

Liu Xiaodong
Spring in New York



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2020.4.6

After days of clouds and storms, today there is not a speck of cloud in the sky.

Let's go to Chinatown and buy some noodles.

I go out in the backlight, a few people around the corner are chatting and walking their dogs. Those that are chatting wear a mask and keep two meters apart. A few old men are squeezed on a roadside bench basking in the sun.

On the way to Chinatown, I pass by some streets, not but a few cars, and even fewer people. Facing the sun the light is dazzling, with my back to the sun the sightline is clear. I 'm walking on the broad and impressive Canal Avenue, usually always bustling with people kicking the hindfoot of the person walking in front of them. Today is transparent beyond description, it turns out that Chinatown as much as Soho has a straight line of hale and hearty New York buildings. Before there were so many people that one couldn't even look at the buildings, the big crowds made them look as if they had a roundish shape.

All of a sudden, a car speed by and I'm completely soaked in water. I am abashed, my first thought is that I may have inadvertently stepped on the road while I was looking at the buildings. So I stand still, I take a good look at myself, I did not. I am on the sidewalk inside the steel frames of the building works, still one meter away from the curb. I look again beyond the curb, there is a puddle half-meter wide tops, I guess the speeding car did it intentionally, hopefully, it's just some youngster playing pranks for fun. Then I connect this with the anti-Chinese episodes frequently reported in the news during this pandemic and I want to turn and shout at him, but the car has already sped off out of sight, I cannot even remember its color.

Forget it New York lad, as long as you are happy. These days the image of Chinese people is questioned anyway (called in question? challenged?). But then again don't Beijingers look down on out-of-towners? (strangers?) It's the same everywhere.

Old Beijingers have been in their direst straits during SARS in 2003. At that time, Beijing was the center of the outbreak. Beijingers were like rats crossing the streets, even in the suburbs of the city banners saying "Beijingers not allowed to enter" were hanging at the entrance of villages, you can only imagine how Beijingers were received elsewhere. Wuhan people today are just like Beijingers 17 years ago. Foreign countries do not hang such banners, but in the depth of their hearts, people probably feel the same. However, when I walk up to the small grocery shop at the corner to buy cigarettes, this foreign guy is very friendly. He is not wearing a mask and greets me with a smile. He gives me a discount. He only has nine packages of Marlboro left and charges me 117\$ when it should be 16\$ a pack!

Starting today I should pull myself together, paint some watercolors and write my diary, I cannot go on watching the news on my phone the whole day, it's all scary news.

I flew from Beijing to Eagle Pass, Texas on January 28, and there I painted Tom and his family. A month later the pandemic outbreak in China was so bad that I could not return, so I stayed in New York but there has been a big outbreak here too. Airlines have almost entirely stopped their flights, I can not go anywhere. All I can do is looking at my phone all day.

In New York, spring has come and the flowers are in bloom. The flowering period is longer than in Beijing. The weather is often wet and a fierce wind sweeps through the streets. Then the next day, the ground is covered with white flowers, people and dogs alike idle about, and the trees are still plump with flowers.

2020.4.6

阴霾风雨多日,今天晴空万里。

走,去唐人街,买点面条去。

出门逆光,街角几个人闲聊遛狗,聊天者戴着口罩,相隔两米,晒阳光的老头还是挤在一张路边椅子上。

去唐人街路过几条大街,没什么车,人更少。逆光刺目,顺光清沥。走在Canal大街宽阔亮眼。昔日这里总是前脚踢着前人的后脚,熙熙攘攘。今天难以形容的疏朗通透,原来唐人街的建筑和Soho一样是完美的纽约硬朗直线的建筑。以前人太多,根本顾不上看建筑,建筑也仿佛被人挤成圆乎乎的了。

忽然被溅一身水,一辆汽车飞驰而过,我很惭愧,马上想到是不是自己竟看建筑而误入马路了。我原地站住,打量自己,不是的,我在修善建筑的铁架里的便道上,离马路牙子还有一米。再看马路牙子外也就半米宽的积水,应该是刚刚飞驰而过的汽车有意为之,但愿他少年气壮,恶作剧寻开心。但我联想近期疫情时期,新闻里经常有排华滋事发生,也真想回头大骂,可是汽车早已飞驰不见,我甚至连车的颜色都没记住。

