

OCULA

Cosmopolitan Orthodoxy: Li Yong Xiang on His Larger-than-Life Tableaux

In Conversation with
[Zian Chen](#)
Shanghai, 17 April 2025

[阅读中文版本](#)

Li Yong Xiang, 2025. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Liu Shuwei.



At Shanghai's Antenna Space, Li Yong Xiang unveils a chapel-like installation that unravels the painterly realism he both reveres and resists.

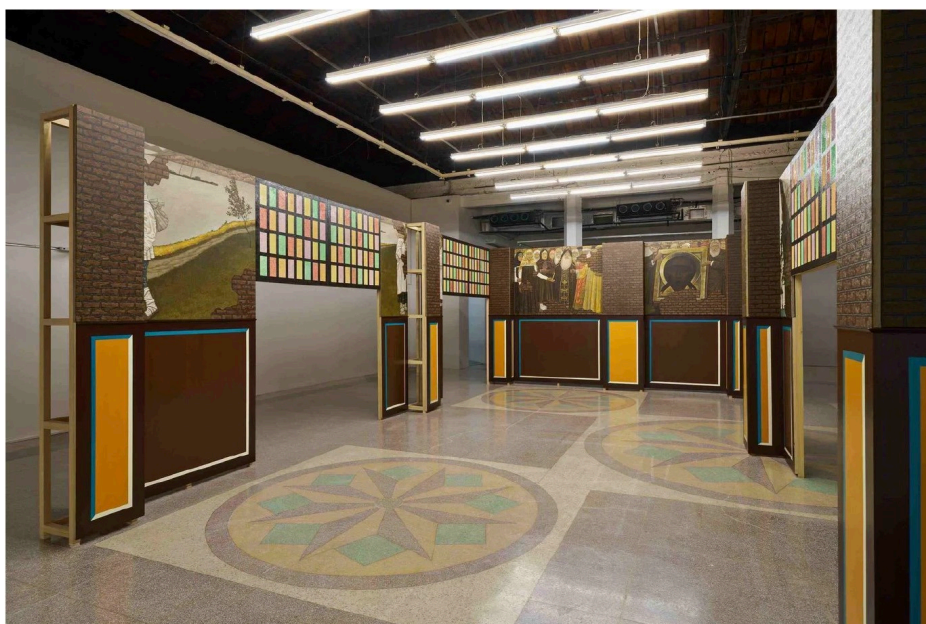
When I met Changsha-born, Berlin-based artist Li Yong Xiang at Antenna Space as he was installing his exhibition *In Rust*, he was intently focused on adjusting the lighting illuminating the painted bricks that clad the surface of his work's church-like structure. Measuring 25 by three metres, the installation is composed of 31 panels, rendered in meticulous detail, which together form an epic serial painting. The piece deconstructs a painting that, in contemporary times, has become a symbol of Russian nationalism: *In Rus: The Soul of the People* (1914–1916) by Russian artist Mikhail Nesterov (1862–1942), whose oeuvre existed at the fringes of avantgarde movements, including Peredvizhniki and Mir Iskusstva.



Exhibition view: Li Yong Xiang, *In Rust*, Antenna Space, Shanghai (15 March–29 June 2025). Courtesy the artist and Antenna Space. Photo: Cra.

As I examined the details of one panel, in which a figurative landscape is progressively concealed by bricks extending from a painted *trompe-l'oeil* wall, I was reminded of works such as *Brick on Brick* (1988) by Chinese American painter Martin Wong (1946–1999). While Li acknowledged Wong's influence in other aspects of his work, he quickly refuted this as direct appropriation, explaining that his brick paintings engage with the aesthetics of Soviet-style collective apartments, while also reflecting his ongoing exploration of the intersections between painting, its structural support, and *trompe-l'oeil*. This exchange reminded me that Li is exactly the kind of artist who is drawn to subtle references and coded allusions.

Following the exhibition's opening, Li sat down with *Ocula* to discuss his time in Georgia, where he visited one of Nesterov's murals, as well as the intersection of his painting practice with sound and other performative mediums. The conversation reflects on themes of identity, alienation, and the artist's evolving sense of home.



Exhibition view: Li Yong Xiang, *In Rust*, Antenna Space, Shanghai (15 March–29 June 2025). Courtesy the artist and Antenna Space. Photo: Cra.

