“To Arrive Where We Started
And Know the Place For the First Time”

By Randy Rosen

At first glance, the portraits in Tianbing Li’s *The Children’s Project* appear to be straightforward. As it turns out, they are anything but that. Upon closer scrutiny, the artist ensnares us in a complex and layered meditation on the provisional quality of identity, the nature of the Self, and the uncertain divide between fact and fiction, reality and memory, life as experienced, and life as imagined. But no sooner does one begin to identify these layers and decode their possible psychological, social and political implications, than you sense that *The Children’s Project* is embedded in still deeper soil.

In our multicultural, globalized world, questions about cultural and individual identity touch everyone. But for those who are bi-national and living on the cusp of two sometimes very contradictory traditions – like the 33-year-old Tianbing Li, who was born in mainland China but has studied and resided in Paris for the past decade – such issues are neither theoretical nor peripheral to existence. They are part and parcel of each breath, informing the content and the aesthetic strategies of his art.

The Children’s Project recapitulates and reconstructs the artist’s childhood memories of growing up at a time when China was operating in the bleak shadows of the Cultural Revolution. Looking through the lens of time and the bifocal perspectives of his native and adopted cultures, these paintings are both a reassessment of that past and a passionate negotiation with it. It is in this rich, transnational soil that the portraits take on their uniqueness and poignancy.

To some extent, we all edit the stories of our lives in the retelling. But here that process is the sustained armature for exploring identity and the fragile threads that weave together the fabric of who we are. Tianbing Li has now spent the greater portion of his adult life living in the West. He studied for six years at the renowned Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris and is an accomplished painter who works in a contemporary Western mode. But Eastern sensibilities and Chinese painting tradition find their way into the work, sometimes directly, but many times hidden in plain sight, enriching both the formal and contextual meaning of the canvases. One soon learns that with Tianbing Li, there are always layers.

Embedding layers of meaning within overtly simple, direct pictorial content has long been an aesthetic strategy in Chinese art. Many of the ancient Chinese

scholar-artists' scroll paintings that strike a contemporary viewer as tranquil, straightforward landscapes to be admired for their beauty and technical perfection were, in their time, understood as clandestine acts of political critique and signs of the artist's personal alienation from the values of those in power. Such pictures emerged in moments of political repression "when every word written was scrutinized by censors or eunuchs for treasonous double meaning. At such times any form of protest was an act of courage." [1]

Using art to express a sense of dislocation and protest in this way can be seen, for example, in the famous hand scroll painting, *Returning Home*, by Qian Xuan (ca. 1235- before 1307). Outwardly serene, the landscape incorporates a poem also called *Returning Home*, penned 800 years earlier by the 5th century poet, Tao Qian (365-472). Qian retired from public office after serving only 80 days and wrote his poem to express his preference for a life of deprivation over serving a corrupt officialdom ("To live in this world it is necessary to become/deeply drunk…"). By appending the earlier man's famous poem in the left margin of his 13th century landscape scroll, Xuan turned a delicately wrought landscape into an act of defiance that was immediately understood by his peers in that time.[2]

Tianbing Li inserts nuanced cultural inflections from both Western and Eastern traditions throughout these *Children's Project* portraits. Overtly straightforward, they are filled with buried treasure for anyone who takes the time to look and reflect on the transnational drama unfolding both in what we see, and in what we do not see and can only "read" or "feel" our way to.

The *Children's Project* began in 2006 with the *Beizitou —One Hundred Children* portraits (*fig. 1*) To understand the ambition and intelligence informing this project – on-going now for almost two years – one cannot simply fast-forward to the artist's most recent works. The early paintings become an important foil for discerning the motivations and aesthetic strategy of what comes later.

Traditionally *Beizitou* were represented as a group of joyful children at play to suggest prosperity and happiness. Tianbing Li's *Beizitou* tell a quite different story. The face of a lone child is depicted on each canvas. Rendered realistically in a monochromatic palette of black, grey and white, the images suggest the indisputable authenticity of a photographic record. The large faces inhabit the full canvas space, pressing up close against the picture plane as though imprisoned in their canvases, each trapped in solitary confinement. These are pictures of children. But the innocence of childhood is nowhere in sight.