算了,纽约小伙子,你开心就好。反正中国人的形象在今天也是遭人质疑的。老北京不也是瞧不上外地人吗?哪都一样。

老北京人的最惨境遇是2003的SARS阶段,那时SARS的中心在北京,北京人如过街老鼠,连郊区的村口都横着标语“北京人禁止入内”,更别说外地人如何拒绝北京人了。今天的武汉人就是17年前的北京人。外国没有标语,内心的标语也是一样的吧。但是我去街口小杂货店买烟,外国小伙子就特别友善,不戴口罩,笑脸相迎,还主动说给我打折,他只剩下9包万宝路,卖我才收117块钱,平时应该16块钱一包的!

从今天起我应该振作起来,画画水彩、写写笔记,不能整天抱着手机看新闻,都是吓人的消息。

我是1月28从北京飞去德州Eaglepass小镇的,在那里画了Tom一家人。一个月过去了,中国疫情大爆发,回不去了,在纽约逗留,纽约也大爆发了。飞机几乎停航,哪都走不了了。只有每天抱着手机的日子。

纽约春暖花开,花期比北京的要长,经常阴雨连连,狂风席卷楼巷。第二天白花铺地,人懒狗闲,溜溜哒哒,树上的白花仍然饱满迎天。

2020.4.7

These past few days the bell of the nearby fire company has gone off every night at 7 pm. And when it goes off, applauses rise from the balconies, and then a high-pitched song raises from among the buildings, it's quite moving.

The epidemic trend in New York is stable and has a descendent tendency, the worst seems to be over. In these terrible days, I learned how to use Instagram, and I now have my own account: Liuxiaodongstudio. I post something every day, the number of followers rises sharply and many are liking my watercolors. I started to paint watercolors only to while away the time, but it has now become my main occupation and I'm fully devoted to painting New York under the pandemic for my followers, I feel sorry if I don't paint one each day. Instagram is waiting for me. It's different from WeChat, on Instagram you interact with strangers, when I post something I'm relaxed, I don't need to think about political orientation. WeChat is different, it's like a tidal wave, in the heat of the crowd I feel embarrassed to post even ordinary moments of life, forget about artworks, that would be showing myself off, people would curse me in their hearts. I haven't shown my face on WeChat since quite a long time ago, but interacting with strangers in an unfamiliar territory is amusing. Of course, there's also acquaintances and people you follow back, but it doesn't change the overall relaxed and pleasant spirit of it. Just like a group of Chinese people traveling abroad would rapidly start to act according to local habits, behave properly, restrain themselves in smoking, spitting, and talking aloud; the overall environment is extremely important.

I've been on Instagram for 10 days now, and I have 562 followers. The small joys in life.

2020.4.9

Yesterday I didn't sleep well, I kept waking up. This fragmented sleep went on until dawn, when at 10 I got up I wasn't feeling great, and I sneezed a lot in the afternoon. Yu Hong was keeping an eye on me "Hold your breath for 10 minutes, feel any tightness in your chest?". Ahah, you want me to suffocate, who can hold his breath that long? Where does this kind of popular science knowledge even come from? It is utterly implausible.

It is true that, under the influence of the environment, people automatically start making mental associations, and these associations always go beyond reality. In the afternoon I painted a watercolor of Yu Hong and my daughter sitting on the riverside; mother and daughter sitting on a bench two meters away from each other, as mothers and daughters also have to keep social distances. Even this simple watercolor painting will probably lead people to make lots of mental associations.

The social context it's the concealed narrative behind every artwork, the reason why it leads to so many mental associations is that the social context makes it thus. Therefore a painter truly gets a great deal, no matter what he paints, people will always come up with greater, more numerous mental associations.

