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Yong Xiang Li
Mannered in a sleeve
08.09.–28.10.2023

“Rise up, fall down / down to the ground for the world to see / oh what a lucrative trade it makes / down to a glass from a lip.” This tongue-in-cheek monologue of a doll, performed by Yong Xiang Li in the video *Rise* (all works exhibited made in 2023), sets the tone of the artist’s first solo show at Deborah Schamoni. As the starlet finishes applying their makeup and launches into a solo, we are suddenly reminded that the art world is not exempt from the hard-boiled rules of showbiz, and that the artist is, in some ways, not unlike a drag persona, a made-up doll.

This affirmation of performance as an inevitable component of artist-hood could invite certain fantasies and cynicism; not in the case of Li, who seems committed to making his marks while playing by the rules. Throughout the exhibition Li constantly reminds us of the artist’s reflexivity through a series of gestures. A thin lad lies on a carpet with his eyes closed, but his apparent fatigue is belied by the tension of his hand, which holds a cat teaser (meticulous insolency & a siesta); a parade of donor figures make a sequence of hand signals as if extending offers, the meticulous alignment between the fingers and the surrounding frames drawing our attention away from the explicit meaning of the signs to reflect on the intractability of framing—and its inevitable entanglement with patronage (Parallel support and possess it in a sleeve). Mixed into this intellectual game of hide-and-seek are drops of banality, like the loathsome but inevitable chore of tax filing, or the anticlimax of the artist’s melancholic crooning. Between rest and alert, subject and object, larger than life and mundane as life, Li secularizes the vanguardist myth of the artist-as-pop-idol and pledges allegiance to his craft at hand: the brush, the makeup, the frame. Playing tricks and telling the real story do not have to be mutually exclusive.

The series of sculptural paintings in the main gallery takes on another set of false opposites: while facing the entrance with a unanimous style of generic abstraction, their image of pure uniformity is betrayed by the ornamental excesses on full display in the back. In *Maritime sunset* and *a fashion idea*, the grainy texture of the back has even seeped through to the front of the woven bamboo veneer, like a mould contaminating its host. Meanwhile, in *Intestinal demonstration & Indulgence*, the juxtaposition of a pristine, metaphysical landscape with a debased scene of carnal abandon dramatises the historical movement of a genre across high and low lines. Li rejects binarism as a framework of critique, looking instead to modernism’s porosity, to its already-existing, ‘messy’ undercurrents. Rather than resisting, disrupting and exploding the canon, he prefers to exercise a parasitical strategy of infection. Take for instance the aforementioned *Maritime sunset* and *a fashion idea*: its inner surface features black calligraphic strokes, floating in a sea of deep blue, that upon closer examination reveal themselves to be inhabited islets brimming with life. By transferring and decelerating gestural abstraction (the ‘strokes of genius’) in a process borrowed from decorative design, Li claims craft as a conceptual tool—not to reconstruct an ethnographic identity, but to challenge, contaminate and rewrite hegemonic techniques and their underlying ideologies.

For all the tricks up his sleeves, Yong Xiang Li is ultimately an artist of great seriousness and sincerity. It’s all real—as long as he doesn’t stop performing.

– Alvin Li