



Ullens Center for
Contemporary Art
尤伦斯当代艺术中心

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Exhibition Dates:

19 September – 15 November 2015

Exhibition Venue:

Great Hall

Press material also available for
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David Diao

Released on 19 September 2015

Through his symbolic painterly rhetoric, David Diao transforms the formal language of New York abstraction through his personal narrative.

The Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) is proud to announce the solo exhibition *David Diao*, running from 19 September to 15 November, 2015. The retrospective brings together 115 artworks drawn from collections spanning North America, Europe, and Asia, the artist's largest exhibition to date. Born in Chengdu in 1943, David Diao left mainland China for Hong Kong in 1949, later settling in America where he has lived for nearly six decades.

His early work is profoundly influenced by the New York School of abstract painting. Starting from this exceptional moment in art history, he gradually transformed this authoritative aesthetic tradition by extending its language to individual experience. The painterly narratives that underpin his work—reflections on how we evaluate the modern masters, systems of artistic production, identity, and memories of his family and his ancestral home—have come to characterize a unique mode of symbolic signification.

Throughout his career, David Diao has shown a profound interest in the history of abstraction. From the 1960s until the late 70s, Diao sought to build on and break through the complex theoretical foundation laid by his artistic predecessors. Diao looked to the formal language of abstract painting, reflecting on and revising the predominant aesthetic discourses through his work. In works like *Wealth of Nations* (1972), Diao repurposed cardboard tubes discarded by garment factories as tools to apply paint to the canvas, disempowering superficial notions of the “aura” of the artist's brushstroke. He would paint over the bilateral canvas again and again until arriving at a satisfactory result—a working method at odds with the Greenbergian painting principles that were taken as consensus at the time. By naming abstract paintings after well-known books and movies in lieu of the standard “Untitled,” Diao referenced objects external to the picture plane, a practice *verboten* in doctrinaire formalism that would inevitably risk being labeled kitsch.

From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, Diao took a brief hiatus, partly due to what the artist felt was an unresolvable crisis facing abstraction and formalism. It was at this time that Diao abandoned entirely self-referential artworks, incorporating narrative as a thematic buttress to



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the painting's composition. The 1984 work *Glissement*, which appears in this exhibition, is a landmark piece from this period. Based on a renowned photograph of Kazimir Malevich's landmark presentation in "The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10," Diao overlays the paintings that comprised this spatial installation onto a single, compressed canvas. Diao's fluid sense of time and space sits at odds with Malevich's rejection of figurative reproduction, even as they both pursue extreme flattening in two-dimensional art. Writing in *Artforum*, renowned critic Thomas Lawson said of this piece, "With the work *Glissement*, [David Diao] reinvented his practice as a droll examination of shifting realities in art, history and personal experience." Himself an adroit observer of modernist art, Diao began to see art and the history that surrounds it as a game, as something to be engaged in contest. In the *Little Suprematist Prisons*, Diao attempts to reconcile the formal styles of Kazimir Malevich and Robert Motherwell in the same compositions, putting the two painters into a putative conversation. Though often considered within the same modernist tradition, Russian abstract art, once at the forefront of European abstract painting, was largely dismissed in Clement Greenberg's Cold War-tinged narrative of formalism. Similarly, in *Tree* (1988) Diao writes the names of several modern artists on the sprawling geometry of Malevich's *Suprematism (Supremus #50)* as if it were a broken genealogy of European abstract art, relationships of influence in disarray.

