LIU DAN

Artist’s Statement

“People have asked me, “What’s the difference between me and the old masters?” I always answer them, “I don’t think there is any difference except that they are dead and I am still alive.” On the other hand, because I’m still alive, they are alive too. I don’t think I’m part of the literati tradition, but I am part of its legacy. I don’t belong to tradition, I don’t belong to anything. I belong to myself, I belong to my art. Being part of a legacy has no limitations.”
All art is at once surface and symbol...
Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.
Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.
It is the spectator, not life, that art really mirrors.

—Oscar Wilde, Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray

It is characteristic of Liu Dan to integrate spectacle and performance into form and exhibition. Uncoiling sixty feet through the gallery, with dramatic cascades of light and shadow, the artist’s Ink Handscroll (1990; cat. 27) called forth this description by Caron Smith:

[It] opens with an explosion of cinnabar ink and spills forth ink boulders and mountain ranges in polyphonic harmonies, propelled along a stream of white, left in reserve, in a long dramatic sequence. Mountains, clouds and rivers formed of ink and paper coalesce and dissolve, only to reform with greater stability as the narrative of transformation unfolds.

Liu Dan’s Preparatory Drawing for “Dictionary” (ca. 1991; cat. 28), drawn to scale, preceded a finished watercolor painting so large that when the latter was lent to the China Institute for exhibition in 2006 a crane was required to lift it through a midtown Manhattan skyscraper window. Among the artist’s many intriguing works—his spectacular Ink Handscroll, the small work on paper and the huge painting of Dictionary, his historically allusive Wangchuan Villa (2000; cat. 30)—is a small monochrome drawing in red chalk on paper called Portrait of a Man (2001; fig. 1; cat. 31). The drawing measures only fifteen by twelve centimeters and depicts the head of a handsome man in his maturity, in profile, looking to the viewer’s right. With his well-defined facial features and intense eyes, it is impossible to tell that the subject is not a European man. Or that he is a Chinese artist, one who is now New York–based, who goes by the pseudonym “Mu Xin” in his professional life, with a character as ambiguous as his name, and who was already well into his seventies at the time the drawing was made. In fact, the model for this drawing was not the living person but an old photograph taken after the subject had already turned fifty.
In this portrait, Liu Dan has referenced Renaissance red chalk drawings by employing terracotta shades of chalk on old eighteenth/nineteenth-century paper. The surface of the ivory-colored paper is speckled with the long-term effects of mold and mildew age spots, foxing, like that of an old drawing from some forgotten archive; the edges are darkened and frayed, most noticeably along the top edge, as if it survived from a sketchbook. In the lower right corner, Liu Dan has signed and dated his drawing “Liu Dan 2001,” rather than his Chinese signature. What should we make of this seemingly innocuous portrait of a Westernized Chinese man in his maturity, styled as a sanguine chalk drawing from the Italian Renaissance? Through Liu Dan’s calculated use of the language of stereotypes as visual shorthand to cultural perceptions, the Portrait of a Man demonstrates the conflation of numerous temporal and spatial displacements in a single portrait drawing. This is, after all, a work by an artist well versed in the traditions of great Chinese paintings, where a landscape is hardly just a landscape and a portrait never a straightforward likeness, devoid of sociopolitical context, even if this drawing appears at first to be anything but traditional or Chinese.

With their eyes obsessively turned toward the West, contemporary Chinese artists have often been found looking toward the likes of Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) and Andy Warhol (1928–1987) for inspiration, as if modern art history had come to a standstill by the third quarter of the twentieth century. Liu Dan, however, looks both back in time and across space. Portrait of a Man is simultaneously an incisive commentary on the state of Chinese contemporary art of the last century and an homage to Liu Dan’s artistic influences, especially the Renaissance masters whom he admires so much. An art history aficionado, he owns more books on the Renaissance than any other artistic period. Nevertheless, the Portrait of a Man is not just about the Renaissance, it is also the continuation of the conversation begun on modernism in painting in the early 1860s, “in which painting’s relationship to its art-historical precedents was made shamelessly obvious,” when Édouard Manet (1485–1576) used the Venus of Urbino (1538) by Titian (1485–1576) as the prototype for his Olympia (1883). Liu Dan’s Portrait of a Man, like Manet’s painting, can thus be seen as a work which exists “in a self-conscious relationship to earlier painting or texts—or rather to the aspect in painting or writing that remains indefinitely open.”

