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**My flowers
are the
flowers that
should not
exist in this
world**

Edited by

Simon Zhou

art@timeoutcn.com

The edge of reason

In her intriguing new show, Liu Shiyuan has destroyed the line between art and gallery, frame and picture – and the result may be a new way of living. **Simon Zhou** investigates

Liu Shiyuan steps out of the taxi. Or rather, she tries to, but the spectre of catastrophe is lurking around the corner. With one foot firmly planted on the gravelly *terra firma* of Caochangdi, her other foot catches on the bottom of the door-frame, and for the briefest of moments, the artist is suspended there, neither inside the taxi, nor outside it.

She is still stuck *in* the taxi, but in a matter of seconds, she will almost certainly fall unceremoniously *out* of it. We will, of course, do our best to console her. There's nothing at all embarrassing about falling flat on your face before your first-ever interview, we will tell her. Auspiciously for us, the sticky situation Liu finds herself in is, in fact, a perfect analogy for the subject of her first solo exhibition, *The Edge*

of Vision, Or the Edge of the Earth, which playfully questions the binary logic governing our everyday lives.

'I was reading a book by [German philosopher Immanuel] Kant at the time,' Liu tells us when we enquire about her thinking behind the work. The book in question, Kant's *The Critique of Judgment*, draws a clear line between the *parergon*, which is the edge or frame that delineates what exists outside the work of art, and the *ergon*, that which exists *inside* the work – or, to put it more succinctly, the work itself. The 'or' matters here, as it does in the title of the exhibition, because in the four photographic installations and two video works that make up her debut solo exhibition, Liu deconstructs all notions of either-or, humorously exposing the fact that most things in life exist neither here

nor there, as this or that, but rather, in the 'or', the murky in-between, which, coincidentally, is the very situation Liu finds herself in now.

She doesn't fall. In the nick of time, she manages to put her second foot onto the gravel road. She smiles like a child who is pleased with herself for having just performed the magnificent trick of nearly falling, but not quite. No doubt her smile was unintentional, but it nevertheless makes a point, that even long after those first tottering years, we are never fully adults, the adult never fully gives up childish things. We simply put a frame around things, so we can say this is this and that is that, this is the inside of the painting, that is outside of the painting. But what of the frame itself? It passes unnoticed, lest we ask the difficult question:

is the frame inside the work, or outside of it?

In 'A Conversation with Photography', an installation piece that adorns an entire wall of a not-so-small gallery, Liu brings the question into focus. Pasted onto the wall is the sort of floral wallpaper that one might find in a 1950s suburban living room. Three moderately sized frames, covered in the same kitsch flower print, hang inconspicuously. Inside the frames are not photographs, as the title feigns at, but glass darkly made to resemble unused celluloid film.

'The frame is the work itself,' Liu explains. 'It's like the curtain on a stage, you don't think it's part of the work, but it's always there, so it is a part of the work. I put the content [the floral pattern on the wallpaper] on the wall, where it shouldn't be, in the frame, where it shouldn't be – but inside the frame, I put tinted film, to filter the content so you can't see it clearly. That's why I chose flowers, because I think flowers are the most common items to be made into content.'

The flower print, it turns out, blooms another contradiction. It is not, as it appears to be, stripped from the corpse of a 1950s living



Frame beckons Left: 'A Conversation with Photography'; above right: 'The Edge...'; video; right: Liu Shiyuan



would make the respectable, twirly moustachioed gentlemen of the art establishment recoil in horror if ever they were unfortunate enough to encounter such a thing in the street. And then there is what is inside the frames themselves: empty panes of unexposed film. A nothing standing in for a something.

"Edge" is the key word of my piece,' says Liu. 'The edge defines the identity of things. We always want to define things, to make them definite, but in my opinion, they are unclear. So I tried to make clear the boundaries of everything, in order to stand there. To make more things possible.' By identifying the lines that demarcate this or that and revealing such binary oppositions as cultural constructs rather than self-evident truths, Liu uncovers the contradictions inherent in the logic, creating the possibility for another way of viewing the world.

In 'The Edge of Vision, Or the Edge of the Earth', the six-minute video work that gives the exhibition its title, Liu teases at such a possibility. There is a procession of mourners. But the procession is intermittently interrupted by crudely artificial shots of fabricated landscapes, the kind of romantic tableaux that, if not so obviously constructed, might make Byron swoon. And the mourners themselves are not quite mourning, but performing an exaggerated representation of mourning. We have forgotten to mention that this is all narrated by a Danish bloke, doing his best not-quite received pronunciation. But even without this, it is difficult not to laugh, because we suspect that secretly the mourners are laughing too.

