

Rhinoceroses, Lilies, Vampires: Yong Xiang Li  
Alvin Li

Born and raised in Changsha and currently based in Frankfurt, Yong Xiang Li—whose multifaceted practice spans video, painting, music, and sculpture, and often blurs the lines between them—does not invest his work with immediately recognizable markers of Chinese-ness. A decade of living and working in Europe has given the artist a nuanced approach to articulating alterity, and to mining and imagining cross-cultural entanglements by way of displacement and hybridity. The promiscuity of form in his work echoes its content, too, which often involves the wild blending of signs and themes to probe peculiar affinities between orientalist, ornamental, and queer aesthetics. All of this is toward the disruption of arbitrary binaries—high and low, occident and orient, us and other—that are the hallmarks of modernity and European Modernism.

Central to Li's work is his interest in the evolution of style and subjectivity as mediated by power dynamics across racial, sexual, class, and national boundaries. From the eighteenth century through the twentieth—while queer signs like the mannerisms of the by-then-obsolete European aristocracy were being adopted by cosmopolitan homosexuals in dis-identification with the increasingly dominant and normative social body of the bourgeoisie—growing exchange between East and West spawned fantasies permeated by fear of the foreign, resulting in Europe's assimilation of other bodies, desires, and aesthetic traditions into its own canon.

Li's tableaux are meticulously orchestrated to flare with a charged theatricality that taps these otherwise-neglected flows. In *Klara on Tour* (2019), a rhinoceros gazes cunningly at the onlooker, while half of its body has dissolved into a poolside resort. As the title hints, this is a portrait of the famous India-born Clara, the rhinoceros who toured Europe in the mid-eighteenth century, a nearly unheard-of rarity on the continent at the time. Rendering her body as a tour site, Li addresses the fetishization of the other, as souvenir and trophy, during the colonial era. As a unicorn mammal, the rhinoceros also stands in for other queer bodies that were likewise subjects of continental fantasies, like the soft-eyed, androgynous Middle Eastern youths who populated orientalist paintings throughout the nineteenth century. In *Rare Curl* (2020), the quintessential oriental symbol of the snake appears on a cabinet-like structure wrapped in a sheet of floral-print curtain the artist found in a store in Istanbul, with a layer of mold-like substance smeared on the painted panels. Mixing orientalist flair and ornamental excess to the point of exaggeration, the work can be seen as caricaturing the presumed proximity of the two aesthetic categories.

Often shunned as a sign of decadence, the ornamental is also an emphatically queer aesthetic, positioned opposite use value and ideals of progress inherited from the Enlightenment. This sense of queer deferral abounds in Li's paintings and sculptures. Male bodies often appear in a state of exhaustion, like the long-haired youth dozing off on a couch, head buried beneath a book, in *Notes on Revenge – 1, Night Reader* (2018), a work on cardboard decorated with ribbons, or the three reclining men in *Shirt Late* (2018). The latter is a free-standing wooden

structure with a floor mirror on one side, and on the other a painting in which two men lie on a violet carpet amid a sea of papers while a third rests next to a pot of lilies—a charged homoerotic sign. The disproportionately large hands of the three brown-skinned figures drive our focus to their gestures: one grips a paper in the shape of a dagger, one points right at the frame, and the last covers his eyes, all signs of alertness that belie their seeming slumber. The dramatic composition leads the onlooker to wonder whether this moment of languor is not a deliberate refusal of interpellation—perhaps because the printed discourses strewn about do not adequately account for the figures' positions? These traces of reflexivity (which recur in other works, notably in the way the depicted figures, when not sleeping, always return the gaze) also reveal the cool sensitivity of an artist all too aware of the not always false association of self-orientation with self-absorption or abandonment—to which he responds with deft good humor.<sup>1</sup>

Li's investment in alterity was exemplified in *I'm Not in Love (How to Feed on Humans)* (2020), with which he turns the vampire genre on its head and recasts it as a metaphor for interdependence. This is an extended music video for his cover of 10cc's titular classic, with a rom-com plot centered on the polyamorous, mutually dependent relationship between a vampire (played by the artist himself) and his three human symbionts. If the construction of gothic monsters like Dracula consolidated a sinister association between the concept of the foreign, parasitism, and sexual perversion, Li's benign vampire speaks to the necessity of embracing contamination and mutual indebtedness. The vampire's bite, with the seductive wit that runs through all of the artist's work, opens up room for queer inhabitation and phantasmagoric encounters.

<sup>1</sup> The notion of "self-orientation" is sometimes used pejoratively to describe the abusive application of signs and images construed in the mainstream as typically and recognizably Eastern—an act of bad faith of sorts. However, that attempts at articulating minoritarian positions are so often scrutinized as potential instances of selling out also seems to belie a distorted critical lens.

99 Yong Xiang Li, *The Hike, a Giant Dog*, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Antenna Space, Shanghai. Photo: Zhang Hong

100 Yong Xiang Li, *Notes on Revenge – 1, Night Reader* (detail), 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Antenna Space, Shanghai

101 Yong Xiang Li, *Shirt Late*, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Antenna Space, Shanghai. Photo: Ulrich Gebert

102 Yong Xiang Li, *Rare Curl*, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Antenna Space, Shanghai. Photo: Ivan Murzin

103 Yong Xiang Li, *Doors*, 2020, *Breathing Through Skin* installation view at Antenna Space, Shanghai, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Antenna Space, Shanghai. Photo: Zhang Hong





