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David Xu Borgonjon

This Actually Happened—On Objectivity Without Universality: A Conversation with David Diao



To a student of art history, David Diao's career seems almost like an art historical summary of the trajectory of New York Painting since 1960. Though often in the thick of the scene, he has frequently been relegated to the margins of the textbook. The gestural abstractions with which he began soon gave way to sheetrock paintings that concerned themselves with their own materiality and single-stroke works that focused

David Diao, *I Lived There Until I Was 6 . . .* (English version), 2008, acrylic and vinyl on canvas, 91.5 x 71.5 cm. Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York.

on artistic process. Now, his hard-edge paintings often derive from his art historical obsessions (with Barnett Newman, Russian Constructivism, and architecture) as well as more personal narratives—such as his *Da Hen Li House* cycle, focused on the site of his Sichuan home before his family fled the newly established People's Republic of China. The melancholy in these stories often has a bite to it, as in his reflections on his exclusion from the art history canon (Diao has painted invitations to a hypothetical MoMA retrospective), as well as in his incisive critiques of Orientalism.

His blend of the personal and the critical—as well as his good application of colour, humour, and deep respect for history in the present—are contributing to something akin to success. An upcoming major retrospective at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) follows on a 2013 symposium in France, and he is represented by galleries in Berlin, Brussels, and, of course, New York. But it is not the first time he has come into good graces—throughout our interview in the Soho loft where he has been encamped since the 1970s, he radiated a gentle skepticism about this change in the air.

David Xu Borgonjon: You've been a painter for a long time, though you often work with architecture and text. Were there ever failed experiments in other mediums?

David Diao: Of course. I began working two dimensionally, but something changed. People used to be fairly proud to announce "I am a painter." Nowadays, people will more likely say, "I am an artist" or "I make art."

David Diao, *40 Years of His Art*, 2013, acrylic and vinyl on canvas, 101.5 x 153 cm. Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York.



The idea of medium specificity has been elided. I came on the scene at a moment when painting was still the most elevated medium within cultural production, on the heels of the triumph of American painting. As a young artist, if you were ambitious, you delved into painting.

David Xu Borgonjon: It's been a long time since then, but you've stuck to your guns.

David Diao: I also had to live through many versions of the death of painting. One thing I try to do is to pay attention to immediate history, history that doesn't just happen in the past. For example, in and around 1967 and '68 people were newly conscious of the materials of art making. It was against illusion; it was postmodern. I created paintings with industrial materials. I would put up five sheets of sheetrock, but as a *painting*. Instead of dividing the space and standing on the floor, this wall was elevated onto the existing wall and framed by the wall it hung on.

David Xu Borgonjon: Are those paintings still around?

David Diao: They got destroyed. They were site-specific, in the sense of not being permanent. There are other ways to draw attention to the *facture* of putting the paint on. I worked with plastering, likening the act of spreading wet plaster to the act of smoothing paint. That carries over to my work now, because I'm quite insistent on having a honed, smooth surface. I work mostly with palette knives, which are a small version of the plasterer's trowel. [Pauses.] So, what was the question?

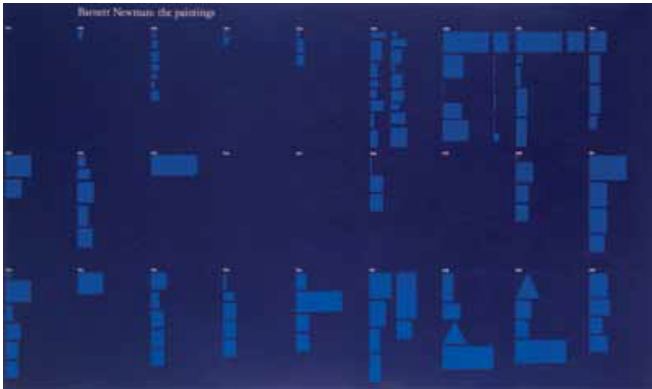
David Xu Borgonjon: That was the answer. The question was, "Why did you keep painting?" You answered already: you did, but you didn't.

David Diao: I did, and I didn't.

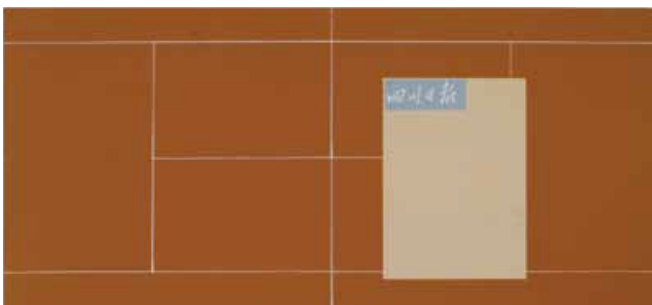
David Xu Borgonjon: Were you interested in architecture from the beginning?



