China's Trickster Mixer-Upper

Using flea-market finds, industrial materials, mixed media, and a hefty dose of irony, Liu Wei comments on China's memory, growth—and amnesia

BY BARBARA POLLACK

Liu Wei always believed "art should be free; it can be disconnected from politics and everything."

When the Rubell Family Collection opened its doors with an exhibition of 28 Chinese artists in time for Art Basel Miami Beach last December, one of the stars that emerged from the show was Liu Wei, whose brand of geometric abstraction surprised many Americans looking for more stereotypical hallmarks of Chinese art. Free of Maos, firecrackers, and calligraphy, Liu Wei's sculptures and paintings are often generated from computer programs.

"Often people want to see what they expect in the work," says Liu Wei, 42, sporting a gray crewneck sweater, 1950s-style glasses, and a clean-shaven head. "They have ideas about China, and are hoping that the work accords with their dreams. When it does, then they think you have creativity. But I don't want people to have such a simple way of looking at my works," says the artist in our interview, translated by Jesse Coffino-Greenberg, director of Xu Bing's New York studio.

"Liu Wei is one of the leaders of his generation," says Michelle Yun, curator of modern and contemporary art at New York's Asia Society Museum. "He

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LEHMANN MAUPIN, NEW YORK AND HONG KONG (2)

***Love it, Bite it I*, 2006–7, from Liu Wei's series of world capitals built out of doggie chews.**

is able to negotiate both the domestic art scene within China, but then is also able to hold his own in this larger international milieu." Indeed, throughout his career, this artist has always been able to maintain an international presence, even while staying and working in Beijing. The scope of his enterprise was made abundantly apparent at his 2011 retrospective at the Minsheng Art Museum in Shanghai, which added to a resume that includes the Sharjah Biennial (2013), the Busan Biennial (2008), the Lyon Biennial (2007), Venice Biennale (2005), as well as the Shanghai Biennale (2004, 2010) and the Guangzhou Triennial (2002, 2005, 2008, 2012). He had his first show in New York at Lehmann Maupin last February, and is also currently represented by Almine Rech Gallery in Paris, White Cube in London, and Long March Space in Beijing. His paintings range in price from $100,000 to $400,000.