Style in Liu Dan’s drawing acts as a retroactive device to trigger a conscious temporal illusion: the drawing becomes a lens by which the viewer is made conscious of the passage of time by the contrast in drawings made at different historical moments. The stroke plays as important a role in the
chalk lines of old master drawings as in the ink brushstrokes of Chinese landscape paintings, in terms of establishing the artistic identity of the painter and the authenticity of the work. In a red-chalk-on-paper self-portrait by Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519; fig. 2), the chalk lines are sure and smooth, the tapering curves of swiftly executed strokes and monochromatic color gradations bear witness to the Renaissance master's facility with the medium. Compared with Leonardo's drawing, Liu Dan's Portrait of a Man clearly belongs to its own art-historical moment, with the most obvious signs found in its sense of current trends, in its use of stylistic appropriation as strategy and in its consciousness of the spectator's presence.

There was another portrait drawing of Leonardo, of which only a later copy that was made in the late Renaissance remains (fig. 3). This later drawing shows the Italian artist in profile, looking in the opposite direction as Mu Xin in Liu Dan's drawing. The entry in Kenneth Clark's catalogue of the British royal collection that includes this later work notes that “the rather timid handling shows that this is not an original drawing by Leonardo but the turbulent lines of the hair and beard suggest that it is a copy of a lost original.” By comparing this anonymous rendering of Leonardo with the Portrait of a Man, the authenticity of Liu Dan's original style is further underscored by the contrast in technique and confidence. The Portrait of a Man is no mere copy, whether of Renaissance drawing or modern photograph, and Liu Dan's strokes are not timid in the least. The majority of his strokes are short and quick, with some longer lines used for the outline of the clothes. Shadows have been achieved through rubbing in this homage, as opposed to the denser patterning of occasionally crosshatched chalk lines in Renaissance drawings. There is a sense of deliberation in the markings that is at odds with the relaxed hand of a casual sketch, giving it instead a certain self-consciousness that indicates the artist's awareness of the audience's presence while executing this homage. The balanced composition of the head against generous amounts of white space further emphasizes the artist's sensitivity to its eventual public exhibition. In contrast to the drawings of Leonardo where the subject's head takes up most of the paper and there is no clothing to distract from the face, Liu Dan has outlined Mu Xin's overcoat collar and the folds of his scarf to serve as a visual pedestal for his head. This presentation conveys a certain detachment; the subject's likeness here is rendered as a still-life object, an appropriate choice given the use of a photograph as the artist's "model" instead of the man himself.

The Portrait of a Man is not content to restrict itself to a single sheet of ivory-colored paper; it has co-opted other versions and forms of its own

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vigor, and the decline of inventiveness—through which we reproach our Alexandrian age, but to unearth an essential aspect of our culture: every painting now belongs within the squared and massive surface of painting and all literary works are confined to the indefinite murmur of writing.”

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likeness, as a drawing of a man’s head, into its existence as a work of art. In doing so, it tables the issues of authenticity and artistic essence and provokes inquiry as to how these are affected by changes in material form. What does it mean when Liu Dan chooses to use an old photograph as a model instead of the man himself, or that he made the drawing specifically to be reproduced in a catalogue of another artist’s work?6

Liu Dan’s process of multiple filtering, by using a photograph as the model instead of a real person, reverses not only the hierarchical order of duplication, where art is made into photograph, but also re-orders a new cycle of replication, as Mu Xin’s likeness moves from drawing to printed illustration. By transforming the likeness from photograph to sketch, the drawing has become an abstraction of the photograph, instead of the more conventional relationship where the photograph limits itself to a traditional handmaiden’s role as the artist’s visual notepad for an eventual painting. And as an illustration in an exhibition catalogue, the mass medium properties of a photograph are now made available to the drawing; its likeness is no longer restricted to a unique pencil-on-paper work but becomes one that doubles and redoubles itself through the printed page. In setting in motion this processing of Mu Xin’s likeness, from photograph to drawing to book, Liu Dan has set the likeness free from that specific and localized photographic moment, the instant when the button on the camera was pressed to capture a fifty-year-old Chinese man in profile. Reproduced and redistributed, Mu Xin’s likeness is now a literal “fragment,” circulating in multiples, recontextualized and seen in a different light by each reader.7 Just as Liu Dan’s drawing had subverted the original likeness in the photograph by re-presenting it as a pseudo-Renaissance drawing, the printed page now confronts the drawing with a new, alternative version—the likeness of itself as a printed illustration. Turning from one to the other, we no longer know which is real and which is fiction. The Portrait of a Man has become the inspiration for multiple Scheherazades, one for every member of the audience. No longer belonging solely to artist or subject, the very image of Liu Dan’s drawing has entered the public domain through the performance that is its exhibition and via the printed pages of catalogues. The audience thus becomes coproprietor of Mu Xin’s likeness and is free to invent any story it wishes for the Portrait of a Man; the visual fiction can be retold as a fresh story each time, to new effect with each viewing. And with each telling, new relations are feigned, fictive ones are induced, and new beliefs take root in our minds, thanks to our imagination and experiences with the world at large.8