David Diao, *Lying 1*, 2000, acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 200.66 x 292.1 cm. Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York.



David Diao, *Barnett Newman, The Paintings in Scale*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 200.66 x 322.58 cm. Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York.



David Diao, *Sichuan Daily*, 2008, acrylic, marker, and paper on canvas, 91.5 x 198 cm. Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York.

David Diao: [Sighs.] I don't think anybody's *not* interested in architecture. If you have to be housed, live within a shelter, enclosures, deal with the inside and the outside . . . if you are in any way attuned to your surroundings, you have to be interested in built environments. That's architecture.

David Xu Borgonjon: Much of your work, from your cataloguing of Barnett Newman's paintings to your records of Kazimir Malevich's exhibitions—or even the *Da Hen Li House* series—relies on forms of measurement. There is an evident interest in standardization.

David Diao: The big struggle in art making is to avoid the subjective and to make something that is based not on my psychology or personal



David Diao, installation view of exhibition *I Lived There Until I Was 6 . . .*, 2008, Postmasters Gallery, New York. Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York.

autobiography but something external. I'm interested in something that is almost objective, to which I can point, and say, "Aha! There it is, the evidence. The art." It's a legacy of a strand of formalism, which skews things away from the irrational and the subjective.

David Xu Borgonjon: Just to dwell a moment longer on the *Da Hen Li House* series: that's a moment when you chose to work with autobiography. Is it the emotional narrative of displacement from a childhood home that you focus on or the precision of the architectural measurements?

David Diao, *Timeline*, 2008, acrylic, marker, and spray on canvas, diptych, 107 x 396 cm. Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York.



David Diao, *Timeline* (detail), 2008, acrylic, marker, and spray on canvas, diptych, 107 x 396 cm. Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York.



David Diao: That was a quest to do the impossible and imagine a place that no longer existed but loomed large in my memory. The piece was in my head for fifty years. Before my first one-person show in China at Courtyard Gallery, Beijing, in 2008, I realized that all the work I had shown up to that point (in Taiwan, the Second Guangzhou Triennial, or

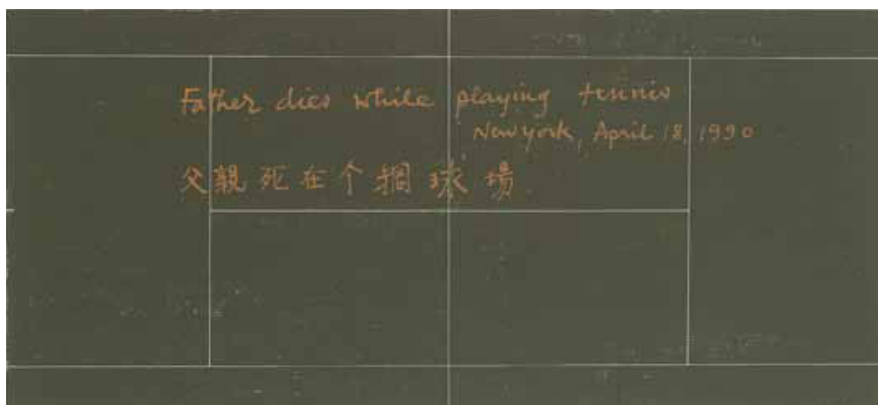
with Johnson Chang in Hong Kong) was simply not seen. It was dismissed as simply "hard-edge painting," as a set of references to the New York School or 1920s Russian Constructivism—blah, blah, blah. There's a certain attitude in Chinese painting that privileges *xiesheng*, or the ability to copy from nature. I have never studied art formally, so I never learned it. The audience didn't seem to care about or even perceive the subject matter I

was wrestling with. I thought now is the time to tackle this subject of a house, which, for whatever reason—actually, we know for what reason—has disappeared. A confluence of events made this thing more than my private story. After demolition, the land was taken over by the *Sichuan Daily*. The editor-in-chief there was the father of Jung Chang, the author of *Wild Swans*, who went on to indict Mao in the most extreme of ways. I found my biography intersecting with someone else's, and also with a whole epic that I lived through, too, though in America. That got me off my rear end.

David Xu Borgonjon: Why the tennis court?

David Diao: Well, as a six-year-old kid, your sense of scale is completely askew. All that is objective is the dimensions of the tennis court, which don't change whether it's 1949 or 2015. That is also why I felt able to insert actual documentation, like blow-ups of the deed or copies of the envelope with our address printed on it. The house may not exist anymore, but there is evidence left, breadcrumbs that tell you I didn't just dream this up. This actually happened. Everyone I know has had a house that they lived in that disappeared. That added ballast to the project.

