LOT 1046
PROPERTY FROM AN IMPORTANT PRIVATE ASIAN COLLECTION
LIU XIAODONG
B. 1963
DISOBEYING THE RULES
signed in Pinyin and dated 1996; signed in Chinese and Pinyin, titled in Chinese and dated 1996 on the reverse, framed
oil on canvas
180 by 230 cm.; 70 by 90½ in.

ESTIMATE Estimate Upon Request
Lot Sold: 66,200,000 HKD

PROVENANCE
Important Asian Private Collection

EXHIBITED
Italy, Venice, The 47th Venice Biennale, 1997
China, Beijing, China Art in the 20th Century, Art Museum of China, 2000
China, Beijing, History of River: The Chinese Oil Painting Exhibition in New Era, Art Museum of China, 26th November-7th December, 2005

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CATALOGUE NOTE

A Brave Departure
Liu Xiaodong

Liu Xiaodong, who transcends his time, is destined to be remembered in the history of contemporary Chinese art. Trained in academic realism but not constrained by it, he uses his virtuosic brush to convey his concern for and sympathetic feelings towards the downtrodden in society, as well as more generally the Chinese people as a whole. Liu Xiaodong’s art is documentary but not realist, and yet it is more realistic than even realism: his surpassing attentiveness and sensitivity are not to be found in technical perfection, but rather in his capturing of the suggestive moments of life and his rendition of the psychological conditions of the Chinese. Throughout the idealism of the eighties, the Political Pop and Cynical Realism of the nineties, and even the predominant conceptualism of the new millennium, Liu Xiaodong has never changed the direction of his painting. Whether through his plein-air documentary practice or by painting from his own photographs, he freezes fragmentary moments of the mundane world and its mundane inhabitants and commits them to canvas with his brush and paint. There have been too many heroes and icons in recent Chinese history. Like many artists who came of age in the nineties, Liu Xiaodong experienced the political storms of the previous decade. Having discovered the vast distance between ideal and reality, he turned his attention to ordinary people: friends, family, migrant and other workers, and farmers are his most inspiring subjects. Created in 1996, Disobeying the Law (Lot 1046) is one of Liu’s most representative works and one of his earliest paintings to thematise migrant workers and express his social concern. It predates, by 8 years, his most explicitly socially-oriented paintings, such as Great Migration at the Three Gorges and New Immigrants at the Three Gorges. Disobeying the Law depicts a large group of naked migrants workers on a truck, connecting their condition with the Chinese people’s general lack of self-determination. Responding to the economic development of the nineties, of which disregard for human life was a by-product, Liu Xiaodong’s work reflects the helplessness of the bottom-rung workers. The gas cans on the truck are vessels, representing the burdens of life. Fate has pushed these migrant workers to dangerous extremes, and all they can manage is to smile meekly. In a scene filled with conflict, Disobeying the Law records the psychological state of a generation of Chinese and, in a powerfully resonant way, asks us to meditate on its lessons on life. An extremely important masterpiece by Liu Xiaodong from the nineties, it has been exhibited on countless occasions, including at the 1997 Venice Biennale and the 1998 group exhibition Representing People in the United Kingdom.

Liu Xiaodong is adept at extracting and distilling fragmentary moments of life and imbuing them with rich
symbolic significance. He cares the most about the poor and downtrodden in society, who have always been neglected in mainstream media. Unusually for a contemporary artist, Liu collaborated consistently with Sixth Generation directors like Wang Xiaoshuai, Zhang Yuan, and Jia Zhangke, all of whom like to focus on ordinary citizens, to create a historically significant series of painters and feature films in the nineties. In Disobeying the Law, a total of 17 migrant workers are cramped on a truck. Liu Xiaodong directs their steady gaze at the viewer as a concrete documentation of their helplessness and optimism. Expanding its vision from these specific individuals to a whole society, the painting becomes a metaphor for the Chinese people and a lament on existential freedom. It is doubtlessly a precious document of the pivotal moment in the Chinese economic reforms of the nineties. Fan Di’an, the critic who discovered Liu Xiaodong, believes that Liu vividly expressed a key theme of that decade: spiritual independence in contemporary existence. Indelibly imbued with its Zeitgeist, Disobeying the Law is one of Liu’s works of the nineties that takes “little people” as its subjects and explores their joys and sorrows and existential conditions.

