

States of Bewilderment: The Arcane Beauty of Ling Jian's World

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The pursuit of “certainty” arises from a longing for security. Yet the world is profoundly complex, and every unexpected turn reminds us of our limitations—even our incompetence or powerlessness. After the Cold War, optimistic ideas such as the “end of history” quickly gained popularity. But ever-shifting and unpredictable realities once again caught people off guard and became increasingly difficult to navigate. Today, the world order and dominant values established after World War II are no longer taken for granted. Dramatic upheavals press in from all sides, sweeping everyone along and leaving us disoriented and unable to find common ground amid the chaos.

Because of their reverence for spiritual resonance, one of an artist's strengths is sensitivity. This sensitivity may arise without warning or rational cause, yet it can be immensely valuable. Just as events can occur without clear antecedents, absolute causes are not always the prerequisites. History shows us that reason may emerge afterward, lie in the future, or remain forever beyond human comprehension. The sensitivity that artists transform into artworks may be intensely personal delirium—or it may be an accurate premonition concerning the fate of many.

In recent years, Ling Jian's paintings have exuded a neurotic sensitivity. They seem obscure and inexplicable, yet clearly urgent, as if something must be said. They appear faintly connected to the psychological symptoms of this era of global upheaval. It may simply be that he cannot—or perhaps deliberately chooses not to—articulate these concerns directly, preferring instead a mode of expression more suited to the intrinsic strengths of visual art.

“A sewing machine and an umbrella meet by chance on a dissecting table” (a line from Comte de Lautréamont). In the absurd tension between unrelated elements, a kind of spiritual vitality shimmers and flows. Ling Jian's paintings largely employ Surrealist techniques, combining the images, symbols, and sensibilities of our time. Beautiful, tender faces; human limbs; animal torsos; plant branches; and nameless, writhing, flowing substances are stitched together and placed within folded, torn, and pierced multidimensional spaces. These constructions form mysterious and uncanny visions. Under the clash of warm and cool colors, they appear even more sumptuous and vivid, yet also decadent and mournful—emotional tones that frequently surface in his work.

By temperament and upbringing, Ling Jian often fuses beauty with mystery. Beauty draws the viewer in; mystery eludes comprehension. This kind of ambiguity and

openness fully leverages the allure of art. He commands the splendor generated by high-purity color combinations and the vitality produced by the collision of warm and cool tones. When seductive visual appeal merges with elusive meaning, these brilliant, luxurious, enigmatic, and despondent works generate a powerful tension between emotion and implication: radiance and darkness, fullness and emptiness, abundance and poverty, blossoming and decay. Bodily desire mutates in its own fever, producing undercurrents that consume the mind. Secular pleasure surges, breeding maladies that corrode belief. Nihilism is the root illness of the spirit; darkness always seeps in where there is emptiness. Even when ghosts don fashionable and glamorous attire, they are accelerating the entropy of the world. It is just that, on the eve of crisis, people are often entirely unaware.

Born in 1963, Ling Jian grew up in China, lives in Europe, and moves within what might be called a fluid society. He continues forward amid the tensions between globalization and deglobalization. Cultural time lags, civilizational differences, and shared aspects of human nature are all deeply etched experiences for him. Since childhood, he has witnessed relentless and rapid social change. Yet the current upheavals—especially those unfolding within Western societies—still leave him bewildered. Many long-held “common sense” assumptions are repeatedly overturned by unexpected events. Where is the future heading?

What Ling Jian experiences is what many experience; his bewilderment is a shared bewilderment. In an era of increasingly rapid information scanning, if one slows down to look carefully at his paintings, one discovers abundant details and suggestive juxtapositions pointing—explicitly or implicitly—to cultural symptoms: the rupture between modernity and classicism; the dissolution of the sacred into the secular; the frivolous covering-over of suffering by hedonism; fullness and clarity deconstructed into emptiness and chaos; intensifying civilizational conflict; the spreading shadow of war; and the coupling of technology with darkness, accelerating human alienation.

Yet Ling Jian does not state these themes plainly. As an artist, he relies instead on the inherent strengths of visual art, transforming complex and shifting judgments into forms, colors, textures, spaces, and structures that strike the retina. He invites viewers back to the act of “seeing” itself—to turn on perception and, through perception, opening memory, reflection, imagination, and the spirit.

Because of this reliance on the intrinsic strengths of the visual, Ling Jian's works have always been full of sensual appeal. Aesthetics is the study of sensation; art is the technique of feeling. Only by stirring the senses can art move emotions and ideas, ultimately forming a resonance of the spirit. The realm of sensation is vast and subtle.

Extraordinary sensory allure can intoxicate, captivate, and enthrall. Art that does not move the senses is ineffective. To bypass aesthetics in favor of discussing themes, narratives, or concepts—however rich or complex—is ultimately superficial.

In Ling Jian's work, sensual allure arouses desire. Within desire swirl complex emotions—joy and sorrow, love and hatred. These emotions ferment into countless words that both long to be spoken yet resist articulation. This deliberate or unconscious ambiguity expands the space of visual and psychological experience, pointing toward open-ended meanings beyond words. As the saying goes: "Cut it, yet it cannot be severed; sort it out, yet it remains tangled—a unique taste lingers in the heart."

In any case, the desire stirred by sensual allure is the primary characteristic of Ling Jian's art. He deeply understands the immense power of desire in the human heart and in social life. Classical texts passed down over millennia distinguish between two kinds of freedom: the freedom to indulge desire and the freedom gained through obedience to truth. Desire is rooted in human nature; truth stands above humanity. The world upheavals troubling people today stem from the irreconcilable conflict between liberalism and conservatism.

When desire is indulged to its peak, the pendulum of history swings toward conservatism. The conservative view of truth holds that no one creates themselves; human beings are created beings—finite, brief, limited, and ignorant. Only by preserving the integral relationship among the Creator, heaven, earth, and humanity—and maintaining a balance between experience, reason, and transcendent trust—can one pass through the dark curtain of emptiness and chaos and find a place of rest.