

Pollack, Barbara. "Three Decades Distilled into 180 Portraits," *Hyperallergic*, June 1, 2018.

HYPERALLERGIC

Three Decades Distilled into 180 Portraits

Liu Wei returns to New York to show an idiosyncratic body of work that marks a radical departure from the paintings that made him a star



Installation view *Liu Wei: 180 Faces*, Sean Kelly Gallery (photo by Jason Wyche, courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery)

Liu Wei is a towering figure in Chinese contemporary art, a leader among the first wave of Chinese artists to have their work recognized in the west. Emerging in the early 1990s with the Cynical Realism movement, Liu Wei responded to the dashed hopes and malaise of a generation impacted by the Tiananmen Square massacre by creating sarcastic portraits of his family and friends, rendered in bright colors and expressionistic brushstrokes. While paintings from this era, such as his "Revolutionary Family" series, have risen to the top of the auction market, this artist never rests on his laurels. He has set up new challenges for himself each year, drawing inspiration from everything ranging from Lucien Freud and Francis Bacon, to calligraphy and Chinese landscape painting.

Despite early appearances in the Venice Biennale and many landmark shows of Chinese contemporary art, Liu Wei has not shown in the United States since 2000. It is difficult to introduce such an important character to American audiences merely through a show of recent paintings, since no one style captures the entirety of this artist's talents. But, the current show at Sean Kelly goes a long way in this direction through his latest experiments in portraiture, succinctly titled "180 Faces." A body of work, that in particular, spans and references Liu Wei's approach to image making.

In this exhibition, Liu Wei presents 180 diminutive portraits, each delivered in a different style and technique. They are arranged in groups of 20, carefully hung in two parallel rows, though chosen randomly to deliberately avoid redundancies. Taken as a whole, the show creates a "rogue's gallery" of Chinese faces, a room full of gazers interrogating their audience. According to the artist, these should not be read as portraits of "real people" but as expressions of his own subconscious. To that point, within this encyclopedia of expressions certain patterns emerge. For example, there are many watercolors painted in the sepia tones of old photographs, men in spectacles posing as for an official photographer. On the other hand, there are dozens painted as if on hallucinogenic drugs with rainbow hues outlining the subject's features.

SEAN KELLY



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Every portrait in this exhibition is presented in a baroque frame, painted in viscous white brushstrokes. This gesture works particularly well when Liu Wei appropriates the picture from the annals of art history, such as a Vincent Van Gogh self-portrait or an heroic figure by Velasquez. Other times, the frames nearly suffocate the subject, especially in those cases where the artist breaks the pane of glass in front of the painting, forcing viewers to peer through shattered shards to see the face in question. Too emotive to be mug shots or passport photos, these portraits are in many cases quite complicated to read and interpret. We want to know more about these people and what has brought them together for this auspicious occasion.

It is worth pointing out that peppered among the faces — the vast majority belonging to men — there are a handful of women. In one rare instance, a portrait that includes a torso, it is a depiction of a lady, and she is nude with breasts exposed. Perhaps, this is a commentary on official portraiture, a critique of who historically gets their portraits painted and who is left out. Perhaps, in line with the artist's own declaration, this depiction of a bare breasted woman points to his own subconscious. But, quite honestly, this is probably just good old fashioned sexism, allowing yet another male artist to essentialize half the human race.

The exhibition is a tour de force of a single artist's imagination. Liu Wei created these works over the course of a year in an extreme departure from the monumental canvases that put him on the map. Hints of those earlier paintings can be found in many of the miniature works on view. It is truly the sign of a master that he can vary scale to such an extent; yet retain the power of his best-known works. For those who are already familiar with Liu Wei's paintings, "180 Faces" will only deepen their appreciation. To those new to his work, this exhibition is an encapsulation of all his previous achievements and a wonderful way to start to learn about an artist who deserves to be better known.

Liu Wei: 180 Faces is on view at Sean Kelly Gallery (475 10th Ave, New York, NY 10018) through June 16.