Liu Xiaodong’s art has always been rooted in his own life, and his paintings are always based on everyday scenes or photographs. Disobeying the Law is no exception, originating in a photograph that Liu took in Beijing in 1996. While driving, he happened to be able to photograph a truck filled with people and another one filled with pigs. The two images gave him a tremendous impact, inspiring him to make the migrant workers naked and place gas cans on the truck. “The Chinese are pitiable. They have no individual life. Everyone suffers through every day mechanically, doing nothing actively or energetically. Much like pigs, they are not in charge of their own fates.”¹ Like cargo being transported from place to place, like pigs being transported to a slaughterhouse, they have no control over their lives. “They are still happy to be alive. I don’t want to say their lives are harsh or joyless. I have painted it all in this painting.”²

Born in 1963 in Jincheng, Liu Xiaodong arrived in Beijing as early as 1981 to attend the affiliated high school of the Central Academy of Fine Art. In 1984, along with Yu Hong, he won admission to the Third Studio of the CAFA’s Oil Painting Department. When he graduated 4 years later, he was sent to teach at the affiliated high school. Campuses were infused with idealism in the eighties, when the ‘85 New Wave swept art schools large and small across the whole country. But for Liu Xiaodong, many trends and behaviours of the New Wave were “excessive and immature.” He was a little uncomfortable in a jingoistic, conceptualist art world. In the eighties, he also tried to use his body as a medium, for example by spreading ink on his body and rolling around in trash. It was only later that he rediscovered the creative drive in painting. “So I just followed a natural path and did what was most familiar and natural.”³ To be sure, the ‘85 New Wave had made everyone who wanted to paint seem passé and old-guard. “I wanted to do things honestly, but also to paint explosively.”⁴ In 1989, Liu Xiaodong was invited to the controversial landmark exhibition, “Chinese Avant-Garde.” His submissions Smoker and Resting were impressive first attempts, but these paintings of his friends smoking and resting, with their realist documentary vision, were at odds with the highly conceptualist and aggressively idiosyncratic tone of the exhibition. Following the student political movement of 1989, Liu Xiaodong’s works became more clearly in tune with the times. In 1990, he organised his first solo show, “Liu Xiaodong’s Oil Paintings,” which generated a tremendous response. Although he did not participate in the “New Generation Art” exhibition of 1991, his painting style had already begun to influence painters of the 90’s, such that he was in fact the earliest of the “new generation.” At the time, the famous critic Li Xianting, who articulated the influential notion of Cynical Realism, thought that Liu Xiaodong, like other realist artists of his generation, felt helpless and lost in the face of insurmountable powers. “[Your, i.e. Liu Xiaodong’s] concern for individuals was a coming down to earth from the high vantage of the ’85 New Wave, a turning towards the everyday, incidental moments in your life and your surroundings.”⁵ Liu Xiaodong himself has said, “From then on, I tended to trust only what I could see with my own eyes. Other kinds of history I couldn’t understand and didn’t have time to learn, but I didn’t trust them. This has influenced my painting style. I still like to paint on the spot, to interact with these people in person. I don’t look at anyone else’s
photographs, but only my own. I only refer to the world I myself see.”

Thereafter, Liu Xiaodong’s painting style and creative approach had basically been formed. In the early nineties, his works were mostly about his wife and friends. Other than sketching indoors from life directly, he commonly elaborated photographs into paintings, which would become his primary mode of operation. Regardless of method, what he seeks to do is to preserve traces of life and crystallise and concretize its energies on canvas. “I especially want my paintings to be more crystallising. How? By nothing else but my momentary feelings and my persistence, I can crystallise it.” Such life energy reflects the spirit of the times. Liu Xiaodong is not satisfied with direct realist rendition, but rather channels and embeds the contradictions and confusion of life in every brushstroke and passage in his compositions. “I sometimes wish to express someone’s internal struggles. When you want to make a lot happen but cannot, you’re already full of contradictions. I try to represent this state in painting. You can feel a certain tenseness and pressure in my paintings.”

