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Cinematic Painting: Time in Liu Xiaodong's *Hotbed No.1* and Three Gorges Dam

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ABSTRACT

Liu Xiaodong is a Chinese oil painter who is best known for his depiction of ordinary people in their actual lived reality. At the same time, Liu's engagement with film production has been widely recognized by public. However, the exact way that Liu has incorporated the structures of film into his painting has not been thoroughly analyzed. In this essay, I focus on Liu's monumental work *Hotbed No.1* from 2005, a multi-panel painting that is part of his series of *Three Gorges Dam*. Liu addresses the environmental problems that the *Three Gorges Dam* created by focusing on its human cost, rather than entirely on the degradation of the place itself. I argue that the most striking innovation of *Hotbed No.1* lies in its rendition of the passage of time, which creates what I call a "cinematic painting." It is significant because the incorporation of temporality enables Liu to depict the progressive harm and loss experienced by those living in proximity to the *Three Gorges Dam*. By introducing a durational component into his work, Liu effectively shows the complexities of depicting human suffering. Furthermore, it enables Liu to document the processes of dissolution and disappearance caused by the dam's construction.

KEYWORDS

Liu Xiaodong, *Hotbed No.1*, *Three Gorges*, Cinematic Painting

Introduction

Liu Xiaodong 刘小东 (b. 1963) is a figure painter, well known for his realistic oil paintings. Liu focuses on human dimensions situated with social and geopolitical problems both locally and globally. Among all his projects, Liu is best known for his series of paintings that represent the Three Gorges dam and its impact on the people who dwelt in the Three Gorges area along the upper Yangtze River. In this paper, I focus on Liu's Hotbed No.1, a monumental work constructed with five separate panels. In Hotbed No. 1, Liu depicted a group of migrant laborers gathered together on a rooftop to play a game of cards. Liu's depiction of the scene in Hotbed No. 1 is all the more vivid as it was produced on site in Fengjie, a city that was slowly being submerged as the construction of the dam proceeded. The construction of Three Gorges Dam has altered the appearance of the iconic landscape, flooded thousands of archaeological sites, neighboring towns and villages, and caused the displacement of over one million people. Instead of politically protesting the state power or the project itself, Liu approaches this geopolitical problem through humanity, focusing on the harm to people brought by the degradation of the environment.

In addition to painting, Liu is also known for his interest in film. He applied to the Beijing Film Academy after his graduation from the Central Academy of Fine Art (CAFA) in Beijing, but he was rejected. Nonetheless, Liu has been actively engaging with film production to today. Having starred in several films, serving as the art director, and creating paintings based on films, Liu is regarded as an ally of China's Sixth Generation filmmakers—a group of independent filmmakers active mostly after 1989.

In 2005, Liu invited Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯 (b. 1970), one of the leading figures of the Sixth Generation filmmakers, to record the whole process of his Hotbed project. These recordings became the documentary *Dong 东* (2006). It includes both Hotbed No.1 about migrant laborers in the Three Gorges area and Hotbed No.2 about bar girls in Bangkok, Thailand. Although Liu's frequent interaction with film is widely recognized by scholars, the discussion is mostly restricted to the shared subject matter and aesthetic styles with Sixth Generation filmmakers' works. However, the substantial influence that film as a different medium has made on Liu's painting has been seldom addressed.

In this paper, I argue that Liu's interest in the interaction between film and painting lies

in his representation of time. According to his diary, Liu explores the portrayal of time, “用什么形式传达这种时间对人的变化, 用什么形式表达人生的不确定性”: “to use which form to express the effect of time registered on human, to use which form to represent the uncertainty of the life” (Liu 222). Traditionally, the medium of painting does not depict time effectively. But film, from Liu’s unique view, is “时间的艺术”: “an art of time” (Liu 128). Liu’s evident interest in time, especially the passage of time, is very likely responsible for his obsession with film.

Therefore, I consider that Liu engages in a form of “intermediality” between film and painting. Eugene Wang has defined “intermediality” as “how one medium appropriates, recycles, and repurposes other media to create more complex effects and visual experiences” (584). In this essay, I examine how Liu incorporates the elements of film in *Hotbed No.1* and realizes this painting as a “cinematic” one. I argue that the most striking innovation of *Hotbed No.1* lies in its rendition of the passage of time. Liu appropriates the capacity of representing time from the medium of film and recycles it into the two-dimensional medium of oil on canvas, which overcomes painting’s traditionally limited representation of temporality.

Through the introduction of the element of time into *Hotbed No.1*, Liu creates a significant example of intermedial work - a “cinematic” painting. The incorporation of temporality enables Liu to depict the loss and harm on humans brought by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. The intermediality of *Hotbed No.1* also enhances the embodiment of the dissolution and documentation of disappearance, which creates a history of marginalized migrant labor with a complex effect of showing human suffering.

Liu Xiaodong as an Oil Painter

Liu Xiaodong is most known for his depiction of ordinary people in their actual reality. This approach is opposite to the academic convention of depicting heroic people, which was encouraged in previous decades, such as socialist realism. Liu studied within the system of the Central Academy of Fine Art, Beijing (CAFA). He began in its associated middle school in 1980 and graduated from the Third Studio of Oil Painting Department in 1988. He then taught at the middle school of CAFA and came back to teach at CAFA in 1994.

