



Liu Xiaodong: Your Friends

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Following its debut at UCCA Edge, the solo exhibition in Beijing presents Liu Xiaodong's latest series of paintings, a suite of related sketches, a diary manuscript, and a documentary film.

Exhibition period:

2022.1.15 – 2022.4.10

Location:

Central Gallery, New Gallery

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BEIJING, China — From January 15, 2022 to April 10, 2022, UCCA Center for Contemporary Art presents the solo exhibition “Liu Xiaodong: Your Friends.” Drawing from the exhibition’s debut at UCCA Edge (Shanghai) in 2021, the Beijing edition of this exhibition centers on Liu Xiaodong’s (b. 1963, Jincheng, Liaoning province, lives and works in Beijing) latest portrait cycle “Your Friends,” which the artist completed upon his return to China in 2020 during the initial phase of the pandemic. This marks Liu Xiaodong’s second solo exhibition at UCCA Beijing, after “Hometown Boy” in 2010. “Liu Xiaodong: Your Friends” is curated by UCCA Director Philip Tinari and UCCA Curator Yan Fang.

A pioneering painter of a new realism in China, Liu Xiaodong emerged in the 1990s, known for his acute and lucid depictions of the minute changes he observed in different slices of China’s rapidly urbanizing and developing society. Since the early 2000s, he has been known to work on-site in locations of particular narrative and geopolitical poignance, from the construction site of the Three Gorges Dam to the U.S.-Mexico border during the Trump administration.

“Your Friends” is a new cycle of portraits of those nearest and dearest to Liu in life and art. In 2020, Liu found himself and his family stranded in New York for an extended stay. The months-long separation between Liu and his friends and other family members back home under the threat of the deadly virus gave Liu a deeper understanding about the nature of human connection. Upon his return to China, Liu turned his creative energy towards the individuals in his life he holds closest, both personally and artistically, both family members and friends who have been closely involved in his artistic practice. The resulting paintings reflect on the meaning of these special, intimate relationships—their mutual growth through decades of friendship, imminent mortality, and the longevity of these bonds.

Liu Xiaodong began work on these portraits immediately after he returned to China from New York in October 2020 and completed the series early summer of the same year. The project began with a self-portrait Liu Xiaodong made during

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the Lunar New Year in January 2020, set in the woods near the site where his father's ashes are interred, in his ancestral village of Heitukeng (Black Earth Pit), Liaoning province. This farming hamlet of 50 households, not far from the paper mill town of Jincheng where Liu was raised, has become a site of memory and conviviality in the years since he and his brother set up a modest family home there. A rustic farmhouse in the local style, this building has become a place to convene and to dwell together, cooking meals and lighting bonfires. In this first painting, a bare Liu crouches tiger-like against the winter landscape, willfully casting himself in a most elemental relationship to the place that made him and the body that contains him. This posture of submission to nature and circumstance—an acceptance of inevitable passing—lies at the heart of this body of work.

The title of the exhibition was inspired by Liu's amusement at his friend and portrait subject, the director Zhang Yuan's joking use of the phrase "your friend" during their portrait sessions. "Your Friends" expands the subjects of Liu's paintings to include the figures who have become some of his closest friends in the three decades he has spent working in Beijing, including renowned writer Ah Cheng and leading directors in China's "Sixth Generation" cinema Wang Xiaoshuai and Zhang Yuan, as well as the family members who will always be at the core of his story—Liu's mother, brother, and his wife, the painter Yu Hong. In this cycle, rather than the urgency of quick studies made at scenes of intense social and historical signification, we see the subtle, nuanced influence of familial intimacy sustained by time, as the artist turns his attention towards those select individuals with whom he enjoys the bonds of kinship, be it filial, fraternal, romantic, artistic, or stylistic. In doing so, the artist invites us to reflect on the ties that bind us to our moment and to each other.

Also on view are a series of small-scale works on paper, a manuscript of the artist's diaries made throughout the project, and a documentary film by Yang Bo recounting the cycle's creation, also titled *Your Friends*. Following up on "Hometown Boy" more than a decade ago, this exhibition continues to chart the artist's unflinching attention to these realities both domestically and around the world. Within scenes of a kaleidoscopic variety of ordinary lives caught in the tides of changing times, Liu captures connections between humans that transcend culture, politics, and race, elaborating a new mode of realism in a country with a long social realist heritage, and persistently probing the meaning of the historical present.



About the Artist

Liu Xiaodong (b. 1963, Jincheng, Liaoning province, China) lives and works in Beijing. He studied oil painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, which he graduated from in 1988, and where he now teaches as a tenured professor. His work has been shown in major solo exhibitions at venues around the world including UCCA Edge, Shanghai (2021); Dallas Contemporary, Dallas, Texas (2020); Louisiana Museum of Art, Humlebæk, Denmark (2019); Kunsthalle Düsseldorf and NRW Forum, Germany (2018); Palazzo Strozzi-Strozzina, Florence (2016); Today Art Museum, Beijing (2013); Kunsthaus Graz, Austria (2012); and UCCA Beijing (2010). He has participated in group exhibitions at institutions including Somerset House, London (2020); the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2017); Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris (2016); Long Museum, Shanghai (2014); Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai (2012); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2008); and Centre Pompidou, Paris (2003). His work has also been included in the Gwangju Biennale (2014); Venice Biennale (1997, 2013); Havana Biennial (2009); Biennale of Sydney (2006); and Shanghai Biennale (2000).

Exhibition Catalogue

The accompanying bilingual catalogue *Liu Xiaodong: Your Friends* released by UCCA will include the full exhibition's oil paintings, watercolor drawings, and paintings on photographs alongside a selection of the artist's diaries and stills from a documentary film about the titular series, directed by Yang Bo. Together, these materials comprise a comprehensive record of the artist's creative process. Additionally, the catalogue features a curated selection of his previous works which appeared in Shanghai, offering a snapshot of his travels around the world over the past decade and the art that grew out of these journeys. The publication also includes an essay by UCCA Director Philip Tinari that discusses these recent works, a text by anthropologist Xiang Biao that explores bodily imagery in Liu's paintings, and a dialogue between UCCA Curator Yan Fang and the artist about the curatorial themes of the exhibitions. The catalogue is designed by Studio Pianpian He & Max Harvey and published by Zhejiang Photographic Press.



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About UCCA

UCCA Center for Contemporary Art is China's leading contemporary art institution. Committed to the belief that art can deepen lives and transcend boundaries, UCCA presents a wide range of exhibitions, public programs, and research initiatives to a public of more than one million visitors each year across three locations. UCCA Beijing sits at the heart of the 798 Art District, occupying 10,000 square meters of factory chambers built in 1957 and regenerated in 2019 by OMA. UCCA Dune, designed by Open Architecture, lies beneath the sand in the seaside enclave of Aranya in Beidaihe. UCCA Edge, designed by New York-based architecture firm SO – IL, opened in Shanghai in May 2021. Formally accredited as a museum by the Beijing Cultural Bureau in 2018, UCCA also operates non-profit foundations, licensed by the Beijing Bureau of Civil Affairs and the Hong Kong government. UCCA's commercial ventures include the retail platform UCCA Store, the children's education initiative UCCA Kids, and collaborations and projects under the rubric UCCA Lab. Opened in 2007 and revived by a committed group of Chinese and international patrons in 2017, UCCA works to bring China into global dialogue through contemporary art.

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