

Liu Xinyi: GOULASH

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Goulash is the 2nd solo exhibit of Liu Xinyi held at White Space Beijing after *Agent L* was brought to fruition two years ago. On display are four brand new works by the artist. At first glance, the works in this exhibit are by and large a continuation of the artist's train of thought prior to *Agent L*, i.e. chiseling a breach within the airtight visual formulae of politics, placing samples within a lighthearted, seemingly harmless new context and redesigning the algorithms involved. After his frequent use of flags, slogans and portraits of various countries' leaders, Liu Xinyi now chooses to work with the national emblems of former socialist countries. The artist's approach for *Agent L* differed from his usual sideline-sampling and collating, as in the work *Whole Lot of Stars* (2012), for which he cut out and rearranged five-pointed stars from countries' flags, or the work *From Marx to Mao* (2010), in which he made the beards or hair of leadership figures into a humorous vignette. The exploratory method of *Agent L* is more about slicing and dicing an exemplary sample, with the four works more or less reflecting the four components of the Soviet Union emblem. Of course, they may justifiably be called the national emblems of ex-socialist states. Back then most countries falling under the socialist alignment all emulated big brother SU, retaining elements such as red stars, sickle and hammer and ears of wheat. Only with the Soviet emblem at the very center could a shape of the world exist that symbolizes the global proletarian alliance.

Most eye-catching of all is the set of voluminous ears of wheat randomly placed in a corner of the space, drooping, made from lemony yellow polyurethane foam, resembling props on decorative floats used in military parades at the occasion of national holiday commemorations, or those discarded after agricultural workers receive their inspection. The flashiness of the lemony yellow and emerald green is not easily associated with the austere symbolism once embodied by the agricultural class. It rather turns the objects into set pieces that can be fiddled with or moved around. Liu Xinyi makes conscious use of gaudy, eye-catching colors in his artistic creations. This instantly gratifying color scheme, rife with consumerism and entertainment, is the ideal "fabric softener" for rigid and entangled political concepts. It allows for effortless dismissal of the pretense of those who sit stiffly in their wooden armchairs. This color usage was already visible in the work *Gems* (2013), in which the artist substituted the Color Revolutions in the Commonwealth of Independent States and Middle Eastern and North-African countries of recent years with colorful soft drinks, and the work *No Passing Through* (2013), in which he used multicolored signboards to match the stereotypical, behavior-regulating slogans. The wheat stalks were taken from national emblems suspended up high. They don't so much replace the lost mutterings of discontent of the agricultural class, as they intend to celebrate the freedom regained by wheat - long-embedded in powerful political imagery - to limber its waist. Wheat is simply wheat, i.e. a crop belonging to the grass family, the deep-processed products of which are a staple for people all over the

world. However, the title of the work *Surplus Value* (2014) appears to be a far cry from the foodie thought chain "wheat - flour - bread - fried dough-sticks - cookies". Liu Xinyi's previous works prove that he is quite adept at finding nuanced titles for his works. Many of these show relative restraint without losing an explicit sense of directionality, especially in the case of highly participatory works that run the risk of diluting the artist's own commentary, such as the chopstick-dispenser coughing up faith-related jottings of the work *Responsive Politics* (2013), or the work *Civil Diplomacy* (2011), in which one can get a first-hand feel of relations between nation states via a hand-muscle developer. The titles are as loaded as the works themselves. Running through the entire exhibit is a red aura, held together by large captions, small titles and a range of visual elements. The title of *Surplus Value* (2014) recalls the communist system of surplus grain collection during the time of Soviet warfare. The work's title is a likely reflection of the exhibit title Goulash, a well-known term among the populace during the 60's and 70's of the previous century, satirizing a communism typified by Soviet revisionist welfare. Or perhaps the artist decided to use it solely for the term's historic weight.

Adjacent to the ears of wheat of our farmer brethren are two dumbbells made of hammers, one prostrate and one upright. Both are covered in the kind of flashy yellow that makes people want to try them out. From hammer to dumbbell: once the working class that loudly chanted the International held that hammer to shatter the ice-cold machines that suppressed them. Today, those who hold the dumbbell rival only themselves, with their heads lowered staring into their navels, releasing the energy pent up throughout the day. They belong to the *Working Out Class* (2014). The pampering of the welfare states, the wearing down of consumerism, the decomposing of intensive labor-division have resulted in the shutdown of what once was the worker movement. The barricades of the labor force are dampened under the strain of global capital, muting the rhetoric of the world's proletarian alliance. What remains are the musings of an elderly court attendant reminiscing emperor Xuanzong of a long-gone century. The obviously powerful, unyielding outer shape of the iron hammerheads that once made the old world tremble, placed on two extremes of the dumbbell, seems to echo a clanging cadence of the past.

In the work *One Night Back To Wartime* (2014), 12 red stars from ex-socialist national emblems form a massive clock face, which incidentally is also the pattern on the European Union flag. This seems to allude to the rapid succession of formerly Socialist Eastern European countries embracing the European Union throughout the first years of this century. Parallel to this rise and fall is the old Chinese saying, "The river flows East for thirty years, then spends the next thirty flowing West". However, places overshadowed by larger countries haven't undergone changes yet. Flashing beacon lights indicate the impending diplomatic orientations, bubbling under the surface. It's not the first time the powerful image of signal lights appears in the *Agent L* exhibition. In the work *Flattened World* (2013), nearly 200 neatly uniform red and blue indicator lamps representing the sovereign nations of the world are arranged to form a vision of one flattened world piece/peace (ping meaning both "peaceful" and "flat"), with the red and blue lights reflecting the choice to be made when faced with a binary dichotomy.

