

Into the Bamboo Grove  
Yong Xiang Li  
LC Queisser, Tbilisi

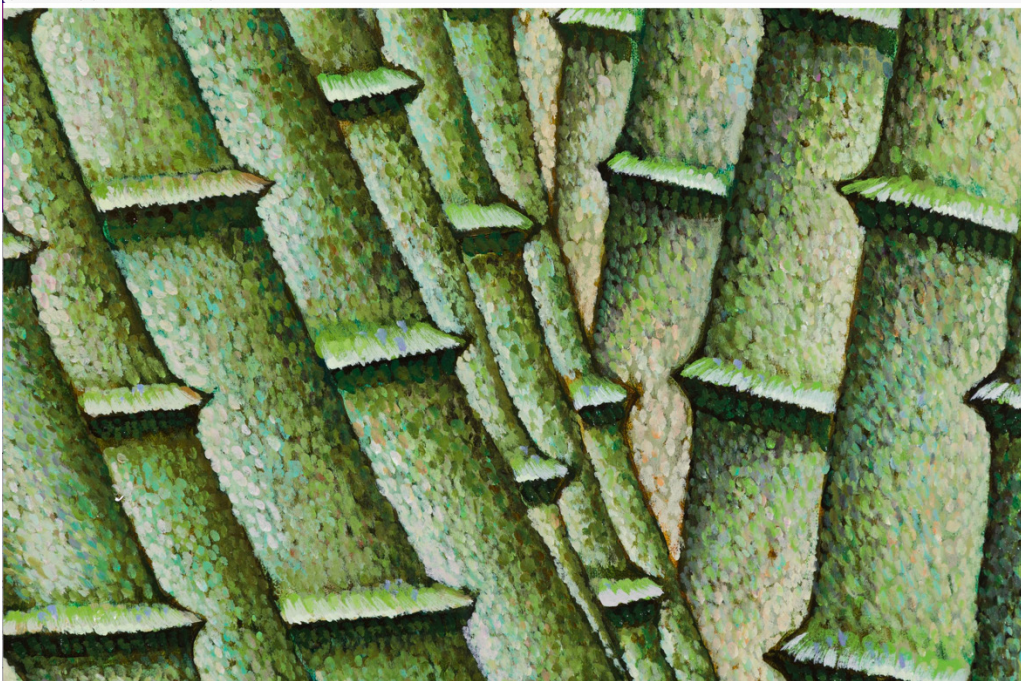
PASSE-AVANT INTERVIEWS FEATURES REVIEWS OPINIONS ABOUT

30-03-2022  
by Ben Livne Weitzman



Yong Xiang Li, *Picnic at the Bamboo Garden*, 2021/2, LC Queisser, Tbilisi. Photograph: George Kolbaia.

Deep in a bamboo grove, one quickly loses orientation. The density of the thin shoots creates a mirror-like maze. Standing in front of the exquisitely painted *Picnic at the Bamboo Garden* (2021/2) of Changsha-born, Berlin-based artist Yong Xiang Li, the hypnotic curves capture your gaze and lure you in. There is a strong cinematic quality to the movement of the viewer's eye across the painted plain. In the top section of this three-part modular painting, the bamboos are tightly aligned as if blocking the view. The feeling is one of incredible beauty and grave distance. Thin dark cracks along the curves' edges suggest a path through the thicket. But what seems to breach the opaque shell of the work leaves us hanging on the surface, preventing you from coming in.



Yong Xiang Li, *Picnic at the Bamboo Garden*, 2021/2, Detail, LC Queisser, Tbilisi. Photograph: George Kolbaia.

Each painted wooden panel is divided into three parts: the curved grove at the top, a fence at the bottom, comprised of a row of pointy bamboo streams reminiscent of a picket fence, and a rhombus-tiled middle part, where one would...well...sit. In Tbilisi's LC Queisser gallery, the painting is presented in its open formation—hinged twice at a 90-degree angle to form a chair-like fold expanding from the wall and into the exhibition space. The three parts could be folded back and placed together, becoming a single continuous painting. Like a grid of clashing patterns, each forming its own kind of surface, its own direction of movement. Each is its own kind of barricade.