The studio system of the oil painting department aims to decentralize the constraint of the domination of the instruction of Soviet art at art academies and increases the variety of artistic

styles (Andrews 216). Therefore, different studios were founded with different goals and taught different styles. The Third Studio (*Disan huashi* 第三画室) was founded in 1962 by the oil painter Dong Xiwen 董希文 (1914-1973), who is noted for having produced *The Founding Ceremony of the Nation* (Kaiguo dadian 开国大典) (1953), a prominent example of socialist realism and one of the most celebrated works of official Chinese art. The Third Studio is known for its emphasis on fundamental skill to paint realistically and its instruction to “imbue the Western medium of oils with a Chinese aesthetic to produce ‘national-style’ oil paintings” (Andrews 217). Here, national style refers to ethnic painting 民族绘画 (*minzu huihua*) rather than national painting 国画 (*guohua*). Poet Ai Qing 艾青 (1910-1996) defines *guohua* as “paintings painted with Chinese brush, Chinese ink, and Chinese pigments on Chinese paper or silk” (Andrews 112). “National-style oil paintings” here emphasizes developing a style of Chinese painting through using Western pigments, oil paint on canvas. The study of early modern style of European art and the understanding of creating oil paintings with a goal of “national style” have greatly influenced Liu’s artistic production through his career.

Liu’s early work evinces his study of European painters such as Vincent van Gogh and Paul Cézanne. He made many imitations of Paul Cézanne’s series of oil paintings *The Card Players*. According to Liu’s photographs, his original plan for *Hotbed No.1* was to depict workers playing cards around a table. Since the 1980s, 19th – 20th century modern European art has been further introduced to China with the increasing number of publications of catalogues and exhibitions. Learning from images in catalogues and magazines was the primary way to learn the modern artistic language (Lu 75). Given this kind of training, it is unsurprising that Liu gradually developed a peculiar working process, which involved relying on photographs as his source of reproducing paintings. Although Liu claimed that the practice of painting based on photographs is harmful for a painter’s good eye, he has employed this practice frequently, which is still evident in his first two paintings of the *Three Gorges Project*.



Pastorale, Liu Xiaodong, 1989, oil on canvas

In his early career, Liu mainly depicted single or double portraits mostly based on photographs of his family, friends, or people around him. As Li Xianting 栗宪庭 (b. 1949) suggests, most of Liu's portraits show us "people lost in their own thoughts at a public gathering or with hints of sadness in happy expressions" (Xianting).¹ In *Pastorale* (1989), Liu depicts himself and his wife leaning on a wall, surrounded by a very pleasurable ambience with the blue sky and bright sunlight. However, their facial expressions present a tension. The man's face is full of anxiety; although the woman faces the same direction as if they are heading towards the same future, their gazes are actually towards different places. They are situated in the same space sharing a close relationship with each other, however, they are only related to each other physically. Psychologically, they are isolated from each other with their own thoughts and concerns, living their lives individually (Fan, 2).² The ambiguity and uncertainty created by abrupt juxtapositions of both subjects and settings facilitate Liu in depicting the complicated

¹ Li Xianting, "The Deconstructive Mindset and Bored Emotions of Post 89 Art: An analysis of Recent Trends in Cynical Realism and Political Pop" (*Art Currents*, 10/1992).

² Dian Fan, "Liu Xiaodong, His Generation and Our Generation" in *an Era of Criticism: Late 20th Century Chinese Art Criticism Digest*, Volume 2 (Guangxi Fine Arts Publishing House, 2003).

psyche of his subjects in an alien and uncomfortable environment.

In addition to the intensity of emotion that it conveys, for Liu Xiaodong, good artwork also depends on the amount of information it shows (Wu 6). Therefore, to help him to deliver more information within the limitation of the medium of oil on canvas, Liu chooses to combine elements from different photographs, incorporating these disparate fragments into one single painted image, and arranging them in an unusual combination (Liu 58). However, these fragments were never situated in the same space or time. The combination of fragments lends a certain oddity and awkwardness to Liu's painting, creating a surrealistic world. Despite being rendered in a realistic style, these fragments are artificial, separated from the real world. By "surrealistic", Liu points out that it is not the surrealism of Salvador Dalí, rather, the real world itself is a surrealistic one without a unified narrative (57).



Battlefield Realism: Images of the New Eighteen Arhats, Liu Xiaodong, 2004, oil on canvas

In 2004, Liu produced *Battlefield Realism: Images of the New Eighteen Arhats* (Zhandi xiesheng: xin shiba luohan xiang 战地写生: 新十八罗汉像) by the invitation from Cai Guo-Qiang 蔡国强 (b. 1957) to the exhibition (also curated by Cai) in the Bunker Museum of

Contemporary Arts in Kinmen. Constructed with eighteen separate panels, Liu painted nine soldiers from each side of the Mainland and Taiwan in each panel. However, Liu chose to associate soldiers with the traditional Buddhist wise men *luohan*, the arhat in Chinese Buddhism, which are never represented as violent in traditional Chinese paintings. Such reference to traditional Chinese subject matter has constantly appeared in Liu's works. Liu also emphasizes that the inspiration of the second painting of the Three Gorges series is from a painting of 李公麟 (Li Gonglin) (1049–1106), a Chinese painter in the Northern Song Dynasty. Liu's constant references to a Chinese aesthetic is a mark of his study in the Third Studio and its goal of achieving a "national-style" painting.

Battlefield Realism is the first time that Liu worked with panel structure and painting from life on site. Since then, Liu has worked with this process and has gradually built up a unique system of his artistic production. Liu has traveled to places both in China and abroad, such as Tibet, Sichuan, Thailand, Palestine, and Israel. Wherever he goes, Liu builds a temporal studio painting on site and brings a film crew group with him to record the painting process as well as to record the local society and living situation of the people there. After finishing the project, Liu will have an exhibition to present his paintings, a documentary, research, and his diary.

History of Three Gorges Dam

Liu Xiaodong first went to Three Gorges in 2002; initially, Liu did not undertake the Three Gorges as a topic for his painting.³ At the time, the Three Gorges Dam was still under construction and left a deep impression on Liu. After coming back from the region of Three Gorges, Liu produced the first monumental panel painting of his Three Gorges series, 三峡大移民 (*Great Migration at the Three Gorges*) (2003). Liu went to Three Gorges in 2003 again, coming back with photographs he took there, and he produced 三峡新移民 (*Newly Displaced Population*) 三峡新移民 (2004). Both of these paintings respond to the huge human cost brought by the Three Gorges Dam: massive migration and the displacement of population.

