

# Liang Wei: Before Itself

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Liang Wei: *Before Itself*

Date: 2018.3.22 – 5.6

Magician Space is pleased to present “Before Itself”, a second solo exhibition with the gallery by Beijing-based artist Liang Wei.

One of China’s most exciting new voices in contemporary painting, Liang Wei has been developing a unique form of abstract art that combines influences from both modern and classical traditions. Avoiding any conceptual or thematic approaches to painting, Liang’s compositions start by sourcing images from a large range of subject matter in order to tear them apart and reassemble them into new forms from her imagination. These compositions are the starting point of a meticulous painting process that uses a variety of materials such as acrylic paint, Chinese ink, and watercolour pencils. The resulting works feel like uncanny topographical visions haunted by echoes of classical Chinese landscapes. These abstract geographies are deeply immersing owing to the way original images have been deconstructed. Hints of recognizable forms appear and multiply as one scans the surface of the canvas as our eyes attempt to make sense of the abstraction. As a result, new and unintended forms seem to emerge and then disappear in the chaos.

The source images that Liang Wei uses mirror her interest in history, classical art and architecture, contemporary urban environments, and cinema. Each work seems to construct a separate imaginary world with its own energy and reasons for coming into being. One can almost discern hidden realities waiting to break out from obscurity into existence, like several films all happening at once in the background of our minds. There is a contrast between the violence and morphogenic qualities of these works, as some paintings seem to be in the process of self-creation or destruction, while others have found a contemplative sense of equilibrium. In these new paintings Liang Wei has created strange new realities that are based on, but alien to, our own.

#### About the artist

Liang Wei is a painter and video artist based in Beijing. She graduated from L'Art Plastiques Universite Des Sciences Humanines De Strasbourg, France in 1999.

Using oil, acrylic, and water based colors, Liang Wei has created a body of work that is varied in form, method, and content – but nonetheless retains a coherent and rigorous personal voice throughout. Through the controlled chaos of her paintings, they convey the contrast between our inner selves and the outer world when our thoughts and feelings merge with and become altered by our surroundings – of social mores, regulations, commercialism, and urban development.

The wide variation of formal sensibilities between her works is a reflection of the extensive source of images that she uses as their starting points. Whereas Liang Wei's previous work primarily used the accumulated detritus of contemporary society, this has expanded in recent years to people, faces, landscapes, architecture, machines, as well as references to past works by the old masters.

Her work has been shown in: Out of Ink, Pera Museum, Istanbul; Before Itself, Magician Space, Beijing; .com/.cn, K11 Art Foundation, MoMA PS1, Hong Kong, Shanghai; The Garden of Diversion, Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing; Place of Residence-with Artists from Brazil and China, ShanghART H-Space, Shanghai; Moving Image In China 1988–2011, MinSheng Art Museum, Shanghai; City Net Asia 2007, Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul; The 12th Kolkata Film Festival; China Power Station, Battersea Power Station, London.



Exhibition view: Liang Wei, *Before Itself*, 2018



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*Near the Entrance*, 2016,  
acrylic on canvas, watercolor pencil, ink pencil, 140 x 190cm

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*Noise of the Present Kind*, 2016,  
acrylic on canvas, watercolor pencil, ink pencil, 150 x 200 cm



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Exhibition view: Liang Wei, *Before Itself*, 2018

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*From Tomorrow*, 2018,  
acrylic on canvas, watercolor pencil, ink pencil, 140 x 190 cm

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*Not Retained*, 2017,  
acrylic on canvas, watercolor pencil, ink pencil, 130 x 170 cm



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*Neither Now Nor Later*, 2016,  
acrylic on canvas, watercolor pencil, ink pencil, 119 x 200 cm

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*Before Itself*, 2017,  
acrylic on canvas, watercolor pencil, ink pencil, 90 x 150 cm



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Exhibition view: Liang Wei, *Before Itself*, 2018



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*Memories Converge*, 2017,  
acrylic on canvas, watercolor pencil, ink pencil, 140 x 200 cm

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*Fragile Drawback*, 2018,  
acrylic on canvas, watercolor pencil, ink pencil, 130 x 180 cm

Selected articles & Media coverage



Billy Tang conversation with Liang Wei

2018.3

BT: In your earlier work, architecture and its urban transformation features strongly as important elements in your paintings. This could relate to how the evolution of the urban landscape ebbing and flowing between growth and entropy, but it also reflects more generally our everyday experience in China in terms of how order is negotiated through cities, society, and politics. You refer to an experience felt in your paintings where elements move slightly out of control, yet they always are tethered loosely to an internal sense of order too. I thought this could be a good way to enter into the conversation regarding the motivation behind your earlier works.