ZC:

Can you tell me about your show at [Antenna Space](#)?

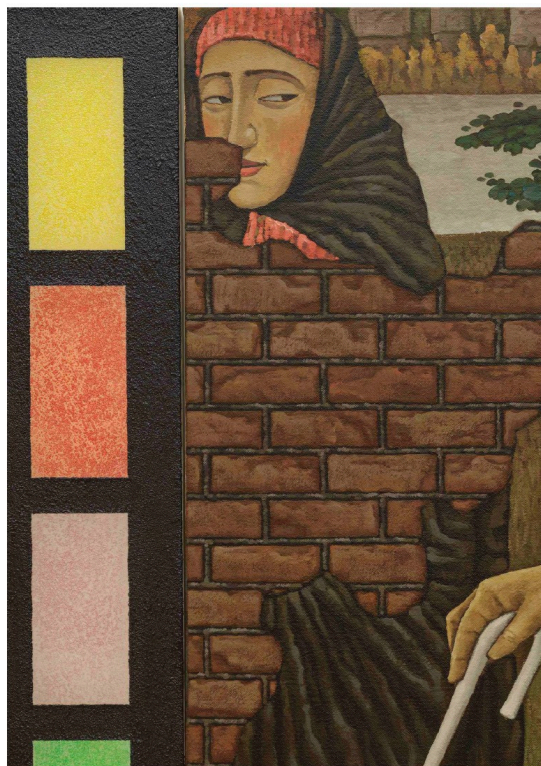
LYX:

The impetus for this project traces back to 2022, towards the end of a brief residency in Tbilisi when I learnt about a series of murals by the Russian artist Mikhail Nesterov at Akhali Zarzma Monastery in the small Georgian town of Abastumani, and I returned with friends a couple of months later to visit this site.

What struck me about these murals was their cosmopolitan rendering of Russian Orthodox iconography, with deliberate, richly decorative patterns and a sense of graphic clarity—a style reminiscent of painters such as Alphonse Mucha and Léon Bakst. I've long been fascinated by the modern styles of late 19th-century Europe, with their messy cross-cultural influences. What captivated me was seeing this style applied to a traditional, religious theme in a small-town monastery—only for the work to then fade into obscurity.

“I wanted to pull artworks into a utilitarian realm while simultaneously entangling the act of painting within a not-quite-liberated sphere.”

For this exhibition, I have produced a large installation of paintings inspired by both my visit to the monastery murals and a later work by Nesterov—a politically charged and some might say problematic history painting from 1916. Created on the eve of the 1917 Revolution, *In Rus: The Soul of the People* marked the end of a particular thematic exploration in Nesterov's oeuvre, and remains one of the most unambiguous examples of it. Depicting the Volga River as a spiritual unifier of an imagined Russian community, the painting resurfaced in the public eye after the 1980s and, unfortunately, has since become a prominent symbol of Russian alt-right nationalism.



Li Yong Xiang, *In rust (small betrayals)* (2025) (detail). Oil on linen, acrylic, glass bead, and varnish on polyester. 150 x 500 cm. Courtesy the artist and Antenna Space.

ZC:

What was it about your trip to the monastery that got you thinking differently about both Nesterov's work and your own?

LYX:

I came to Nesterov's oeuvre somewhat obliquely, and my experience of his painting has been shaped by both temporal and thematic distance. Apart from what I saw at the monastery in Georgia, I've encountered none of his original works, and my grasp of Orthodox iconography is minimal. Nor have I ever been particularly interested in religious themes. Still, something in his formal language resonates with me—a fascination perhaps precisely indebted to that distance. For example, I find his more religious paintings often bear a dramatic solemnity; however, its intensity almost edges into camp, which I find captivating.

It was only after my trip to the monastery that I began researching his work in greater depth and became somewhat obsessed with his heroic yet, in my view, awkward and deeply contradictory magnum opus. Seeing the monastery frescoes also convinced me to think about my own spatial approach. I consider large-scale painting to be almost a genre in itself—one that demands a certain tour de force which blends together physical perseverance, ideological/performative conviction, and ego too embarrassing to be admitted, though these qualities are often treated as if they were invisible.



Exhibition view: Li Yong Xiang, *In Rust*, Antenna Space, Shanghai (15 March–29 June 2025). Courtesy the artist and Antenna Space. Photo: Cra.