Yong Xiang Li, *Picnic at the Bamboo Garden*, 2021/2, LC Queisser, Tbilisi. Photograph: George Kolbeia.

The work plays with its own "being mysterious," aware of its alluring opaqueness. Seducing with one hand and pushing back with the other. The coded iconography of the bamboos themselves hints at a Western exoticising perception and cliché fascination with the "curios East." Li's bamboo grove is a mirror maze of reflecting perspectives: bouncing back from the West to the East to the imagined East reflecting in the eyes of the West. Clichés, fears, phantoms, and fantasies all take on strange shapes in this house of mirrors. Yet all remain flat on the two-dimensional surface. Depth is part of the alluring illusion.



Yong Xiang Li, *Picnic at the Bamboo Garden*, 2021/2, LC Queisser, Tbilisi. Photograph: George Kolbeia.

Having been influenced by East Asian design, Chinoiserie was developed in 16th century Europe as a fantastic mashup of Chinese, Japanese and Indian motifs. Many chairs and other pieces of furniture were adorned with "oriental" lines and patterns, later evolving into what we today refer to as Rococo. Indeed, the flat white pedestal resting on the floor below *Picnic at the Bamboo Garden* is reminiscent of a design museum presentation. However, this is by no means a design piece but merely art pretending to be functional. The chair-painting resists function. The mere idea of sitting on it is refused by the sharp edges of the bamboos aligned at the bottom.



Yong Xiang Li, *Inside Job*, Installation view, LC Queisser, Tbilisi. Photograph: George Kolbala.

*Inside Job*—the title of Li's minimal exhibition at LC Queisser—becomes site-specific through the activation of the space's margins. Several small green paintings, also featuring bamboos, were made to fit the wooden reliefs below the street-facing windows, emphasising the room itself and highlighting its specific features. Unlike the smooth surface of the *Picnic at the Bamboo Garden*, the chunky plane of the *Untitled (2021/2)* series expands the spectrum of sensations and becomes a pattern of its own. Being a structure of repetition, a pattern is a tactic of hiding, disguising, and masking. Perhaps there is a nook amid the thicket, behind the dense decorative camouflage.



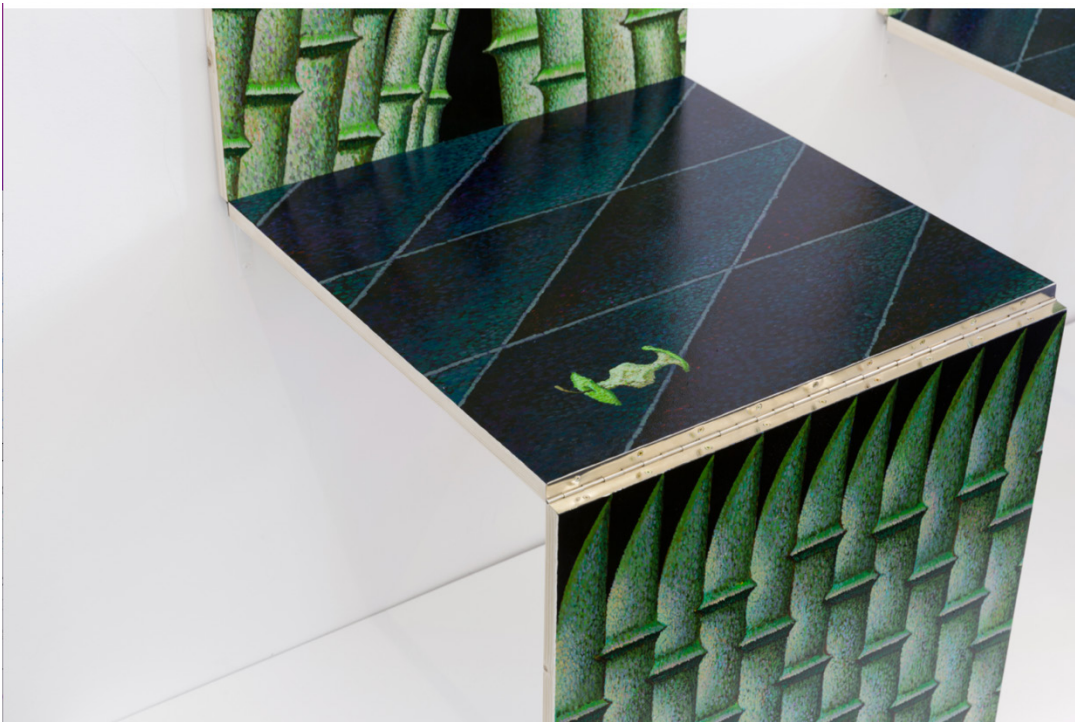
Yong Xiang Li, *Inside Job*, Installation view, LC Queisser, Tbilisi. Photograph: George Kolbala.