The Three Gorges Dam is a hydroelectric dam located on the upper reaches of the

³ In 2002, Liu Xiaodong's wife Yu Hong 喻红 (b. 1966) was holding an exhibition in Wuhan, China and the curator sent them traveling to Three Gorges, which became the first time that Liu has even been to Three Gorges region.

Yangtze River in southwestern China. This project had been planned and discussed since 孙中山 Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), the father of modern China, first wrote a petition about the magic power of electricity in 1894, which later became a major concern for every government.⁴ The major benefits that the government claimed the Three Gorges Dam would completely solve are the uncontrolled flood problem which has existed since the Han Dynasty in 206 BC; efficiently increasing national output of electricity by 10%; and leading to a better navigation (Dai 147). However, many Chinese engineers and journalists had argued that an equal result can be achieved with a much less environmental risk and human cost by a series of smaller dams in less populated areas (Chetham 220). Chinese engineer and journalist 戴晴 (Dai Qing) (b. 1941) has opposed this uncontrolled project, reporting and conducting independent research on the Three Gorges area. She also collected interviews and essays from people who opposed this project. After decades of debates, the Chinese government eventually approved the construction of this project in 1992. The construction of the Three Gorges Dam began in 1994 and was completed in 2009, but discussion and reflection of this highly controversial project never ends.

The Three Gorges Dam is named after the region of Three Gorges, where a much longer history traces back to the Upper Paleolithic era (ca. 45,000-8000 BC). With its long history, this area also embodies a cultural imagination. Many stories of legends, goddesses and regional tales are inscribed in every rock and mountain there.⁵ From the Tang Dynasty (618-907), many famous poets such as 李白 (Li Bai) (701-762) and 杜甫 (Du Fu) (702-772) produced innumerable poems about Three Gorges. Du Fu lived in Fengjie from 766-768. In his miserable exile and in his distress at the state of political affairs, he wrote nearly a quarter of his life's work, or about 400 poems, during his two years in Fengjie (Chetham 26). “*Zaofa Baidi cheng* 早发白帝城” (Setting Out at Dawn from Baidicheng) by Li Bai is one of the most famous depictions of the Three Gorges Region, which records the journey along the Gorges.

At dawn depart Baidi midst many-colored clouds
Across 1,000 li to Jiangling in a single day return
From both banks the sound of gibbons crying without rest

⁴ Sun Yat-sen did not succeed to present his petition in 1894, but this should be the very first time that the idea of hydroelectricity appeared in Chinese history. Though, there are different versions about specific date of Sun Yat-sen's proposal. In the book of *Before the Deluge*, it is 1919. According to Dai Qing, it is 1912.

⁵ See more about archeological sites in Chapter 2 History and Myth in Chetham. *Before the Deluge*.

The light skiff has already crossed myriad-fold mountains

朝辞白帝彩云间，千里江陵一日还。

两岸猿声啼不住，轻舟已过万重山。

Three Gorges has long existed as a literary myth and an iconic cultural landscape. Among the beautiful scenes along the Yangtze River, Kui Gate (*Kuimen*夔门) is the most recognizable one. Made up of two mountains, it marks the downstream entry to the Gorges. Kuimen has been depicted in numerous poems and travel notes. It is also represented on the back of the ¥10 banknote of the Chinese currency. Thus, it has been one of the most popular tourist spots in China with its beautiful scenery.⁶ However, the construction of Three Gorges Dam alters the appearance of the landscape forever. In the period leading up to the construction, the amount of tourism greatly increased since people all over China and the world wanted to see it one last time.

Liu Xiaodong's Engagement with the Three Gorges Dam

The construction of the Three Gorges Dam has brought much degradation on the environment, which consequently brings the harm to the people. The demolition of thirteen towns and cities caused displacement of more than one million residents. Many residents are displaced to faraway provinces that have totally different cultures, weather, and unintelligible dialects.⁷

Many artists have responded to the controversial issues raised by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam in various ways. In 2008, Wu Hung curated an exhibition entitled *Displacement: The Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art*, which was held in the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago. Four artists who work with different media were featured in this exhibition: Ji Yunfei 季云飞 (b. 1963), Zhuang Hui 庄辉 (b. 1963), Chen Qiulin 陈秋林 (b. 1975), and Liu Xiaodong. The paintings of Ji Yunfei, which feature traditional Chinese formats such as the handscroll as well as traditional Chinese ink and pigments, portray the migration of impoverished people who are haunted by ghosts. Zhuang Hui, a conceptual artist and photographer, documents the changes wrought upon the landscape through photographic installations. Chen Qiulin uses performance, video, and installation to emphasize

⁶ See more about cultural landscape and literary landscape of Three Gorges in Byrnes, *Fixing Landscape*.

⁷ See more about human cost in chapter 10, Chetham, *Before the Deluge*, 188.

her perspective that her native city of Wanzhou was partially submerged under the water due to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. In *Displacement*, Liu Xiaodong was represented by an oil painting entitled *Hotbed No. 1*. Like Ji Yunfei, Liu focused on the human cost of the dam. But unlike Ji, who populated his paintings with ghosts, Liu emphasized the sheer misery of the workers who labored to demolish thousands of buildings in the cities that would be submerged once the dam was completed. As is his habit, he approached the people at the site, enhancing the sense of their alienation and solitude.