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More archetypal than individual, the *Beizitou* portraits are the looking glass through which the artist begins rewinding personal memory and examining the human toll of the One-Child per family policy instituted in China in 1979. For all the meticulously rendered differences in their features, the children are surprisingly alike; detached and offering little hint of an interior life. They confront the world with deadpan expressions. One thinks of passport and police photos. Or the stares of the traumatized and vulnerable. One young girl mischievously sticks out her tongue, but her eyes do not smile. These *Beizitou* look back to a difficult period in which millions of people, the artist's family among them, faced material and spiritual deprivation. Individual choice, even at the intimate level of reproduction, was suppressed in the name of collective survival and to this day, millions of *hei haizi*, non-declared children, born outside the One-Child quota exist without any official legal status.

The surfaces of the *Beizitou* paintings appear mildewed and weathered like worn photographs retrieved from a long forgotten box left in a damp cellar. Photographs the artist takes himself or those he has come across are points of departure for the images. But their intended impression is of remembered time. The young faces peer out from the past through the faded photographic emulsion and peeling paper as though the artist snatched them from the edge of memory before they vanished forever. One by one. It is this solitary status, each child alone in the world, that Tianbing Li recovers from memory. Intentionally, he depicts them in the evidentiary mode of the black and white family photograph, so many of which were destroyed as a matter of policy during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) as a way of breaking the hold of tradition and family loyalties. Viewed as a grouping and mounted in a grid like presentation, Tianbing Li's *Beizitou* (*One Hundred Children)* evoke the empathy one feels when watching relatives scan bulletin boards filled with the photographs of those missing after a catastrophe. Our stranger's eyes see certain sameness in the repetition of the images. But to the seeker, each image has the quality of an amulet, a memory encapsulating the individual essence of the person being sought.

The artist begins to address this idea of "essence" – identity – more directly in a slightly later group of *Beizitou* in which several of the children's faces are now marked by nearly imperceptible imprints of multinational corporate logos (f*ig. 2, Detail*) or by swatches of text appropriated from newspapers and the internet. In this surreptitious way, the children are branded, not with an iron but with something potentially more destructive. In *"Federal Express,"* for example, the corporate hues are blended so closely to the tones of the child's face that the two become fused. Tianbing Li reminds us that tyranny wears many guises and may even be invisible. The branded children open an examination of the limits of individual choice in shaping "who we are" and, perhaps, the mutable nature of that Self.

In our globalized world, people everywhere wear tee shirts emblazoned with product names, and an entire age group is now identified as the Ipod Generation. The branded children raise the specter that "who we are" – our identity – is increasingly seen as synonymous with our marketing profile, our brand, the things we buy, or are likely to buy. As so many parts of the world today, including the artist's homeland, reach out for a piece of the rich global marketplace, innovation and social transformation are put on a fast track. Many traditions that once encoded and transmitted deep cultural values and sensibilities are being jettisoned in the rush forward. Without such cultural markers for individual continuity and meaning, Tianbing Li seems to be asking with these paintings, what is left? Federal Express? Microsoft? Designer jeans? "In ironic fashion, I express in my paintings what is taking place in China today, where long-held traditions are little by little being eroded by the invasion of consumer society, and it is becoming subsequently a world submerged in desire and yearning." [3]

In a next group, *Enfants de Yangshuo* (*fig.3*), Tianbing Li maintains his monochromatic hues and weathered photographic format, intimating that these portraits are also meant as extractions from memory. The children remain solitary figures. But these youngsters, portrayed in three-quarter length, exist in a less restricted space and are more visibly childlike and individuated than the *Beizitou* youngsters. The small hands clutch at their shirts the way children often finger a favorite blanket for comfort. One boy (shown) stares out with the urchin-like shrewdness of a survivor. Yet his vulnerability is palpable and his cockiness tentative.

Indeed, the boy's portrait itself seems on the brink of dissolution. Streaks of paint, applied in thick, staccato, slashes flicker across his image, disrupting its cohesiveness in the way that pixel patterns break up on a television image when the picture can't stabilize itself. Produced at about the same time as the branding portraits with their implied warning of consumerism's consuming presence, the Yangshuo portraits warn that modern media is an equally intrusive hand in defining who we are. The provisional nature of the media's pixilated images translate in these paintings into a pixilated Self; continually cannibalized and revised to accommodate the newest trend, newest lifestyles, newest desire inculcated at sound byte speed.