The colors red and blue in which the beacon lights are steeped are superimposed onto the backdrop, making ideological information appear and then disappear again. What would normally be a one-off

decision, quite like answering a true-or-false question, now becomes less forthright. To give another example, in the work *Beauty Salon* (2012), the background shown behind the portraits of leaders currently in office of various countries doesn't come from an accidental, senseless pairing of the colors red, white and blue. "Agent L" has always made very conscious and prudent use of the straightforward yet subtle signals emitted by colors, as well as the communication and mismatches that occur among them. The sparkling red stars, a remainder of the red-hot, revolutionary fervor and alertness, have come to substitute the tranquil blue hue of the European Union flag. People are left wondering whether this is an embracing gesture, or an instance of illusory occupation. As is the case in the work *Treasure Island* (2012), Agent L is like a naive leftfield dreamer, climbing the tops of skyscrapers that tower aloft in the jungle of diabolic wealth, illuminating remote and inspiring little red stars. The title of the work *One Night Back to Wartime* (2014) also offers much to ruminate over. Initially this phrase was uttered by a group of not so bright farmers as a begrudging response to the policy of household production output quotas implemented at the onset of economic reforms at the end of the seventies. They ended up having to toil on publicly owned lands for several decades, which overnight fell into private hands once again. Interestingly enough this phrase turned sour not long after, and eventually often got used to scoff the people of North-Korea, the country with which we were once closely interdependent, where debates regarding the system were entirely overshadowed by the forward and backward movements of the economy. Returning to the work itself, the erstwhile faith - for what it's worth - has fallen through, thus awakening us from the dream, leaving us with much to poke fun of, staring at the red stars that flicker on and off. Could it be that we are left with the remote, despondently reverent gaze of the dismembered Lenin statue by the Danube river as portrayed in the Angelopoulos film *Ulysses' Gaze*?

The final work discussed here, concerns three different side-angle renderings of the globe, densely covered in post-it notes with the word for "friend" written on them in different countries' scripts. With the multitude of languages spoken by people all over the world after the tower of Babel fell by the wayside, it is hard for us to communicate without obstruction. Regarding the word for friend, there exists a universalism of feeling and regionally bound disputes. However, this work not only discusses personal friendship. The title *We Have Friends All Over the World* (2014) takes us back to the stormy, unstable times in diplomatic history. This phrase, adapted from the Confucian saying "All those who roam the four seas are brethren", was used by Mao Zedong in his 1966 congratulatory letter to Albanian labor party secretary Enver Hoxha. This had an undulating effect on the hearty, lofty sentiments of the day, be it that allies back then always appeared in pairs with their enemies. Who classifies as our enemy? Who classifies as our ally? This oft-repeated question of paramount revolutionary importance has revealed a self-imposed vigilance, manifesting itself under inflammatory circumstances. And yet, abnormal friendships or enmities have a tendency to commence, turn around and end in abnormal ways. After a short period of not more than a few decades, the work before us uses different scripts to express the same referent. Perhaps some inspiration was gained from the Soviet emblem, which uses the scripts of ten something SU member states to give expression to the phrase "Workers of the world, unite!". Yet at no point are people made to feel any foreshadowing of impending disaster, rather what's revealed is a mood of goodwill prevailing in the era of globalization, a peaceful picture of the rule of capital. The word friends can be easily enunciated without being weighed in the hand. Each country's writing

featured on post-its on the map resembles the strategic blueprint of global partnerships of a multinational corporation. The differences between them are far from being a difficulty, but rather they are seasoning that add to the merriment. They are debugging strategies, ways of "doing as the Romans", coupled with...Google translate.

Perhaps the title of this exhibition, *Goulash*, is most appealing of all. It is derived from the name of a home-style dish that appeals to both young and old, able to make any high-end discussion grounded again in the local reality. One catch is that this dish was once associated with the words socialist revisionism, which grew out to become a historic benchmark, because at the time the "Goulash Communism" of Khrushchev was repeatedly brought into the discussion. People were warned never to forget the class struggle, and to take heed of the philistine social restoration of welfare communism. But it could be that the Chinese people, eating plain, boiled cabbage while versing themselves in the commentary articles on Soviet Communism serially published in the People's Daily, when push comes to shove might have a deeper impression toward not resisting a good plate of goulash. But the actual reason for this Western tasting dish being so ubiquitous is Mao's sentence "The potatoes are done. Add beef. No farting allowed. Try and see the world turned upside down" from his poetry bundle *Two Birds: A Dialogue* (1965). However, by the time these allegorical words were uttered in the mid-sixties, with Chinese-Soviet rivalry raging heavily, it was already the eve of an era about to come to conclusion. Not long after, goulash, a dish that once represented revisionism, was itself effortlessly revised among regular people finally making bold strides toward moderate prosperity as a sign of the good life under communism. This reminds us of the artist's father aspiring to acquire affluence for his family, as mentioned in the foreword of the exhibit.

The entire exhibition is something of a visual essay, departing from the emblems of former socialist nations, showing us that the area of private investigation in "Agent L" gradually extends to the folds of history. Compared with the works of contemporaries that make creative use of foaming agents, this exhibit is doubtlessly worthy of high praise.

---Translated by Sid Gulinck