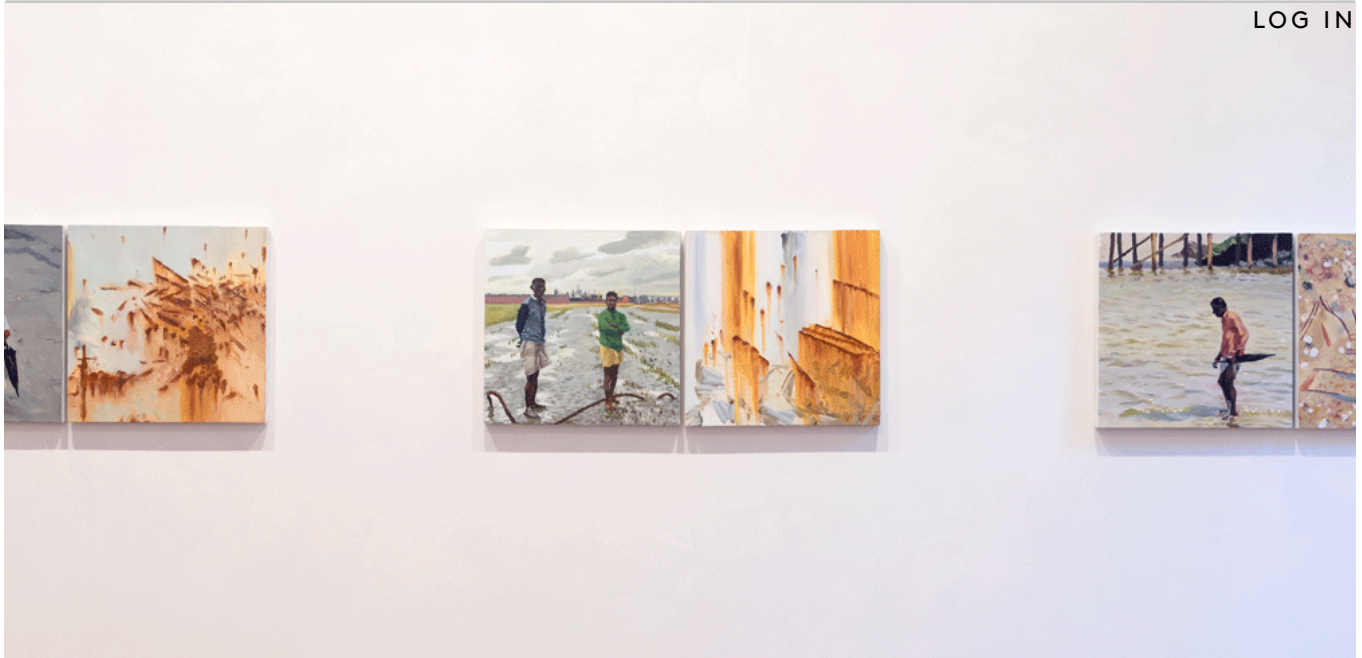


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REVIEW - 18 MAY 2017

Liu Xiaodong

Massimo De Carlo, Milan, Italy

BY FRANCESCA TAROCCO

Engaged with photography, film and painting for the past three decades, Liu Xiaodong has described his style as an

'open' one that explores the spaces between realism and abstraction. This vision is evident in the exhibition 'Chittagong', a series of paintings based on in situ research of the everyday realities of the men working in the shipbreaking yards of Bangladesh. Seven small diptychs – one half figurative and the other abstract (*Steel*, numbered 1-6, 2016) – and four larger paintings (*Steel*, numbered 7-10, 2016-17) are hung in the sumptuous rooms of the neoclassical Palazzo Belgioioso. In the diptych *Steel* 7 (2016), the canvas on the right is neatly divided into four sharply contrasting areas of evenly daubed blue green and burnt sienna. The painting on the left is one of the few works here that does not represent a full human figure: perhaps in a gesture of playful defiance, a child's stretched out forearms are seen from above, vividly covered in henna designs. In its juxtaposition of contingency and order, the work magnifies the tension between the natural and the synthetic that is central to Liu's practice.



Liu Xiaodong,
'Chittagong',
2017,
installation
view, Massimo
De Carlo,
Milan-
Belgioioso. Courtesy:
Massimo De
Carlo,
Milan/London/Hong
Kong;
photograph:
Roberto
Marossi

Masculinity and the lean physicality of the workers is another of the themes of Liu's enigmatic *mise-en-scène*. In *Steel 10* (2017), he focuses on relationships between objects, architectural forms and human beings. While the subjectivities of the individuals depicted remain elusive, complex layers of signification permeate the still life and its rich material surface. The flat patches of burnt sienna, umber and ochre are interspersed with high-keyed thicker blue pigments. The strokes of turquoise on the half-derelict yellowish building that occupies the top half of the canvas echo those of the shirt of the young man at the centre of the canvas, the only one whose gaze is directed towards the viewer. This painterly mimicry of photographs achieves something that photography and video, for all their pretention to the real, cannot: evince connections with images beyond themselves.



Liu Xiaodong, 'Chittagong', 2017, installation view, Massimo De Carlo, Milan-Belgioioso. Courtesy: Massimo De Carlo, Milan/London/Hong Kong; photograph: Roberto Marossi

Trained in oil painting at the prestigious Central Academy

of Fine Arts in Beijing, where he still teaches, Liu belongs to a group of successful male Chinese oil painters that includes Zeng Fangzhi, Yue Minjun, Zhang Xiaogang. These artists came of age after the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. While critical of socialist realism and the academic conventions of drawing, they remain – more or less consciously – bound to that tradition.

In a style that entwines photorealism, cinematic framing and storytelling, Liu initially made snap-shot-like paintings of his colleagues, family and friends who belong to the generation of cultural workers that emerged relatively unscathed from the first decades of Communist rule in China. 'I wanted to merge with the other constituent parts of this country, like a plant', Liu told Jérôme Sans – the director of Beijing's Ullens Center for Contemporary Art – in the late 2000s. The artist is also well known for his ties to China's so-called Sixth Generation of filmmakers: he was the protagonist of both Jia Zhangke's *Dong* (2006) – a reference to Liu's name and to its literal meaning, 'East' – where he is shown painting a portrait of migrant demolition workers in the Three Gorges, and of Wang Xiaoshuai's film, *The Days* (1993).





Liu Xiaodong, 'Chittagong', 2017, installation view, Massimo De Carlo, Milan-Belgioioso. Courtesy: Massimo De Carlo, Milan/London/Hong Kong; photograph: Roberto Marossi

During the last decade or so, as China strives to erase the traces of its recent industrial past and assert a new role as a global cultural broker, the sites of Liu's paintings have become increasingly translocal and transnational. In 'Chittagong', the workers subsist in a dismal present of toil and penury that China – for all of its postmodern fast-forwardness – insists it wants to leave behind. Ultimately, Liu's paintings, endeavour to complicate the global media spectacle of televised compassion.

Main Image: Liu Xiaodong, 'Chittagong', 2017, installation view, Massimo De Carlo, Milan-Belgioioso. Courtesy Massimo De Carlo, Milan/London/Hong Kong; photograph: Roberto Marossi

FRANCESCA TAROCCO

Francesca Tarocco is a writer and academic who lives in Shanghai where she teaches visual culture and history at New York University.



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FRANCESCA TAROCCO

London

1 Montclare
Street
London
E2 7EU, UK
+44 (0)203
372 6111

New York

247 Centre St
5th Floor
New York, NY
10013
+1 212 463
7488

Berlin

Zehdenicker
Str. 28
D-10119 Berlin
Germany
+49 30 2362
6506