of the genre, Philip Johnson's Glass House. Johnson (1906-2005), a disciple of Mies van der Rohe and the founding curator of architecture at the Museum of Modern Art, designed and built the house as a retreat in the upscale suburb of New Canaan, Connecticut, in 1949. He died there in his sleep a few months before his 99th birthday in 2005. In one painting, Diao lounges

in the living room as if he owns the house; others make reference to Johnson's exacting arrangement for the furniture—which he compared to the details of the medieval cathedral at Chartres—in light of the fact that the white wool rug shrinks with each washing, altering the proportions. Diao remains fascinated both by Johnson's supremely elegant and exacting vision, and by the ways in which entropy always interrupts such visions.



► David Diao, *Sitting in Perfect Arrangement*, 2004, acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 213.5 x 274.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Postmasters Gallery.

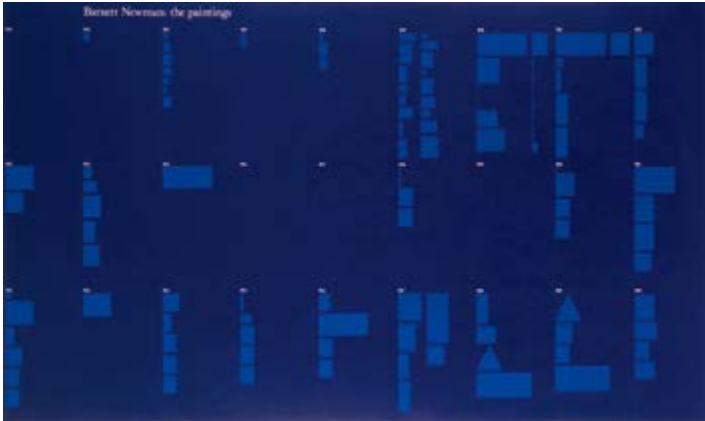
▲ David Diao, *Salon 2*, 2010, acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 226 x 335 cm. Courtesy the artist and Postmasters Gallery.

◄ David Diao, *The Rug, It Shrank!*, 2004-2005, acrylic on canvas, 183 x 274.4 cm. Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin.

The Paintings in Scale

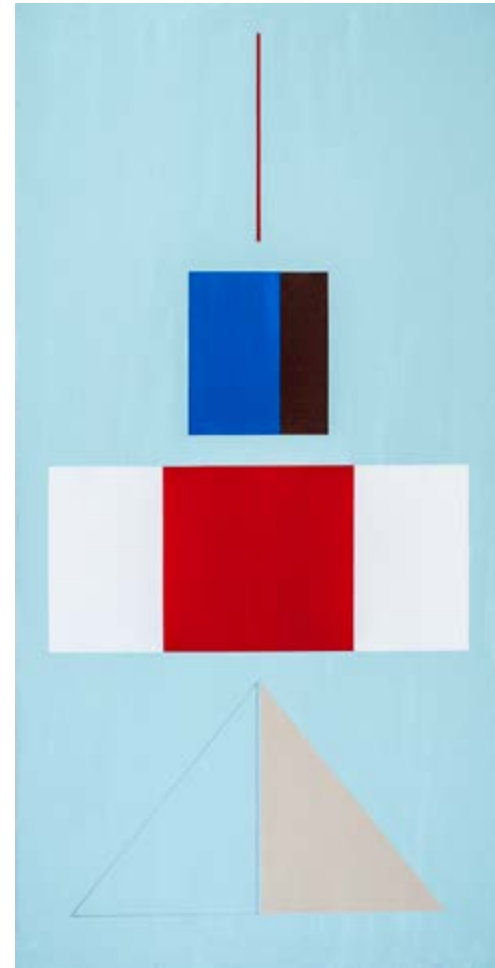
Barnett Newman as Icon and Example

1990s – 2010s



Of all the modern masters with whom Diao has conversed in his work, none has captivated him more deeply than the painter Barnett Newman (1905-1970), whom he considers “the most intellectual of the Abstract Expressionists.” As a young painter in New York, Diao helped to install Newman’s most important exhibition, “Stations of the Cross,” at the Guggenheim in 1966. Years later, as he started taking stock of his own career, Diao realized that Newman’s god-like reputation had been built from only 120 paintings. “Measured against his enormous influence on me and others, it certainly puts into question the

convention that great artists are prolific. I wanted to make my astonishment visible and chose a Newmanesque scale and format to do so,” he has said. Diao thus went about visualizing Newman’s output in lists, as icons, as explorations of particularly productive or unproductive years. In using the canvas to address and convey such detailed factual information, Diao sought “a way to escape grand universalist claims often made for abstract painting,” even as he created powerful abstractions of his own.