LW: That's right, the early works began in 2004. Your description of my early work is also pretty accurate. In these works, I used subject matter that was relatively specific in that it was about the metropolis, machinery, waste, accumulation, order, and chaos - all the things that you have to experience while living within a large city. These things all have an internal logic to them within the canvas. Moreover, the composition within these paintings depends entirely on their internal logic, just like how with chaos in reality there is still a logic or sense of order that persists. In the last few years, I have experienced in my work a big change in terms of the subject matter I use. Moreover, this change to my subject matter has also completely transformed the compositional logic and method of painting in my work.

BT: Contours begin to feature more predominately throughout. Eventually, there are paintings where color is completely omitted, giving the compositions a schematic or machinic quality, which becomes more pronounced in later paintings (particularly to the period up to 2015). Contrasting this is another method where disparate things are sutured together into assemblages. It is an interesting relationship between these two organizing principles. You mentioned before about experiences in the city. Is this an effect you try to mirror in your paintings and could you talk about the shift into your recent work through this aspect?

LW: Before, when engaging with the concept of a metropolis, there wasn't a specific event I was trying to react to by using a particular subject matter. In the 2000s, Beijing experienced in this period its fastest growth of urban development – but despite this, I still felt a distinct lack of order. My studio was located in the Huantie village and my daily experience was largely defined by this convergence between the city and the countryside rather than skyscrapers. This enabled me to experience the disarray of the complex surroundings around a metropolis as opposed to everything being neat and tidy. What is also important is that my paintings do not attempt to describe or expose anything. What I paint is the feeling I have in my mind, which is attained from the canvas rather than reality itself. The objects that I paint all lack a specific status, place, or cultural background to them. Beginning in 2015, there has been a huge shift in the sense that

I try to avoid any restriction that might limit the range of subjects that I can choose from. Whether it is a fragment of the metropolis or any kind of object from the world, I started to expand the range of subjects that attract my interest. There is no longer a specific criteria of subject matter or material that I will intentionally be drawn towards or choose to reject.

BT: There does appear to be a deliberate change in the sense that the source material and the final form on the canvas are increasingly different to one another. It seems that your work has transitioned from a description of physical urban change to exploring the challenges we face in making sense of a vast spectrum of information in the world. There is a quality I find in your work that resonates with the phenomenon of 'apophenia' - a term used to describe a situation where a person begins to recognize patterns and meaning between unrelated things, a common example is when people begin seeing human faces in clouds or on the moon. Does this reflect your current approach and how you control this effect through using certain techniques? The striking quality of your recent work is how our eye instinctually combines the fragments on the canvas and it seems to build up an image similarly to how we might naturally perceive a landscape in nature.

LW: As I have mentioned, my work has become less restricted to the subject material it uses and this has freed up the possibilities of a

composition within my paintings. It has allowed me to explore different ways of making composition and employ new painting techniques. My earlier work had a subject matter, but you can say in my recent work there is no longer a subject. I often use a few source images in the beginning stages to first give structure to the composition, but result on the canvas at the end always becomes separated and detached from its origins. This has been the big change for me. In regards to the discernibility of forms within my work, there are two works I have recently completed, which use line in a prominent way. In other works, I often break the form down in a comprehensive manner so that it is impossible to tell what it is. However in the works with straight linear forms such as 'Not Retained' or 'Stick to the Sound', I deliberately leave out parts of the form untouched. But in general, it is a very intuitive process in terms of how I use source material and combine them in different ways with other things. There are times when the beginning of a painting is improvised, then with the process of making the work, it generates into a form determined by something random, which guides the direction of where the work will go. Right now, as with any source material that I chose to incorporate with any given combination, the most important factor that helps me decide on using them is whether or not it provokes my interest. Often there are times that the connection between the images is coincidental. Sometimes there are other moments when the elements of a work appear mutually complementary to one another. For example with the painting that we are taking to Art Basel

called 'Dry rain', with this composition I selected images from the movie 'Transformers', which I combined together with a painting 'George and the Dragon' by an unknown artist, which was something I found very interesting.

BT: 'Right but wrong' is a good way to describe your technique. Each image has a hidden capacity and an internal logic beyond the dualism of what is good or bad and away from the hierarchies involved in painting. It makes me think back to your earlier interest in waste material, which is an abject entity we typically ignore thinking about. You also collapse a separation between nature and the human world in your work. Aside from your experience living in city, I was wondering if there are any other influences that direct this approach to your art?