In an interview, [4] Tianbing Li mentions in passing that some personal notations in his diary resonated with ideas expressed in the *Diary of a Madman*,

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by Lu Xun (1881-1936), the first story written in modern Chinese. The artist gives no clue as to what that connection is. But a recent article in the Los Angeles Times described China's orphanages and the plight of the large number of the country's many undeclared children (known as "Black Children"). The article closed by quoting the final line of Lu Xun's story: "Save the Children!" In *Diary of a Madman*, the narrator visits an old friend whose brother has recently recovered from a mental illness in which he fantasized that everyone around him was a cannibal and soon it would be his turn to either eat or be eaten. The narrator is given the brother's diary to read. In it, the troubled man determines not to join in the cannibalism even if it means his own demise. The story ends with the man's plea for those children who have not yet eaten human flesh: "Save the Children!" Again, hidden in plain sight, and employing the formal language of paint and brush instead of words, Tianbing Li's *Children's Project*, seems, in its own way, set on a similar quest.

Having grown up under the strictures of the One-Child formula and at a time when the one-size-fits-all Mao jacket was an insignia of dire times and limited personal choice, the artist is winding back memory and begins to edit it like a producer, splicing new "takes" into place. Increasingly in *The Children's Projec*t, fact and fantasy, retrieved memory and imagined world, become interchangeable and indistinguishable. Memory becomes a tool of both self-deception and self-healing; a way to recycle a childhood that wasn't and, perhaps, to locate new meaning in its revised possibilities. *Save the children.*

With *Deux Enfants sur Neige (2006),* a shift occurs in Tianbing Li's work. The solitary figure has been joined by a playmate (*fig. 4*). One toddler sits on a bank of snow, the other peeks out from behind it in a barren winter landscape dotted with stone boulders. The two youngsters appear almost like waifs abandoned to fend for themselves on some cold, desolate planet. It comes to mind that in the traditional Chinese landscape, depictions of nature are often not outright representations of the world. They can be a kind of Morse code, expressions of interior worlds of the individual artist – a wish for the world to be other than it is. What some have called "Landscapes of the Mind." [5] Perhaps Tianbing Li has painted one here. So deftly has the artist rendered the placid, powdery snow and its sea-like flow through intermittent rocks, drawing our eye deep into the canvas space, that one almost overlooks the frayed, roughhewn jacket worn by the toddler on the snow bank. The jacket's lower section, built up with ragged patches of fabric and a crude stitching as though mended many times, reaches out from the flat picture plane into the viewer's real space. This bulking up seems less an artifice than a pressing need on the part of the artist to bring the viewer back with him into memory, to have him viscerally *know* and *feel* its rawness.

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The somber tones of the children's clothes match precisely the obdurate grayness of the stones wending their way almost to the top edge of the canvas. Children and stones. Surviving. The artist pushes these portraits up against the frontal picture plane. The children's questioning eyes cannot be avoided. The viewer must contemplate, as the young children staring out at us may also be doing, what lies ahead. The freshly fallen snow, a pure white tabula rasa, like the future, is without imprint. But beyond the snow line, in the top-most section of the picture, the silhouette of a modern city with its promise of abundance and modernization rises like a mirage. Change is in the air. A tiny, almost invisible toy – a plane – flies in the air space between the children.

In Deux Enfants avec Jouets sur Neige #2 (*fig. 5*), two other children, older now and wearing more traditional Chinese clothes (rather than the military type garb), are imagined in another winter scenario. Small red toy soldiers and tanks dot the snow. But their miniature size and the manner in which the much larger children are observing them, signals that these toys are wishful objects in a dreamscape. "In my childhood, the Chinese are so poor that children's toys are a great luxury," says the artist. "The only toy I had is a wooden gun made by my father." That single toy, lost shortly after it was received, finds consolation in reconstituted memory: "The toys that I paint are the toys of today with fresh color. …The paintings give me a way to spend my childhood again in the imagination. Although painted earlier than the artist's *Autoportraits*, in which he creates a "brother" for himself, the standing boy on the right resembles the artist and suggests that this painting is the progenitor, however unconsciously, of the later development.

