

ArtSeen

## LIU XIA *The Silent Strength of Liu Xia*

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Liu Xia (b. 1959) may be the most under-recognized Chinese artist alive. Since she was 30, her paintings, photographs, and poetry have been banned in China. When her husband, Liu Xiaobo, was awarded the Nobel Peace prize in 2010 the situation grew worse; she was placed under strict house arrest and deprived of all means of contact. Unlike the most famous dissident artist, Ai Weiwei, Liu Xia has never been charged with a crime. And yet with only the barest of support and minimal acknowledgement of her artistic endeavors she perseveres, demonstrating a bold and resilient self-reliance.

*The Silent Strength of Liu Xia* is a collection of 25 black-and-white photographs the artist produced between 1996 – 99 while her husband served his second stint in a labor re-education camp. None are titled, all heave with grief. Each print is square, matte, and nearly three feet to a side. Most feature dolls—Liu Xia refers to them as her “ugly babies”—in a variety of symbolically charged tableaux that include books, burning candles, and videotapes. A few are staged by an ocean, perhaps on the coast of Dalian where her husband was being re-educated, though a greater number were shot in Liu Xia’s Beijing apartment.

The rankling mood of these pictures has as much to do with Liu Xia’s compositional acumen as it does with the aggravated and embittered expressions on the doll’s faces. She tends towards stark lighting arrangements that spotlight figures in the foreground while forcing the background into an impenetrable darkness. It is as if they exist in a void, not unlike the artist herself. This sparseness contributes greatly to the emotional gravity of the images, but it is also what allows the symbolic and allegorical content of the photographs to emerge.

These dolls scowl, grimace, or howl in every frame—they are quite clearly unhappy. In pictures where they are bound with cord or ensnared in plastic, Liu Xia acknowledges the social and cultural suffocation she suffers and, perhaps more broadly, the stifled freedom of all artists working in China. In one image a doll stands on a chair, bound and glowering, before an open book. It seems to suggest that if the object of play and imagination is not free, then neither is that of knowledge; both merely stand by in dead stagnation, uselessly gathering dust.

In another image a yelling doll points at a set of books with the names of Thoreau and Poe on their spines. One immediately identifies and yokes together the existential despair and horror of Poe with the isolation and civil disobedience of Thoreau, both allegories for the realities Liu Xia faces daily. Perhaps she turns to these writers for solace; perhaps she uses them solely as symbols, to send a message to anyone capable of deciphering her code. If so I would suspect the message to be an emotional, even a spiritual one.

There are also a few spooky, near-abstract images of cloaked figures in shadowy atmospheres. Whether or not these photographs refer to specific incidents, they evoke the lost and missing, the dead and never acknowledged of every horrific circumstance. They are creepy horripilation inducers, like sad ghosts stuck where they don’t want to be.

Not only is the work itself intensely moving and deeply personal, so is the story of how it made it onto gallery walls in the West. The French scholar Guy Sorman, a long time friend of Liu Xia and her husband, spirited the prints out of China one by one over the course of a year. Exhibiting the work was Sorman’s suggestion and Liu Xia agreed on one condition: he not tell her where or when an exhibition might take place. That way when she was questioned by the authorities—as she knew she would be—she could honestly tell them she didn’t know where her pictures were being held, much less shown. This is the first exhibition of Liu Xia’s artwork in America; hopefully it is the first of many.



Liu Xia, "Untitled," 1996-99. Courtesy the Italian Academy.