LW: 'Right but wrong' is a good way to describe the feeling behind my work. It is something I try to attain and reach towards. I have never really thought of myself as painting with abstraction or using a representational style of working. It is the same as the reason why I do not wish to do oil painting, acrylic, water color, or ink painting. There are things within the canvas that you might find recognizable, but then on close inspection you will realize that it is simply something else. This is a game that is played between the mind and eye. The mind simply does not have the capacity to comprehensively recognize everything. Similarly there is no such



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thing as abstraction existing in nature. Even though I do not intentionally look to paint this kind of result, nonetheless it seems to reach this effect involuntary through the process of painting. This is because my paintings are constructed using a combination of existing forms. After I break down these specific images, the fragments are reconstituted together back into a new assemblage, the traces of these previous images can still be found in these pieces. Consequently, the eye begins to see shadows of resemblance everywhere around the canvas – but in fact you can never fully locate or distinguish a specific object in the composition.

BT: You have mentioned influences such as Song Dynasty painting. Here we could perhaps go back to the question about external and internal rules involved in painting. Maybe this leads us to a concern of articulating another form of expressing the coherence of things, which relates less to visual resemblance, but emphasizes a connection that brings together different objects. Is your interest in Song Dynasty confined to only technical questions about composition in painting or do they also relate to philosophical, conceptual, or historical concerns?

LW: I have long admired Song Dynasty painting and you could say it was the peak of a golden era of painting in China. I believe that Song Dynasty painting had an extremely expansive worldview and there was a tremendous aura to it. This state of painting is extremely hard to achieve.

Although I have never formally studied Song painting, but for me its world view and ambience is something very precious and probably something unsurpassable. For me this is also important that there is a higher boundary to set the standard for art. However, I have never actively researched Song painting and it is hard to say specifically how it has influenced me. My paintings in the past two years maybe from far away look like these traditional landscapes, but on closer inspection, they of course look nothing like them. It was only afterwards, that I noticed a similar likeliness composition-wise to Song painting in a few of my works, but then again, this was not something I tried to achieve in a conscious manner. I am not so involved with incorporating philosophical, conceptual, or historical concerns when thinking about my own work. I am rather more interested in questions to do with painting itself. It is about how one faces the world rather than being guided by subjects or discourses.

BT: Can you talk more about the influence of moving-image in your work, because I remember you also use a lot of films as source material?

LW: You could say that while there are many influences for me and not only in terms of the urban environment. The other is film, even though I do not use ideas or content from film explicitly in my work, but this art form has been very important to me. The temporality in film is like layers of images overlapped together and this aspect shares many connections to

my own work. Apart from this, recently a lot of my work has a lot of source material from western art history too. What's more, probably another very important influence for me is the Internet. Although my earlier work was centered on the material existence of reality, the fictional world on the Internet is also just as real. It gives me the ability to employ another worldview in the sense that it brings together many co-existing things. Time, a place, or a subject, they can co-exist together within the network. My canvas works sometimes have this kind of connection. I recently exhibited in an exhibition co-organized between K11 and MoMA PS1, which was about using another idea of geography – a fictional concept of geography. When I was selected to participate in this exhibition, at the time I wondered why the curator had chosen my work for a Post-Internet show. After thinking about this question, I realized that in fact my work does connect to this concept of a fictional geography. You could say that my work is a kind of abstract geography. Moreover, it is a concept of geography that can be understood only through the experience of the Internet.

BT: It is interesting how you also mix up different compositional devices to disrupt the surface of the picture plane: from different angles, close-ups, to wide angled shots. These juxtapositions vary the form and rhythm of viewing within the picture plane of the canvas. What is the relationship to each painting?

LW: The techniques I use to paint are inseparable to the way I think about a composition – there is a quality of feeling slightly off. I'm attempting to depart from the boundaries of traditional painting such as oil painting, acrylic painting, watercolor, or ink painting. But of course it is also impossible to think that you can completely separate yourself away from these things. As I mentioned before, technique and the concept behind painting are inseparable. I have never pursued the composition defined by traditional landscapes, however there are works that naturally formed into something with a similar resemblance or quality. I am actually not exactly sure quite the reason why the composition of a work might go towards that direction – it is a process that happens naturally. There is a possibility that after a certain period of time that this might completely change. I would say that the works do not have a subject matter between them that creates a dialogue – but there is a dialogue that happens on the level of technique and feeling. If there is a method I experiment with that ends up well on the canvas, I will find ways to continue the experimentation of that technique in another work. In that way, there are a few works where they are connected in this way.

BT: In terms of the exhibition title, can you talk about this in relation to how you would like to direct the viewer towards seeing your work in the exhibition space?