So, I approached the work literally like I was building a house, with the top half of the installation painted to imitate a worn and damaged mural, while the bottom half incorporates an abstract interpretation of wall panelling. For the painted figures, I grouped, rearranged, and transformed most of them from *In Rus*, emphasising the graphic quality I found in Nesterov's strokes and aligning them like a procession in a frieze.

In addition to the oil-painted canvases, I also created a series of stained-glass window imitations using semi-transparent fabric, glass bead and transparent paint, which are backlit to emphasise their translucency. Lastly, audible throughout the entire space is a six-channel sound work, *Untitled (Ebb Tide)* (2025), in which I recorded my vocals in the style of a barbershop harmony.



Li Yong Xiang, *Rise* (2023). Exhibition view: *Mannered in a sleeve*, Deborah Schamoni, Munich (8 September–18 November 2023). Courtesy the artist and Deborah Schamoni. Photo: Uli Gebert.

ZC:

Many of your installations are accompanied by sound works, primarily songs you've composed or performed. What is the role of performance in your practice?

LYX:

I wouldn't call myself a performer—I tend to approach performance more as an intermediary. From early on, I used recordings of myself humming or singing, not as expressions of an authentic self, but as material to shape and play with. I never sought to hide my voice, either. In my DIY recording and editing process, I align with a close-yet-removed quality, where my voice retains a raw simplicity but feels distant from my everyday sound.

Sometimes I see painting as performatively mediated, too. Some projects take a long time to prepare and produce, and, during that process, I can find myself inhabiting a certain performative mindset rather than operating as an all-knowing, autonomous artist. For example, while carefully layering transparent hues, I might imagine myself as a well-trained service worker performing a familiar task in a hotel, perhaps with a florid touch to impress. Doing this often helps me adjust my state of mind.



Li Yong Xiang, *In rust (doze)* (2025) (detail). Oil on linen, acrylic, glass bead, and varnish on polyester. 150 x 485 cm. Courtesy the artist and Antenna Space.

ZC:

As part of a generation of Chinese artists working abroad, what does a homecoming show mean to you?

LYX:

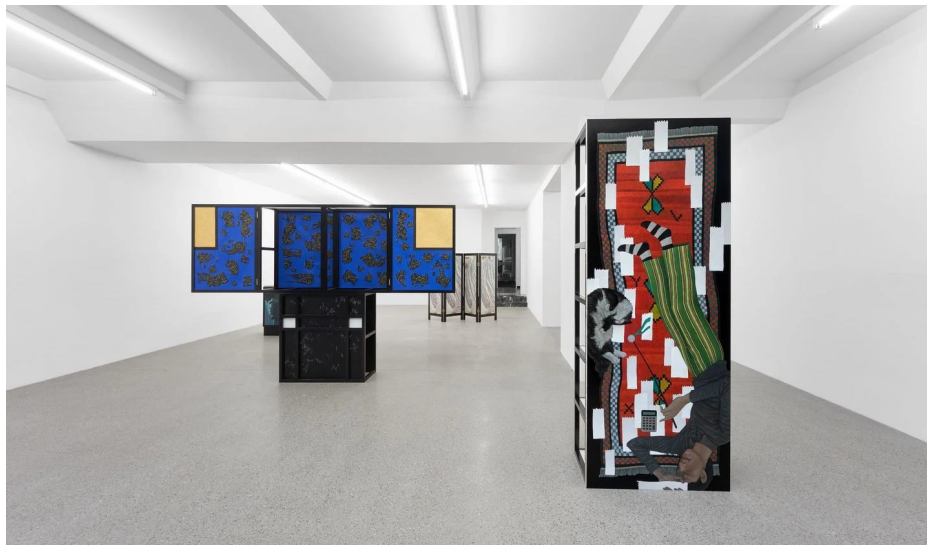
I don't see home strictly as the place where you're born. At the moment, I find a sense of belonging in the fact that I have left 'home', and I've formed deep friendships with many people who share similar experiences. Despite the alienation I often feel in Germany, I currently regard Berlin and its community of foreigners as a kind of home. So, from this perspective, holding an exhibition in China doesn't feel particularly special. Perhaps certain personal, and also collective, histories—such as my early art education in China, which carries a socialist imprint—have become the driving force behind this exhibition.

ZC:

Maybe it's more a question of an unhomed-home, then?