In the aforementioned early work Resting, for example, a sleeper, a bed, and an electric heater beneath the bed are all that is needed to create a sense of danger in the viewer. It expresses the period’s contradictory state of passivity and being under threat. From a psychoanalytical perspective, we can better grasp the zeitgeist behind Liu Xiaodong’s works. In Descendant of Yugong of 1994, a shirtless youth kicks a wall. The name “Yugong” (“The Old Fool Who Moved a Mountain” according to a Chinese famous fable) is particularly suggestive given that the photograph on which the painting was based was taken on June 4.

For his mastery of psychological states and his painting style, Liu Xiaodong is often compared to the British artist Lucien Freud. Both create emotionally compelling scenes with nudes. But the two are also very different in creative approach. Whereas Freud painted hired models hermetically in his studio, Liu Xiaodong wanders out and about. In the 90’s, he most often painted from his own photographs, which he took not only of acquaintances and friends but sometimes also of complete strangers. He would sometimes replicate a photograph thoroughly, but he would also transform a photograph to bring out its psychological background and mood. In 2003 and 2004, he ventured outwards to paint Great Migration at the Three Gorges and New Immigrants at the Three Gorges from life. In the same year, on Cao Guoqiang’s invitation, he participated in “Jinmenbao Art Exhibition: 18 Solo Shows,” in which he painted Mainland and Taiwan soldiers from life. Liu Xiaodong emphasises the need of a true connection with his subjects and hopes to sublimate their individuality into more general emotional truths. Of this approach, Disobeying the Law is a prime example.

As Liu Xiaodong’s brushwork became more and more impressionistic, and as his social commitments became stronger and more explicit, the metaphoric significances of his paintings also became more evident. “You don’t recognise me because I conceal myself very well. Chinese intellectuals have all learnt to conceal themselves, to preserve themselves amid the many political struggles. They have learnt how to talk, how to express the spirit of the times indirectly in their works.” A grand submerged metaphor for the Chinese environment of the 1990’s, Disobeying the Law bears eloquent witness to the passage of time.

1 Britta Erickson, Browsing Through Two Decades of personal Photographs with Liu Xiaodong, The Richness of Life: The Personal Photographs of Contemporary Chinese Artist Liu Xiaodong 1984-2006, p.201
2 Refer to 1
3 ()
4 Refer to 3
5 Refer to 3
6 Art Bazaar, November 2012, pp. 95-96
7 Refer to 3
8 Interview with Jean-Marc Decrop
9 Refer to 1
The Choice of the 1990s: The Art and Artists of the “New Generation”

The “China /Avant-Garde” exhibition held in Beijing in early 1989 seemed to symbolize a turning point in Chinese contemporary art. On the one hand, the exhibition marked the end of the vibrant “New Wave” art movement of the 1980s; on the other hand, as the 1990s unfolded, the social and cultural environment in China began to change in subtle ways. At the same time, confronted by issues of “cultural relevance,” the creative and intellectual climate inhabited by artists and art critics began to evolve as well. To a significant degree, these changes came about as a result of the barriers raised by generational differences—while those artists representative of the “85 New Wave” who had experienced the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) directly varied in their enthusiasm for entertaining such metaphysical propositions as “absolute principles” and “great spirit,” a younger generation, born in the 1960s, who had studied art in the academies and had suffered fewer emotional wounds than their elders, were more willing, for personal reasons, to seek truth and place their trust in real life, while at the same time emphasizing the importance of realizing the value of the individual. Responding to the general social climate of the time, the revival of market economics in the 1990s had a negative impact on the avant-garde character of art. No longer was art considered a vehicle for realizing political ideals, a situation that left many in a state of perplexity and at a loss. Against this background, the appearance of the “New Generation” of artists on the art world stage was something fresh and novel. Shifting their glances away from the Big Questions of humanity in favor of a greater concern for individual lives, the “New Generation” relinquished the sublimity of the spiritual in exchange for the mediocrity of everyday life, and rejected an attitude of condescension while embracing the practice of “close-up” observation. Comparing the internal logic and artistic style of the “85 New Wave” with that of the “New Generation” can offer a more direct understanding of their differences. After the Cultural Revolution, the long suppressed emotional pain and humanist concerns of the Chinese people were first expressed through the mediums of “Scar Art” and “Life Stream” art. But by around 1985, mere reflection on the pain of the past no longer fulfilled the requirements of artistic expression. Following the large scale influx of Western modernist philosophy and art, members of the “85 New Wave” generation began to engage in heated philosophical speculation. Gao Minglu’s reconceptualization of “New Wave Art” as “Rational Painting” encapsulates the spirit of the times. Artistic style reflects the spiritual and intellectual climate in society. For example, Wang Guangyi’s rational and analytical compositions, his concise and orderly visual language, offered a “revisionist” critique of Western Classical art. Shu Qun filled the severe geometric spaces of his canvases with a kind of religious solemnity. And even artists like Zhang Peili, who tended to emphasize individual experience, relied on surrealist painting techniques and an attitude of indifference to express his own rational state of mind. The backlash carried out by the artists of the “85 New Wave” was naturally directed against hyper-emotional “Scar Art” and “Life Stream” art; yet this led to their deliberately taking up abstraction and vacuous conceptualism, and to their contempt for realistic depiction. From this point of view, the art of the “New Generation,” born out of the academic tradition, can be seen as a dual backlash against both traditional oil painting and “New Wave Art.” As artist Wang Huaxiang said at the time, “We’re fed up with conceptualism; artists have to go back to the reality of their own lives, without exaggeration.”

