

Andrew Maerkle, 'David Diao', Art Asia Pacific, March 2008



David Diao

Photographed by Rona Yefman for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

Outside an imposing building near New York's Chinatown, a key flutters to the ground from a window on the top floor, nearly hitting a luxury sedan idling curbside. David Diao, known for his minimal paintings investigating modernism's defining themes and iconography, moved into the former textile warehouse 34 years ago. He brought along fellow Whitney Independent Study Program peers such as choreographer and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer, Whitney ISP founder Ron Clarke and sculptor Al Taylor. The elevator is broken and Diao jokes that tossing the key to visitors provides them a taste of New York life in the 1970s.

Diao originally intended his apartment to be a studio and the entryway opens directly onto a rectangular space with high, lofted ceilings and a skylight. A narrow nook overflows with paints and supplies; the unfinished walls bear works in progress and accumulated multi-colored paint splatters. However, Diao has since added a bedroom, kitchen and a small wine collection. There is a palpable shift in sensibility upon passing through the utilitarian studio into the living area, dominated by a row of windows and a handsome wood dining table. Diao's interest in modernism translates into consummate design taste: near a long blue sofa opposite the dining table sit two geometric Gerrit Rietveld chairs.

The emphasis on comfort over production suits Diao, a voracious reader. He explains, "I spend a lot of time not working because I never know what to do next." Yet such self-deprecation belies the intensive research that goes into projects such as "Demolished/At Risk" (2005), paintings and photographs chronicling the demolition of seminal

modernist suburban houses in Connecticut.

Diao's latest interest is his Chinese heritage, addressed only obliquely in past works. Born in Chengdu in 1943, Diao fled China with his paternal grandparents in 1949, just weeks before the communists took power, when the family had a chance to board an evacuation flight to Hong Kong. There was time only to grab one suitcase each; his mother and two siblings, sheltering with relatives outside the city, were left behind.

Diao's grandfather was a retired KMT general with progressive tastes who designed the family estate on property in downtown Chengdu that formerly belonged to a Manchu prince. No photos or documentation remain of the house, which was converted into the headquarters of the *Sichuan Daily* newspaper and then torn down in 1979. The only certain detail is that its grounds included a regulation-size tennis court.

An invitation for a solo show at Courtyard Gallery in Beijing prompted Diao to attempt to reconstruct the old estate using the tennis court's dimensions as a cipher to unlock its history. The centerpiece of the "Da Hen Li House" (2007-08) series is a group of paintings that present architectural schema made from Diao's own childhood memories and the recollections of two uncles and an aunt who also escaped to the US. One uncle, an architect, provided a polished blueprint; the aunt's sketch includes the names and locations of different trees on the grounds.

Diao recalls that when the family left for Hong Kong they thought they would only be gone for a few weeks. He notes, "The idea of displacement, whether in Palestine, Bosnia or Sudan, is the same. People think it won't last forever but then it lasts a lifetime." The show, opening March 1, will be his first significant exhibition in China. Diao expects many friends and family members to attend the opening. While the content of his work is personal, he is anxious to see how Chinese people respond to it. He comments ruefully, "These stories are sad but they're not unique." ■ Andrew Maerkle