LYX:

An unhomed-home, or a home-unhomed. To some extent, this template does encapsulate my life. From another perspective, there's a deep sense of depression and unhomeliness within the Berlin art crowd right now, watching Germany's horrific 20th-century history being weaponised—by the far-right and, increasingly, by the political mainstream—to attack migrants and citizens, to justify Islamophobia, and to impose censorship on critical voices. My friends and colleagues come from diverse geographic and economic backgrounds, living here as migrants, refugees, expats, or brats—depending on who's labelling us. This group of people is a constant source of inspiration and joy for me in an otherwise homogeneous society.



Exhibition view: Li Yong Xiang, *Mannered in a sleeve*, Deborah Schamoni, Munich (8 September–18 November 2023). Courtesy the artist and Deborah Schamoni. Photo: Uli Gebert.

ZC:

Your show at Antenna Space marks your first venture into history painting. It goes a step further than your previous installations—*Maritime Sunset & a Fashion Idea* (2023), for instance—in which you connected paintings with functional structures, such as folding screens or cabinets. What prompted this shift?

LYX:

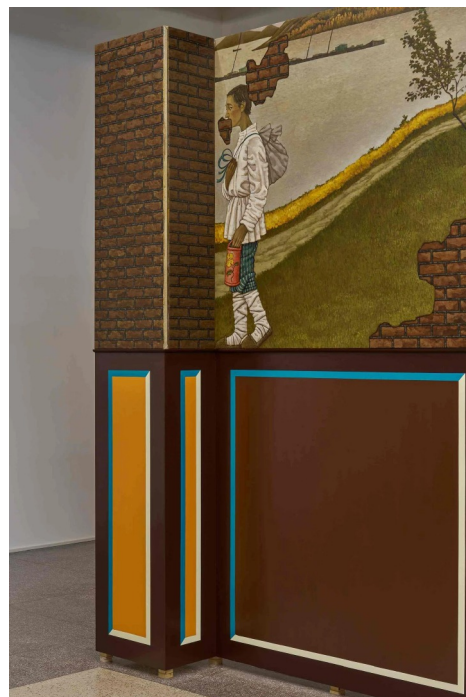
I was thinking about the functionality of a large-scale painting: creating heroic, monumental works is always a deliberate choice. It requires careful planning, and the physical act of making poses a challenge for most artists. That alone raises the question: why take on such a task? The motivations could be ideological, spiritual, bureaucratic, diplomatic, or economic.



Li Yong Xiang, *In rust (a painting within a painting)* (2025). Courtesy the artist and Antenna Space.

Yet, when we talk about the myth of the totally autonomous artist—someone who supposedly maintains radical independence while working in an inherently public, exhibition-oriented field—these external influences are often treated as secondary or irrelevant. I take issue with that dichotomy because I don't believe such a pure split truly exists in any artist's life.

With my earlier works that take the form of furniture, I was also playing with the tension between painting as a supposedly independent, liberated act and painting as something in service of a functional, three-dimensional object. I wanted to pull artworks into a utilitarian realm while simultaneously entangling the act of painting within a not-quite-liberated sphere. In that sense, rather than seeing this project as a stark departure, I see it more as a continuation—despite its specificity, it extends my ongoing interest in these blurred boundaries.



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ZC:

You've mentioned feeling uneasy about the heroism of history painting, yet you've chosen to tackle it in this solo exhibition. How has that push and pull shaped your approach?

LYX:

Growing up in China, surrounded by paintings that embodied nation-building ambitions through the visual language of 'realism', I was taught to see them as noble and important. I internalised much of that passion, yet it often left me feeling unsettled. Over time, I made significant efforts to break away—efforts backed by my later, more cosmopolitan surroundings. But with every attempt at clean and thorough severance, I found myself confronting a kind of self-erasure that felt crippling, even suffocating.