2020.4.7

这几天每晚7点,附近消防队的铃声响起来,号声响起来,阳台上人们的掌声响起来,然后一首高音贝的歌声悠昂在楼宇间,感动人心。

纽约疫情走向平稳且有下降,可怕的日子过去吧。在这些天可怕的日子里,我学会了上Instagram,有了自己的账号:Liuxiaodongstudio。每天我都发些东西上去,粉丝大涨,而且点赞我的水彩画的超多。本来我只是没得做画点水彩消遣,现在成了主业,而且我完全投入为粉丝画疫情下的纽约的热情,每天不好意思不画一张。Instagram在等着我呀。和微信不同,Instagram上很多陌生的人,发起东西来很轻松,完全不用考虑政治导向。微信则不同,微信像浪潮,都在群起激昂时,发点小生活都不好意思,更别说发上自己的作品,那等于显摆自己,众人心里唾骂。我已经很久没在微信上露脸了,Instagram上和陌生人在陌生领域互动有趣呀。当然也有熟人互粉,但整体性的轻松愉悦是变不了的。就像一帮中国人出国游玩也会很快入乡随俗,注意行为举止得当,抽烟吐痰、大声吵闹也收敛许多,整体性很重要啊。

我开Instagram 10天了,有562位粉丝呢,小愉悦的很呢。

2020.4.9

昨晚睡眠不好,常常醒来。碎片化的睡眠熬到天亮,10点起床有点不舒服,下午打了许多喷嚏。喻红盯着我:憋气10分钟,胸闷吗?哈哈,这不得憋死人呀,谁憋气不闷呢。这都是哪位大神科普的知识,完全不靠谱。

是啊,在大的环境影响下,人都会自动联想,联想总比现实更离谱。下午我画了喻红和红孩坐在河边的小水彩,母女相隔两米,各自坐在长凳上,母女也要保持社交距离噢。这一简单的水彩也会让人联想多多的吧。

社会环境就是作品的隐秘的叙事,联想之多是因为社会环境使然。所以画家真是捡了大便宜,无论你画什么,别人都会产生更多、更大的联想。

2020.4.14

These last few days it has been raining constantly, today it's finally sunny. I wanted to stand on my balcony and bask in the sunlight, but I discover there is rainwater all over the place so I sweep it away with a broom. When the rain hits the pavement two women come out, and I very apologetically tell them it's just rainwater.

I feel ashamed. I feel sorry and guilty.

With a dustpan I poke the rain into a pot and then I flush it down the toilet. This is how you want to do it. Why didn't I think of that earlier?!

At 7 pm we will be standing on the balcony again to applaud the nurses and the medical staff. See you at 7 pm downstairs neighbor, I'm sorry, thank you for putting up with the sound of my laughter.

2020.4.16

Today there's a beautiful sunlight and the wind is strong. I held back for a week, but it's now time to take a walk outside, I'll head for Chelsea.

Along the way, there are just a few people, couriers, and people walking their dogs. I pass by the aerial walkway created on the former railway and there are no people; I pass by fashion shops and there are no people, just some wooden mannequin in the shops' windows. Long corridors, long streets.

I walk up to 14th Street, the Apple Store is empty. Even the old cow on that steakhouse signboard looks lonely up there by himself. It's sad, I don't want to walk forward.

2020.4.17

I've received an official notice saying that the flight on May 17 has been canceled, and there are no tickets for June.

How long will it take until I'll be able to return to Beijing? No one knows. I didn't expect my homeland to be so unwelcoming of people from overseas to go back to her embrace.

Lisson Gallery made available their gallery space for me to paint in, and also Nicholas's flat.

This is very warm (of them) and I feel sentimental.

I usually paint one small watercolor a day, but today I painted two. Seeing that my watercolor notebook is almost full puts my mind at ease.

2020.4.14

几天来一直下雨,今天天晴。我想站阳台晒晒太阳,发现阳台上都是雨水,我用扫把扫了两下,雨水泼在一楼水泥地上,出来了两女子,我好抱歉,告诉她们是雨水。

好惭愧。好抱歉内疚。

我用簸箕一点点把雨水戳进锅里,揣回屋倒在马桶里,这样是对的,方才我怎么没想起这招呢?!

