

## Li Gang: Playing by Your Own Rules

by Manuela Lietti

In a contemporary art world increasingly fascinated and ruled by the spasmodic search for new and undiscovered talent to feed its “visual hunger,” the word “young” has become far more than a mere adjective used to describe the cutting-edge and the new. The term has surpassed its qualitative nature to unfold specific operational semantics, hinting at the final artistic result as well as the mechanisms and logic tacitly regulating artistic creation, circulation, and appreciation, affecting both young creations and creators. An artist’s youth is often regarded as the ultimate value that generates appeal and brings recognition to his or her art; paradoxically, youth has turned into the key factor in being accepted by the establishment, rather than a cause for questioning whether the artist is worthy to be a part of it. As a result of this methodology, artists at the beginning of their careers may be tempted to let themselves and their art fall within the borders set by the word “young,” whatever and wherever those borders may be. These artists may respond to the momentary yet specific needs of visual and conceptual patterns that, despite their volatility as trends, contribute to the formation of certain preconceptions and misconceptions. This response is not shared by Li Gang, an artist who, despite his age, has decided to fly solo, bravely positioning himself on the fringes of current trends and pursuing his own methodology, while enjoying the luxury of moving according to his own inner rhythms and considered ideas.

Born in 1986 in Dali, Li Gang does not care to be associated with any of the current trends that define his peers. He is the author of pieces that act as catalysts for the reflection of essential dilemmas and personal contradictions; these works possess the rare ability to combine the universal and the specific, the intimate and the distant. Li is no less reluctant to fall into any fixed classification of genre. He trained as a painter according to traditional precepts in his native Yunnan, but painting is just one of the components of his practice. Along with sculpture and installation, all media coexist in a rather idiosyncratic and even performative way in Li’s work. Materials are combined in a dialectical way; from daily trash to traditional pencils, from natural wood to transparent scotch tape, from organically asymmetrical stones to surprisingly irregular measuring tapes, these elements blur the line between mimesis and estrangement, the two extremes of artistic creation. Li’s realm is what Jörg Heiser refers to as “the hegemony of the impure,”<sup>1</sup> in which past “-isms” give way to individualistic, pluralistic, and atomized methodologies that unfold an infinite range of possibilities before the eyes and hands of the viewer and the artist.

Li Gang’s artworks are also literally metamorphic. The variety of the materials employed allows the artist to carry out his many transformations, journeys between being and non-being, defined and undefined, known and unknown, perceptual and conceptual. When he moved to Beijing in 2008, his artistic practice underwent an essential change. From the realist tones of his early pieces, Li Gang turned to expressionistic works that soon embraced a rather unexpected deconstructionist twist, a tendency that has become a leitmotif of his artistic ethos and testifies to Li’s openness to transformation in materials employed and processes involved. From the seminal piece *Fleeting Time* (2008–2009, canvases, washed off oil paint, plastic bags, photos, series of 19 pcs., available in units of minimum 4 pcs.; canvases, 100 × 80 cm each; plastic bags, 19 × 12 cm each) a stunning turning point endowed with poetic yet harsh tones, to the most recent *Beads* (2012, wooden spheres, 397 pcs., ø 0.5–ø 51 cm) a large scale installation of nearly four hundred wooden spheres shaped from the forking branches of a dead Yunnanese tree, deconstruction is not the ultimate end, but one of the steps in the ongoing metamorphosis of thought and matter that is the foundation of many of Li’s pieces. Under normal circumstances, the branches of a tree give life to more new branches; in the case of this tree, only the radical intervention of the artist allowed the tree to undergo a qualitative transformation, closing a natural cycle but opening up new semantic routes. Li’s transfigurations do not simply create new patterns for understanding; they create new patterns for being. In this process, only when the artist is willing to return to a blank slate, giving up all visual and conceptual certainties and accomplishments, can he see more deeply into the life of things,

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<sup>1</sup> Jörg Heiser, “Torture and Remedy: The End of -isms and the Beginning Hegemony of the Impure,” *What is Contemporary Art?* Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010, 80–103.

phenomena, and himself, and hold fast to a core that escapes definition. This becomes a prerequisite for affirmation, just as in *Mirror* (Nos. 1 and 2, 2011–2012, manhole cover, ø 72 cm–ø 73 cm), a piece where an act of negation is based on the artist's polishing a manhole cover until the iron patina completely disappears.

The inability to react to the above loss of unity may lead to a sense of barrenness. In Li Gang's work, the fragmentation of these pieces literally exposes a thin borderline, the in-between area of a potential link between presence and absence, being and non-being, visible and invisible. These components coexist in a way that is evocative rather than descriptive, implied rather than overt, declaring elements that become the work's core. For example, *Beijing Afternoon* (2011, pencil on canvas, series of 5 works, 100 × 100 cm–150 × 130 cm) is spectacular for its deep roots in a daily dimension that can be trivial and unfathomable at the same time. The artist uses a simple pencil and tries to give a shape to time, the most volatile and intangible of all things. In *Pedestal* (Nos. 1–9, 2012, wooden plinth, banknote pigment, plinths sizes 80 × 60 × 45 cm–140 × 70 × 45 cm) fragmentary traces of Chinese banknotes, one of the mediums employed to create the work, are not represented at all; although illusory, they become signifier and signified, the work itself. The most recent paintings by Li Gang push the link between metonymy and the whole to a new level. Details of masterpieces from the history of Western art, such as a moustache and a cheek, are suspended in highly material compositions of hearty colors and canvases that, for their carefully considered structure, are far more than a mere support. The canvases are a strong conceptual component of the work and pieces of art in themselves; specifically conceived by the artist, these canvases are hand-made from hemp, patiently assembled from threads 2–3 cm thick. In this body of work, the hand-made process of materialization typical of painting and the notion of de-materialization associated with conceptual art share the same ground, complement each other, and fuse the material and representational with the abstract. Li Gang maximizes the subjects and the medium, such that the viewer is unable to recognize anything in the composition. Once the viewer suddenly realizes he is looking at fragments, and perhaps even recognizes their origins, he discovers he has been tricked by Li Gang once again. The viewer is looking at an investigation into the essence of painting; the process of fragmentation is used to reflect on unity itself. The viewer may feel like the proverbial frog in the well, but Li Gang offers him a way to see the sky.