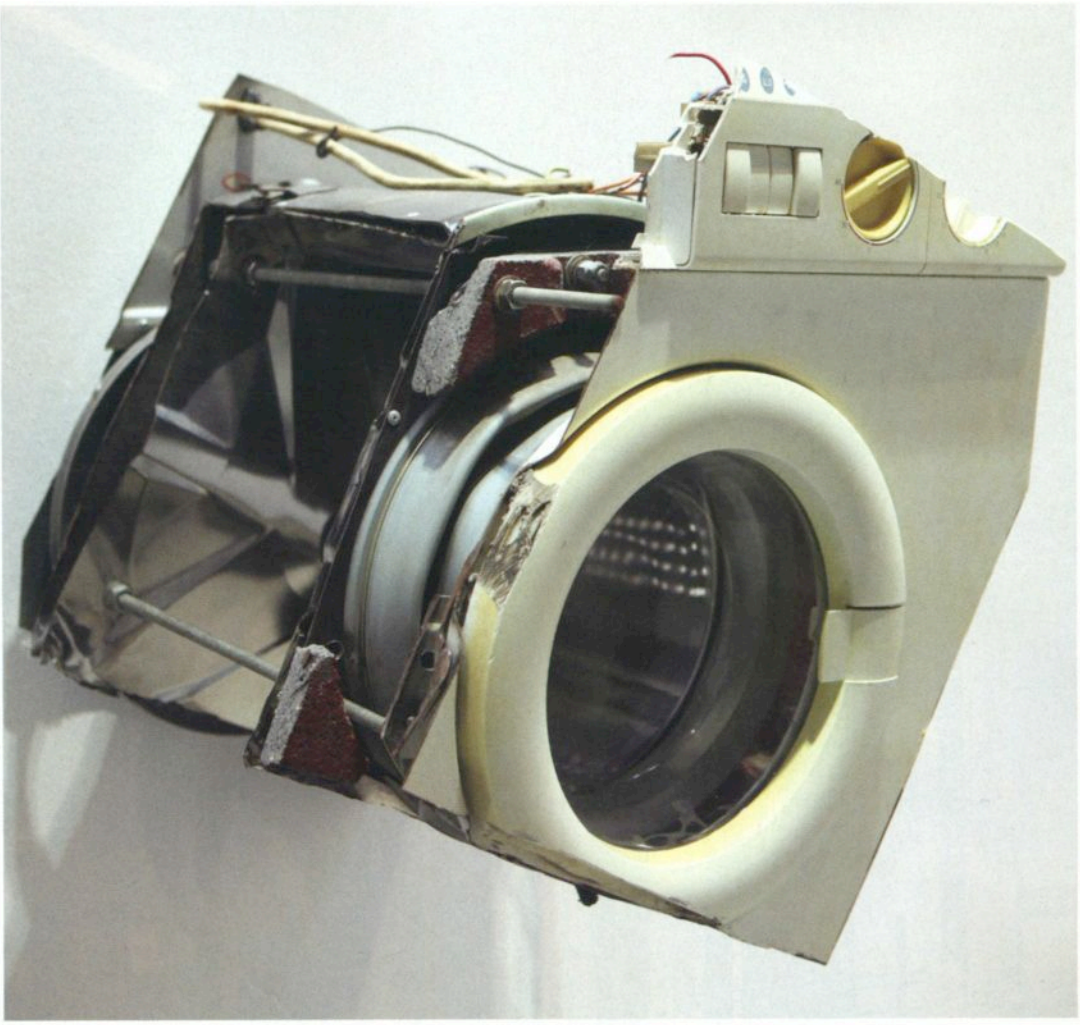
Born in 1972 in Beijing toward the end of the Cultural Revolution, Liu Wei spent his youth moving from place to place as his parents, both doctors, were assigned to various hospitals and clinics around the country. The artist, who recalls a happy childhood spent drawing as his main form of play, attended the prestigious high school of the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou when he was just 15. His family was already known by his teachers because his grandfather ran an important stationery company, with stores in China and Japan, that sold art supplies to such customers as Qi Baishi, China's leading 20th-century modernist painter.

"At that time in China, if you could do a great drawing you could become a famous artist," says Liu Wei, who was more interested then in partying and arguing than studying. A turning point for him, he recalls, was a lecture given by an American professor, titled "The Good Andy and the Bad Andy," on Andy Warhol and Andrew Wyeth, respectively. "It had a great influence on me," he says. "From that point on, I decided I wasn't going to be a good student. Studying technique was not important." Although he achieved mediocre grades in college, he received high praise and encouragement from his teachers, who recognized his creative potential.

Barbara Pollack is a contributing editor of ARTnews.

***As Long As I See It–No. 3*, 2006, composed of a Polaroid and a refrigerator chopped in half.**

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LEHMANN MAUPIN, NEW YORK AND HONG KONG (2)



From the same series, *As Long As I See It - Washing Machine*, 2006, reveals the guts of another household appliance.

"My friends and I were looking at artists born in the 1960s, like Zhang Xiaogang and Wang Guangyi, and we didn't agree with the way they did things," he says. "They all had come up during a political period, and even though they were different from the Cultural Revolution artists, they still had a connection to politics and purpose." Moving to Beijing after he graduated in 1996, Liu Wei gravitated toward a group of artists rebelling against such ideas. "We thought art should be free, it should be whatever you want it to be—it can be disconnected from politics and everything."