Hotbed No. 1 was preceded by several other paintings about the Three Gorges. Indeed, Liu often works in series, experimenting with various perspectives or figural compositions in each unit of a series. Liu's Three Gorges series involved the creation of three major multi-panel monumental paintings: *Great Migration at the Three Gorges* (Sanxia da yimin 三峡大移民) (2003), *Newly Displaced Population* (Sanxia xin yimin 三峡新移民) (2004), and *Hotbed No. 1* (Wenchuang zhi yi 温床之一) (2005). In addition to these three monumental oil paintings, Liu also produced other small paintings, which are derived from the multi-panel works. The first two multi-panel monumental paintings are both reproduced from photographs and composed with fragments. Only the third large painting, *Hotbed No. 1*, which I will examine in detail later, was produced from life (*xiesheng* 写生) on the site of Three Gorges itself.

Sanxia da yimin 三峡大移民 (*Great Migration at the Three Gorges*) is Liu's first monumental painting about Three Gorges. This 200 cm x 800 cm painting is comprised of four panels. Liu reproduced it from photographs he took after coming back from the Three Gorges area in 2003. Liu first saw a group of laborers carrying the long metal rod in 2001 while he was driving on a highway in Beijing. He later asked the laborers who built a house for him in Beijing to reenact this scene with a water tube in his yard. After coming back from the Three Gorges area, he finally decided to transpose this scene with the landscape of Three Gorges area and produced it in his studio based on photographs he took.



Migrant workers in yard of my studio, Liu Xiaodong, photograph

As I have mentioned before, Liu's practice of combining fragments from photographs is also applied in this painting, which results in an abrupt disconnection between figures and landscape. Without the reference of Three Gorges in the title, no direct association of that region can be made from only viewing the painting. The landscape only functions as a backdrop behind the human figures. Instead of responding to the alteration of landscape, Liu primarily focuses on human activities and represents a chaotic scene of a variety of people in this painting. This group of six labors is placed dominantly in the foreground. They are neither situated in the landscape nor interacting with it. Their distinctive costumes, motionless gestures, and emotionless facial expression, all make it as a staged performance.



Great Migration at the Three Gorges, Liu Xiaodong, 2003, oil on canvas

In the second panel on the left, three children are playing on the ground in the bottom next to two pigs, one with a toy gun; beside the dried-up river bed, many temporary work sheds were built, and some people who drive motorbikes are coming toward us. Such depiction responds to issues of migrant laborers, who are not local residents. They come from elsewhere doing the job brought by construction or destruction and displace the people who had lived there for a long time.

三峡新移民 (*Newly Displaced Population*) (2004) is Liu's second monumental painting of the Three Gorges Project, another four panel painting, 300 cm x 1000 cm, depicting four different groups of displaced people along the river. The literal Chinese title of this painting is "Newly Displaced People from Three Gorges." This is the only time that Liu includes the Three Gorges Dam itself in his paintings. However, as a state project, the Three Gorges Dam is not centered in this painting but on the side in the first panel, which is in the middle of construction and fading away in the mist. Liu is never interested in representing this gigantic engineering marvel and his representation of the Three Gorges Dam is diametrically opposed to the glorification of the dam and the nation. What is closely placed next to this national construction is its interference of the landscape: a residential area, occupied by groups of small buildings, is waiting to be flooded. Four different groups of people, potentially forced to be relocated from the residential area, stand on the riverbank, dealing with their new life situation. Furthermore, Liu placed a duck above the Three Gorges Dam in the first panel. In the nationalist narrative, the national construction would only be aligned with heroic people. Such juxtaposition of a duck and the dam undermines the nationalist narrative. More importantly, this duck reappears in the third panel, but is shown violently dead hanging in midair, which demonstrates the environmental cost brought by the dam. Liu's representation of two temporary moments of this duck in one painting exemplifies his experiment on temporality, which is further developed in *Hotbed No.1*.



Newly Displaced Population, Liu Xiaodong, 2004, oil on canvas

Similar to the painting *Great Migration*, *Newly Displaced Population* was also reproduced from photographs in Liu's studio in Beijing. The fragment of the duck comes from a photograph in a magazine. Figures that were depicted in the two paintings are not all locals from the Three Gorges area. Since they are fragments from photographs, the element of three children appears in both paintings, but a different composition in the larger scale with more detailed depiction in *Newly Displaced Population*. According to Liu's photographs, two young men on the first panel on the right are from Baidicheng, and three prostitutes on the same panel were photographed by Liu in an apartment in Beijing, who also appear in Liu's painting *Prostitutes No. 9* in 2001. In this painting, different people from different places were juxtaposed with the landscape of Three Gorges, representing a disjunctive presence (Decrop 101). Liu's use of fragments becomes more explicit in his painting *Hotbed No. 1*; without the use of photographs, fragments of time and space still exist by painting from life on site.

Compared to the disjunction between figures and the landscape in *Great Migration*, *Newly Displaced Population* presents an attempt of interaction between humans and the environment. Liu claimed that this painting is inspired by the representation of interaction between humans and water in the painting *Picture of Confluence of Oceans* by Li Gonglin that Liu saw in New York in a private collection. Known from Liu's several drafts of *Newly Displaced Population*, one can tell that Liu's original idea is far different from this final version, which places a fair amount of people in the river to show the great amount of water flooding everywhere. In the end, Liu chooses a V-shaped composition to arrange four groups of people along the river bank in the foreground. People either look toward us or facing the overwhelming

water.

In 2004, these two paintings, *Great Migration at the Three Gorges*, and *Newly Displaced Population* (2004), were exhibited in the China Art Archives & Warehouse (CAAW) in Beijing, directed by Ai Weiwei 艾未未 (b. 1957). During that exhibition, under Liu's request, the writer Ah Cheng 阿城 (b. 1949) compiled a book called *Chang Jiang jilu* 长江辑录 (Compiled records about the Yangtze River). In about one hundred thousand words, Ah Cheng includes Sun Yat-sen's ambition, a history of Three Gorges, and articles by some long-time opponents of the project, such as the journalist Dai Qing and hydrologist Huang Wanli 黄万里 (1911-2011). Liu was touched by Ah Cheng's dedication of the compilation of records as a more meaningful intellectual labor, compared to his own production in studio.