Following this principle, the artists of the new generation consciously chose realism as their painting language as a way of depicting the supposedly spontaneous moments in life. They also sought to see through life’s superficialities, and to strip the “little people” bare and depict their boredom and emptiness unapologetically on their canvasses. This approach is evident in, for example, Yu Hong’s somewhat vulgar, unbeautified female figures in “Bright Sun in the Sky,” who appear entirely oblivious to the meaning of existence; and Wei Rong’s photorealistic street scene in “The Telephone Booth. Wang Jinsong leaves large blank spaces on his canvases as a way of suggesting his status as a “bystander,” while Song Yonghong partially lifts the veil on sexual behavior that is normally considered taboo in the public arena in China. By
“consciously emphasizing the possible psychological manifestations of occurrences in daily life,” these two artists’ works have been simultaneously criticized for expressing “ridicule and self-mockery.” Furthermore, works created in the early 1990s by a number of graduates of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, including Zeng Hao, Shen Ling, Wang Yuping, Wang Huaxiang and Zhao Bandi all display the stylistic characteristics of the “New Generation.” As beneficiaries of the tradition of oil painting taught in the academies, they possess a firm mastery of the basic techniques of the genre. As a result, these artists are particularly concerned with the polished brushwork and perfect execution of their works. One finds no traces of conceptual or philosophical thought in the art of the “New Generation.” Instead we discover more practical and realistic concerns about everyday life. “The art of the New Generation emphasizes the intrinsic logic and integrity of daily life. They draw on the most familiar details of their own daily lives to point out our own limited experience and understanding. The psychological elements that filter through into their works are both complex and tedious; they neither reinforce nor set forth a single conceptual way of thinking.”

The paintings of Liu Xiaodong have all the identifying characteristics of “New Generation” art. Although Liu did not participate in the “New Generation Art” exhibition held in Beijing in 1991, which symbolized the artistic debut of the “New Generation,” he has long been regarded by critics as an important representative member of that group. Already in the late 1980s, Liu’s paintings evinced these characteristics, that is, they not only gave expression to his own state of mind, but also revealed the situation in which all the members of his generation found themselves. Liu stands out for his penetrating examination of society. In the words of critic Fan Di’an, “The paintings of Liu Xiaodong very clearly depict an important central theme running through discussions of culture in the 1990s: the present trend towards spiritual independence... Liu portrays the life of the ‘little people’ who occupy the middle ranks of society. He casts his gaze on these ‘little people,’ their joys and sorrows, and their thoroughly familiar and commonplace living situations, and depicts their response to the world around them. We might say that he creates landscapes of survival in contemporary society. From “Dinner” (1991) and “Underground” (1993) to “Disobeying the Rules” (1996) and “Burning Garbage” (1998), Liu continued to paint in this vein. Without judgment, Liu portrayed the setbacks, embarrassment, successes and helplessness of his subjects. Through his cool and detached method, he depicted the lives of the common people and their self-assured state of mind.”

