



Alvin Li

Emerging painters from the Chinese world

The new generation is redefining lineages and styles

It is a challenging exercise today, to think of painting from the Chinese world as a collective body, to track its shifting contours and influences. Just ten years ago, the mention of contemporary Chinese art would immediately evoke images with identifiable markers, like the blown-up heads from the 1990s by Cynical Realists **Fang Lijun** or **Yue Minjun**.

Although there have been a great many painters since the 1980s, working in diverse styles and languages, up until the early 2010s many of them shared a common investment in the traditions and history of Chinese painting – whether the heritage of socialist realism or the use of ink – and in the depiction and invention of culturally specific signs. But now, that seems to be yesterday's story when we look to a younger generation of painters. The five profiled here were all born after the mid-1980s in Mainland China and Taiwan, trained both domestically and abroad, and are currently based around the world, from Shanghai to Los Angeles to Paris.



Left: Yong Xiang Li, *I'm Not in Love (How to Feed on Humans)* (video still), 2020. Courtesy of the artist, Deborah Schamoni, and Antenna Space (Shanghai). Right: Yong Xiang Li, *Harp Player*, 2021. Photograph by Ulrich Gebert. Courtesy of the artist, Deborah Schamoni, and Antenna Space (Shanghai).

Yong Xiang Li's paintings, which often double as furniture, are at once meticulous and chunky, earnest and cunning. An interest in applied arts, first developed while still in his native Changsha in China, led him first to study design at Central Saint Martins in London, before enrolling in the Städelschule in Frankfurt. Having graduated in 2020, he continues to live in Germany. Following a sudden pivot to 'fine' art, his position as a member of a racial minority in Europe enabled him, despite a lack of formal training, to turn a destabilizing sense of otherness into a working strategy. This deliberate othering operates on multiple planes. It is present in the act of masquerading a painting as a bench or a mirror, thereby spoiling the 'purity' of the painted canvas. It is also evident in his choice of subjects and signs, laden with histories of Orientalism and fetishism, that confront viewers with old power structures that have never gone away. The seriousness of Li's labor might at times prevent his work from being immediately seductive, but his world, once entered, abounds with intricate thoughts and patterns that urge you to reconsider the subject- and objecthood of painting and peoples.