

## On the Photographs of Liu Xia

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**T**he photographs in this exhibition reverse engineer the process by which oppressive force deprives a human being of her freedom. If the end of political force is to turn a human being into a thing, the end of Liu Xia's photographs is to turn small things into expressions of humanity at the limit of freedom.

The photographer Liu Xia has described herself as apolitical. The introverted artist married Liu Xiaobo — co-author of Charter 08 that promotes democratic rights in China — so she could visit him in the reeducation camp where he is incarcerated. But after Liu Xiaobo won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, Liu Xia was placed under house arrest and constant surveillance. Her freedom is severely constricted hour by hour, day after day, month after month, without any foreseeable end — as is her husband's freedom and many of their colleagues.

The ultimate reach of political force is, in any historical vector, to turn its object into a thing. But a human soul resists this process with horrible tenacity and anguish. Long after she might want to accept her fate, the soul goes on longing to recreate the world in which she could move and make and love. Such incurable longing is neither liberal nor romantic: It is the torment of slaves and prisoners anywhere.

Therefore, there is something universally arresting in the inconsolable animation of the dolls in Liu Xia's black and white photographs. They are so simple and still, yet their expressions penetrate the viewer. The dolls are things — inexpensive and unbeautiful material objects — whose arrangement and expression nonetheless witness to damage and distress. None of us knows what it costs Liu Xia to capture in

her negatives the soul's bitter protest against its reduction to a thing. To make such negatives does not arrest the artist's ongoing reduction or her anguish but the dolls tell the world in her photographs.

In a pamphlet published in 1940 (under a pseudonym), the political philosopher Simone Weil wrote about the effects of force on a human being. She observed that, even in its desolation, the soul sometimes grasps moments of self-possession in which there only remains room for courage or love. Liu Xia's photographs bear the impress of such fugitive moments. These may be felt as the monotonous loneliness of missing another soul without any near purpose but to endure the psychic clamor of going on missing him. Thus, it has been suggested that Liu Xia's "ugly babies" represent her dissident husband Liu Xiaobo.

At the limit of freedom what stands between the soul and its reduction to a thing may be some inconsolable animation of the other within. Yet such animation is also neither liberal nor romantic: It is the inner tumult of democrats everywhere.

We are honored to welcome Liu Xia's photographs to the University of Richmond.