One of the walls of the galleries has a built-in closet carved into it. Through a cracked door, a faint pop tune is emitted. A short video titled *A View from a Suspended Bridge (2019)* is playing from a casually-placed iPhone on the top shelf, a collaboration with artist François Pisapia whose cinematographic perspective is especially sensitive to spatial configurations and the psychosis of man-made environments. Following a car ride on a dark country road, the video focuses on a seemingly abandoned, half-industrial, half-residential area, and specifically on the small bursts of overgrowing plants and other signs of decay. The camera wanders through an allotment garden, peeking through and above the fences. The visuals are overlaid by Li singing a song he wrote in Mandarin. The words and the English translation appear mid-screen, rendering the footage into an emo karaoke video. Words and phrases like "guest of honour," "brake," "escape," "turtle shell", "nowhere is prohibited," "dens woven tablecloth" float and disappear on the small screen. Like the bamboo in the painting, the picket and wire fences in the video keep the viewer in an outsider position, looking for cracks and gaps to peek through—a sense of being foreign, of distance. Heavy grey skies; it feels like it's about to rain.



Yong Xiang Li and François Pisapia, *A View From a Suspended Bridge*, 2019, 5:53" Single-channel video. LC Queisser, Tbilisi. Photograph: George Kolbaia.

Li's exhibition transforms the space of LC Queisser into a charged and alluring environment, fleeing from interpretation to the soft beat of the song emanating from the built-in closet. Blocked, fenced, and sealed, Li's works create a complex, misleading space that mirrors off several layers simultaneously. On the edge of the left "chair" of *Picnic at the Bamboo Garden*, a cartoonish, mostly-eaten apple functions as a humorous wink. A memento mori of a kind, it reminds of Pompeii's mosaic floors, which were decorated with trompe l'oeil of debris and half-eaten food. It's the eaten apple that breaks through the flatness of the surface, climbing through the layers of historical sediments to find rest on the edge. Like in the lavish dining chambers of pre-eruption Pompeii, the picnic is in itself an ideal activity for the upper class, originating in 17th-century post-revolution France when royal gardens became parks accessible to the public. Not unlike the fancied Chinoiserie style, the picnic also has to do with an imagined image of nature that is transformed into a "countryside"—a detached amusement construct basked in a romantic ideal. Here the surface of the checkered blanket becomes a mobile barrier, keeping your fancy ass separated from the reality of the ground below. Maybe life *is* a picnic?



Yong Xiang Li, *Picnic at the Bamboo Garden*, 2021/2, Detail, LC Queisser, Tbilisi. Photograph: George Kolbaia.

### Yong Xiang Li

'Inside Job'

27. February 2022 – 02. April 2022

**LC Queisser**  
10 Giorgi Mazniashvili St  
Tbilisi, Georgia