Through its “oscillation between the art object and human subject, presented so personally,” the Portrait of a Man is simultaneously an insightful

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7 Susan Sontag, “Melancholy Objects,” in Susan Sontag, On Photography (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 71. Sontag observed that “Rehabilitating old photographs, by finding new contexts for them, has become a major book industry. A photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading.”
portrait and a revealing self-portrait that presents us with an intriguing case of a work deliberately situated in “the interface between art and social life” by an artist who had initially sought to shape the perceptions of the audience through strategic visual presentation, only to have the work take on a life of its own.⁹ In Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray, Basil Hallward, painter of the original Dorian Gray, comments that “every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the colored canvas, reveals himself.”¹⁰ But it is not just the artist who is implicated in the Portrait of a Man; as viewers, we might also take heed of the sly observation that Wilde embedded in the preface to his own novel, that “it is the spectator, not life, that art really mirrors.”¹¹

Since much has already been made of Liu Dan’s rejuvenation of traditional Chinese art forms in works like the Wangchuan Villa, let us turn now to a discussion of other influences that surface in his works, namely graphic techniques and the legacy of Surrealism.¹² Liu Dan’s extensive range of pencil-on-paper drawings, with subjects ranging from Chinese landscapes to flowers, from life drawings to printed pages, is unusually varied for a contemporary artist.

As much as it is a contemporary update of the Chinese ink painting tradition, Liu Dan’s Ink Handscroll is, at the same time, a work whose imagery is comfortably at home with the graphic arts. The opening section of the Ink Handscroll is painted with red cinnabar which, according to Liu Dan, represents the fiery origins of the universe (fig. 4; cat. 27).¹³ Cloud and mountain formations spiral around the horizontal axis of the painting, and it could well be a greatly enlarged freeze frame from a Japanese science fiction anime, as fiery trails stream in the wake of a nuclear rocket taking off into space. The Ink Handscroll is the culmination of a process that began with Liu Dan’s first large-scale work, Aceldama (1987; fig. 5), an installation of hanging scrolls, landscapes in ink, where the central scrolls spills off of the wall and across the floor. Alexandra Munroe described Aceldama, writing: “The unworldly crescendo of ground and space, fire and mountains, bodies of water and clouds make Aceldama a vision that the modern mind can recognize as a real or imagined apocalypse. Chinese in style and technique, Liu Dan’s first major painting is shockingly contemporary in spirit.”¹⁴ However, in the discussion of Liu Dan’s process that follows, Munroe proceeds to describe a procedure that is difficult to perceive as distinctively Chinese in style and technique. Neither does it seem a stranger to Western tradition, with its similarities to Western mural- and fresco-painting techniques. According to Munroe, Liu Dan’s

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¹¹ Ibid., Preface, unpaginated.
¹³ Conversation between Liu Dan and Jerome Silbergeld, August 2007.
first step in preparing the large-scale paintings presented in this exhibition is to draw a
detailed pencil study. The refinement of Liu’s preparatory drawings reveals his founda-
tion in classical Western art, his mastery of chiaroscuro, and his dependence on graph-
ite to develop his initial idea. Liu then grids the drawing and transfers these marks onto
a sheet of paper attached to a wall. He sketches the outlines in charcoal and, consulting
his pencil study often, gradually begins to fill the surface with ink.15