- ▼ David Diao, *BN: The Paintings in Scale (Blue)*, 1991, acrylic and vinyl on canvas, 198 x 335.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Postmasters Gallery.
- ▲ David Diao, *BN: The Unfinished Paintings 2*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 213.5 x 106.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Postmasters Gallery.

M & M (Melnikov and Malevich)

Investigating the New York Avant-Garde
1990s – 2000s

David Diao, *M & M (Melnikov and Malevich)*, 2012, acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 122 x 305 cm. Courtesy Liu Gang.



Diao's recurring fascination with Constructivism and architecture led him to Konstantin Melnikov, who, after having been one of the most active figures in the twenties avant-garde circles of Russia, refused to yield to Stalin's mandate to build uniform structures and had his

license taken away in the 1930s. Melnikov is best known for his own house in Moscow, consisting of two intersecting cylinders with hexagonal windows and built between 1926 and 1929. In this group of works Diao explores the unique properties of this building,

which began life as a utopian manifesto but ultimately became a prison for its owner. Playing on the shared initials of Melnikov and Malevich, he also looks for other similarities between their lives and works—from their similar predicaments under the Soviet

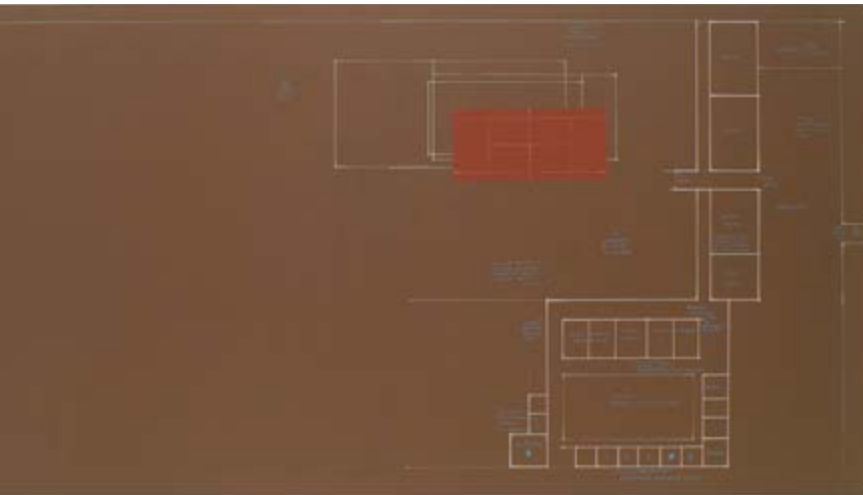
system, right down to the recurring element of a Thonet chair that appears in both the photograph on which Diao's painting *Glissement* (1984) is based and a photograph of the Melnikov house interior.

I Lived There Until I Was 6...

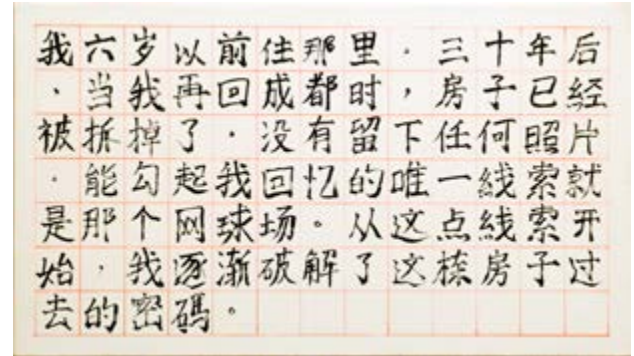
The Da Hen Li House Cycle
ca. 2008

Invited in 2007 to make his first exhibition in mainland China, Diao sought a method to “meet halfway” an audience who would not be familiar with the modernist references of his usual work. He settled upon the idea of his childhood home, the Da Hen Li House in the center of Chengdu, which he left when he fled China

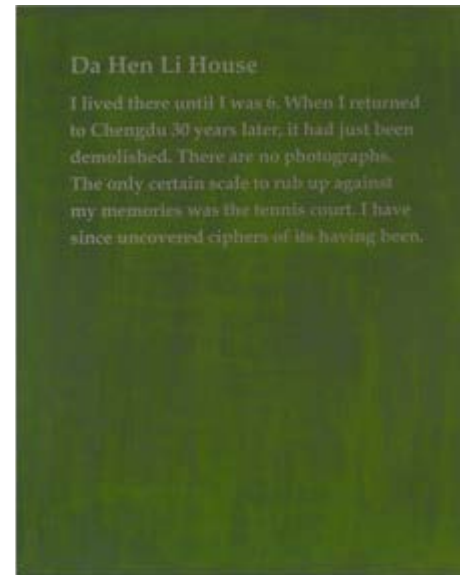
in 1949 at age six and never saw again. Shortly after the founding of the People’s Republic, the house was converted to the headquarters of the Sichuan Daily. It was demolished shortly before Diao returned to China for the first time in 1979. No photographs or plans remained.