七点,我们还要在阳台上为护士等医务人员鼓掌呢,七点见,楼下的邻居,抱歉,谢谢你的原谅我的笑声。

2020.4.16

今天阳光好,风大,憋了一星期,应该出门走走,走向 Chelsea。

沿途街上零星几个人,遛狗,外送小哥,经过旧铁路改造的空中走廊,无人,沿途时尚店,无人,几个木偶模特在橱窗里,长长的走廊,长的街道。

走到14街,苹果店空空的。那家头顶着一头老牛的牛排馆也在风中傻呆着,伤感,不想往前走了。

2020.4.17

被确切通知:5月17日的飞机取消,6月份也没有机票。

我要等多久才能回到北京?不知道。没想到祖国这么不欢迎海外人员回到她的怀抱。

Lisson让我去画廊画画,也可以住尼古拉的房子。

我温暖而伤感。

平时一天画一张小水彩,今天画了两张。看到快画完一本的水彩,心生安稳之情。

2020.4.18

Never meeting other people makes dreams simpler too. After yesterday's flight cancellation, tonight I dreamt that plane tickets were nowhere to be found.

Dreams become a direct reflection of the day. Days have no substance, therefore dreams too go in fragments.

2020.4.24

From March 15 to April 23 I painted over 20 small watercolors, a full notebook, as of yesterday there are no more sheets left.

This is the largest radius I can come into contact with. From Charles Street in West Village expanding north to Chelsea, south to Soho and Chinatown and west to the Hudson riverside.

Making almost a painting a day helped me going through the pandemic lockdown in my apartment. Sometimes, because I bent over the desk for too long or because I was eager to complete a painting, my bladder would ache from holding back. Sometimes I would lie in bed at night rejoicing over what I painted that day. From the initial confusion, lack of focus and patience, inability to paint, to “Yu Hong buys pizza”, I suddenly started painting unusual watercolors with confidence. I gained focus by starting off the painting with depictions of the small houses or small windows in the background. Becoming increasingly aware of the lack of other choices, I just knew I couldn't get through this long pandemic by watching my phone all day. I had plenty of time, I knew that I should paint all the details in the photographs, this was the best way to kill time.

But then when I devoted myself to paint all the details, I felt the time was too limited. In one day I could only paint one small watercolor. I painted streetscapes and was keen to paint people too, but Americans are very aware of their image rights. You need to ask permission even to take a picture of someone walking their dogs and sometimes they still won't let you, pointing my phone or my pencil at someone would be extremely rude. So I turned to my wife and daughter. It may not be a bad idea, painting my family in this streetscape will also be a unique keepsake of unique times.

The notebook is now full. I went from being impatient at the beginning, to suddenly have a way with it in the middle, then I got to a point when I was a little bit repetitive or the paintings were increasingly resembling photographs. I rested my brush, closed the notebook, and can now lay aside all anxiety and rest content.

But can I truly rest without worries? Besides painting I also cook lunch and dinner for my wife and daughter, I try to lift their spirit, but unconsciously some kind of melancholy breeds(rises) from the bottom of my heart. Am I homesick? Do I want to get together and have a few with my friends? It doesn't seem to be either. With each passing day, I stay up later and sleep in later in the morning, as if only being utterly lazy and do nothing at all could soothe my melancholy. I suddenly feel as if the world was too big, while I never thought of distances as a problem, now I cannot go further than Chinatown. I don't seem to have the physical strength to deal with this world, even making a phone call feels like a strenuous effort.

I can't let my soft heart slowly sink me. I'll start to paint again on photos. I'll paint another book of overpainted photographs. I'll try my best to live in the moment.

2020.4.18

老不见人连做梦都简单了。昨天机票被取消,晚上就梦见到处买不到票。

梦变成了当天的直接反映,白天没内容,晚上梦也断片。

2020.4.24

从3月15号到4月23号,我画了20多张小水彩,满满一本,昨天完成。

这里是我能接触的最大半径,以西村Charles街辐射到北面Chelsea,南面Soho唐人街,西面 Hudson河边。

几乎每天一张,帮我度过疫情在家的封闭生活。有时伏案太久又急于画完,憋得我尿疼,有时晚上躺在床上自我欣赏白天的画作而偷摸乐。从开始的心乱、不专注、没有耐心、不太会画,到“喻红买披萨”,忽然安心画出异样的水彩,这是从远处小房子、小窗子开始一点点描绘中达到的专注。因为我慢慢知道别无选择,不能每日看手机熬过漫长的疫期。我要对着照片慢慢画出每个细节,时间太多了,这真是消磨时间的最佳方案。

