

ELI KLEIN FINE ART

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A Day in the Life of: Liu Ye

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"In the foreword to 'Lolita,' Nabokov wrote that many people said that because his book was about a middle-aged man who loves an underage girl, he must not have the best morals," recalls artist Liu Ye. "But his answer, I think, is great- he says art is not about being immoral, but rather amoral. It is the opposite of something that can or cannot be moral."

This is quite a statement for an artist who began his schooling during the Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, it seems only natural that, while sitting in his Beijing studio surrounded by paintings just months before his American debut at Sperone Westwater gallery in New York this fall, Liu would be prone to such introspective musings. The studio, a dry-walled white space much like those inhabited by artists all over the world, is located in the Dashanzi art district in a building known as Factory 798, due to its origins as a munitions plant. It is now filled with studios, galleries, boutiques, and cafés.

"In 'The Portrait of Dorian Gray,' Oscar Wilde said that every painting is a self-portrait," says Liu, who often alludes to Western literature in conversation, alternately reaching for phrases in German, English, and Chinese. "The little girls, therefore, are me, but more beautiful." The "little girls" he refers to are the delicate, often prepubescent creatures who are frequently the subject of his art. Sometimes his girls are set loose in art galleries, avidly studying paintings by Mondrian. More recently, they've shed their school uniforms and become nymphets and seductresses, soliciting affection with their soulful eyes. In the "anime"-infused global artworld, these images are not entirely unique, and will no doubt remind many viewers of the work of Japanese artists Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara. But Liu's work, despite its apparent simplicity to a Western audience, takes on a different meaning in China, perhaps because of his uncanny ability to make these carefully rendered young ladies shimmer with a complex individuality.

As a child, Liu's teachers encouraged him to become an artist- "because when I drew the sun, it was always a perfect circle" -at a time when this only meant producing socialist realist propaganda paintings. And, though his father was a renowned children's-book author, Liu first learned of Lewis Carroll, Hans Christian Anderson, and other writers that influence his work when he discovered a locked black box hidden beneath his parents' bed. "I took it out, which at this time was very dangerous, and opened the box," confides Liu, recalling that he was just seven or eight years old then. "It was filled with books from Europe, and I read them and looked at them until my parents came back home from work." Perhaps it was this early revelation that led Liu to pursue a scholarship at Hochschule der Kunst Berlin in 1989 when he was still a third-year student at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. He spent most of the '90s in Europe, returning to Beijing in 1998 after completing a residency at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam.



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Liu's studio bears evidence of his continued zest for children's literature in the stuffed-animal versions of Dick Bruna's Miffy that sit on a shelf next to catalogues of Bruna's work. Miffy, the funny bunny drawn with few lines and even fewer colors, appears in many of Liu's paintings, accompanying a girl to an art gallery. In concert with Miffy's Dutch origins, the two are always examining Mondrian's vibrant compositions of red, blue, and yellow. Perhaps it is a comment on the melding of high and low art, or on children's potential to absorb challenging ideas-or perhaps it is a subtle endorsement of the value of exposing people of all ages to international culture.

But for Liu, the success of his work depends less on cultural allusions than his own idiosyncratic psyche, as complicated and conflicted as his personal biography. As the artist leans forward to pour more hot water into the miniature cast-iron teapot filled with jasmine buds, he shrugs philosophically. "I think not a lot when I make paintings," he says, intentionally using poor English to make a joke-and a point. And though he has witnessed monumental upheavals in China during the past two decades--"when I left Beijing in 1989, there were only a hundred private cars; when I returned, there were over two million"-- he is not prepared to take this on directly in his work. "Maybe in Japan or Europe, artists can get a feeling for their country as a whole," he says, "but China is too big for me to understand, and what has happened is too big to turn into a painting."

Barbara Pollack

