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On Photography: Witness to Innocence in Peril

By William Meyers
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The Silent Strength Of Liu Xia

The Italian Academy at Columbia University

1161 Amsterdam Ave. (212) 854-2306, through April 15

Liu Xia's husband, Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo, is again in prison, and she is under house arrest. He was first imprisoned from 1989 to 1991 for his part in the Tiananmen Square demonstrations, and then sentenced for a term of labor re-education from 1996 to 1999. It was during this incarceration that they married and that Ms. Liu took the photographs on display at **Columbia**. Although her husband is a pro-democracy activist, she has steadfastly refused to involve herself in politics. But given their lives, it is inevitable that her photographs, and her poems, are banned in China.

The subject of most of these pictures are "ugly" dolls; these little Italian-made figures have faces that express puzzlement, unhappiness or pain. Ms. Liu photographed them in perilous situations, and the resulting images are moving.

In one, a doll hangs upside down from the edge of a wood-shingle roof, its mouth open in a scream. In another, four dolls wrapped in suffocating plastic are lined up on a shelf, their eyes seeming to plead for release. Two dolls, one dismayed and the other quite upset, are posed on a rocky shore looking at the sea they would like to cross.

Other dolls are pictured on shelves with books, or behind scrims covered with calligraphy. One troubled doll sits in a wooden arrangement of what might be coffins. Ms. Liu wrote a poem about her dolls and "the power of silence."