

# DAVID DIAO





Born in Chengdu, David Diao first left Mainland China in 1949 for Hong Kong before settling in New York, where he has lived for nearly six decades. In this conversation with Pauline J. Yao, he recalls what led him to be an artist and discusses formalism with backstories, “fake” memories, and the uncanny.

Conversation held in Hong Kong on March 23, 2016. Pauline J. Yao is Visual Art Lead Curator at M+, Hong Kong.

**PAULINE J. YAO** You are experiencing a “homecoming” moment. In 2015 you had a major exhibition at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing. At the fair you are presenting a new body of work relating to your experience in Hong Kong from 1950 to 1955. But before speaking about today, I would like to hear about your early career in New York.

**DAVID DIAO** Many artists have the idea that they were born to be artists, but I wasn’t one of those. The idea of being an artist found me, rather than my choosing it. Falling into the milieu of New York—I worked at the Sam Kootz Gallery for a while, meeting many artists and art people—and being attentive to the culture around me basically drafted me into being an artist. Things happened, and I decided to embark on this journey.

When I started in the mid-1960s, painting was still the highest form of cultural production. So, once again, I became a painter because it was the most natural way to be an artist. But, of course, over more than 40 years, the work is not by any means a long linear development. It has many stops and starts. Some artists may have this kind of linear development; I don’t. I like to question my own practice, to see what is lacking in a new series, to force myself to go somewhere else. That is how I have proceeded. You don’t need special knowledge to be engaged by my art. First of all, there are the colors, the shapes. Basically I am still a formalist; it is just that I want to make my formalism have a back-story. This is something formalism



Pauline J. Yao and David Diao, Art Basel Conversation, March 23, 2016

didn’t allow. Formalism in its heyday didn’t allow you to deal with anything other than shapes, colors, and composition. They were not supposed to refer to anything in the world, or history, or politics, maybe to feelings—as for some music. One of the things I do is to work against that.

**PY** In Hong Kong one could see at the same time this body of work about your time in Hong Kong and some of your earlier geometric abstractions from the 1970s. It underscores what you are saying.

**DD** As a young artist I was very taken by being part of the New York School of painting. It’s hard to go back to some points of origin, but I think, from the very beginning, I was very ambitious. It wasn’t just following the crowd, but at any given moment, certain theories do come to the fore. If you are ambitious, you engage with those ideas in a critical way. You take

them and try maybe to tear them apart. That is the tradition of the avant-garde I come from. You are alluding to some paintings of the 1970s that were brought out of the warehouse and that I hadn’t seen myself for 40 years. They were made where most art was based on the grid, but these paintings deliberately did not have a grid. It may be something as simple as that. At other moments in my life, when issues about politics and ethnic identity became a subject people discussed, I had to deal with that somehow. Given my own inclinations, I probably would not have gone there, because in some ways I was perfectly happy being a kind of formalist painter, dealing with color and shape.

**PY** In your Beijing show, your personal history was very present through the narrative about the house you lived in.

**DD** Having this chance to show in Beijing, I said to myself, I have to reach out to the “local” audience in some way. So I dealt with this story of the house I was born in and lived in for six years before escaping to Hong Kong. The more I dealt with it, the more it grew. In excavating how to image that house, I discovered that a famous writer’s father happened to be the editor of the *Sichuan Daily*, whose offices were in that house in the 1970s, so somebody else’s creative activity and storytelling intersected with my own history. Also, the house had a tennis court, which was very unusual, but it afforded me, because of the standard measurements of the tennis court, a particular certitude: its standard dimensions helped me understand how the spaces were organized—rather than relying on miasmic childhood memories in which the actual scale is completely excluded. These various things became parts of how the story grew, and before I knew it, I ended up with more than 30 pieces. There was this sort of in-and-around-the-story that had lain dormant in my brain for 60 years.

**PY** I would like to ask you about the notion of the uncanny in your work, especially in relationship to this Hong Kong body of work. It seems to me your paintings are often triggered by uncanny parallels and coincidences.

**DD** If you want to look for it, you can find it, but the uncanny has to find you. It found me, and I grabbed it. The fact that my father died while playing tennis helped to make the tennis court a kind of leitmotiv for that house.

In Hong Kong I lived in an apartment on Chatham Road, and I have a memory of Li Lihua, a famous actress who lived downstairs. You don’t pick these things: it happened. We were living in a kind of refugee squalor, not the squalor of the inner cities of Kowloon Town, but the squalor of a family that had lost everything. We were above the garage, no elevators. My memory is walking down the stairs, and when the door of Lihua’s apartment was open, I’d see servants padding around in black and white uniforms, and perfume would waft out. This is probably a fake memory, but at least it is there. Funnily enough, Li Lihua somehow saw a work of mine containing her portrait, and she sent her personal assistant to see me in New York with the commission to make some silkscreens using her image “à la Warhol.” I didn’t accept the commission, but I was given a lot of images of her that are now part of my archives.

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Regarding this new series, one of the things I decided I could do was to image the schools I went to. The first school I went to was Elvy’s Private English School, on Austin Road in Kowloon. I did it as if its sign were superimposed onto a blackboard. Its title is *Elvy’s Private English School*, but I could actually also have named it *The Formation of the Colonial Subject* because I was educated in English from the moment I started my schooling. As a result, I don’t know Chinese well, and I regret that I didn’t have a chance to acquire a better knowledge of Chinese.

**PY** This play between information, aesthetics, and information aesthetics itself is very interesting. Language—different kinds of language—plays a very important role in your work. You copy, trace, write in English and Chinese.

**DD** My Chinese writing is very poor, but in the case of these new paintings, it works, because it looks like a six-year-old boy wrote the Chinese.

Using language is something I discovered when I was studying the Russians, the Constructivists. Rodchenko and Lissitzky dealt with geometrical forms but also included language in what they did.

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To go back to the series, there is also another image of Li Lihua from an actual movie magazine. Given the paucity of material to use for imaging from those five years—I have some tiny 1950s contact-sheet-size prints

of images done by my uncle, who was the family photographer—I found myself actually comparing my five years in Hong Kong to my present existence in Manhattan. It is how those two maps of Tsim Sha Tsui and Manhattan came about. I lived at 72 Franklin Street in New York for many years, and when I thought about Hong Kong, my memory was that I lived at 72 Chatham Road. But just to make sure, I asked my uncle what number we lived in on Chatham Road. He immediately said 73. He couldn't have made it up; it had to have been in his memory. I thought, "Oh no, I want to have the same number, but it is one off." And I made this work where Chatham Road is on the left, with a long yawning gap of time and distance to the right, where New York is. But then I thought the actual gap in the sequence was very interesting because it is something unexpected, and it even alludes to the fact that Chinese sometimes write from right to left.



David Diao, *Hong Kong, Tsim Sha Tsui*, 2014  
Eslite Gallery

David Diao  
*Three Points a Line*, 2015  
Eslite Gallery