Born in 1974, Tianbing Li belongs to our age of cell phones and cyberspace. The concept of constructing alternate realities in digital space, once the fodder of science fiction, is now as commonplace as the computer keyboard. Likewise, the notion that Truth can be continually re-contextualized is something of a postmodernist mantra. The introduction of a second child into the paintings, and in this example, one that resembles the artist himself, suggests that more is going on than blurring fact and fiction or a clever rewriting of biography.

In the same way that an individual color takes on different hues (identities) depending on the colors next to it, human relationships may also be seen as defining who we are. Who hasn't heard someone say, I'm a different person when I'm with so-and-so. Inserting a playmate – an "other" – into his invented scenarios psychologically rescues the children from solitary status, but the companion also represents an opening to a larger world and possibilities for change. New signs of individuality begin to emerge in the children, and more

spatially complex composition and pictorial solutions begin to animate the paintings.

This willingness to engage memory with an "other" may also reflect some deepening awareness on the artist's part about the defining power of "otherness" on one's sense of Self. Many of those who navigate between two cultures, as the artist does, know that this binary existence places special demands on identity. At one level, Tianbing Li's *Children's Project* is a painterly enterprise, using the power of imagination to revisit and reassess the past. At another level, the paintings represent the ongoing struggle for synthesis, a search to establish a creative common ground between the artist's two cultural and aesthetic inheritances. A much earlier canvas of 2000, *Micky-Soldat* (*fig. 6*)), externalizes this duality and its contradictory claims.

In *Micky-Soldat,* a single figure dominates the center of the approximately 5 ft x 2 ft (162 cm x 80 cm) canvas, spanning the narrow rectangular canvas top to bottom. The figure's left half is a rendition of Mickey Mouse, the ubiquitous symbol of Western (as embodied in "American") mass marketing and media culture: big ears, big white glove, bold red trousers, and a perpetual smile of optimism built into his expression.

The right side of the figure depicts a stolid-faced soldier in a Mao style quilted jacket and combat boots. His fist is clenched, ready to fight. Unlike the blaring color and flat planes used for the "Micky" side, the soldier is executed in the modulated blacks, browns and grays of traditional Chinese ink painting. The color is applied in the nuanced, sometimes liquidy washes typifying such painting and their use acknowledges the artist's skill in such historical techniques even in his twenties.

However, *Micky-Soldat* is rendered not in paint but in another traditional medium, lacquer. In this split figure, the soldier's monochromatic form, juxtaposed against the vivid colors of "Micky," causes him to recede, suggesting a clash between the past and the present, the traditional and the modern worlds. This split figure stands on a white tile, grid-like flooring. Tellingly, in place of one tile in the lower left hand corner – the "Micky" side – the artist has substituted a large price code bar of the kind that appears on consumer packaging. The code's white rectangular form intensifies the already strident whites on "Micky's" side and has the effect of strengthening the dominating presence of this personification of Western success. Yet both of the symbols, Western and Eastern, each in its own way, represents a force that engenders conformity. Although this painting precedes *The Children's Project* by almost seven years, its attempt to sort out and reconcile split worldviews, dual aesthetic traditions, and

recognition of the complexities of creating an identity in the modern world, continues to inform the artist's more mature work.

Although not literally a "split" identity in the sense of the *Micky-Soldat* example, a mirroring device of sorts also appears in the 2006 painting, *Deux Enfants en bas* (*fig. 7*). is the first instance in *The Children's Project* in which youngsters are actually shown laughing and happy. We witness a genuinely intimate relationship, spontaneity, trust, and a level of interior expressiveness not evidenced in any previous portraits. The artist's pictorial composition, particularly his placement of the children's heads and hands, calls attention to "twoness," the existence of "the other." The face of a young boy who holds a hand over his mouth to suppress a giggle dominates the upper half of the canvas. Directly under his face, is the head of the other child, turned on its side, as though reflected in water. The faces are seen virtually on top of one another, forcing the viewer to take in the two faces at the same time. In contrast to the *Beizitou* (*One Hundred Children*) portraits, in which giant heads in claustrophobic space communicated the angst of a solitary status, this composition is a celebration of being more than one. The child in the lower part of the picture has flung two hands up in the air in a fit of laughter. Like the heads, one hand sits above the other, a further allusion to the double versus the solitary. There is a joy to *Deux Enfants en bas* that borders on relief. That thought leads to a surprising place.

