

Exhibition in Lucerne:

**Li Dafang**

**"MAKE WAY! MAKE WAY! Painting is an Aversion to All that Glitters"**

October 30, 2009 – January 9, 2010

Opening: Friday, October 30, 2009 6.00 PM – 8.00 PM

**"MAKE WAY! MAKE WAY!"**

Li Dafang's (born in Shenyang in 1971) paintings have departed from the new generation of figurative painters such as Liu Xiaodong and filmmakers such as Jia Zhangke, who have emerged in the spotlight since the mid-1990s. At that time, there was a collective return of the artistic community to everyday life which was extremely dramatic and dynamic in itself. What the artists had to do was to extract samples from this social reality and then represent them without having to demonstrate any critical or analytical position. But the temptation and need to truthfully document and expose a fast-moving and powerful reality is less urgent today, as exemplified by artists such as Li Dafang. For Li, what connects his art to his own being is less the subject matter his paintings depict or its relationship to society than the possibility of experiencing and reflecting through the act of painting on what painting means to him on an individual level.

Li Dafang strongly advocates the withdrawal of any expectation that art should have a function. The attempt to resist such expectations is exemplified in 'painting is an Aversion to All that Glitters', the subtitle of his solo exhibition MAKE WAY! MAKE WAY! at Galerie Urs Meile in Lucerne.

Li Dafang presents in this exhibition a series of seven works completed in 2009 that were created through an expression of attitude rather than a theme. There is no radical stylistic rupture or conceptual transition from his paintings of the last few years, but more of a continuation. His detailed brushwork is unmistakably Li Dafang, the foggy quality is enduringly present, the trees cannot be mistaken, and the senseless scenarios are still perplexing.

From very early on, the artist revealed his grand ambition to carve out a space for drama and storytelling, the flat surface of his canvases are the equivalent of a theatrical stage. He recalls his childhood exposure to, and fixation on, theatre and literature. He paints human figures, depicts scenarios, creates tensions, invents dialogues and monologues for his characters, gives out clues, designs plots of suspense, and emulates the effect of the long exposures found in movie making. He is the scriptwriter of all the absurdities in his paintings; he has tight control over the narrative structure and won't let it run on its own free will. Yet, the artist will hasten to add that the narratives in his paintings are not to be trusted. They simply make no sense, and it's no use trying to piece a story together from what he chooses to paint in such meticulous detail. No one other than the artist can figure out the puzzles or bring any logic to his images.

However, the discrepancies between the depicted and the actual in Li Dafang's paintings, although it's often an impossible task to gauge the degree of absurdity between the two, are almost imperceptible and securely concealed in the contained space of his canvases. It's no surprise that Li Dafang is a fervent admirer of Alfred Hitchcock, whose strength lay in his ability to formulate suspense through the extension of time and the closing in of space in his story-telling. The simultaneous depiction of everyday situations and hints of potential danger, as well as the obliviousness of his protagonists to their immediate jeopardy, played masterfully on the fear that exists deep within our subconscious minds.

But Li Dafang's paintings are far away from playing exclusively on instinct. The artist is confidently in charge of bringing together various possible elements of theatricality despite their obvious incompatibility with each other. His recent addition of wooden stairways and ladder-shaped podiums to support the canvases, or enlarged and elaborate wooden frames, defies easy classification or interpretation. It's another Hitchcock-

esque strategy. Images of staircases often play a central role or are featured prominently in Hitchcock's films; his stylistic interest in staircases can be attributed to the influence of German Expressionism which often featured heavily stylized and menacing staircases. Yet the staircases in Li Dafang's painting installations are more stylistic than symbolic. They are bulky, artificial, and conspicuous, lending a solemn and monumental quality to Li's canvases, yet they bear no responsibility in conveying meaning. As the artist points out, they are, instead, an embodiment of his attempt to understand and exercise perception about what is painting and what is art.

Text: Carol Yinghua Lu (2009)