I've learned a lot from oscillation and from steering through confusion. In some ways, it allows me to reflect critically on patriotic fervor—quietly passed down through generations via state narratives shaped by historical trauma—while also questioning the vanguardist's ego of painting broad strokes on behalf of someone else. This constant push and pull—the inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to detach while still craving independence—mirrors what I see in the act of painting itself: a convergence of ideas, inertia, breakthroughs, muscle memory, ecstasy, shoulder pain, swagger, humiliation, political participation, isolation, anticipation, disappointment, spirit, economy, and so much more. —[O]

OCULA

李泳翔：与现实主义较劲

In Conversation with

陈玺安

上海

2025年04月05日



李泳翔。摄影：刘树伟。

当我在天线空间遇见现定居柏林的艺术家李泳翔时，他的人正埋在画廊中央搭建起的一个类似教堂的木作结构中，专心调整着覆盖在教堂表面的砖块画作的亮度。展厅中央的这块25×3米的空间，覆盖了31块精致的画布，它们组合成一幅史诗般的系列作品“锈色”（2025）以及装载画作的空间装饰本身。这组大型作品解构了俄罗斯艺术家米哈伊尔·涅斯捷罗夫（1862-1942）创作的历史画《在俄罗斯：人民的灵魂》（1916）。涅斯捷罗夫曾周旋于巡回画派和艺术世界（Mir iskusstva）等多个先锋艺术流派之间，但他也从未完全被这些流派所吸纳。只不过，如今这幅作品仍旧成为了俄罗斯民族自豪感的象征之一。



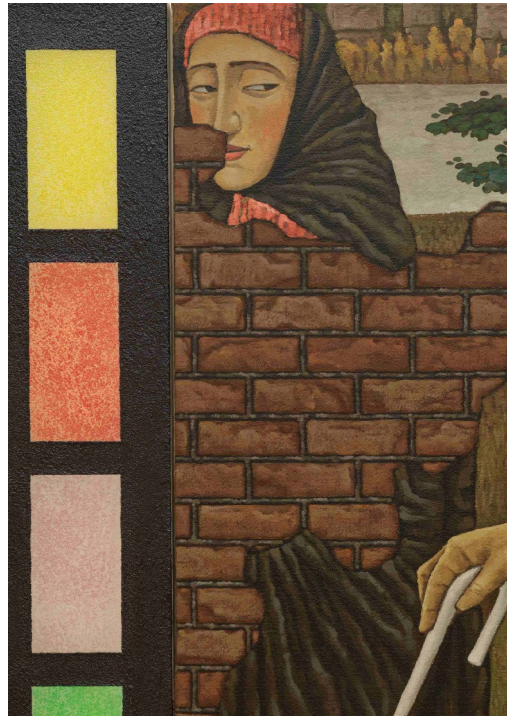
展览现场：“李泳翔：锈色”，天线空间，上海（2025年3月15日至5月5日）。图片提供：艺术家与天线空间。摄影：Cra。

就在我端详展厅其中一幅画作的细节时，李泳翔解释说，他强调了原画的布料褶皱。确实，李泳翔非常强调诠释的自由，常常融入多层隐喻——例如，他的砖块画让人不禁联想到华裔美国同志画家黄马鼎（1946-1999）的作品。然而，李泳翔否认这是直接的挪用，表示黄马鼎对他的影响另在别处。他说，绘制这些砖块画作，一方面回应了集体性建筑的主题，另一方面展现了他对绘画、建筑与欺眼画交汇点的持续关注。展览开幕后，艺术家与《Ocula》进行了对话，讨论了他前往格鲁吉亚探访涅斯捷罗夫壁画的旅行，以及他如何将绘画与声音和其他表演性媒介相结合。此次对话围绕在他对身份、疏离感以及艺术家不断变化的归属感等主题而展开。

○：谈谈你在天线空间的个展“锈色”吧？

李：这个项目的灵感追溯到2022年，在格鲁吉亚的短住结束后，我意外地查到俄罗斯艺术家米哈伊尔·涅斯捷罗夫在格鲁吉亚西南部小山城的一间修道院有壁画创作，便在几个月之后和一些朋友开车到这里参观。这些壁画给我留下深刻印象的是，它们通过一种算是当时的世界主义的风格呈现俄罗斯东正教绘画传统。壁画明显的现代平面感，以及丰富的装饰性图案，风格让人想起穆夏，莱昂·巴克斯特等。我一直对十九世纪晚期欧洲的这种“现代风格”以及其复杂的跨文化的构成很有兴趣，看到这种风格在一个小镇修道院里一个看似很“陈旧”、很“保守”的主题上呈现，接下来多年后又被遗忘在阴影里，我很是被吸引。

