

tinct tonal break, establishing a figure/ground relationship unusual in this work. Other drawings fleetingly suggest drifting smoke, foliage seen in mist, torrents of water or the directed scatter of magnetized iron filings.

But this gestalt of the larger massing requires a greater viewing distance than the reflexively close inspection called for by its intricate matrix of components. Nelson thus recasts the central, enlivening paradox of pictorial art: surface manipulation begetting the sweep of space. The sheer, membranelike tissues hang loosely in deep frames, heightening the drama of avowedly illusory ends achieved by abundantly material means.

Graphite hits the retina in allusive ways, and in these drawings, broad tonal variety and the use of both white and buff sheets simulate chroma. Drawing is Nelson's main artistic activity, and though the work is educed from graphical concerns, one wonders what the artist might do with a broader palette. His meditative focus has the high seriousness of a spiritual discipline. And like yoga, Atkins or karate, this work is less effective in small doses. The great many drawings measuring under 4 by 3 inches lack the commitment that gives the bigger sheets their authority. —Stephen Maine

Lu Shengzhong at Chambers Fine Art

Born in rural Shandong, one of China's coastal provinces, Lu Shengzhong grew up exposed to many folk-art traditions. He studied fine art in Shandong, then earned a master's degree in folk art from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, where he is a professor of folk art today. In his work, Lu has refined one of China's oldest folk techniques—decorative paper-cutting—for his own purposes. For generations, the Chinese have made richly patterned, lacelike tissue-paper cutouts by hand and used them to accompany gifts or as accoutrements of rituals. With little more than scissors and homemade knives, Lu has made the technique his own.

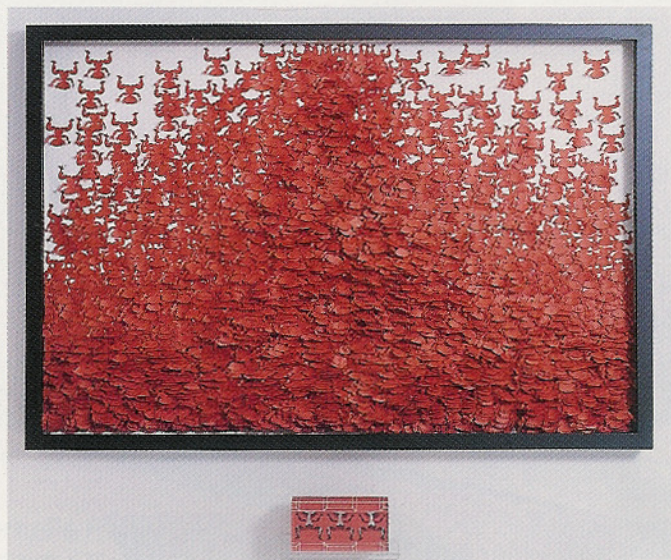
In this respect, Lu stands distinctly apart from dozens of other Chinese contemporary artists who were quick to embrace or imitate Western styles or approaches—most notably, conceptual, mixed-media installation art—in the late 1980s, when the government's

fledgling economic reforms began to open the door to cultural influences from abroad. Lu uses red tissue paper; red, in Chinese culture, is a symbol of life. Lu's work is dominated by a signature motif he calls "Little Red Figure." A sprightly, androgynous human form with outstretched arms and legs, it has appeared in infinite repetition in the many mandala-like wall and site-specific pieces Lu has created to date.

In his most recent works, collectively titled "The Book of Humanity," Lu assembled numerous variations of his red-on-black or black-on-red collages within handsome bound volumes. Some feature Western-style bindings; others use traditional Chinese sewn bindings. Some of the books' collage pages were crafted from scraps left over from his paper cutting (in effect, the negative spaces around his cut-out figures). In addition, he created wall-mounted abstract works, filling the pictorial space of each one with thick clusters or fluffy billows of Little Red Figures. Beneath each of these pieces, he exhibited the "brick" from which the figures had been extracted—thousands of the iconic creatures had been cut from this thick stack of red tissue paper.

Both Lu's books and his related "picture" works resemble mysterious artifacts from an unknown civilization. Because a human form, however abstracted, lies at the very heart of his art, and because he has developed a vivaciously expressive formal language around it, Lu's unusual, inventive creations exude a sense of unabashed humanism. The Little Red Figure, Lu has written, repre-

sents "the common innocence of humanity." —Edward M. Gomez



Lu Shengzhong: *Human Brick I*, 2004, paper, Plexiglas, silk thread, 39½ by 60 by 3¼ inches (paper brick 4¼ by 9½ by 3¼ inches); at Chambers.

Odili Donald Odita at Florence Lynch

From the glancingly horizontal, jangly-cool television buzz of Odili Donald Odita's abstract paintings of a few years ago, landscape spaces and even figural references have recently emerged. Influences are equally American and African; swooping angles and translucent planes evoke the suave, perky energy of midcentury "boomerang" design and broadcast industry logos as much as Yoruba and Igbo textiles and the West African savannah. The gliding angles that previously resided at and, by implication, beyond the edges of the canvas have been redirected to elusively figurative ends. The five large acrylics in "Notes From Paradise," this mid-career Nigerian-born American artist's latest solo show, feature strongly vertical components. In *Peace/Pieces* (84 by 109 inches; all works 2004), a towering, faceted structure in blues and blue-grays interrupts rhythmic strata of warm earth tones; the fragmented left half of the painting might be a detail of a similar totem. The new work is as fastidiously designed and immaculately crafted as ever; discrete areas of flat, matte color are fitted like joinery. The cautiously vibrant palette is close in value, as though seen through a scrim or filtered by memory.

Odita's tectonics of chroma is strongest in *Dutch Light* (63 by 78 inches). Four creased, twisting fronds in forceful hues snake