We might note here that the term “New Generation” was neither invented nor further elaborated upon by the members of that generation of artists. Strictly speaking, the “New Generation” was not a close-knit, clearly defined and interactive artist group. For the most part, the members of the group worked independently, and in their own individual ways. However, their shared academic backgrounds and similar life experiences resulted in their inadvertently having chosen similar forms of expression, which in turn endowed them with a presence in the art world that could not be ignored. Their emergence as a force to reckon with was portended by a series of small scale exhibitions held in the exhibition rooms and galleries of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, beginning with Liu Xiaodong’s solo show, “The World of Female Painters” and Yu Hong’s solo show, all in 1990; and “Close-up: The Art of Wang Huaxiang,” an exhibitions of work by Shen Ling and another of new work by Zhao Bandi, which took place the following year. The new trends that surfaced in these exhibitions attracted the attention of a number of critics, Yin Ji’nan in particular, who pointed out the traits shared by the members of the group. According to Yin, “Their artistic tendencies, characterized by a relaxed approach to cultural aims and a refined artistic language, sparked my interest in following their careers. As I have stated before, Liu Xiaodong’s solo show and ‘The World of Female Painters’ signaled the arrival on the art scene of a new generation.” Drawing on the concept of time in geology, the term “New Generation” came to signify this group of artists and their work. Yin explained this further in an essay entitled “The New Generation and Close-up Views:” “The term ‘close-up’ describes their artistic point of view: They wish to reduce the spiritual distance between art and concepts, and between art and life.”
The exhibition “New Generation Art,” organized and curated by a number of art critics, was held at the National Museum of Chinese History (today the National Museum of China) in Beijing in July 1991. Works by 16 artists were shown, including Yu Hong, Wei Rong, Song Yonghong, Wang Jinsong and Shen Ling. The exhibition set off a significant furore, giving the term “New Generation” some notoriety. Thanks to the published views and personal encouragement of a group of young academically trained critics, including Yi Ying, Fan Di’an and Zhou Yan, the “New Generation” of artists soon gained scholarly recognition. In this sense, the term “New Generation” transcends the notion of a particular coterie of artists, or a particular style of painting, and has come to represent an entire artistic worldview, formed collaboratively by critics and artists in the early 1990s. While consolidating a number of artistic trends, the “New Generation” highlighted the important role of the critic, paving the way later in the decade for the “Age of the Curator” in Chinese contemporary art. The “New Generation” emerged in China at the same time as “Cynical Realism,” and “Gaudy Art,” with its thin overlay of ridicule, which can be seen as the intellectual heirs of the “New Generation.” “Rather than claim that the ‘New Generation’ chose the 1990s, it is more accurate to say that the 1990s chose the ‘New Generation.’” 7 In the course of development of Chinese contemporary art, the importance of the “New Generation” as heir to the past and herald for the future cannot be disputed.

Notes: [all cited sources are in Chinese]
7. Yin, loc. cit.

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Fig. 1

Artist’s sketch of the current work

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Fig. 2

Photographs taken in Beijing by the artist which inspired the present work

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Fig. 3

Photographs taken in Beijing by the artist which inspired the present work
Fig. 4
Photographs taken in Beijing by the artist which inspired the present work.

Fig. 5
Photographs taken in Beijing by the artist which inspired the present work.

Fig. 6
LUCIAN FREUD (1922-2011), Naked Man, Back View, 1991-92 (oil on canvas), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA © The Lucian Freud Archive / Bridgeman Images

Fig. 7
LIU XIAODONG, Pig, oil on canvas, 2000

Fig. 8
Photograph taken in Beijing by the artist which inspired the present work

Fig. 9
Artist

Fig. 10
Entrance of New Generation Art, Celebrating the 10th Anniversary of the Resuming Publication of Beijing Youth News, a Group Exhibition at The History Museum of China, Beijing, 1991