在这次展览中，我创作了一件大型绘画装置，观摩修道院壁画的旅程为我提供了些灵感，但更多的是对涅斯捷罗夫后期作品的重新解读——一幅被广泛讨论，甚至是被认为有沉重政治负担的史诗绘画《在俄罗斯：人民的灵魂》（1916）。这幅画创作于1917年革命前夕，是涅斯捷罗夫同类型画作的最后一幅作品，也是最露骨的一件大作。画家以其独特的绘画语言，描绘了一个经典民族主义主题：伏尔加河作为“俄罗斯精神”的象征，集结她所养育的人民。作品在苏联时期被雪藏，一直到1980年代才重新进入公众视野，而现在不幸地沦为俄罗斯极右翼民族主义的象征图像之一。



李泳翔，《锈色（小背叛）》局部，2025。150×500cm。亚麻布面油画，聚酯纤维上丙烯、玻璃珠、清漆。

O：你的修道院之旅如何让你重新思考涅斯捷罗夫以及你自己的创作？

李：我想，我是在一种有时空和主题的隔阂下去靠近他的作品——除了格鲁吉亚的修道院我没有看过他其他任何原作，以及我对东正教题材知识很有限，并且就我个人而言，兴趣也并不大。但是我对他的绘画形式非常有共鸣，这种共鸣也许某种程度上正是归功于隔阂。涅斯捷罗夫的一些宗教题材作品经常有一种静谧而沉重的气氛，有时候这种气氛是过于浓烈的，在我看来有点近乎坎普的戏剧化。他的形象塑造给我的感觉是在概括中具体，而这种具体性给画面崇高感的营造中又添加了很多世俗气。这些特征都让我很有兴趣。直到我参观了修道院后，我才开始更深入地研究他的作品，并开始对他那幅看似悲怆英勇的，但在我看来却充满矛盾的巨幅作品产生了兴趣。

我有时感觉大型绘画几乎可以说是一个具体的艺术门类，它有点像是画家徒手盖一个房子。在这个过程中画家要公开地展示自己那有点不堪的野心和自负，创作的过程也是一种对耐心、毅力甚至体能的考验。这不是一个透明的、没有负担的媒介。

这次展览我构建了一件大型绘画装置，真正意义上地把绘画盖成了房子。房子的上半部分是我模仿陈旧脱落的壁画进行的创作，下半部分则是抽象的木质墙裙。对于绘画人物，我将《在俄罗斯：人民的灵魂》中的大部分人物进行了重新编排和转化。除了布本油画部分，我还用化纤材料、玻璃珠等制作了一系列半透明的仿彩色玻璃花窗，并通过背光照明来强调它们的通透。最后，空间的外围围绕着一件六声道声音作品《无题（退潮）》（2025）。这是我参考理发店合唱（barbershop music）的风格，自己录制的无伴奏人声合唱。

O：你的许多绘画装置都伴随声音作品，主要是你自己创作或演唱的歌曲；我想问表演在你的创作中扮演了什么样的角色？

李：我不会把自己称为表演者，或者说我更倾向一种中介的方式参与表演。我之前的作品中经常使用自己哼唱的声音，但是观众却经常惊讶那是我的声音。我从没有刻意用特效去掩盖自己，但可能我从不把自己的声音视为某种真实自我的体现，而是视为可以拿来塑造、玩弄的材料。在往往很DIY风格的反复录制和修改过程中，我的声音可能保持了某种原始的简单性，却离我的日常有很多距离。这种“近且有距离”也许是我对表演的一种理解。

我认为有时绘画的过程也是某种间接的表演。我常常发现自己在比较长的创作过程中无意地扮演某种角色，而不是作为一个所谓全知的、独立的艺术家来创作。例如，在细心地罩染透明色彩时，我可能会想象自己是某家酒店训练有素的服务员，用熟练的手法为顾客展现自己训练有素的某种服务性的艺术。这经常可以帮助我调整心理状态。



李泳翔, *Rise*, 2023。展览现场：“李泳翔：Mannered in a sleeve”, Deborah Schamoni, 慕尼黑（2023年9月8日至11月18日）。图片提供：艺术家与 Deborah Schamoni。摄影：Uli Gebert。