David Xu Borgonjon: As an adult, you have to recalibrate from being a child. That's why the tennis court was so important. It's like a Pantone swatch of colour, a fingerprint, or some other reference point.



David Diao: It's Sherlock Holmes. Real evidence.

David Diao, *Death on Tennis Court*, 2008, acrylic and marker on canvas, 41.5 x 99 cm. Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York.

David Xu Borgonjon: That makes many things click for me. I hadn't realized how dedicated you were to the idea of an objective art.

David Diao: You know, Sol Lewitt and Ad Reinhardt were important to me, but never Willem de Kooning. The New York School was by no means monolithic, and I've always gravitated toward what I refer to as its intellectual wing. Not Franz Kline, not de Kooning, but definitely Barnett Newman, Robert Motherwell, and even people like Clyfford Still.

David Xu Borgonjon: When you talk about objectivity, you mean a very rooted, local kind.

David Diao: I'm almost never interested in universals. I'm interested in particulars. And it's usually right there. [Gestures.]

David Xu Borgonjon: People often talk about the objective and the universal as though they're related or even the same.

David Diao: That's annoying. I see a red flag any time people try to universalize or generalize. If you take a common denominator that is big enough you can encompass everything, but to what end? You miss the specificity.

David Xu Borgonjon: It could be a really big tennis court, so to speak.

David Diao: It could be, but who would play on it? [Laughs.]

David Xu Borgonjon: Right. A tennis court is a certain size because that is the optimal proportion for a game. The limit on scale is play.

Left: David Diao, *Demolish—Small*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 51 x 51 cm. Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York.

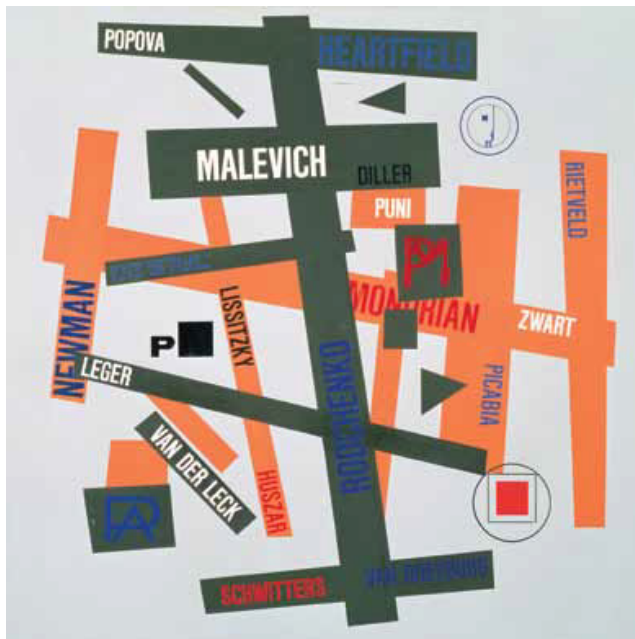
Right: David Diao, *To Construct—Small*, 2008, acrylic and marker on canvas, 41 x 46 cm. Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York.



David Diao: I have always insisted on the idea of play. Not in the sense of games, but as a kind of elasticity. It's not a tight belt. It's a belt that gives you room. In a very obvious way, the tennis court is like a formalist painting writ large. I like that correspondence. Given a two-dimensional space, how do you demarcate it into different areas?

David Xu Borgonjon: All these exhibition opportunities in East Asia, like the upcoming UCCA exhibition, put you in a different context with yet another set of rules.

David Diao: It is yet to be seen how it's going to be read. I'm not showing a linear development of works. It spans forty years. What artists do is to think against themselves and do what they couldn't have done. My decision to stop making process-oriented paintings was an antagonistic critique of my earlier work. Luckily, when I delved into Constructivism and saw how my



David Diao, *Tree*, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 213 x 213 cm. Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York.

heroes had no problem with words—though it was Russian, so I saw it as design—I found a way to let text creep into my work.

David Xu Borgonjon: Which brings us back to translation. You have shown pairs of paintings that say *chai* (demolish) and *jian* (construct).

David Diao: While I worked on the *Da Hen Li House* series, those two characters came up again and again. I made a timeline painting and had to write *jian* to locate the moment it was constructed, and *chai* for the year of demolition. So, those two characters became the bookends of the whole project. Everywhere you go in China, *chai* is on the doors because the country is so hell bent on destroying its own past.

David Xu Borgonjon: I was struck by the way you applied the paint.

David Diao: I did it many ways. I constructed *jian* much as a child would learn to write it out, stroke after stroke. I wrote *chai* more loosely. I'm trying to incorporate more at all times, and the fact that I have been so geometric and linear isn't lost on me. The whole series, *Suprematist Little Prisons*, is a self-indictment.

