



LI GAO

MEZ E MEZ / HALF AND HALF

Li Gao (b. 1970, Jilin, China) works across a variety of media producing quiet, poetic work that explores notions of affect and care. His second solo show in Switzerland and the first with this gallery presents new sculptures and installations in the context of two early works: *Brothers* (2015) and *Toilet Paper* (2016).

Brothers, a series of brooms lined up and leaning against the wall, echoes the title, evoking an image of solidarity. *Toilet Paper* is not what it appears to be, namely, a neatly stacked column of white toilet paper rolls. On closer inspection, the rolls prove to be white, unglazed ceramic. Not only did the artist exploit the custom of stacking toilet paper as a sculptural strategy, he also transformed the object itself. The simplicity of means, as well as the precise and sensible choice of materials demonstrated in these two works prefigures much of the artist's current work. Indeed, Li Gao's use of simple materials and everyday objects relates to his exploration of simplicity – both as a way of life and as a formal quality. His precisely evoked material incongruences, on the other hand, are rooted in his phenomenological exploration of domestic and everyday objects: can the presentation of an everyday object, such as a towel or a pillow, recreated in unexpectedly alien material, encourage us to perceive the object's affective or symbolic qualities?

Towel (2019), a recent work, testifies to Li Gao's continued use of ceramics as well as his ongoing preoccupation with the phenomenology of the everyday. Presented on a white canvas, the towel has been rendered with great care and attention to detail; texture, folds, wrinkles, and even single threads are translated into a new material. The fact that the towel is framed reinforces its transformation from object of use to art object: freed from any practical use, the towel, originally soft and absorbent, is frozen into permanent shape. Thus isolated, it becomes visible as an object in itself, open to the viewer's projections. *Touching* (2019) and *Couple* (2019) similarly alienate everyday objects – gloves and pillows – but they are invested with an additional layer of meaning. *Touching* is composed of two white ceramic gloves enclosed in a stainless-steel box and arranged to indicate the gesture of touching. As the artist explains, this work is "about the importance of touch in manual labor, but also about touch as an affective and emotional gesture."¹ *Couple* consists of two pillows lying on top of each other in mute togetherness. Cast in lead, a poisonous material, the two pillows have clearly transcended their utilitarian function although the nature of their presence might evoke the image of a double bed. This image, together with the title, might be interpreted as symbolizing monogamy, while the toxic material of *Couple* leaves no doubt about the potential downside of that specific form of human interaction.

Reflection on interpersonal relationships is inherent in much of Li Gao's work. *Snuggling* (2019) as well as *Stitching Ice* (2020) testify to the artist's preoccupation with the diametrically opposed but coexisting notions of togetherness and loneliness.

¹ In conversation with the artist, Beijing, December 2019.



Snuggling is one of the first works that Li Gao produced in a precious material. In this rectangular sculpture, the artist has fitted a smaller black piece of marble into a larger

white one, two unequal pieces that form a perfect whole. While *Snuggling*, as the title indicates, conjures a harmonious image reminiscent of Ying and Yang, *Stitching Ice* is more complex. The piece consists of two large panels of ice propped against the wall and sewn together with a red thread that zig-zags across them. *Stitching Ice* is performative, echoing Li Gao's custom of sewing things together or repairing them.² It is also impermanent: the installation will melt in the course of the exhibition. *Stitching Ice* accentuates the transience and ephemerality of our relations while also asserting their importance and, paradoxically, the permanence of their influence: when the ice eventually melts, the red thread, the bonding element, will remain in the exhibition space.

On the gallery's top floor we encounter a suite of 11 small stainless-steel boxes mounted on the wall. Picture, sculpture, and installation at once, these works exemplify Li Gao's ability to make art that defies easy categorization. The artist cut into the white surface of these boxes. Folded outwards, the cuts not only yield visible forms, they also provide an insight into the inner life of the boxes. In *Morning* (2019), for example, the artist cut out a rectangular shape on three sides and folded it down. The piece is an abstract rendering of a window, a window opened in the morning.

Born in the 1970s in rural northern China, Li Gao acquired a deep respect for manual and domestic labor, and feels a similar affinity with the gestures and objects of simple everyday life. Relying on his personal experience and instinctive aesthetic competence, rather than on formal education, the artist produces humble, precise, and profoundly moving works.

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² In 2015 Li Gao made a piece entitled *Stitched Banana* (2015), for which he stitched up a split banana skin. A year later he made *Stitched* (2016), a white canvas with a Fontana-like slash, which Li Gao then repaired.