

## Liu Fei: A Perfect Smile

Jonathan Goodman

The penchant for the bald head is nearly a defining trait among male artists in contemporary China, yet Liu Fei feels it necessary to paint the women in his art with bald heads as well. His dancers, often holding guns, do not exactly originate in present times; instead, they come from the Cultural Revolution ballet entitled *Red Detachment*, in which a group of female Red Army soldiers do battle with those engaged in the exploitation and suppression of working people. The women also present an eerie sameness in regard to their countenance; they uniformly engage in wide smiles that do not charm so much as distance and even unnerve their audience. The combination of bald heads, frozen smiles, and pistols or rifles add up to scenarios that in no way entice; instead, the overall experience of Liu's work is one of discomfort and dread, so that the women's expressions suggest that something is terribly, terribly wrong. Liu's audience knows that he is old enough to remember the Cultural Revolution, but his paintings give no real clue about his feelings—the unease we experience on seeing these paintings is hard to categorize either as specifically cultural or political absurdity.

The Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, a little more than a generation ago. Surely Liu's art shows us a mirror of some sort in regard to that highly charged period, in which cultural struggle was based upon the recognition that, in cultural endeavors, hierarchy inevitably results in class difference. Liu's paintings, almost always in blacks, whites, and grays, represent a version of truth in the face of China's historical insight that culture—high culture especially—is inherently political; but the question remains whether we can make sense of the perception. By offering no answers, Liu refuses to commit himself either to revising history or to ignoring it—a position that may disappoint his general audience. Yet perhaps his reticence is that much stronger for its demurral; locked into a parody of graciousness, his ballet dancers enact what to this writer amounts to a troubling assertion of charm in the face of historical facts. We already have seen the myriad works of Yue MinJun, who paints himself always wearing a broad grin. It is hard to say what his smile means exactly, although one intuits that it may intimate the mask that Chinese wear in polite society. Sometimes, it seems, we must participate in a

theater that distances us from emotional truths even as we enact gestures meant to display them.

Liu's remarkable paintings thus invigorate and reflect the *performance* of civility and high culture. Yet the originating circumstances of what we see comes from a highly politicized representation of ballet, surely a medium of privilege. But perhaps the tension in the wide grins of the women we encounter demonstrates the inevitable difficulty facing the dancers, who adhere to political consciousness as well as the display of a highly disciplined, even rarified artistic activity. In the West, ballet, like opera, is for the connoisseur; it is considered an elite activity. In most cases, in China as well as in America, it is fair to say that high culture intimates hierarchies that die hard, despite the best intentions of those determined to democratize culture. While it is true that these hierarchies are based upon accumulations of prestige, money, and power, the culture that it supports is often *inherently difficult*, to the point where it is usually only a minority, educated and intellectualized, that is fully able to appreciate the kind of art we have been speaking of. As a result, any attempt in any culture to read high culture in purely political terms results in a disconnect, whereby the high aspirations of ballet, for example, are in conflict with the social realities of its experience.

This means that an artist such as Liu, in demonstrating the innate tensions between high culture and the privileges it suggests, cannot commit himself to what we might call a pure version of culture. The artificiality of the women's expression undercuts the general assertion of ballet as an exquisite activity; thus, it is Liu's job to point out that tension as one of the unavoidable characteristics of high art—surely in any culture, but particularly in China, where awareness of the entitlement of consumers of pastimes such as ballet or opera has been raised to a very high degree. Indeed, the unspoken question raised by painting itself is whether visual art joins the pantheon of arts considered high culture. In many ways, Liu follows the recent history of his profession, given as it has been to the style of socialist realism. At the same time, it can be argued that his work parodies the style, although as I have said, Liu shows no actual preference for either a sincere or an ironic reading of his own motives. But for many viewers, Western as well as Chinese, it becomes clear that Liu's style might best be described as politically mannered—as being both a homage to and a criticism of the art that he saw while coming of age during the Cultural Revolution.

To what extent this parody implies a critique of socialist realism's sincerity of style is not known. It is precisely the refusal to commit to an interpretable reality that makes Liu's paintings as powerful as they are. In consequence, his audience must read what they see as exemplifying their own tendency to see socialist realism either as a movement dated and lacking in force or as an ongoing, powerfully politicized mode of representing the real. On an important level, the paintings by Liu comment on style by imitating it; shrewdly, he does not make his work available to an easy interpretation, one that would place him in one camp or another. As a result, the unease we feel on seeing these bald woman and their weapons represents our own reaction to the political attitude they may—or may not—define. Their laughter may—or may not—be subversive of their own intention to please. One intimates that the work may well be about a certain kind of despair—what might be called the hopelessness of a perfectly politicized life. Thus Liu raises questions but refuses to answer them. His viewers, on the other side of the ballet dancers' gaze, can feel free to see the figures as they seemingly are on the surface, or they can see them as the exemplars of a cautionary tale.