Tianbing Li works intuitively and prefers to leave interpretation of his paintings to the viewer, and a Janus motif was probably not intended in *Deux Enfants en bas*, yet that is the association immediately evoked by the painting's "doubling" aspect. Perhaps, as it turns out, for good reason: The Roman god Janus was considered the god of beginnings and the guardian of gates and doors. This archetype serves well as a metaphor for *Enfants en bas.* The painting heralds a new beginning in the way the artist records and re-processes memory. More positive. More personal.

The concept of "doubling" continues to resurface – in other snow paintings such as *Deux Enfants avec Jouet sur Neige #2 (fig. 9)*, and later, in a pivotal group of *Autoportraits* in which the artist truly crosses the line between fact and fiction by inventing a "brother" for himself who appears in the same canvas, courtesy of the ingenious ruse of depicting himself at two different ages (fig.). This self-duplication, an act of pure imagination, might also be seen as a metaphorical retraction of the One-Child edict still affecting family life and choice in China.

It's instructive to compare the transformation that occurs between *Autoportrait avec mon Frère #1* and the similarly titled *Autoportrait avec mon Frère #2* (*figs.8 and 9*). In the first, the two brothers stand attentive as soldiers

receiving their mission orders, knee-high in the snow, symbolically restricted in an environment in which nothing grows. Even the trees in the background are barren. The taller, older brother dutifully clasps a book tinted in a light red wash, perhaps a school text or a reference to the little red book of quotations by Mao Tse-Tung. The younger version of himself holds a sheet of white paper with Chinese text written in faint red tint on its surface. Into this disciplined world, the artist injects small red toys: a dinosaur sits whimsically atop the sheet of paper and a red toy helicopter spins happily at the older boy's elbow. Though only figments of the artist's grownup imagination, these vibrant, red toys flicker in memory like tiny jewels, gifts from the present to fill a void in the past.

With *Autoportrait avec mon Frère #2* (*fig. 9*), which was executed slightly later, both boys' demeanors have changed. They are more child-like and relaxed. Instead of military caps and uniforms, they wear street clothes. The older brother wraps an affectionate and protecting arm around the younger version of himself, calling to mind the New Age admonition that once had such currency about the need for the adult self to embrace and parent its "inner child," to comfort childhood's wounds. The older sibling's embrace of his younger self may represent such a healing gesture as the drama of *The Children's Project* plays out. Unlike the children in the snow paintings discussed earlier (*figs. 4 and 5*), who remain untouching and keep their inner worlds off limits to the viewer, in *Autoportrait avec mon Frère #2*, the facial expressions emanating from the children as one brother wraps a protective arm around the other, reveals an authentic interiority and warmth; we sense thoughts going on behind these eyes, individuality and personality.

This greater internal complexity also expresses itself in formal aspects of the composition and style. Tianbing Li brings the "brothers" portraits closer to the frontal picture plane in a standard three-quarter length format. To relieve the stasis of two stationery figures, he activates his canvas in a number of ways to keep the eye involved and moving beyond mere figural depiction. The vertical patterns in the older boy's sweater repeat their rhythms in the younger brother's under sweater, visually wedding the two selves together to further intensify the picture's sense of intimacy. Their tenderness, in the context of the Project's ongoing psychological and socio-political critiques, implies the positive nature of sibling and family relationships. The viewer is also engaged by the dark shoulder strap of a book bag that zips diagonally across the older boy's white jacket. Arrow-like, it directs the eye away from the centrality of the two figures and into the upper and lower regions of the painting. Similarly, the sharp angles created by the smaller boy's slanted collar and the angle at the bottom of his knotted lower shirt (which works in unison with the bottom of the older brother's sweater) send the eye off in parallel directions deep inside the pictorial space. Although their clothes remain threadbare, dense snow no longer engulfs these children. The snow is melting. We detect intimations in these imagined selves of a new freedom and expressiveness. This liberation and openness finds stylistic

expression in the patch of snow on the ground next to the taller child, rendered in a loose, idiosyncratic gestural style.