Other works address the systems that support art, in particular institutions tasked with critically evaluating artists. Most prominent among these is a series of canvases based on the art of Barnett Newman, one of Diao's artistic idols. In 1990 Diao read that in his 27-year career, Newman only painted 120 artworks in the style for which he was known. Fascinated by the disparity between Newman's enormous influence and relative paucity of works, Diao began to research various metrics related to Newman's output, displaying this information in a series of graphical paintings. These seemingly "abstract" paintings suggest that quantitative measures of an artist's practice amount to nothing more than trivial bits of information, immaterial to the true value of art. At the time he was making these works, Diao was also over twenty years into his own career, prompting him to consider his life and work with Newman's as an implicit foil. In *Résumé* (1991), the artist depicts his complete exhibition history as a series of lists by year; in the same vein, he also began incorporating other aspects of his career—studio floor plans, sales records, positive and negative reviews—into his artworks. The banal realities that underlie the life of the artist are thus transformed into a language of symbols. In doing so he deconstructs the romantic notion of the artist as solitary genius, replacing it with the banal realities of a career with its ups and downs. The exhibition's Chinese title is in part inspired by the artwork *David Diao: A Retrospective (Chinese)* (1995), one of a series of paintings of



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“invitations” to imaginary exhibitions at major institutions including MoMA and the Centre Pompidou.

Other works from the 1990s engage directly with then-current conversations around multiculturalism and identity politics. In pieces such as *Twin Dragons* (1999) and *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1994), Diao mobilizes imagery including film stills of Bruce Lee (considered by Diao “the most famous Asian man in American culture”) and the Swedish actor Nils Asther playing a Shanghai warlord in a 1933 Hollywood film. In *Pardon Me, Your Chinoiserie is Showing* (1993), he makes a textual image from a riposte to a leading French curator’s misguided comment during a meeting that “you’re not really a Chinese artist.”

Since the mid-2000s, Diao’s art has taken a more autobiographical tack. Faced with his first solo exhibition in Beijing in 2008, and understanding that local audiences might not be as familiar with the modernist histories he often addresses, Diao artist decided to meet them halfway by using his childhood home—the Da Hen Li House in Chengdu—as the subject of a major cycle of paintings. For this project, Diao interviewed several of his family members now living in the U.S., turning their (often conflicting) recollections and other supplementary materials into a group of paintings that implicitly concedes the impossibility of objective truth, particularly where memory is concerned. In his most recent works, Diao depicts memories of his childhood in Hong Kong, where he lived on Chatham Road in Tsim Sha Tsui from 1949 to 1955. With these paintings, Diao, one of the most introspective contemporary artists to emerge in the past few decades, connects his practice to the artistic ecology of China.

About the Exhibition

David Diao is curated by UCCA Director Philip Tinari with Felicia Chen, and designed by Christian Bjone. The exhibition catalogue is published with support from Frank F. Yang Art and Education Foundation, ESLITE GALLERY, and Artron Art (Group) Co., Ltd. Airline sponsorship comes from AIR CHINA. Coinciding with the public opening is an exhibition symposium entitled “David Diao: Which Way Up?” Other programs include “Building Memory: David Diao’s Return to Da Hen Li House,” “David Diao, American Artist—Forum on Late Twentieth Century American Painting,” and a series of screenings entitled “David Diao: Documents of Diaspora.”

About the Artist

A transplant to New York via Hong Kong, David Diao (b. 1943, Chengdu) graduated from Kenyon College in 1964 and has taught at Hampshire College, The Cooper Union, and the



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Independent Study Program of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Diao has a long history of notable exhibitions, most recently including the Whitney Biennial 2014 and a solo exhibition at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. His works have been collected by the Whitney Museum of American Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of Modern Art, Hirshhorn Museum, and M+, Hong Kong. In 2014, the University of Strasbourg hosted a seminar focused on his work.

About the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art

The Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) is an independent, not-for-profit art center serving a global Beijing public. Located at the heart of Beijing's 798 Art District, it was founded by the Belgian collectors Guy and Myriam Ullens and opened in November 2007. Through a diverse array of exhibitions with artists Chinese and international, established and emerging, as well as a wide range of public programs, UCCA aims to promote the continued development of the Chinese art scene, foster international exchange, and showcase the latest in art and culture to hundreds of thousands of visitors each year.

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