Ah Cheng's book helped Liu to understand the complicated cultural and historical significance of the Three Gorges area and the serious social issues that resulted from the construction of the dam. After learning this history, Liu was inspired to go to Three Gorges and match his labor of painting with the labor of constructing the Three Gorges Dam rather than hiding in the studio, imagining the people who witnessed the environmental destruction and who labored there. Liu realized that relying only on photographs to reproduce paintings in the clean studio is not enough. His first two paintings of the Three Gorges are not serious enough; they do not embody the monumental history of the Three Gorges (Liu, 73). Therefore, Liu decided to paint on site.

In 2005, when Liu went to Three Gorges to paint *Hotbed No.1*, he invited Jia Zhangke to make a documentary about his painting process. This became the film *Dong* 东 (2006), named after Liu Xiaodong and the direction East (东). Jia further developed the material he filmed for the documentary into a second film, the well-known *Sanxia haoren* 三峡好人 (Decent People from Three Gorges), ordinarily translated into English as *Still Life* (2006).

Although Liu has explored ways of juxtaposing figures and landscapes in his first two paintings, the relationship between humans and the environment is not clearly represented. In the third painting, *Hotbed No.1*, Liu situates the human in a degraded environment and depicts the dissolution of both human and environment.

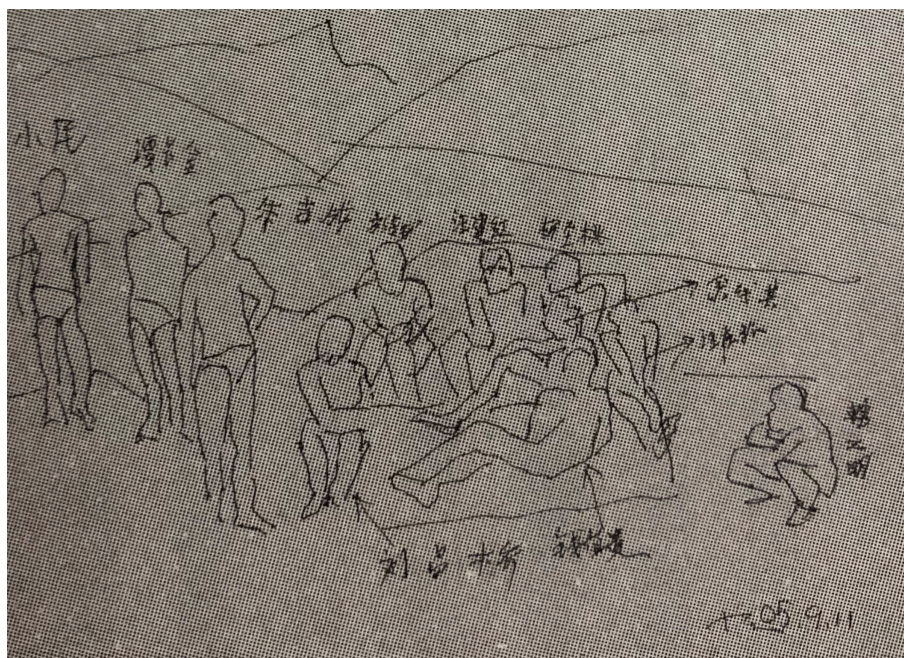
Liu Xiaodong and *Hotbed No.1* (Wenchuang zhi yi 温床之一)

In September 2005, Liu Xiaodong went to Fengjie, a city that was slowly being destroyed by the elevation of water by the building of the Three Gorges Dam. Liu produced *Hotbed No.1* in a temporary studio on the rooftop of an abandoned building in Fengjie. *Hotbed No.1* is the third and the last multiple-panel monumental painting of Liu's Three Gorges project. Constructed with five panels, 260 cm x 1000 cm, *Hotbed No.1* continues the same panel construction that was employed in the previous two paintings, *Great Migration at the Three Gorges* (2003) and *Newly Displaced Population* (2004). Unlike the first two paintings in this series, *Hotbed No. 1* was not based on combinations of different photographs. It was painted instead from life and on site. Thus, it truly represents the miserable situation of migrant laborers at the site of the Three Gorges dam.

Liu has typically turned away from grand nationalist narratives to document the lives of ordinary and miserable people. The state government ordered that the entire city be demolished. The demolition project required enormous human resources. Migrant laborers flocked to the site for work. Even though migrant laborers undertook an unimaginable amount of work for this national construction, their contributions have been seldom recognized and their living conditions have been ignored. As Liu said in the interview, the “narrative of heroism made me uncomfortable because in my eyes every individual is important. Everyone possesses only one life and only has this one experience” (Liu 22). During his previous visit to Fengjie, Liu had met and photographed a group of migrant laborers. Prior to painting *Hotbed No.1*, he actively sought them out again. Liu hired eleven of them as models and produced a group portrait of them in *Hotbed No.1*. These laborers have never been a part of official Chinese history nor owned their own stories. Through writing down their names in his diary, depicting them in his painting, and documenting them in the documentary, Liu creates a verbal history of a group of migrant laborers. As what Liu said, “the individual has never stood in the center of Chinese history, only the collective. As a painter, I direct my gaze on the humanity, the individuality, and the subjectivity of every single person in their actual lived reality” (Liu 23).

In Liu's sketches, which preceded his paintings, each laborer is clearly identified. The squatting person in the far-right panel is Han Sanming 韩三明; the man on the right edge of the mattress is Wang Qingsong 汪庆松, the leader of this group, who brought the rest of the people from their hometown to Fengjie to earn a living. Lying across two panels next to him, is Qian

Zhigui 钱值贵. The man who sits in the center of the mattress is Yu Daiqi 余代其. The three men who sit along the back on the sofa from right to left are: Yang Shengtao 杨圣桃, Wang Jianhong 汪建红, and Fang Chuan'an 方传安; the last person left on the mattress is Liu Changqiao 刘昌桥; the young man, standing in a distance from the mattress on the left, is Zhu Jicheng 朱吉成, who is only eighteen years old. In the next panel, there are two standing men; from right to left, they are Tan Changjin 谭长金 and Xiaomin 小民.



