

Alex Greenberger, "The Land That Time Forgot: In His Paintings, David Diao Tries to Recall His Hong Kong Boyhood", Art News, March 2017

ARTNEWS

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*David Diao, Arrive/Depart, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 42 x 100 inches.
COURTESY POSTMASTERS GALLERY, NEW YORK*

Since 1964, David Diao has lived in New York, but his presence in China, where he was born, continues to loom large. A 2015 survey at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing remains one of the artist's biggest shows, and his heritage continues to haunt him.

Diao's childhood in Hong Kong, where he was raised after emigrating from Chengdu in China, was the subject of this show, "HongKong Boyhood," though his focus in it was as much on what he remembers about living there from 1949 to 1955 as about what he forgot. He recalls, in a statement in the exhibition's press release, that his family lived next to the movie star Li Lihua, and that the internet helped him remember Hong Kong.

But there are gaps in Diao's memory, and he suggestively leaves them open, as in such works as *My Favorite Image of Her* (all pieces 2016), a two-painting portrait of Li. On the right panel, Diao silkscreens a photograph of a smiling Li on a teal background, her image appearing so big that we can see the Ben-Day dots. On the left, a teal-colored square appears where her portrait would be, suggesting a loss.

That work is a clever homage to Abstract Expressionist and Pop painting, and "HongKong Boyhood" is indeed partly a love letter to some of Diao's artistic heroes. With its royal-purple rectangle superimposed on a pink background, *I was caned by the Headmaster 1* looks, at first glance, like a Rothko; *Best Western*, a painting of the logo for the hotel that exists where Diao's childhood home once was, may as well be an early Warhol.



David Diao, I was caned by the Headmaster 1, 2016, acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 78 x 60 inches.

COURTESY POSTMASTERS GALLERY, NEW YORK

But something is missing in these near-monochromes. Perhaps Diao is suggesting that, in America, not all art histories—and, by extension, not all personal histories—are equal. Whatever visual language crossed the Pacific with Diao got lost in the shuffle of his becoming an American.

The saddest part of “HongKong Boyhood” is that Diao seems unable to reclaim his history. For *Arrive/Depart*, which is split into two monochromes, à la Barnett Newman’s “zip” paintings, Diao constructs two timelines. Various events—the explosion of the first H-bomb, in 1952; the death of Josef Stalin, in 1953—are paralleled with Diao’s time in Hong Kong, which curiously has no entries. Here, Diao has gone in search of lost time and failed to find it.