A new life force emerges with the *Autoportraits*, as though the earlier youngsters had been trapped inside memory by an evil spell that the artist's brush is gaining the power to undo. In fairy tales, the breaking of a spell is an act of redemption and marks a moment of transformation, a newly conscious state. *Autoportrait avec mere* (*fig. 10)*, one of the earlier 2006 *Autoportraits*, already shows signs of this more authentic self. The artist, an infant in the foreground, sits on his mother's lap. She looks barely more than a girl herself and is dressed in the traditional Mao jacket of the time. Her gentle, smiling image rises up behind the child, a ghost-like presence rendered mostly in a range of muted grey, white and black. The baby's face and clothes are tinted in a pale yellow wash, and tiny, bright blue toy spacemen and space ships swirl in the atmosphere around him.

The two figures seem to exist in different time zones in this reconstruction. A world of color separating the mother's reality from the child's, denying their reunion even in memory's hall of mirrors. The words on the infant's small sailor hat may also separate her time and his. According to Tianbing Li they read, *New Chinese Child*. "As the son of a military man," the artist explains, "my father was always at the military base and [only] back home two days a month. My name, *Tianbing,* means 'Soldier from Heaven' in Chinese. It was given to me by my father. So when I was a child, most of the time, I put on the small military clothes and the hat which is for the Navy."

The portraits eventually cycle back to the single figure. But now they are explicitly biographical and subjective revelations in which fact and fiction blend flawlessly. Emotion is no longer held at a safe distance, it is fully exposed. One reads the sadness, or the turmoil or the doubt and roots for these children, empathizes with them, cares about them. In one of the paintings, *Autoportrait rouge avec Livre* (2007), the artist depicts himself at about seven years old, decked out in formal military attire (*fig. 11*). The uniform's rigor and weight seem too grown-up for the small being inside it. It is humorously incongruous with the school bag looped around his small neck or the expression of the young boy holding a book in front of him like an apprehensive student, anxious to please but unsure about what that pleasing response should be.

In still younger versions of himself from 2006, the artist wears an infant's sailor suit. In *Autoportrait á Xing An* (*fig. 12*), the outfit is decorated with a large anchor but makes no pretense at being a replica of a uniform. Daubs of freely applied pure white paint articulate the fabric's delicacy and its crisp, freshly laundered quality. Like the unsuspecting naiveté in the child's gaze, this

immaculate sailor suit conveys a time of untroubled innocence that, one suspects, exists only in the artist's revamped version of it. Memory, indeed, saves the children. The same mildewed and weathering marks appear on this portrait but here seem to act less as indicators of memory and loss than as a kind of birthing liquid clearing the way for a new self to be born in the mind's eye.

Suddenly, in a quantum aesthetic leap, that new child stares out at us from a haunting 6ft. x 5 ft. (200 cm x 160 cm) canvas, *Autoportrait avec Jouet* (*fig.13*). Executed in the summer of 2007, this canvas represents a compelling synthesis of the artist's formidable painting skills in both the Eastern and Western traditions. It brings together the multilayered socio-political concerns and the personal journey into identity that have occupied Tianbing Li for so long.

The larger-than-life sized child, feet astride, fills the center of the canvas like a small god afloat in some dreamy, galactic outer space. Tiny, phantasmagorical Day-glo green toys circle his lower body in a galaxy of whimsical planets: a teddy bear, a horse, a helicopter, among them. This self-portrait is rendered largely in the same monochromatic palette as the others, but the impression here is less photographic, more expressive and painterly. Adding to the painting's dreamlike atmosphere is a luminous glow that seems to emanate from within the child himself and spreads out into other pictorial elements in a soft phosphorous, Day-glo pink. Two such phosphorous pink ovoids, as ethereal as smoke rings, edge the boy's jacket pockets, but also function as autonomous abstract forms that float independently on a separate plane. The same soft, pink glow encircles the boy's cap, marks his jacket sleeves and flushes his skin with an inner radiance.

Most strikingly, the child-god is operating the lever on a tube-like apparatus that releases what appears to be a fluffy, Day-glo pink material from which a new toy seems to be taking form. Apparently, it too will soon join the other toys filling the child's universe. "The toys I paint are the toys of today with fresh color," Tianbing Li has said; it is "a way of spending my childhood again in the imagination."