From left to right, top to bottom: Xiaoming, Tan Changjin, Zhu Jicheng, Fang Chuanan, Wang Jianhong, Yang Shengtao, Yu Daiqi, Wang Qingsong, Han Sanming, Liu Changqiao, Qian Zhigui. Liu Xiaodong's sketch.

Although this painting was produced on site and Liu did not rely on photographs to combine people from different places and simulate the landscape of Fengjie, he still took many photographs during his production of *Hotbed No. 1*. The photograph below tells us that Liu's original plan was to depict laborers playing cards around a table, similar to scenes in Paul Cézanne's series of oil paintings *The Card Players*. In the end, Liu entitles this painting as *Hotbed* and carefully depicts four men sitting or lying on the mattress in an extremely painterly

and loose way, which accentuates the sensuality of their play.



Liu's photograph

The literal Chinese title of this painting is *wenchuang*, which means a warm bed. The living condition of migrant laborers was bad and dangerous. The whole city of Fengjie was under demolition and these migrant laborers who undertook the demolition work could only live in the temporal buildings that had not been demolished. They were not even able to rest and sleep in the mattress after every day's hard work. Liu placed a new mattress on the rooftop and arranged the migrant laborers to play the card game on it. In *Hotbed No.1*, Liu depicts a tilt-up mattress in a reddish and sensual way and creates a focal point in the center. Four men who are either sitting or lying down on the mattress are aligned together in a circle. Three men sit on the sofa behind the mattress watching the card game. Even though they are together, they seem to be disconnected and isolated from each other. Although all the photographs that Liu took show that everyone who participates in this game is laughing and enjoying the moment, Liu depicted them with miserable facial expressions, reflecting their harsh living condition and suffering.

The central placement of the mattress in *Hotbed No.1* continues in *Hotbed No.2* (2006). Another five-panel monumental painting of the same size, *Hotbed No.2* depicts eleven female bar workers in Bangkok, Thailand, wearing bright-colored clothing with a mysterious

background full of tropical fruits. These eleven female bar workers all come from nearby villages to Bangkok to find jobs, thus becoming migrants into the city. Pi Li suggests that the mattress becomes a momentary rest for these migrant laborers and an escape from the disorderly reality (647).

Time in Hotbed No.1

Five large panels comprise *Hotbed No.1*. Because Liu painted each panel separately, the horizontal composition itself is strongly divided into parts. The overall composition is broken-up and viewers will tend to look at it panel by panel. Furthermore, each panel is 260 cm long and 200 cm high. Each panel required a significant amount of time to paint. The divisions within this enormous painting are not simply marked by the five panels; each panel represents a different time and space.

Liu's awareness of this effect and his obsession with time are clearly evidenced in his diary. On 17 September 2005, Liu wrote about the central panel in his diary:

Today is mostly a sunny day. White clouds wind around transparent blue mountains.

There is no fog. Just now I am able to look at the beautiful fine details of the mountains on the opposite bank of the clear river. During the past two days, I have almost finished painting Fang Chuan'an, Wang Jianhong, and Yang Shengtao. Only Fang Chuan'an was painted on a cloudy day. Therefore, I finished painting him in the light of a cloudy sky. The others I painted on sunny days. It was already sunset when it came to paint the landscape in background of this panel. Therefore, the background was depicted as a background at the sunset time. Jeff was right: I painted time into my painting. Today is also a cloudy day, and I painted Liu Changqiao. Painting from life is absolutely true to *transcribe* every single detail. When the *transcription* is finished, the whole painting is not situated in the same space or time. They are all in their own space and time, just like our lives, which is completely among fragments. Among fragments, we unconsciously complete our experience.

今天阴晴天，白云缠绕在透明的青蓝色的山间，没有雾，才看清江对岸的山间美丽的细节。这两天，方传安、汪建红、杨圣桃几乎画完，方传安赶上阴天就画成了阴

天的光线，别人是太阳天画的，这幅的背景赶上傍晚没了太阳的时候，也就画成了傍晚，Jeff说得对，把时间画进去了。今天画刘昌桥，也是阴天。写生是绝对地真实地对每一个细节的抄写，等抄写完毕，整幅作品却不是在同一空间、时间里的，他们各在自己的空间、时间里，像我们的生活，完全在片段中，在片段中不知不觉完成我们的体验。⁸

And on September 19th, 2015, Liu wrote about the second panel on the left in his diary:

Painted Xiaomin [the person on the left], and then painted the landscape behind him - Kuimen. He was in the sunlight at the noon. When it came to the background, it already was the sunset time. It took time three hours to pass from Xiaomin to Kuimen. That is to say, in this panel, time had constantly shuttled back and forth from the figure to figure, from the figure to the landscape, from the noon to the dusk approaching evening, and from a sunny day to a cloudy day.

画小民，然后画了他身后的风景—夔门。他在中午的阳光下，等画到背景已是傍晚，时间从他走到夔门用了3个小时，也就是说，在这次这张作品里，时间不停地在人物与人物与景物间穿行，从中午到傍晚，从晴天到阴天。

It is clear from both the diary and the painting that the constantly changing light conditions outside was an important factor that enabled Liu to delineate the passage of time. Since this painting was produced outside, unlike an indoor studio painting done with stable light source, the weather and the time of the day both dramatically affect the condition of the sunlight. The passage of time becomes perceptible in the changing colors of light in each panel. Therefore, in each panel, there is a specific hue reflecting the individual day. While the far-right panel has the most neutral color of the background, the rest of the panels employ certain hues. For example, the second panel on the left employs a pink hue, which potentially is resulted from the sunset producing time according to Liu's diary.