等真正专注细节描绘时又觉时间太紧了。一天只能完成一件很小的绘画。我画街景,也想画人物,但美国人的肖像权意识太强了,连拍张他遛的狗都得征求意见,有时还被拒绝,拿个手机或铅笔对着人家真是无礼的很呢。那就画老婆孩子吧。也好,溶在这片街景的家人,也是特殊时期的特殊纪念。

画完了一本,从开始不耐烦到中间忽然有了方法,再到后来有点重复或者越来越像照片的时候,我停笔了,封好画本,高枕无忧。

我真的高枕无忧了吗?我除了画画也给老婆孩子做午饭、晚饭,逗她们开心,但不知不觉某种忧郁从心底滋生出来。我乡愁了吗?我想朋友喝酒了吗?好像也不是。我越来越晚睡晚起,懒到什么也不干才解忧似的。忽然觉得世界太大了,以前觉着去哪都很不成问题,现在最远才走到唐人街。好像没有力量和这个世界打交道了,哪怕通个电话也费劲巴拉的。

不能任凭这颗肉心慢慢沉下去吧,我开始在照片上再画吧,再画一本照片画,励志过好当下,活下去。

2020.5.17

Today I breathe a sigh of relief. I sorted out the watercolors painting and the overpainted photos I made in the period from March 15 to May 16 and selected 36 notable paintings for Lisson Gallery, they intend to make an online exhibition starting from June 20.

18 watercolors painting, 25×33.5cm;

18 overpainted photographs, 36.6×49cm.

Now I can just sit around and do nothing. I can just sit around as if in a trance, watching my phone in the daytime and movies in the evening, a vindictive punishment for my hardworking. Just doing nothing.

Sitting around waiting to return to Beijing on the 29. What if the flight is postponed again? We'll see, for now, I'll just sit around.

When I have sat around for long enough we'll see about that.

2020.6.1

Children's day. The Black Lives Matter movement is getting increasingly fiery. Two days ago there's been a large demonstration just outside my doorstep, on that night a video shot by a friend showed the commotion around Chinatown, people setting fire in the streets. The situation was even worse in SoHo, where power supply was cut off and episodes of looting occurred.

Yesterday night things took a turn for the worse, police started to make arrests, and fires burned near the White House. It would appear as things are not going to settle for a while.

With the pandemic not abating and new turmoil rising, the lack of available flights forces me to witness history.

Where do we go from here? We'll have to wait two more months.

Starting from today 11 pm New York will be under curfew.

2020.6.7

The time it takes to smoke a cigarette, and the moon rises three and a half inches among the tree leaves.

2020.5.17

今天舒口气,把3月15日到5月16日的水彩画、照片画全部整理完毕,挑出36张拿得出手的画给Lisson,画廊要在6月20日在网上展出。

水彩18张,25×33.5cm;

照片画18张,36.6×49cm。

我可以什么都不干了。每天发呆,白天看手机,晚上看电影,报复性惩罚自己的努力工作,就是啥都不干。

干等29号回北京,飞机再延怎么办?再说吧,先发呆再说。

呆够了再说。

2020.6.1

儿童节,Black Lives Matters运动越演越烈。前两天在家门口大批队伍游行,当晚朋友的视频显示唐人街附近骚动,而且路上有人放火。Soho严重一点,已经断电哄抢。昨晚更烈,警察开始抓人,白宫四周烈火肆虐。看来一时无法平息。

疫情不减,又起纷乱,飞机断航,逼着我见证历史。

何去何从,再等两月。

今晚11点纽约开始宵禁。

2020.6.7

一支烟的功夫,月亮在树叶中上升三寸半。

2020.6.12

The tree in front of my balcony is blooming, the pagoda tree flowers smell of rapeseed oil. New York's spring flowers have all turned into green leaves, except this one that has just started to bloom. Beyond the trees, I can hear the sirens of the firefighters' car, or maybe it's an ambulance or something else. During the night a helicopter buzzed overhead. There have been many over the past few days, on the account of the looting and stealing part of the BLM demonstrations, New York has been under curfew for many days now, and almost all the shops facing the streets in the West Village, SoHo, Chelsea, 42nd Street, and others have been boarded up. There is intensive media coverage of the events that are plunging the country into chaos. It appears as if America is on the verge of a revolution.