David Xu Borgonjon: You also are invested in the display of data through graphs, charts, and diagrams. Your paintings of Barnett Newman's corpus almost reduce them simply to information.

David Diao: Basically, by using diagrams I try to counter the highfalutin tone of most abstract painting. That skews it toward the universal and the spiritual. I wanted to go somewhere plain, flat-footed, informational, and accessible instead. Transcendence is *not* a good word in my vocabulary.

David Xu Borgonjon: Should art not deal with the subjective?

David Diao: I can't avoid it, as much as I probably want to. It comes creeping back. There's a performative aspect to all art-making because there is a stratagem. It has to read, but in a fresh way—in the fissures of things that haven't been codified. At the same time, you are also going against the code. I very much believe that art is about critique, in every sense of the word. It is about saying, "What if something else were to be the case?"

David Xu Borgonjon: Critique and speculation.

David Diao: And being obtuse. Not saying yes.

David Xu Borgonjon: Including to yourself.

David Diao: Beginning with myself.

David Xu Borgonjon: Tell me about colour.

David Diao: That is still subjective. Although when I began this series of works about Newman, I was thinking of *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?* In the case of my painting of the Afghan flag with the country names in Russian and English, well, that's a flag. In other cases, I am thinking of a green blackboard. Usually, I assume a pre-existing convention to make the subject matter more conventional and less subjective. At the same time, colour is always metaphoric. Blue is the sky. Brown, the earth. The whole series of *Da Hen Li House* oscillated between the red clay of Roland-Garros and the green grass of Wimbledon. There is everything else in between, including concrete, but in my head it was very specific. This is where my insistence on the particular is very important. You begin with red, yellow, and blue. But which red? My big lesson in colour was Piet Mondrian's 1971 retrospective in the Guggenheim. You know, the history books tell you Mondrian worked with a triad of red, yellow, and blue. Some of those yellows were pretty close to lime green. And there were blues that were almost black.

That old Greenbergian formalist idea that paintings have to be only about their formal concerns (colour, line, shape) without reference to the outside world became very constricting for me. After a certain point, in 1984, when I painted the Malevich photograph of his show in St. Petersburg, almost all my work began to involve a backstory. The designs, the texts, the colour, they all refer to something. They point beyond themselves to the world.

David Xu Borgonjon: Is the connection always personal?

David Diao: I'm sure it is; otherwise I wouldn't make it. But not explicitly. For one painting, I was sent a .jpeg file of a Newman painting that had been cut up and pieced back together. He had told his wife that he wanted the painting destroyed. She did it after he died. But the same night she had a dream that he came back to her, and said, "You're killing me!" In

remorse, she had the painting sewn back together. So those are not arbitrary lines I came up with. There is even more of a backstory. It resides at the conservation lab at Harvard, but the chief conservator doesn't let most people know it exists or let images of it out of their fiefdom. But the cat's out of the bag, the .jpeg's on the Internet, and I have it. I would like to make it again with the lines sewn, to refer to Newman's job as a men's tailor.

David Xu Borgonjon: It says a lot about his precision.

David Diao: Maybe. He dressed very well. With a monocle. But at a certain age you need help with seeing. I'm not sending this to Beijing because I didn't want the scandal-mongering of this painting to skew the rest of the show.

David Xu Borgonjon: Does your audience need to know all this backstory? How easy do you make it for them to know?

David Diao: I bend over backwards to make all the information accessible. I have no secrets. My last show in New York was called *TMI* (Too Much Information).

David Xu Borgonjon: So there is no mystic, hidden core.

David Diao: Even the way I paint is totally accessible. I don't have a special touch or unique skills. Anyone working with the subject matter I work with would probably come up with something not unlike what I have. And that's a democratizing notion I have always carried.

David Xu Borgonjon: What about the scale of your works? They are usually quite large.

David Diao: That's a legacy of New York painting. I could chide myself for it, but I have done many small works. Usually, they have brothers and sisters that show together.

David Xu Borgonjon: The limit is the stairwell of your apartment, right?

David Diao: Ninety-one inches tall, before it has to be floated. It could be thirteen feet long, since it is a huge stairwell. One of the reasons I moved in here was because I had checked out the staircase!

David Xu Borgonjon: Do you draw, make sketches, or do other preparatory work?

David Diao: Hardly. Nothing *prima facie*. Or, rather, always *prima facie*. There is nothing planned. You approach whatever you do directly. Sometimes, though, I might make something graphic and smaller after the fact, rather than on the way.

David Xu Borgonjon: And all the research and archiving?