"Naturally, the sound of crying is very similar to the sound of laughter," Liu muses. "Happiness" or "sadness" are just labels we put

on emotions. I flatten the emotion.' The piece calls into question the lines we use to demarcate the different emotions we experience. In ordinary life, this passes unnoticed, in order to conceal the fact that certain values are privileged over others. It is better, so we think, to be happy rather than sad. But one of the reasons for our unhappiness is the pressure to always be happy.

For Liu, the possibility of salvation lies in performance. Speaking of the mourners in her video work, she laments, 'This kind of emotion is performed, it's fake.' But for her, the only difference between a performance in the theatre and the roles we perform in our everyday lives is that in one we think that we're seeing a performance, and in the other, we think that we're not. 'Everything is performed, even my life. A boundary is always placed between what is real and what isn't, so I try to play with this.

My feeling is that the whole world is like this. But I know that if I say that my life is a performance, and I am a performer, then people will think that I'm not an honest person, that I have a personality defect. For me, the only thing that is authentic is the performance.' By deconstructing the binary division between authenticity and artifice, and by delimiting where and what constitutes a performance, the possibility of another way of being emerges, a possibility that is not obligated to being this or that.

It is a possibility that Liu inhabits naturally. As we part, she remains standing in the doorway, neither inside or outside. Half of her body is in shadow, and the other is in the warm afternoon light, neither early nor late.

The Edge of Vision, Or the Edge of the Earth is at White Space Beijing until **May 5**. See listings.



* Competition Win a pair of tickets to the Surge Beijing opening party

Surge Beijing is the new name for Affordable Art China (AAC), a yearly event that puts quality art in the hands of plebs like us, rather than those weighed down by *mao*. Of the 1,000 works on sale this year, half are going for 15,000RMB or less and all cost less than 30,000RMB.

The artworks – which have been selected by a judging panel including Bao Dong, who curated the UCCA's recent *On / Off* exhibition, and artist Liu Xiaodong – will be available to buy on the Surge website, but the highlights will be on display in Sanlitun Village's The Orange for people to inspect. Artists this year include Li Jinguo, who makes arresting sculptures; Chen Linggang, whose work sold out completely at last year's instalment; and Liu Aijing, who also uses inks – one of the more popular mediums this year.

The event at The Orange will also be supported with free talks, presentations and discussions by artists and curators on art collecting, new trends and the future of art, among other topics, though the details hadn't been finalised at the time of going to press.

And that's not all! On Monday 29 there will be an opening party for the folks involved with the event – the movers and shakers of Surge Beijing – and we have five pairs of tickets to give away! To be in with a chance of winning, just email the correct answer to the following question to prizes@timeoutcn.com by Monday 22 with the title 'Surge competition'. **Dan Vimes**

Question: 'Surge' rhymes with 'urge', justifying this question: which track, performed by Urge Overkill, appeared in *Pulp Fiction*?

Surge takes place at The Orange from **Tue 30 to May 2**, free. The Village, 19 Sanlitun Lu, Chaoyang district (6536 0510). For opening/closing times and details of talks see www.affordableartchina.com. 朝阳区三里屯路19号三里屯VILLAGE



room, but a pattern that has been lovingly assembled by the artist herself, to make it appear to be period wallpaper. This is complicated further by Liu's re-appropriation of Penelope Umbrico's practice of using images found on Google to create her works of conceptual art. 'The funny thing is, I didn't Google "beautiful flowers", or "flowers", you get roses. But my flowers are the flowers that shouldn't exist in the world. I looked up "disgusting flowers", but they are more beautiful than roses.' The *fleur-play* Liu performs in the piece makes it impossible for us not to notice the rigid lines of demarcation that structure our thinking, and in doing so, declare the impossibility of such self-assured lines. The flower print is an inauthentic reproduction of 1950s domesticity, but it is the authentic labour of an artist. The effort of choosing the flowers is individual and idiosyncratic, but the flowers used to create the pattern were appropriated from Google, articulating a standardised consensus of what a flower is. The work inhabits a space in an art gallery, legitimising it as part of high culture, but aesthetically, it belongs to the kitsch, the sort of thing that