At 7 pm every day for the last three months, everyone has stood on their balcony to applaud and bang pots and pans for the nurses. I also have learned to follow their rhythm, regardless of wind or rain. Today at 7 pm there was no sound, I don't know whether they received any notice to stop it, or it's because the pandemic is already in the past, or it's on the account of the chaos created by the BLM movement.

Has the pandemic quieted down? And so did BLM too? Or should we expect things to get even worse? I have no idea, my eyes only go as far as this, I see a huge troop of protesters crossing in front of my apartment, cars stuck in the streets, a sports car driven by a black man surpassing on the wrong side of the road and freaking out the big crowd of demonstrators. I see young white people arguing with the police, I see LGBT communities gathering merrily as before, I see countless people of all the ethnicities working out by the river. And I paint them, I paint what my eyes can see.

In 2020 we all know the world is chaotic and not really fair. We all wish this year could be over soon, that we could just wipe it out our calendars, to go back to the past, even though the past wasn't perfect either. The reality is like watching two films at the same time, a tragedy and a comedy. In the tragedy, each and every frame of the film is relatively happy, compared to the sheer desperation of the ending while in the comedy none of the frames is fully satisfying until the perfection reached upon the end.

Which film better embodies today's world?

I heard the head of the Columbus statue in Boston has been cut off. At dusk, I walked up to the Hudson River to gaze at the Statue of Liberty in the distance. She is still there.

I saw on someone's Instagram a gif showing the Statue of Liberty hiding away under the pedestal. Apologies, I've been making too many mental associations.

May freedom last forever.

I also heard that "Gone with the wind" has been taken off the shelves. What about other literary and artistic works of that period? What about the artworks inside and outside the museums? Will the history of human civilization be overthrown because of the "political correctness" of different periods? China's Cultural Revolution was the "politically correct" choice at the time.

May art and civilization last forever.

2020.6.12

阳台前的这棵树开花了, 槐花夹着生菜籽油的味道。纽约春天的花都变成绿叶了, 这棵才刚刚开始。树缝间传来不知是救火车、救护车, 还有什么车的鸣叫声, 夜空中还有一架直升机盘旋。前几天更多, 因为BLM游行抢砸, 纽约宵禁多日, 西村、苏荷、切尔西、42街等等临街商铺几乎都被木板封了。各种媒体铺天盖地都是美国各地的混乱局面。美国闹革命了。

连续三个月每天晚7点, 大家都在阳台为护士鼓掌、敲锅盆, 我也学着他们的节奏, 风雨不误。今天7点没声了, 不知道他们是接到停敲通知, 还是疫情过去了, 还是被BLM闹乱了。

疫情安静了?BLM也安静了?还是正在等待更大的动静?我不知道, 目光所及有限, 我看到大队人马游行, 穿过我的公寓门前, 汽车堵在路上, 排队耐心等待, 一辆黑人驾驶的跑车逆行超车, 横穿游行队伍, 人们吓傻了。我看见白人小伙跟警察辩论, 我看到同性恋们仍然快乐地聚会, 我看到河边无数塑身健体的各色人等。我画下了他们, 画下我的目光所及。

2020年, 我们知道世界不太平, 世界乱了。我们都想这一年快快过去, 在日历上铲除这一年, 回到从前, 即使重前也不完美。真像似同时看了两部电影, 一部悲剧、一部喜剧。悲剧电影中的任何一帧都是相对美好的, 因为结尾更加绝望。喜剧中的任何一帧都是不令人满足的, 因为结尾更加美好。

现在的世界到底是哪部电影呢?

听说波士顿哥伦布雕像的头被砍下来了, 今天傍晚我还特意跑到哈德逊河边, 远望自由女神, 她还在。

抱歉, 我联想多了, 因为看到有人的Instagram上的动图显示, 自由女神躲到了底座下面。

愿自由永在。

也听说《飘》下架了。那么那个时期其他艺术作品呢?博物馆内外的艺术作品呢?人类的文明史会不会因为各个时期的“政治正确”而不停地被打倒推翻?中国的文化大革命就是当时的“政治正确”的选择。

愿艺术长存, 文明永续。

LISSON GALLERY