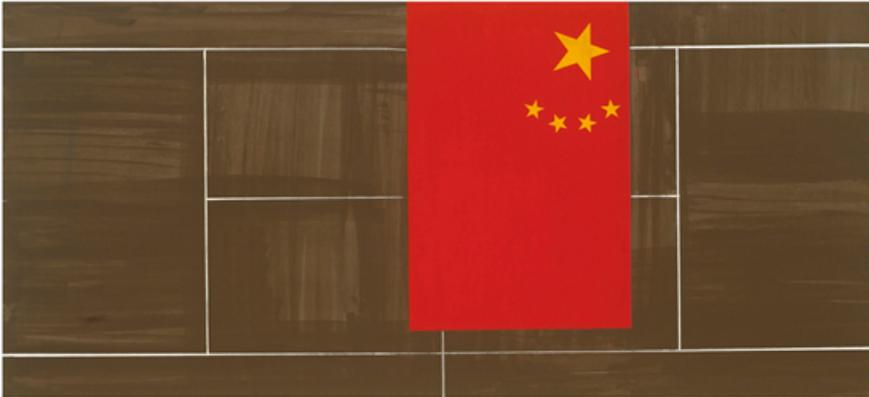


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David Diao: "I lived there until I was 6..." at Postmasters BY STEPHEN MAINE

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459 West 19th street, between Ninth and Tenth avenues
New York City, 212 727 3323



David Diao *Red Start over Tennis Court* 2008. Acrylic and marker on canvas, 36 x 78 inches.
Cover FEBRUARY 2009: *Wild Swans* 2008. Acrylic and marker on canvas, 18 x 39 inches. Courtesy Postmasters

During the January 2009 Review Panel's discussion of Peter Doig's recent exhibition, the estimable Ken Johnson of the New York Times denied that a painting of lasting significance could be made with ping-pong as its subject matter. The critic may be correct, but if the contest in question were tennis, one could cite David Diao's current show at Postmasters as compelling evidence to the contrary.

In truth, the show, titled "I Lived There Until I Was 6..." is only glancingly "about" tennis, though the motif of a tennis court seen in plan recurs in 10 of its three dozen canvases. (Many others are keyed to variations on the colors of grass and clay.) The sport looms large in the artist's memory for reasons that slowly dawn on the viewer and echo through this lovely, haunting collection of recent work.

For decades, Diao has injected deeply personal, even confessional content onto the placid surfaces and into the untroubled spaces of Modernism by way of a formal vocabulary grounded in the conventions of presentation graphics: diagrams, plans, text. In the early 1990s, for instance, he made paintings charting the relative size of his various New York studios, and of his annual sales figures. The new work retains its erstwhile formal elegance and restraint, but rueful humor is replaced by a seething emotional undertow stemming from the artist's inherited memories of his family's displacement and fragmentation at the hands of the Chinese government.

A small painting just inside the gallery entrance clues the viewer in to the back story. In silver vinyl lettering on a dense green ground, it reads:

Da Hen Li House

I lived there until I was 6. When I returned to Chengdu 30 years later, it had just been demolished. There are no photographs. The only certain scale to rub up against my memories was the tennis court. I have since uncovered ciphers of its having been.

The next few paintings provide spatial orientation. They are based on a series of increasingly specific maps that locate the tennis court in the context of the family's property, neighborhood, city, province, and nation. The chronological sweep of events of both

personal and historical significance is accounted for in the largest work in the show, the 13-foot-long *Timeline*. In 1949, as Mao's forces prevailed over the Kuomintang, the family mansion was seized and converted to Communist Party offices. The family was separated; Diao eventually made his way to New York. *Timeline* limns those and other markers such as the Cultural Revolution and Tianamen Square, as well as the death of the artist's parents and the demolition, in 1979, of the Da Hen Li House.

Then there's that tennis court leitmotif. In *Wild Swans* it underlies a quote from Jung Chang's eponymous 1991 saga of life before, during and after Mao in which the author refers to the office of the *Sichuan Daily*, which was among those housed in the commandeered Da Hen Li house. *Red Star Over Tennis Court* depicts the star-studded crimson banner of the People's Republic obscuring the center line and one forecourt. The painting's chromatic opposition has plenty of visual snap, but the niceties of formalist abstraction dissolve under the weight of history and the confluence of the personal and the political, public and private, industrial and agrarian.

Above a seemingly straightforward painting of the dimensions of a tennis court, called *Standard Measurement*, hangs a small canvas called *Balls* in which a pair of yellow circles is suspended in the center of an orange-ochre field. Given Diao's penchant for tweaking the master narrative of 20th-century painting, it is perhaps not too fanciful to consider this work in the light of Jasper John's *Painting With Two Balls*, widely interpreted as mocking the macho swagger of mid-century gestural abstraction. Diao's retooling of the pun is a tacit admission that his upper-middle-class family's ostentatious enjoyment of the Western, bourgeois pastime might have seemed a brazen display of counterrevolutionary *chutzpah*.

In a twist of fate, the artist's father died while playing tennis, in New York in 1990. The event is dispassionately commemorated in a small 2007 tennis court painting.

The show's understated tone, its precisely measured sense of bewilderment and outrage, is in marked contrast to Jim Dine's recent, diarrhetic exhibition at Pace on 25th Street. Dine's unfettered, inchoate, apparently autobiographical blatherings formed a dense torrent from which the visitor emerged feeling embarrassed and demoralized, as if blanketed with a thick coating of partially digested ideas. The difference between the two shows is like buckshot versus a sniper's bead.

In this rebus-like exhibition, a painting's content is absorbed in part from surrounding works. Hanging above *Timeline* are two small canvases bearing traditional Chinese characters. At around 1935 is a small canvas called *To Construct*, which indicates the order in which eight strokes of the calligrapher's brush form that verb. Marking 1979 is *Demolish*, crudely wiped on a stark white canvas twenty inches square. It is easy to imagine it emblazoned on the side of a building earmarked for razing.

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