****O： ****作为新一代旅居海外的中国艺术家，回到中国做展览对你来说意味着什么？

李：我不把“家”仅仅看作是你出生的地方。现在，我感觉我是在一帮“离开了家”的人群中找到了某种归属感。我和许多有相似经历的人建立了深厚的友谊。尽管我在德国常常感到疏离，我目前还是将柏林和在此栖居的“外国人”群体视作某种意义上的家。所以从这个角度上说在中国做展览也并没有那么特殊。也许一些个人（同时也是群体的）历史，比如我在中国间接接受的俄国艺术教育以及其影响，成为这个展览发生的动机。



李泳翔, 《锈色(画中有画)》, 2025。局部。亚麻布面油画, 聚酯纤维上丙烯、玻璃珠、清漆, 150×435cm。

**O: **也许这更像是“家非家”的感受？

李：“家非家”听起来像是个经典的酷儿体验范本。我也承认有时候范本确实是能在一定程度上概括自己的生活体验。不过从另一个更当下的角度来说，现在，德国主流政治力量联通极右势力，频频利用其 20 世纪的罪恶历史来为他们仇伊斯兰种族歧视和排外论调找借口。目前，柏林艺术圈弥漫着一种深沉的抑郁。我的朋友和同侪来自各个不同的地方，经济背景也大相径庭，他们在这里作为移民、难民、外籍人士，或者被人蔑称为“混杂人群”。尽管我因为工作常常宅在工作室，看似是可以不问世事而自给自足，但事实却恰恰相反。正是这个面临着诸多困境的群体，持续地在这个有着臭名远扬的阴郁冬季且称得上是美食荒漠的城市，给予我许多灵感、归属感和温情。

**O: **你在天线空间的展览标志着你首次涉足历史画的创作，进一步发展了你过去以折叠屏风或橱柜等形态发展的绘画装置作品；是什么促使你进行这种转变？

李：我在思考大型绘画作为一种艺术形式的功能性——树立英雄式的立足点和创作宏伟的作品始终是一个有指向的选择。它需要精心规划，而制作过程对大多数艺术家来说都是一种挑战。单单这一点就提出了一个问题：为什么要承担这样的任务？它的原因可能是意识形态的、精神的、官僚的、外交的，或是经济上的，甚至是被强迫的都有可能。然而，当我们谈论绝对自由、独立的艺术家的神话——那种以公共展览为主业，却仍能够保持不被污染的隐私的艺术家神话——这些外部影响往往被视为次要或不相关。

我对这种二元对立有异议，因为我不相信在任何艺术家的生活或作品中，存在这种纯粹的分裂。通过我的物件绘画，我也在玩味绘画作为一种独立、解放的行为与作为服务于一个功能性、三维物体的东西之间的张力。我想把艺术作品引入实用的领域，同时将绘画的行为与这种功能纠缠在一起。所以从这个意义上来说，我并不认为这个项目是一次彻底的突破，相反，我把它看作是一次延续——尽管它有其特定性，但它延续了我对这些模糊边界的持续兴趣。



展览现场：“李泳翔：锈色”，天线空间，上海（2025年3月15日至5月5日）。图片提供：艺术家与天线空间。摄影：Cra。

****O: ****你曾提到对绘画中的英雄主义感到不安，但你选择在这次个展中挑战它。这种拉扯如何塑造了你的创作方式？

李：在我成长过程，周围很多的绘画作品充满了通过“现实主义”搭建起的国族建设的雄心，我被教导这崇高且重要。我内化了其中的大部分激情，虽然它常常让我感到不安。随着时间的推移，我付出了很大努力去挣脱，特别是从后来更加国际化的生活环境中看来，那些被视为太狭隘太守旧的东西。但每次试图彻底和它们划清界限，我就感到一种自我抹杀。这种状态令人窒息，与那狭隘的国族宣传的窒息感可以说是如出一辙。

我从这些波动和困惑中学到了很多，学会去反思那些代代相传的法西斯式的激情，也去反思精英前卫主义那种替人说话的自负。就个人来说，我是希望这种波动在驱使我成为一个更坦诚的人。就画画来说，我现在是无法割断伴我成长的现实主义绘画的影响，但我还是希望我做的事情不是去为某个僵化原教旨续命。我感觉这些日常却又不凡的拉扯——虽然渴望独立，却无法或不愿跳脱出来——其实反映了我对绘画行为的体会：一种汇集了思想、惯性、突破、肌肉记忆、狂喜、肩痛、傲慢、羞辱、政治参与、孤立、期待、失望、精神、经济等等的一大锅剪不断理还乱的东西。 —[O]