To emphasize the change in time and the fact that each panel was created separately, the panels are not continuous. The levels of the wall of the rooftop in each panel are not consistent. Especially in the far-right panel, the wall is dramatically lower than the rest of the panels. At the same time, Sanming in that panel is squatting in a low body position. Subsequently, the wall and

⁸ Jeff Kelly is the consulting curator of Asian Art Museum at San Francisco.

the squatting body position establish the lowest level in the far-right panel of the painting. In the next three panels in the middle, figures that are lying and sitting on the mattress and the sofa are slightly higher than Sanming's squatting position. The up-standing figures on the left are even higher. With the increasing levels of body positions and the descending outline of the mountain on the left, a diagonal composition is created.

Accompanied by the diagonal composition, Liu also applies an increasing painterly and loose brush style moving, from right to left. Like the shifting frames of the composition, the unstable application of paint to canvas adds to the sense of change that imbues this painting. Liu precisely rendered the figure with a contained squatting position and a background of carefully depicted landscape and residential place. Windows of the building, shadow, and reflection of light on the mountain are all clearly shown in the background. The thick impasto leaves visible the traces of the brush as it smeared paint onto the canvas. On the three central panels, Liu's depictions gradually become sketchy. He reduces the amount of paint and loosely depicts the bodies of migrant workers, the mattress, and the landscape. There are some washes and streaks of paints. Incompleteness appears in the second panel on the left: an area of the rooftop and the wall is awkwardly left as vacant. On the final panel, Liu leaves most of the canvas unfinished, in which a juxtaposition of mostly destroyed mountain and destructed houses are placed. The landscape is mostly finished, but the destructed houses are simply outlined with several tiny stick figures, which look like demolition labors.



A Bunch of Pork at River, Liu
Xiaodong, 2003, oil on canvas

Along with the changing brush style, Liu also presents a dehumanization through depictions of different forms of human bodies. On the far right, Sanming's body is the most contained and carefully depicted one. The rest of bodies in the middle are much more abstracted, and gradually become less in the form of a human. *A Bunch of Pork at River* (2003) is another painting of Liu's Three Gorges series, in which a piece of meat is hanging in the mid-air near the riverbank. In Liu's interview with Jean Marc Decrop, Liu said that he used this piece of meat to cover up the landscape which should be the construction site of the dam. Furthermore, Liu explained this painting as an allegory "The scene was actually taken from a small stall selling noodles. The cook was cutting slices of pork directly from the hanging piece of meat into the frying pan... I was thinking that the Authority was likewise cutting into the flesh of common people to serve its purposes" (Liu 22). The representation of the human body as meat-like flesh is developed in *Hotbed No.1* as well. The bodies of Tan Changjin and Xiaomin are especially developed in the second panel on the left, with the use of meat-like colors of pink, red and white to portray their chests. The mattress is also depicted as meat, the red edge with white stroke on the right in particular. Furthermore, at the end of this painting in the far-left panel, the form of the human being is being reduced to tiny stick-like figures at work on the cliffs along the river's

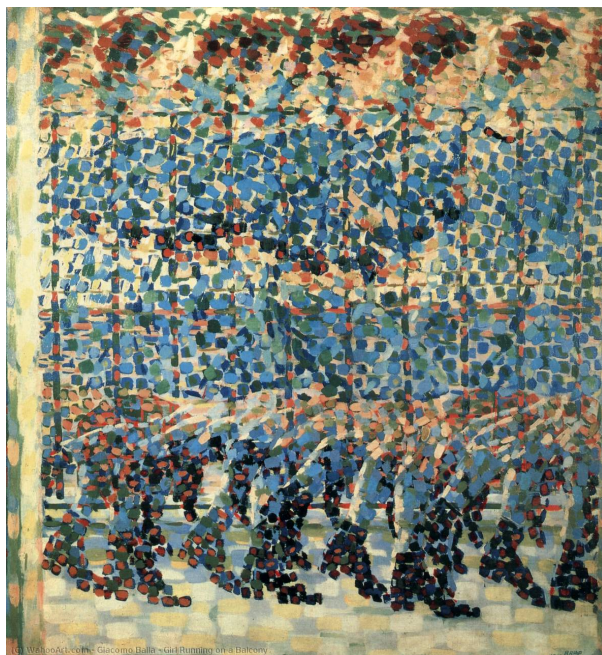
edge on an unfinished canvas.

Therefore, time is not only evident in the changing light and changing perspective of the landscape. More importantly, a changing brush style, a gradual dehumanized depiction of migrant laborers, a diagonal composition, and an incomplete end, all show that the gathering of this group of workers itself is an ephemeral moment and everything is moving toward dissolution.

Liu's interest in panel structure and embodiment of the passage of time shown in *Hotbed No.1* has been further explored by him in his later production. In 2007, Liu produced 青藏铁路 (*Qingzang Tibet Railway*) with similar five-panel structure. In 2015, Liu produced 时间 (*Time*) (2015) with twenty panels. Each panel is finished separately in different dates; figures' gesture, the sky, the expression-- everything in this painting is constantly changing, emphasizing the passage of time.

Hotbed No.1 as a Cinematic Painting

Yu Daiqi's feet, the man who sits on the center of the mattress, is so ambiguous that it's hard to distinguish his leg from the leg of the person Yang Shengtao, who sits on the sofa behind him. Considering that Liu painted them playing cards on site (which is a constantly moving scene), this unclear depiction of legs could also be understood as the movement of the leg, which is similar Italian futurism. *Young Girl Running on Balcony* (1912) is a representative painting of Italian futurism, produced by Giacomo Balla. It captures the girl's repeated form across the canvas, representing her movement through the space of the balcony.



