

ARTslant

Pleasure in Losing One's Way
by Edward Sanderson

[Mi Lou: Recent Works](#)

Hong Lei

CHAMBERS FINE ART BEIJING

Red No.1-D, Cao Changdi Chaoyang District, Beijing, China

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Hong Lei's particular form of mythicized, fetishized work would usually not attract me. In other artists I have found the saturated content and symbolism seen in Hong Lei's myriad works too heavy-handed and oppressive, leading me to feel the work held itself—and the audience—too far apart from a reality.

This is something that I've recently experienced in the work of Cai Guo-Qiang, for instance—an urge to create a critical mass of meaning at the expense of a connection with the audience. In the process I experienced alienation through the latter artist's works, by what I found to be its highly considered and artificial approach to the subject matter.

While this is certainly a risk with Hong Lei's works on display at Chambers Fine Art, in this case I've found that the artist's lightness of touch and subtlety of its approach to the viewer—while not resolving all of my issues with its tendency to objectify aspects of its subjects—entices the viewer in and adds a sense of wonder to the overall installation, *à la* the fantasist Borges.

There is simply not enough space here to cover the plethora of works on display. The photography that Hong Lei first became known for is present in the staged scenes of love-making between two elaborately dressed women (*Kingfisher* 2012), and the photograph of classical Chinese gardens populated by oblivious tourists paired with cherry blossoms seen through shattered glass (*March – He Garden* 2012). Fine embroidered butterflies depicted in a panel of transparent muslin, transform into erotically intertwined legs, all held in a fine, semi-circular brass frame hinged out from the wall (*Water Polished Mirror* 2012). A small, raised, black lacquer tray filled with white gravel, provides the setting for two black rock-like forms, taken from paintings by famous historical Chinese artists (*Li Cheng and Li Zhaodao* 2008). Four small videos of vague mountain-forms emerge from drifting smoke (*Cloud and Rain* 2012), next to a cast of Japanese AV star Maria Ozawa's genitalia set into the wall at the correct height.

In the other room, the artist's *pièce de résistance* is an upturned model of the Sui Emperor Yang's (604–618) titular *Mi Lou* ("Labyrinthine Mansion"). This mythical structure was designed as a distraction in which the ruler could get lost for days, comprising thousands of rooms and women. The model is on the light side of a pair of rooms, connected by a pin-hole lens. On the dark side a shadowy image of the building becomes visible as the viewer's eyes adjust to the light.

All together the works strongly allude to a symbolic reading of their subject matter, and in many cases drift into an explicit eroticism. The obviously deep understanding of Chinese history and social sensibilities on the part of the artist, and the works' exposition of highly thought-through objects and settings, makes for a satisfyingly erudite presentation. The collection builds to form a good sense of the artist's world, a world complex enough to get lost in if one was to surrender to the blandishments of the works.

However this success of the work reveals its cost. The way this relation between the viewer and subject is set up is very uncomfortable for me. Entering this exhibition is like being drawn into someone's world, which entralls one into acquiescence. Looking at the subjects dispassionately, there seems very little by way of sympathy with the reality of the participants' situation. The people and animals involved are divorced from reality, idealized, aestheticized objects of contemplation. In this way human beings become objects of use, for enjoyment, exploitation, much as the Emperor, as a god-like entity, apparently internalized this way of viewing his subjects.

The artist's approach to lesbianism in particular, seems questionable. Lesbianism seems to be very much objectified as a "thing" to be presented, to be observed. This makes the artist—and by extension the audience—a voyeur. This relationship seems problematic, implying an ill-founded relation of power. The viewer (be it the artist or the audience) sets themselves apart, contemplating the participants in their stylized sexual acts. This position apart seems to reflect the Emperor's own position of power in relation to his subjects, eventually giving him the opportunity to pursue his vision of the labyrinthine retreat from reality that is *Mi Lou*.

--[Edward Sanderson](#)



Hong Lei, Installation View, Mi Lou: Recent Works by Hong Lei; Courtesy of Chambers Fine Art and the artist



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