

## Issue 174 October 2015

### Ding Yi

LONG MUSEUM WEST BUND, SHANGHAI, CHINA



Ding Yi, *Appearance of Crosses*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 1.4 x 2 m

Shanghai-based artist Ding Yi developed his instantly recognizable combination of '+' and 'x' marks during the 1980s, just a few years after China reopened its doors to the outside world, ending decades of cultural isolation from the West. For Chinese artists, the excitement of being exposed to such a massive amount of previously unavailable artistic material led to a frenzy of experimentation, now known as the '85 New Wave. The Shanghai component of this movement consisted mainly of artists exploring abstraction, with Ding being an important member of this group. What makes Ding unique among that generation, however, is that he is the only prominent artist who has not changed his artistic style or approach since then.

Considering China has been through such seismic ideological and cultural changes in the past 30 years, to not be somehow affected can mean one of two things – that Ding is either intransigently insensitive or that he has found an artistic language that has remained vital over time. You could be excused for being sceptical of a three-decade practice of painting almost exclusively '+' and 'x' marks. However, upon entering the Long Museum West Bund for his recent major exhibition of new and past work, 'What's Left to Appear', my own scepticism quickly evaporated. I was immediately confronted by ten major new works, each measuring 4.8 x 2.4 m, filling the massive central exhibition hall, whose high concrete walls had previously seemed insurmountable. In one fell swoop, Ding confounded expectations about the limitless possibilities within the seemingly limited confines of his practice.

But does this limited/limitless quality pertain to Ding's artistic language, or is it a quality unique to the artist himself? In an interview with the show's curator, Shane McCausland, published in the accompanying catalogue, Ding explained that, in order to complete ten canvases of this size, he worked for 15 hours a day for six months. While the physical endurance of this task is impressive, perhaps more interesting is what it reveals about the obsessive nature of his work and the way his imagination works in tandem with this.

The rest of the Long Museum space displayed a retrospective of Ding's work, enabling us to trace his practice back to its origins in the 1980s, when he slowly started to discern '+' and 'x' marks in landscapes and urban scenes. Slowly, the realism that formed the basis of his abstraction faded away, leaving only the cross signs extracted from them. Since then, all his works have been titled Appearances of Crosses. Consequently, while the works' repetitive and patterned nature seems to stem from minimalism, their roots lie elsewhere: Ding is equally obsessed with the infinite nuances of texture as he is with pattern.

One of the foundations of Chinese art is that the subtlest difference in the weight of a line can convey something. It does not seem coincidental, therefore, that the curator of this show does not ordinarily curate contemporary but classical Chinese art. While Ding may have developed his abstract language from Western modernism, over three decades it has merged with multiple traditions to become something surprisingly robust – so much so that it is immune from ideology.

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