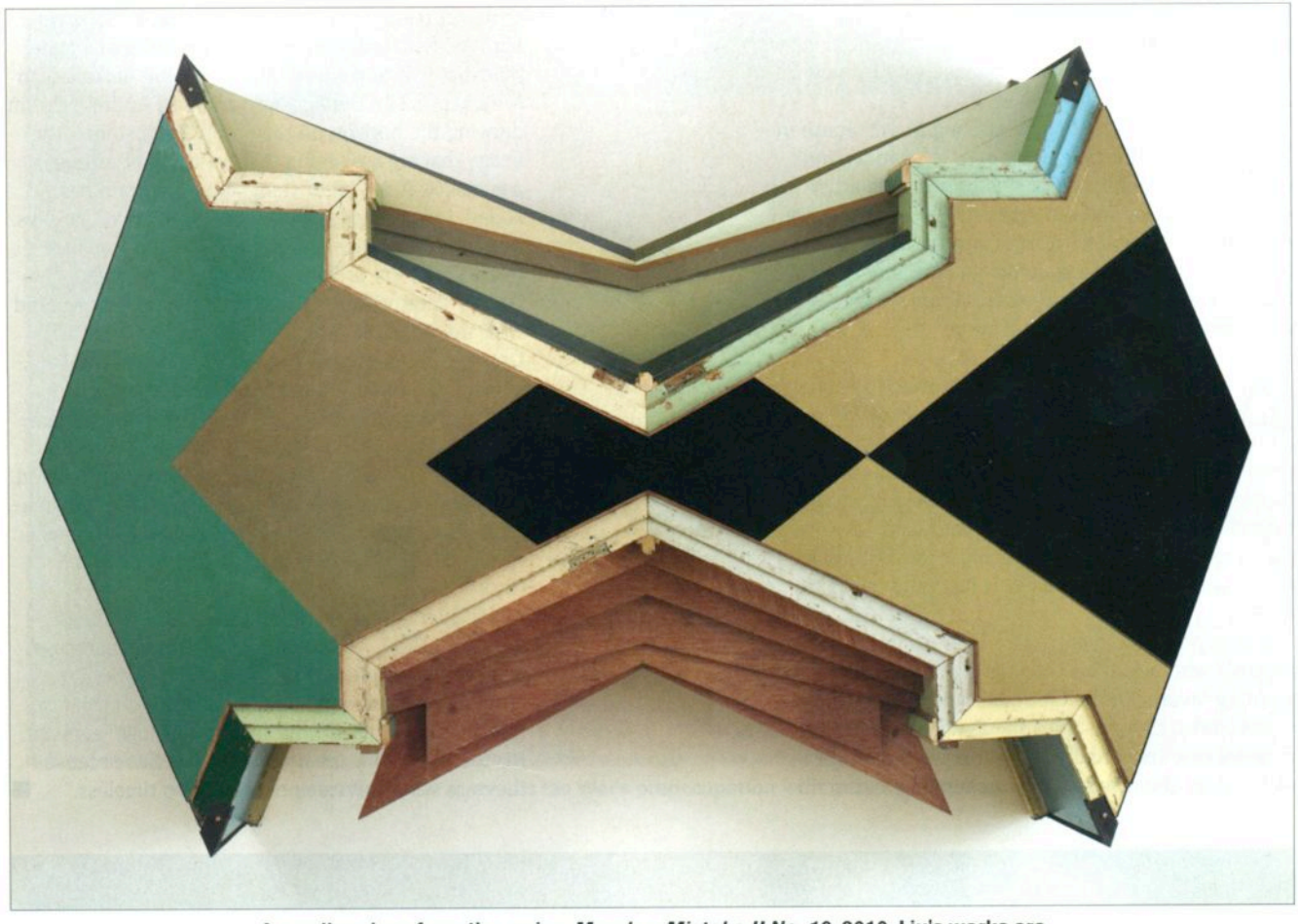
In 1999, Liu Wei was a member of an artists' collective that organized the landmark show "Post-Sense Sensibility: Alien Bodies and Delusion," curated by Qiu Zhijie, a 2012 Hugo Boss–prize nominee, and Wu Meichun. It took three years to organize and all the artists' cash to launch the one-night underground event in the basement of an apartment building. The show included many works of "shock art," including an installation with a human cadaver, and another with a live goose glued to the floor and dying of starvation. For his part, Liu Wei contributed a video, *Hard to Restrain* (1999), depicting a group of naked human beings scooting across the floor like bugs.

"We wanted to take a different approach to understanding the world, posing questions and not just saying 'That's the way it is,'" he explains. "We weren't trying to be critical, because criticism itself had become empty. I don't want to criticize anything." Liu Wei and his friends appreciated the irony that, as a generation trained on realist painting, they were now making works that questioned what is real and what is not, reflecting the rapidly changing conditions in China as it evolved into a capitalist market economy. "I want to find a way to look at reality and pose questions of that reality," he says.