Young Girl Running on Balcony, Giacomo Balla, 1912, oil on canvas

In the horizontal composition that is created by the multi-panel structure, Liu places the migrant workers in the foreground. From right to left, Liu carefully arranged some workers in observer positions to unfold the narrative. Beginning with Sanming resting his elbow on his knees on the far-right panel, Liu positioned him as a thinker and observer. Although he is separate from the gathering that is centered in this painting, his thoughtful gaze focalizes and directs the vision of the scene that is upcoming on the next two central panels. With the unfolding primary scene of workers playing the card game, Liu places another observer, the young man Zhu Jicheng, standing next to the mattress. While Zhu is looking at this ongoing game of sensual male bodies, he is shown with an erect penis. Emphasizing the erection, Liu regards it as the youth and energy of the male body. In the next panel on the left, two men stand even more distant, leaving the major scene. The lost thoughts shown in their faces lead us to the end of dissolution. This use of different stages of participating in the game to unfold a narrative may be understood to be part of the filmic presentation of the figural group.

In addition to the multi-panel structure, the monumental scale is another unusual composition of this painting. Its monumental scale requires the act of scanning for the audience when standing in front of the painting also mimics the cinematic technique of panning as a way

to capture temporality. The background of the landscape is changing, as if it had been panned by a camera. Interestingly, many scholars have also argued that Jia's use of camera work is influenced by both landscape painting and figurative painting.

As mentioned before, Liu has had a close relationship with the Sixth Generation Filmmakers since the 1990s; they went to college around the same time and experienced the same social environment. The Sixth Generation Filmmakers, a group of independent filmmakers, arose around 1989 after the tremendous Tiananmen Square Movement. The Sixth Generation Film is known for subjects of marginalized characters, semi-underground life-style, low budget, and non-professional actors, which is opposed to the national epic style of the Fifth Generation. Some representative Sixth Generation Filmmakers are Zhang Yuan 张元 (b. 1963), Wang Xiaoshuai 王小帅 (b. 1966), and Jia Zhangke. Liu has actively engaged with their film production from the beginning and still today.

In 1992, Liu co-starred with his wife Yu Hong in Wang Xiaoshuai's first film *冬春的日子* (*The Days*) (1993), which was later named as one of the top 100 most important international films of the past century by the BBC. In the same year, Liu also undertook as the art director of Zhang Yuan's film *Beijing Bastards* 北京杂种 (1993). In 1995, Liu produced a painting based on the film with the same title by Zhang Yuan. In 2000, he produced another painting: *Heroes Always Stem From Youth*, based on a scene from Wang Xiaoshuai's film *十七岁的单车* (*Beijing Bicycle*) (2001), etc (Ou 143).

Liu's interaction with film seems even more significant in the case of *Hotbed No.1*. Jia Zhangke has known Liu since Liu's very first solo exhibition in 1990. A German company was about to sponsor Jia to make a documentary of a contemporary artist and Jia chose Liu for his Three Gorges project. However, this plan did not pan out, and Liu decided to go to Fengjie anyway, preparing his production of *Hotbed No.1*. While Liu was already at Fengjie, his friend Dan Bo 淡勃 (b. 1972) called him and in a very short amount of time, he decided to sponsor Jia to make this documentary of Liu.

The collaboration with Jia would have interesting ramifications for the composition of *Hotbed*, as we shall see. While Sanming and Zhu are observing the ongoing card game, Liu is observing and depicting all of them. At the same time, Liu himself is observed and recorded by the film crew group. Furthermore, all the residents nearby are observing both Liu's painting

process and the film crew's group recording process. All of Liu's careful arrangements makes the process of this painting like a performance. Liu's project inspired Jia to further produce an accompanied fiction in the film *Still Life*. The squatting person on the far-right panel, Sanming, plays the actor after his name Han Sanming. In Jia's film *Still Life* (2006), Sanming is a coal-miner from Shanxi province, who has returned to Fengjie and works as a demolition laborer while searching for his wife and daughter.

Traditionally, oil painting on canvas is regarded as more capable of representing one single significant moment rather than temporality embodied in film because the limitation of two dimensionalities of this medium. However, Liu's practice of using panel structure and painting over time at the same site enabled him to capture the passage of time in *Hotbed*. He was hardly limited to the representation of a "decisive moment" (Pi 647). As indicated in Liu's diary, he captured the three-hour time difference between the figure and landscape. More significantly, even though film is usually regarded as better at documenting the temporality, the editing can only apply between shots and scenes rather than presenting different times of day within one shot, like what Liu did in one panel.

Dissolution and Memory

Liu produced the scroll painting *River* in 2006, a horizontal scroll, thirty-feet-long by twelve-inches-high. As a compendium of Liu's own history as an artist like a time stream of his personal memory, *River* includes Liu's previous oil paintings going back to his art school days and rolling forward to the present, including *Hotbed No.1*. Each painting that is included in *River* is basically reproduced from his original work with the simple changes of color and composition. However, for the part of *Hotbed No.1*, one figure is deliberately removed by Liu and only left with a simple outline: Wang Qingsong, who died from being pressed underneath the skeleton of the building being demolished on September 23rd, in the middle of Liu's production of *Hotbed* in Fengjie. In the documentary, Dong records Liu's visit to Wang's family in a nearby village and gives his painting of Wang to his family as a remembrance since Wang did not have any other pictures of himself. Liu's painting of life is not simply a representation, but a documentation of the disappearance.

This disappearance of Wang in *River* commemorates his death and reminds people of the harm that the Three Gorges Dam project has brought to people. Such representations of

disappearing of people and the dissolution of the city is also depicted in the last incomplete panel in the *Hotbed*. The incompleteness and disappearance deliberately created by Liu in his paintings become the existence and documentation of the disappearing and disappeared city and people. When the city, the history, the people, and everything are disappearing, Liu's documentation of dissolution brings their existence into history.

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