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LW: I think this title embodies a state that best represents my recent work. I never try to express something to the audience or try to guide them to thinking a certain way or looking at the work a certain way. The title basically represents the state of the work itself.

BT: Can you talk about the relationship of color in your painting? In recent work the application of color also appears different; there are more sharp contrasts between certain tones, which disperse different focal areas across the canvas. There are also other pale colors that are barely perceptible. This is also different from earlier work, which was built on a flatter more homogenous plane of color.

LW: Color in my work is equally important. I control the different hues as they are positioned close to one another, from this foundation there almost certainly will be a contrast – however I never use blocks of color to construct a composition. Its oil painting but again it is not, its acrylic and again it is not, or it is watercolor or ink, but then again it isn't – this is part of my entire concept of painting.

BT: What about the role of duration in your composition? Because you are less concerned with narrative description than in the activity of painting itself, how do you employ duration to guide you towards certain experiences beyond a pre-existing plan – is the aspect of time

something that you vary in order to attain different results. For example, compositionally wise, there is noticeably a different intensity in your smaller canvases compared to your larger works. Visually your paintings rarely appear static and materialize differently according to the conditions that you give to yourself to work within.

LW: Duration is an important part of my work. This is because my work is composed of a countless combination of small lines. It takes an amount of time to achieve this kind of assemblage. In that way, my work as a form of practice is very important – you could say that it is the single most important thing at the crux of my work. However, I have never attempted to control this element of my work in order to ascertain a particular result. I only need to employ time so that the work can gradually begin to emerge. The feeling of a composition also requires time to emerge. The other important constituents are material and color. Even though I use line to give structure to the canvas, the decision of what material to use in order to create a certain type of line is also important to me. In order to achieve the result on the canvas, I need to focus on combining these different kinds of materials together. Acrylic, ink, watercolor, I am always trying to avoid the traditional techniques of painting to give form to my work. I need to go through a collection of different mediums in order to give form to this quality of indiscernibility that can be found throughout my work.





Liang Wei, *From Tomorrow*, 2018, acrylic, water colour pencil, ink on canvas, 1.4 x 1.9 m. Courtesy the artist and Magician Space, Beijing

**Liang Wei, 'Before Itself'**

Magician Space

22 March – 6 May

For her second solo exhibition at Magician Space, Beijing-based Liang Wei presents a series of abstract paintings generated from her constantly-evolving imaginative world. By changing specific images – Song landscape paintings, people-filled stadiums, goats – to something suggestive, these meticulously arranged compositions disrupt the picture plane and uncouple the connotations attached to these images. The result feel like a space between the abstract and the representational. Inspired by Song dynasty painting techniques and calling on a generous worldview, Liang's creative process hints at her concern for articulating an alternative way of expressing the inexhaustible chaos of our world and challenges the viewer to restore order.

VISUAL ARTS / GALLERIES / ARTICLE

# “Before Itself” by Liang Wei at Magician Space, Beijing

BY BLOUIN ARTINFO | APRIL 08, 2018



“Fragile Drawback,” 2018, by Liang Wei, acrylic on canvas, watercolor pencil, ink pencil, 130 x 180 cm at Magician Space  
(Courtesy the artist and Magician Space)

RELATED

VENUES  
Magician Space

This spring the Magician Space is hosting the striking works of Chinese artist [Liang Wei](#). The solo exhibition is taking place at the gallery’s Beijing venue and features the artist’s unique style of traditional and abstract practices. “Before Itself” will be on view until May 6, 2018.

ARTISTS  
Liang Wei

[Liang Wei](#) is one of the most renowned Chinese artists, who infused classical tradition with modern abstract art to develop a unique form of painting. She creates her oeuvre from a large collection of various subject matters and recreating them according to her imagination. She uses various kinds of materials like acrylic paint, Chinese ink, and watercolor pencils in her creations and the products resemble unusual topographical visions inspired by classical Chinese landscapes. These processes of creating abstract geographies by deconstructing the original images make the paintings highly interesting. There are hints of recognizable forms that momentarily appear and multiply as our eyes scan the surface of the canvas and our brain tries to make sense of the abstraction. Thus, new and unintended forms appear and then disappear in the chaos.

Liang Wei collects her sources from history, classical art and architecture, contemporary urban environments, and cinema: subjects which interest her. Each finished painting seems to create a separate imaginary world using its own energy and reasons for its creation, so that we can grasp the hidden realities waiting to come out from obscurity into existence, as if multiple images are playing at the back of our minds. There is a dynamic between the self-replication and self-destruction simultaneously going on in these paintings that are captured in a state of equilibrium. In these new paintings, Liang Wei has created strange virtual realities based on but not quite our own.

