

MAY 07 2020

CHINA

OBITUARY: LI HUI (1977–2020)

BY CHARMAINE KONG, HG MASTERS



LI HUI, known for his captivating lighting installations passed away on May 4, aged 43. Courtesy the artist and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.



Beijing-based multimedia artist and sculptor Li Hui passed away on May 4 at the age of 43. The news was first reported by the Chinese cultural site [arttron.net](#), which said that he died of an unspecified illness.

Known for his interactive, atmospheric installations which incorporate technology, Li was recognized by his contemporaries in China and internationally as a groundbreaking artist. Born in Beijing in 1977, he specialized in sculpture at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, where he learned to utilize stainless steel and wood. Upon graduating in 2003, Li quickly discovered his voice as he started to delve into sculptures made with lighting devices. By experimenting with materials that ranged from lasers and LED light panels to smoke, mist, transparent acrylic, optical fiber, and silicone, Li created visual illusions that evoke sensory experiences within visitors.

Among his most iconic works were *Cage* (2006–14), a black room draped in mist and punctuated by green laser beams that create a sense of entrapment. The work was shown at the Light Art Museum in Eindhoven (2010), The Netherlands, at the [Schering Stiftung](#) in Berlin (2011), and later at the Yuz Museum in Shanghai (2014). His ground-breaking installation *V* (2011), created for the Nave space at Beijing's Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA), combined red lasers, fog, and mirrors to simulate an otherworldly, futuristic landscape. UCCA director at the time, Jérôme Sans, said Li Hui's works "transcend the boundaries of language, logic and linear time," and that he was "more an archeologist of the future than a spiritual shaman . . . allow[ing] us to viscerally experience the realities of this world while anxiously contemplating the mysteries of the next."

The sculpture *Atlantis* (2012), an illuminated lightning bolt within a decaying robot, signified the artist's view of technology's capability for evolution and its potential for

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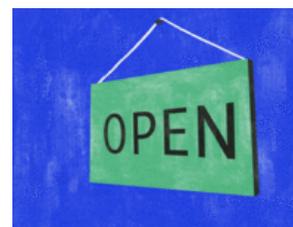
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destruction. As much as Li was dedicated to producing techno-centric artwork, he was interested in exploring the power imbalance between nature and humankind by defying unquestioned notions of time, space, and speed through a spiritualist lens. “The fusion of art and technology must reveal some truth about humanity,” Li said when speaking of his solo exhibition “Ksana” at New York’s Sandra Gering Inc. in 2015.

With his independent spirit, even at a young age, Li appeared at major biennials such as the Shanghai Biennale and the Busan Biennale in 2006. He showcased his works extensively at solo and group exhibitions both in China and beyond, including at the UCCA in Beijing, the Yuz Museum in Shanghai, the Singapore Art Museum, the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, and the Light Art Museum in Eindhoven. In 2015, he presented two radical new sculptures at Sandra Gering Inc., namely *Ksana* (2015) and *Broken Heart* (2014), in which the former’s image of collision and fracture is juxtaposed against the latter’s delicate balancing of steel and LED lights. More recently in 2018, Li took part in the collective annual exhibition “*Labs New Artists II*,” launched by Red Hook Labs in Brooklyn, New York.

For his 2011 UCCA exhibition, the artist explained his practice according to principles of Chan Buddhism: “When two kinds of energies collide, a new energy emerges. This new energy is unidentified, just like the feeling visitors have when they see my works: it can’t be expressed in words.” His 2015 solo exhibition “Instant Insanity,” at *Arario Gallery* in Shanghai, tapped into those emotions with a sculpture of a rhinoceros seemingly trapped inside a large shipping container on the back of a truck. The giant animal appears to have bent the contours of the container to its own bodily form, in an expression of what the artist saw as the energetic “expansion and compression” of Chinese society at the time. Or, in another of his signature phrases, the “truth of uncertainty” that defined the early decades of the 21st century.

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