

## Artist in Her Own Right

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Photographs by Liu Xia, wife of imprisoned Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo, showcase the couple's political struggles.



RFA

*Liu Xia's photos on exhibit in New York, Feb. 9, 2012.*

Smuggled photographs by jailed Chinese Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo's wife Liu Xia have gone on display in New York even as the artist remains under house arrest in Beijing.

The exhibit, titled "The Silent Strength of Liu Xia" and which opened on Feb. 9, showcases Liu Xia as an artist in her own right and, at the same time, reveals some of the political struggles shared with her husband.

The curator of the exhibit, French intellectual Guy Sorman, said he noticed the photos while visiting the couple's apartment five years ago and asked Liu Xia if he could show them abroad.

She agreed, but told him not to tell her when or where, so that when authorities came to question her, she wouldn't know.

"I feel that these were very dramatic photos and she's able to tell us so many things with such limited resources, so this is what makes her a great artist," Sorman said.

He arranged for friends to bring the photos out of China one by one.

### House arrest

Cut off from the outside world without Internet or phone contact, Liu Xia remains unaware of the exhibit.

She has been under house arrest in Beijing since October 2010, when her husband was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his human rights activism.

China's most prominent political prisoner, Liu Xiaobo was jailed in 2009 for his role in authoring Charter 08, a controversial manifesto circulated online that called for sweeping changes in China's government.

The photos in the exhibit were shot in the 1990s, while Liu Xiaobo was serving a sentence in labor camp.

The images, 25 black-and-white photos taken inside Liu Xia's apartment, feature a plastic doll given to her by her husband.

The doll's face shows fear and anger.

At the exhibit's opening, Chu Hailan – the fellow wife of another Chinese activist, Liu Nianchun, who was imprisoned for his democracy and labor activism in the 1970s and 80s– said she could relate to the themes in Liu Xia's photographs.

"The doll in these photos is like a person.... In this world of ours, the government plays with us however they like. I'm not sure, but I think [the doll] has this kind of ironic meaning," she said.



*Liu Xiaobo and Liu Xia in Beijing, Oct. 22, 2002.*

### **Artist and Poet**

In addition to being a photographer and painter, Liu Xia is also a poet and writer like her husband.

The couple met in Beijing in the 1980s and married in 1996, when Liu Xiaobo had just begun serving a sentence of re-education through labor after he had participated in the Tiananmen Square protests and written about political reform.

They published a shared collection, *Selected Poems of Liu Xiaobo and Liu Xia*, including poems written to each other that blend their personal story with political themes. Some of Liu Xiaobo's poems, including those dedicated to Liu Xia from "her lifelong prisoner," have been published in English.

"This is not about politics first. It's about art first," Sorman said of Liu Xia's photography. "Her husband is his own story. She is a major Chinese artist who happens to be the wife of Liu Xiaobo,"

The photos were also exhibited at a museum in France in October. After the New York exhibit ends on March 1, they will travel to Madrid and later to Hong Kong, Sorman said.

*Reported by Zi Jing for RFA's Mandarin service. Written in English by Rachel Vandenbrink.*

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