While it is unusual for a Chinese ink painter to make preparatory sketches
in pencil, this certainly helps explain why Ink Handscroll not only makes dia-
logue possible with works by Chinese painters like Gong Xian (ca. 1618–1689)
and Guo Xi (ca. 1020–ca. 1090) but also can engage in an interesting exchange
with the graphic works of Dutch artist M. C. Escher (1898–1972).16 Every me-
dium has its own particular influence on the artist’s expression, and graph-
ite tools are no different. While it is eminently controllable and extremely
conducive for quick, precise renderings in exquisite detail, pencil on paper
requires a highly disciplined yet imaginative mind to push it beyond its pre-
paratory role. The molten flows of rock that shape the mountains and rivers
in Ink Handscroll are remarkably evocative of the extravagantly sensual folds
of clouds and mountains in Escher’s early lithographs of the Italian land-
scape, for example Castrovalva (1930; fig. 6). However, where Escher’s Italian
landscape prints have the dreamy quality of a European fairytale, Liu Dan
presents fantastic views of a “nature” that can only derive from the human
imagination. The tranquil lakes and mountains of a Chinese literati land-
scape painting are absent in Liu Dan’s handscroll. Instead, the graphic im-
pulse plays out through rounded forms with defined edges, powdery shades
of gray, and sharp plays of light and shadow, that combust into fierce mael-
stroms and fiery flows of lava.

While graphic work is primarily seen these days as a tool of the de-
dsign arts, the separation between craft and the fine arts is less marked in
Chinese art history, where craft traditions have always formed a basis for
its arts, even if literati scholars often pretended otherwise. Perhaps the an-
cestral origins of Liu Dan’s ink painting are more aptly located in the dra-
matic cloud swirls that cover the surface of the intricately designed Chu
lacquer coffins and silks of the Western Han (fig. 7) than in Northern Song
paintings of misty mountains and tranquil lakes. The surrealism that Susan
Sontag defined as “the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the
second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by nat-
ural vision,” had already existed in the ancient Chu imagination millennia
ago.17 Liu Dan’s Ink Handscroll would not be out of place as a background for
the fantastic figures and beasts from ancient Chu mythology. For the Chu

FIGURE 6
M. C. Escher (1898–1972), Castrovalva (Abruzzi, Italy),
1930. Lithograph on paper, 53.0 × 42.1 cm.

FIGURE 7
Lacquer coffin, detail of painted designs on black base,
China, Western Han period, late 5th century.
Excavated from Tomb No. 1, Mawangdui, Changsha,
Hunan. Hunan Provincial Museum, China.

15 Ibid., 12.
16 Ibid., 14.
18 See the Liu Dan biographical essay in
this volume.
19 According to Liu Dan there is no
specific reason for his choice of text.
20 Michel Foucault, This Is Not a Pipe
(Berkeley and Los Angeles: University
people, there was no separation between real world, myth-world, or after-
world. Heaven, earth, and hell were simultaneously present in the topogra-
phy of that ancient Chu imagination; in Liu Dan’s handsroll, that same am-
biguity of time and place exists.

The influence of the official Surrealist movement of the 1920s, and
its obsession with psychology and all things Freudian, can also be found
in some of Liu Dan’s other still-life drawings and paintings. His painting
of a Chinese dictionary has been read as a visual metaphor for a more in-
timate subject.\(^8\) The ink-and-color preparatory version in this exhibition
(fig. 8; cat. 28) is a miniature of the larger watercolor made later. In both, we
see a dictionary that cannot be described as either open or closed; it is in be-
tween, its pages in the midst of falling open. A few pages in the middle of
the book are clumped together and they stand upright in the center, as if un-
declared which way to fall. Meanwhile, the edges of the gold floral-patterned
and dark blue cloth dustcover are wrapped around the sides of the covers,
and paper of a deep blush color visible inside the front cover. There are two
openings where one can see the Chinese characters neatly organized in gridded
columns. But the words themselves offer no clue as to any meaning or
reason as to why these specific pages have been chosen for view. Here is text
that claims to hold only visual purpose.\(^9\) It is presented, but semiotically
it is without substance. If these characters frustrate the reader who cannot
read Chinese, it can only be doubly frustrating for the reader who can, es-
pecially when the characters appear in a book which purportedly exists to
provide lexical meaning to visual markings. Liu Dan’s *Dictionary* thus pres-
ets a philosophical conundrum in the vein of the René Magritte (1898–1967)
painting *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* (1928/29), where a pipe is depicted along with a
short statement of denial, “This is not a pipe.” In fact, Magritte, too, painted
a sequel to his first work — *Les deux mystères* (1966; fig. 9) — a Surrealistic vari-
ation that compounds the visual irony of his earlier painting. Michel Fou-
cault’s analysis of Magritte’s *Les deux mystères* is humorous:

*Magritte reopened the trap the calligram had sprung on the thing it described. But in
the act, the object itself escaped.... The “pipe” that was at one with both the statement
naming it and the drawing representing it — this shadow pipe knitting the lineaments of
form with the fiber of words — has utterly vanished.... In vain the now solitary drawing
imitates as closely as possible the shape ordinarily designated by the word pipe; in vain
the text unfurls below the drawing with all the attentive fidelity of a label in a scholarly
book.... Nowhere is there a pipe.*\(^{20}\)

Neither can one find a real dictionary in Liu Dan’s small drawing — nor in
the greatly magnified painting that followed. Instead, the viewer and those
would-be readers of Chinese characters are left with a mystery. This, too, is characteristic of Liu Dan: to let the audience make what they will of his works once they have been completed.

A man of studied elegance and a master of detail, it would seem that Liu Dan belongs to the same club as Wilde and Charles Baudelaire in his ability to elicit the characterization of dandyism, as an aesthetic practice (in)famously espoused by these iconic nineteenth-century figures. He has been described as possibly “the most paradoxical figure in Chinese art today” and one for whom “the practice of tradition became a form of dandyism.”

Dandyism has been found in his works as “a personal form of originality, within the external limits of social convention,” as demonstrated by his “overwhelming attention to details.” While the crafted surfaces of Liu Dan’s paintings should not be mistaken for mere surface sheen, nevertheless their depth lies less in the spirituality Baudelaire laid claim to than in the historical substance underlying his multiple affiliations to East and West. His painted poppies exemplify this. All Ready (1999) is a diagonal composition of four long-stemmed poppy flowers: two red, one white, and a fourth, seen from its underside, is rendered only in ink, the shade of its petals tantalizingly left to the imagination (fig. 10; cat. 29). In the delicate edges of their petals and fur-shadowed stems, Liu Dan’s poppies recall the beauty of Northern Song bird-and-flower court paintings in all their exquisite detail

( fig. 11). Their striking crimson and stark white hues, however, contravene traditional Chinese flower painting’s classical preference for soft pink peonies and snowy plum blossoms. Liu Dan has made several paintings of poppies, and at first glance they appear quite similar. In fact, each poppy flower is unique. It is only when these painted flower arrangements are placed beside each other that one can see the fragile difference between one flower and another. These wildflowers have a charm of their own, and against the sand-colored paper their luminosity catches and holds the eye.

What sets Liu Dan apart is not so much his drawing of inspiration from East and West, nor his intriguing innovation with traditional techniques—there are others walking that path too. Rather, it is his evocation of a distinctly modern Chinese sensibility, one inherited from the days of newly modern China at the turn of the twentieth century, a time of romance and revolution. Liu Dan’s cosmopolitan polish brings to mind the sophisticated southern Chinese cities in the 1920s and ’30s. A gentleman painter at heart, Liu Dan’s attention to the finer details—in both life and art—tells of this old-world charm. And in a Chinese contemporary art scene dominated by sound, speed, and spectacle, his works stand apart by leaving the viewer with a sense of beautiful nostalgia that subtly lingers on.

FIGURE 10
Liu Dan (b. 1953), All Ready, 1999. Ink and color on paper, 35.6 × 40.6 cm. Collection of Murray and Suzanne Valenstein.

FIGURE 11
Emperor Huizong (Zhao Ji) (1082–1135; r. 1101–25), Flowering Peach and Dove (Tao jiu tu), inscribed 1107. Album leaf mounted as a hanging scroll; ink and color on silk, 29.0 × 26.0 cm. Setsu Gatodo Collection, Tokyo.

22 Ibid.
23 Maggie Rickford, “Huizong’s Paintings,” in Emperor Huizong and the Late Northern Song China (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), 471. Rickford’s careful description of Huizong’s treatment of the peach blossom in the Northern Song album painting Flowering Peach and Dove (see fig. 8) might well describe Liu Dan’s Poppies: “he firmly outlined branches, leaves, buds, and blossoms, neatly partitioned their interior structures, and colored between these lines with opaque pigment.”
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