David Diao, *All That I Remember*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 106.5 x 198 cm. Courtesy M+, Hong Kong.



David Diao, *I Lived There Until I Was 6 (Chinese version)*, 2008, ink and acrylic on canvas, 45.5 x 71 cm. Courtesy M+, Hong Kong.



David Diao, *I Lived There Until I Was 6... (English version)*, 2008, acrylic and vinyl on canvas, 91.5 x 73.5 cm. Courtesy M+, Hong Kong.

Kowloon / Lower Manhattan

Revisiting the Refugee Years
ca. 2015



After fleeing Chengdu with his paternal grandparents, Diao spent five and a half years living as a refugee in Hong Kong before moving to join his father in New York in 1955. In the leadup to this exhibition, Diao began to reflect on

this hitherto unexplored period in his own life. These paintings map the area where he lived—the tip of the Kowloon peninsula—in relation to the China he had left behind and the Manhattan he would come to inhabit.



► David Diao, *Kowloon / Lower Manhattan*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 152.5 x 162.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Postmasters Gallery.

▲ David Diao, *She Was a Neighbor*, 2014, acrylic and paper on canvas, 223.5 x 172.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Postmasters Gallery.

Public Programs

Conversations

David Diao: Which Way Up? **Exhibition Symposium**

2015.9.19 (Sat) 14:00-16:00
Program Place: Auditorium
Speakers: David Diao (Artist), Pi Li (Senior Curator, M+), Christian Bjone (Designer, Writer), Zhao Gang (Artist)
Moderator: Philip Tinari (Director, UCCA)
Language: English with Chinese translation

Building Memory: David Diao's Return to Da Hen Li House

2015.11.7 (Sat) 14:00-16:00
Program Place: Auditorium
Speakers: Ma Yansong (Architect), Ma Qingyun (Architect)
Language: Chinese only

David Diao, American Artist **Forum on Late Twentieth Century** **American Painting**

2015.11.15 (Thur) 14:00-16:00
Program Place: Auditorium
Speaker: Pi Li (Senior Curator, M+)
Language: Chinese only

Screenings

David Diao: Documents of Diaspora

My Architect: A Son's Journey
2015.10.4 (Sun) 18:00-20:00
Program Place: Auditorium
Language: English with Chinese subtitles

Fist of Fury
2015.10.5 (Mon) 18:00-20:00
Program Place: Auditorium
Language: Chinese only

Painters Painting
2015.10.11 (Sun) 14:00-16:00
Program Place: Auditorium
Language: English with Chinese subtitles

A Good Rain Knows
2015.10.11 (Sun) 17:00-19:00
Program Place: Auditorium
Language: Chinese only

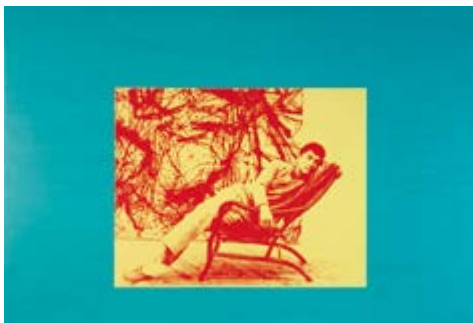
About the Artist



David Diao portrait in country studio, 2005. Photography by Martien Mulder.

Born in Chengdu in 1943, David Diao left China in 1949, going first to Hong Kong and then to New York, where he has lived and worked for the past five decades. A graduate of Kenyon College, he has taught at Hampshire College, The Cooper Union, and in the Whitney Independent Study Program. His work has been shown extensively in the US, Europe, and Asia, notably in a solo exhibition at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum (2014). His work has also been included in exhibitions at the Albright-Knox Museum, Art Gallery of

Ontario, Vancouver Art Gallery, Brooklyn Museum, Musée d'Art Moderne de Saint Etienne, and Taipei Fine Arts Museum, as well as in the 2014 Whitney Biennial. He has been collected by institutions including the Whitney Museum of American Art, SFMOMA, and Hong Kong's M+ Museum of Art and Visual Culture. He was the subject of a major research conference organized by the University of Strasbourg in 2014, and was inducted into the National Academy in 2012.



David Diao
Lying I
2000
acrylic and silkscreen on canvas
200.5 x 292 cm
Courtesy the artist and
Postmasters Gallery.

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Continental West Gallery
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King's Contemporary Gallery
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Continental West Gallery
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Contemporary Gallery
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Hours

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Last entry at 18:30

Closed on Monday

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