But this mesmerizing image of a child-god pouring forth products nonchalantly from a tube in his hands – manufacturing them in what one intuits could be an endless stream of supply – with the sole purpose of fulfilling infantile desire, is somehow unnerving. It suggests the chilling prospect of a universe one day crammed with little else; the individual lost in a sea of things he has created. Again, the artist hides his critique in plain sight. The boy's hand-operated factory provides a telling analogy to our adult world and modern technology's capacity for producing an endless cascade of "things" – grown-up toys – and a relentless flow of information that goes hand-in-hand with that industrial capacity. "We are

inundated with so much visual information through technology," observes a concerned Tianbing Li. "I think everything moves much more rapidly than before and so this increased velocity also applies to our identities which are also changing at this rapid rate."

This sense of the modern individual being swallowed up by "white noise," the steady flow of new products, new information, new circumstances, finds ingenious expression in the Tianbing Li's contemporary recycling of a traditional Chinese art form: calligraphy.

His technique is almost impossible to decipher in a photographic reproduction. What appears initially to the be the glint of light on the boy's cheeks or a highlight on the band of his woolen hat, or a cluster of white creases on his jacket's left elbow, or deep shadows on his left shoulder are, in fact, exquisitely inscribed calligraphic notations and phrases rendered in Chinese (*fig.14, Detail*). These calligraphic episodes appear in other images in *The Children's Project* as well. Most notably in the image of the boy with the red book (*Autoportrait rouge avec Livre*). What appear as shadows below his neck and between the uniform's collar are clusters of calligraphic writing, masterfully disguised. No less duplicitous are the scribbles masquerading as watery, white fade marks across the front of boy's book (fig.15, Detail). These scribbled phrases and words are plucked at random by the artist from something that caught his attention in a newspaper and are used "to give the impression of the bombardment of the media world," he explains. "That's why I write them in Chinese and show the works in the Western world. … The meaning of the text is not important for understanding the paintings."

Well, yes. And no. The words are not selected for their literal connotations or to elaborate the picture's specific content. But their very "meaninglessness" is the point, isn't it? In this sense they are an annotation for post-industrial society's "white noise." Here again, the dialogue between East and West meet in the artist's recycling of the ancient art of calligraphy, coding meaning into his pictures with a sub-rosa subtlety that even a 13th-century Chinese scholar-artist might appreciate.

Like many of his fellow contemporary Chinese artists today, Tianbing Li struggles with issues of hybrid identity, reconciling the contradictory values presented by living and working in diverse cultures, finding a balance between the promise of modernization and the value of tradition, questioning whether consumerism isn't as debilitating to individuality and freedom of choice as collectivism. But unlike contemporaries such as Zhang Xiaogang and Yue Minjun, for example, who have opted for cool, ironic styles in the Warholian pop art mold and turned them into lucrative signature "brands," Tianbing Li finds

inspiration in the Tao notion of “wu chang” (without fixed form) and in the protean, ever-changing styles of a Western artist like Picasso. “I hate the repetition … as if we find a formula to success and repeat it all the time. I always struggle against this idea. Style for me is a way to see the world, the world changes, our vision changes.”

Tianbing Li links an artist’s style to the nature of the Self, which for him is much like breathing. Each breath alters us, “bringing the outside (universe) inside (to the smaller self) and then, the inside, outside again.” We experience this breathing process in the changing faces and aesthetic strategies of *The Children’s Project.* It is a slow breathing in and out of memory, each breath re-issuing the Self in a new form. One can only hope that Tianbing Li will hold his breath for a moment longer to explore the rich painterly and conceptual terrain flung open with *Autoportrait avec Jouet* and perhaps discover the wisdom of T.S. Eliot’s observation:

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.[6]

Footnotes:

1. Michael Sullivan,*The Three Perfections: Chinese Painting, Poetry, and Calligraphy* (New York: George Braziller, 1999), Revised Edition, pg. 37

2. Information about Qian Xuan’s scroll painting *Returning Home* was included in the *Journeys: Mapping The Earth and Mind in Chinese Art* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, February 10-August 26, 2007

3. Quoted from the artist’s profile, Kashya Hildebrand Gallery

4. Interview with Deborah Zafman, Paris, February 2006.

5. Unless otherwise noted all quoted comments by artist are from his email response to the author’s questions, May 26, 2007.

6. This quotation and the essay’s title come from *Little Gidding*, the concluding 4th quartet in T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* published in 1942.