Five years after "Post-Sense Sensibility," Liu Wei achieved instant fame in China with his contribution to the 2004 Shanghai Biennale. He had proposed

***Merely a Mistake II*, 2009–11, like all of Liu Wei's work, is a dissection of his ideas about reality.**

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LEHMANN MAUPIN, NEW YORK AND HONG KONG



A smaller piece from the series, *Merely a Mistake II No. 10*, 2010. Liu's works are "as much a critique of architecture as they are architecture," says Hans Ulrich Obrist.

ELISABETH BERNSTEIN/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LEHMANN MAUPIN, NEW YORK AND HONG KONG

installing a train's boxcar and having it rotate on a set of tracks; the car was to hold a mini-retrospective of his work. Although the proposal was accepted, the organizers told him that it would require alterations. Instead of compromising, Liu Wei submitted an entirely new work, *Looks Like a Landscape* (2004), a mural-size photograph that resembled a moody Chinese scroll painting of a mountain range, but it was actually an assemblage of naked backsides. "I was really angry, really angry, so I decided to show them an ass," he recalls. "But it looked like a Chinese landscape, so they liked it."

At the time, the artist was still working full-time as a photo editor at the independent liberal newspaper *Beijing Youth Daily*. The job ended when the Chinese government took over the paper to exercise control over its freethinking coverage. But, by then, the Shanghai Biennale had made Liu Wei into an art star. "This photograph changed my life and made it possible for me to live off my work," he says. "The day after the opening I was getting calls, calls, calls." Swiss collector Uli Sigg immediately acquired the work.

In the ensuing years, Liu Wei began to exhibit his works in galleries, changing strategies and styles with each exhibition. In 2005, he exhibited a series of badly drawn diamonds along with paintings of starry skies at Beijing's Courtyard Gallery. Next he made *Love it, Bite it I* (2006–7), a series of constructions of world capitals made out of rawhide dog chews, equating a dog's love of biting with man's quest for power. At Beijing Commune in 2006, he took Polaroids of ordinary things, like trees, washing machines, and television sets, and then, after cropping the images, cut out the actual objects to match the framing in the photograph.

But his breakthrough work was *Outcast I*, shown at Boers-Li Gallery, also in Beijing, in May 2007. For this installation, Liu Wei built a huge, hanger-size shelter out of windows and doors discarded from government institutions and still bearing the green paint identified with Chinese hospitals and schools. Viewers could peer in and see a meeting hall with desks and telephones set amid an interior windstorm, with papers and dust being blown around by electric fans. It is a vision of depleted Communist power, devoid of the popular enthusiasm it once

inspired. It also sums up Beijing's urbanization process, whereby buildings that once had social currency are ripped down daily to make way for new architectural wonders.

"I remember his first show at Long March Space in 2010, which really caught my eye," says independent critic Lee Ambrozy. For this project, the artist cut into the floor and transgressed the gallery space, creating a cityscape with skyscrapers and steel scaffolding. "From one perspective you are seeing a city from a distance," Ambrozy says. "From another, you are standing in a construction zone."

At the same time, Liu Wei returned to painting. He began using computer software to generate patterns and pixels and then applied the pattern to canvas, directing studio assistants to fill in the color. "The computer is like a big brain that is constantly thinking, and I am only organizing," he explains. "But its method of thinking is totally different from mine. It is just pure logic into color."