It is of course conceivable that Liu paints the way he does because he was trained in the realist style; but to this writer the social implications of his approach amount to a critique of socialist realism, whose forms make for an easy self-parody. The art that Liu commands in his absurdist scenarios owes its historical intensity to a political culture determined to sing the praises of peasants and the working class, who are portrayed as heroic, both physically strong and morally virtuous. But the note of the absurd creeps into his serenely smiling women, who enact a sterile joy that means quite the opposite from what they seem to be on the surface. The fact that these figures are regularly painted with guns—not all of them are shown to be ballet dancers—adds to the alienation we experience on viewing Liu's paintings. But it may be that socialist realism is inherently a parody in itself—not because the emotions associated with the style are insincere, but because the style itself is a parody of good intentions. This is so because art can be persuasive as politics only up to a point—the independence and idiosyncrasy of the artist result in a disconnect between him and the impositions of a moral esthetic system. Clearly, Liu means to illuminate the difference between the imagined reality and its actual outline, which describes a world where nothing seems real.

As a result, the images present a disclaimer that is inevitably a part of the style itself, which is unable to transcend the implications of the politically correct. So there is dissonance built into the method of representation. The sour note struck by Liu's bald beauties occurs because they cannot rise above the way they have been portrayed. The bald head distances us from their attractiveness; moreover, the uniformity of their smiles indicates a sameness born of conformity rather than genuine happiness. Implicit within the close confines of Liu's world is a critique of social discourse, which the absurdity of his approach mirrors by alienating those he would supposedly charm. We must remember that the women are meant to engage in a highly politicized art activity; but they only enforce the suggestion that their politics occur on the surface and lack depth. My point is that the estrangement is a part of the esthetic reality itself and cannot be wished away as part of the interpretation. The kind of political reality we have in the West, in which this writer takes part, depends upon an equally earnest perception of inequality; however, the way in which this lack of equality is engaged remains democratic in the sense that many kinds of styles can be used to present social reality.

Yet even though the representation of politics in America is allowed to be various in its methodologies, it seems that realism is the only style that can produce imagery whose power is meant to change society. Abstraction in art results in a specialized taste, one that is dissonant from the wish to fix an image as politically resonant. (One of the more interesting facts of Chinese art is the persistence of realism, which occurs partly because figuration is what Chinese artists have been trained in and partly because socialist realism is what they know historically.) So it would seem that realism is the best means of describing the social reality of the poor. As an art painting is particularly well suited to report on the injustice and circumstances of the poor; at the same time, however, it is a medium of extraordinary plasticity and variety of effects, making it capable of more than the simple cataloguing of a chosen social stratum. Its ability to find intelligence and esthetic strength in purely abstract formal relations shows us that painting is a method of unusual complexity; it can take both the high and the low road. Perhaps this is why the socially committed artist returns to realism—in order to memorialize the struggles of a lower class.

Yet the question remains, How successful can such an approach be? Westerners are often given to irony, an attitude that does not make itself as well known in China, where the consequences of something meaning

something else or even its opposite can cause trouble. Yet the unspoken power of Liu's paintings develops from irony, that is, the implication that the women's frigid happiness may well describe something troubling, even out of control. The paintings therefore undermine their own structure, so that they finally communicate the reverse of what they appear to be. This is irony at its best because what seems right is actually mistaken. Liu understands that the introduction of guns undermines the apparent harmony of the women who hold them. Guns promise violence, while smiles lead one to expect joy. The two are meant to oppose each other; as a result, by including weapons in his paintings, Liu shows us how to undermine the positive outlook of the women he paints. And we remember that it is *only* women who are found in his compositions, which accentuates the absurdity of Liu's frozen tableaux. His outlook mixes irony with the risible, in ways that comment on China's recent past. To his credit, Liu plays dumb in light of the ramifications of his scenarios, leaving it to us, his public, to make sense of the nonsensical, or even the irrational. His reality is specifically Chinese and contemporary, but the notion that everyone *performs* their joy in social exchanges can be understood as universal. In this sense, Liu is an artist who speaks beyond the particulars of his position as a Chinese artist.

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