Liang Wei was born in 1966 in China. She lives and works in Beijing. She graduated from L’Art Plastiques Universitedes Sciences Humaninesde Strasbourg, France in 1999. Her work has been widely exhibited in China and abroad. Her work has been shown in K11 Art Foundation, MoMA PS1, Shanghai (2017); K11 Art Foundation, MoMA PS1, Hong Kong (2017); Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing (2013); ShanghART H-Space, Shanghai (2012); Min Sheng Art Museum, Shanghai (2011); Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea (2007); The 12th Kolkata Film Festival (2006); and Battersea Power Station, London (2005).

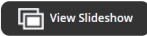
“Before Itself” will run from March 22 through May 6, 2018, at Magician Space gallery, Magician Space, 2 Jiuxianqiao Rd, Chaoyang Qu, Beijing Shi, China, 100015.

For details, visit: <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/galleryguide/magician-space/overview>

Click on the slideshow to have a sneak peek of the artist’s work.

<http://www.blouinartinfo.com>

Founder [Louise Blouin](#)



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Liang Wei

1999 Graduated from L'Art Plastiques Université Des Sciences Humaines De Strasbourg, France  
Lives and works in Beijing, China

### Solo Exhibitions

2019 *Folded Silence*, Bernier/Eliades Gallery, Brussels, Belgian  
Art Basel in Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China  
2018 *Before Itself*, Magician Space, Beijing, China  
2016 *Vague Necessity*, Magician Space, Beijing, China  
2014 *In-Between*, Space Station, Beijing, China

### Group Exhibitions

2019 Art Chendu, Chendu, China  
*Out of Ink*, Pera Museum, Istanbul, Turkey  
*Hic Sunt Leones*, Gallery Weekend Beijing 2019 UP & Coming Sector, 798 Art Center, Beijing, China  
*La Belle Noiseuse*, Mocube, Beijing, CN  
2018 *About the Worlds We Know*, OCAT Xi'an, Xi'an, China  
West Bund Art & Design, Shanghai, China  
Beijing Contemporary Expo, Beijing, China  
Art Basel in Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China  
2017 *.com/.cn*, K11 Art Foundation & MoMA PS1, Shanghai, China  
West Bund Art & Design Fair, Shanghai, China  
*.com/.cn*, K11 Art Foundation & MoMA PS1, Hong Kong, China  
Art Basel in Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China  
2014 *Other Flows*, Bernier/Eliades Gallery, Athens, Greece  
*Shanghai Deal*, Shanghai, China  
2013 *The Garden of Diversion*, Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing, China  
Studio, M50 Art Space, Shanghai, China

*Why Paint*, Pekin Fine Arts, Beijing, China

2012 *Place of Residence-with Artists from Brazil and China*, ShanghART H-Space, Shanghai, China  
*Time Difference*, Contemporary Multimedia Art Exhibition, Hanover, Germany  
*Cinema Alley Screening – Double Vision*, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, Australia  
2011 *The Couple Show*, Shanghai Gallery of Art, Shanghai, China  
*Moving Image In China 1988—2011*, MinSheng Art Museum, Shanghai, China  
*Poster Exhibition*, TOP Contemporary Art Centre, Shanghai, China  
2010 *Jungle*, Platform China, Beijing, China  
*Paralinear*, Pekin Fine Arts, Beijing, China  
ShContemporary 2010, Shanghai, China  
2009 *Bourgeoisified Proletariat*, Songjiang, Shanghai, China  
*Daily Rituals*, Shanghai Gallery of Art, Shanghai, China  
*Labyrinth III: Dangerous Liaisons*, Li Gallery, Beijing, China  
PHOTO TAIPEI 2009, Taipei  
2008 *China Power Station: Part III*, Mudam, Luxembourg  
*Lionel Esteve*, Moshekwa Langa, Liang Wei, Bernier/Eliades, Athens, Greece  
*Realms Of Myth*, Shanghai Gallery of Art, Shanghai, China  
*Disorientation II*, Fun Art Space, Beijing, China  
2007 Art Basel Miami Beach, Miami, America  
Shanghai Art Fair, Shanghai, China  
The 4th China Independent Film Festival, Nanjing, China  
*City Net Asia 2007*, Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul, Korea  
2006 *Three-dimensional endoscope*, Beijing, China  
The 12th Kolkata Film Festival, India  
Border Line video Art Festival, Beijing, China  
*Chao City*, Universal Studios-Beijing, China  
2005 *China Power Station*, Battersea Power Station, London, United Kingdom  
*Seven Colors*, Experimental Short Film Screening, Beijing, China



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