

MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL

Back in the '90s, Beijing-based artist Liu Wei was part of an underground movement that ducked the mainstream—and government censorship. Now he is entirely above ground and his work sells for millions.

STORY **PAYAL UTTAM** PORTRAITS **GARETH GAY**



Beijing-based artist Liu Wei at White Cube, Hong Kong.

It wasn't long ago that Beijing-based artist Liu Wei was showing his work in secret locations—a sealed off basement, a supermarket and a film set. Part of an underground group of artists active in the late '90s, he flew under the radar avoiding government censorship. "Securing a space for a show could be a work in itself," remembers Liu. "It was a very tight group back then. We were classmates. We would discuss on a daily basis how to make an exhibition."

Liu and his friends—now known as the Post-Sense Sensibility artists—had little interest in the market and mainstream. Instead they staged spontaneous shows including their subversive basement exhibition with works made from animal carcasses and even human body parts. Liu's contribution was an experimental video titled *Hard to Restrain* (1999), featuring human figures scuttling around like insects under a spotlight.

Sitting with the neatly dressed artist recently amid his slick mirror installations in the austere surrounds of White Cube gallery, it was hard to imagine this was the same man. The stealthy exploits of his youth are far behind; he is now a successful contemporary artist very much entrenched in the global art circuit. His conceptual artwork sells for millions at auction and regularly crops up in museums and prestigious shows like the Lyon Biennale, where he just finished installing a work titled *Enigma*—a sprawling maze of steel armatures, bulbous canvases, found objects and video projections.



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PHOTOGRAPHY: TANG XUAN COURTESY UCCA AND WHITE CUBE

01 The *Dialogue* works are made from stainless steel mirror glass and metal.

02 *Puzzle* is a monumental installation consisted of a series of tall, organically shaped mirrors leaning on each other.

“JUST TO SHOW MY DISRESPECT TO THE INSTITUTION, I MADE A LANDSCAPE OF ASSES.”

Born in 1972 in Beijing near the end of the Cultural Revolution, Liu has been fascinated with art since he was a boy. “I started drawing when I was seven. I would use whatever I could get a hold of,” he recalled. “There was not much else to play with. It was a way of self-expression.”

Liu went on to study painting at the renowned China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. When he graduated, he held down a day job designing and editing at the *Beijing Youth Daily* newspaper while experimenting with new media including film and staging DIY shows with his artist friends.

His first major chance for exposure was an invitation to exhibit at the 2004 Shanghai Biennale where he proposed installing a train boxcar, or freight wagon—rotating on a huge turntable—containing a mini exhibition of his own. The

organisers, however, rejected the idea. “Just to show my disrespect to the institution, I made a landscape of asses,” he said, referring to his literally cheeky work, *Looks Like a Landscape*, a black-and-white photograph composed of images of human buttocks resembling mountains in traditional Chinese ink painting. Not only was the work a success in China but it also drew the attention of Swiss collector Uli Sigg who snapped it up quickly.

The audacity and experimentation that characterised his initial works is evident throughout his vast oeuvre. Eager to learn, Liu explored several artists as a young graduate. Among his early influences was the work Andy Warhol which opened him up to the unexpected possibilities of art. “Back then realism was prevailing but Warhol was totally the opposite of that,” said Liu.



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Liu began investigating various mediums. For his *Anti-matter* series, he took items including televisions, washing machines and fans and pried them open, inverted them and cut into them with almost violent results. Coming of age at a time of rapid urbanisation in China, it was only natural that references to his environment seep into his practice. “Daily life is an important source of inspiration,” he said. “You are in it. It’s your reality so you want to get to the bottom of it.” By the mid-2000s, he came up with his renowned *Purple Air* series. Meticulously painted, the abstract works containing dense circuit board-like forms evoke claustrophobic cityscapes.

Continuing to touch on themes of architecture, he used the unusual material of oxhide to create a giant model metropolis with iconic buildings, including the Pentagon and St. Paul’s Cathedral. Titled *Love It, Bite It* (2006), it was inspired by dogs gnawing on oxhide chew toys and raised issues about human greed for power. He went on to create beautiful urban islands of vertiginous buildings carved out of discarded books. In his piece, *Merely a Mistake II* (2009-12), he overturned viewers’ expectations by digging out cavernous holes in a gallery and placing inside them imposing assemblages made from detritus from demolition sites.

03 Another work of art from the *Puzzle* series.

04 *Love It, Bite It* is a giant model metropolis with iconic buildings. This was inspired by dogs gnawing on oxhide chew toys and raised issues about human greed for power.



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“DAILY LIFE IS AN IMPORTANT SOURCE OF INSPIRATION.”

His autumn show in Hong Kong plunged viewers into a similarly disorientating environment albeit with more elegant materials. By placing reflective surfaces everywhere, he at once fractured and expanded the audiences’ perception of space. On the top floor, pieces of oddly shaped mirrors rested against walls while a row of chunky angular sculptures made of mirrors sat nestled in pieces of furniture. He said one of the blocky forms resting in a chair evoked a human body. Downstairs, a monumental installation titled *Puzzle* (2014), consisted of a series of tall, organically shaped mirrors leaning on each other at dramatic angles. Seen together, the works had a tactile, seductive effect luring viewers towards them. The profusion of shimmery surfaces also created a sense of spectacle.

“The exhibition theme and colour palette is *bai-yin* [white silver]...the term has a double meaning—one of the colour in the installations, and it also alludes to the colonial past of Hong Kong,” explained Liu. “Back then that was the commodity for trade. You need silver to buy opium for example.” His works’ reference to *bai yin*, had dark connotations of the city’s origins and the opium trade but also implicit was the fact that Hong Kong has thrived as a result of its past. “Hong Kong is unique now also for its historic place of commerce,” he added. “It was a port for China to open up to the world.”

The show also featured his *Crucifixion* works, wall reliefs made of layered metal plates folded over metal rods that form a border with an empty centre. To create them, he cut and peeled away each sheet revealing a new layer below creating a vortex-like effect that gives an illusion of depth. The pieces made obscure references to religion.

“How can we put a limit on something that is apparently in the process of infinite extension?” he mused, alluding to the way frames contain a work but perhaps also touching on religion confining people’s belief systems.

Asked if he ever feels hemmed in by exhibiting in formal institutions like White Cube and if he misses showing in more elusive, unconventional spaces, Liu replied: “Certainly it’s a very sweet memory but going back to that period is not something that’s preferable. It’s always easy to remember ‘the good old times’ and it’s also easy to say the future is scary and threatening but given the choice I prefer the future. It may be unpredictable, but I still like the idea of it.”