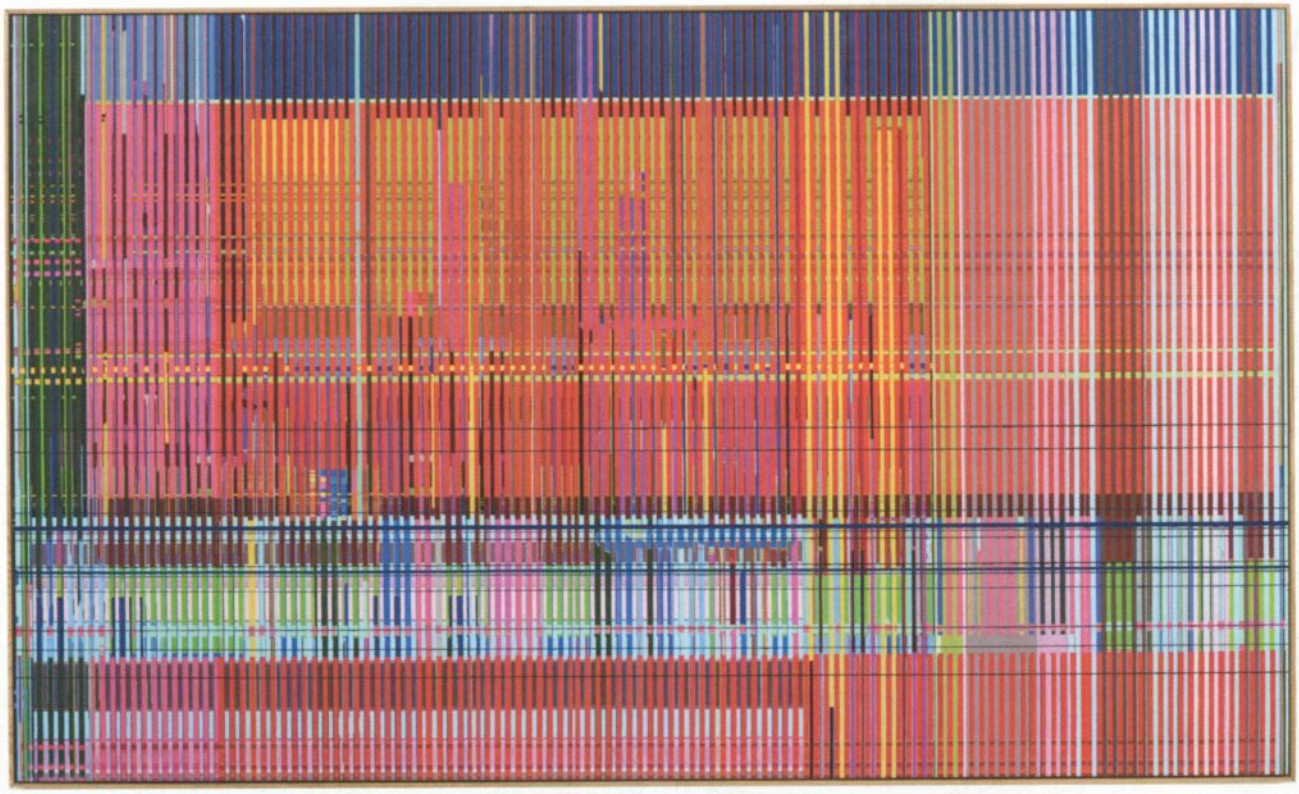
This approach to reality is an interesting choice for an artist who began his training with the realistic painting favored in the Chinese academy. In fact, all of his works, though appearing as allegories of Chinese society, are actually straightforward dissections of his ideas about reality. "I am not going to describe or depict reality; that is not very interesting," says Liu Wei, who favors an approach to industrial materials that is in some ways similar to that of American Minimalists like Donald Judd and Carl Andre. "If I am drawing the horizon on the ocean, for instance, the image that we are seeing that we think of as real is not reality. It is a lot of things that our brain has added. I want to take away that experience," he says.

"These works are as much a critique of architecture as they are architecture," says Serpentine Gallery curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, who first worked with the artist on "China Power Station" in 2006. Drawing parallels between Liu Wei's work and the cutting of buildings done by Gordon Matta-Clark, Obrist explains that Liu Wei is interested in the amnesia that occurs in Chinese society as the architecture of urban spaces is torn down and reconstructed. "He builds a crystal palace made out of recycled materials but, in this way, he is as much anti-architecture and anti-urbanism as he is an urbanist," says Obrist.

"Liu Wei has a really ambitious scope of ideas," says Yun. "You can look at his work in a microcosm and see how it relates to his kind of experience growing up in modern-day China, but you can also look at it in terms of how all societies have evolved. His ideas are very timely in one way, but because they are very universal, they are also timeless." ■

***Outcast I*, 2007, was Liu Wei's breakthrough work, with windows and doors discarded from government institutions.**

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LEHMANN MAUPIN, NEW YORK AND HONG KONG



Truth Dimension No. 6, 2013, reveals Liu Wei's preoccupation with urban architecture and sprawl.

Star, 2005, a collection of lights and motion detectors, was installed at the 2005 Venice Biennale.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LEHMANN MAUPIN, NEW YORK AND HONG KONG (2). TOP: ELISABETH BERNSTEIN