

On the eve of MGA's spring exhibition *Li Gang: in the grey scale*, Mark Hislop talks with the contemporary Chinese artist about his close relationship with Australia and his fascination with the materials and processes of photography.

## LI GANG: IN THE GREY SCALE

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**Mark Hislop: Welcome to Melbourne Li Gang. Like many of your Chinese contemporaries you have travelled and studied internationally. You studied in Perth and completed your degree at VCA in Melbourne. Since then you have exhibited internationally and have established an international residency program in Beijing. Can you tell our readers the reason you chose to study in Australia and talk about the contribution that Chinese contemporary artists have made internationally in the last 20 years.**

Li Gang: Yes, as you know I studied in Australia from 1990–97. I had a good time in Australia because I learnt techniques and also ideas about making art. I had always wanted to do art but in China there is a lot of competition and I didn't really have a chance to go to college. So I was very happy to be in Australia and to have studied here.

In 1997 I went back to China and I set up a studio and workshop for myself. I also worked together with some other artists from Norway, Sweden, America and Australia. We set up an artist exchange program without government support which is very difficult. I have since stopped running this artist exchange program because I had to move my studio away from the city centre because of the development happening in the city.

For the last 20 years Chinese art has really expanded internationally. Some artists have gone to Europe, some to the United States, and many artists have established themselves in Australia – like Guan Wei. Some of these artists' works are contemporary, some are more traditional. But for me I find a balance in both. I studied in Australia but I am Chinese.

**Commentary about your work talks about the emphasis you place on process and materials. Can you talk about your training as a sculptor and the link between your use of materials as a sculptor and your approach to the photographic medium?**

I trained as a sculptor; I really like the materials I work with. I learnt bronze casting in Australia and set up a foundry in Beijing. But after working in the foundry for more than ten years it became very difficult both physically and financially. When I started the price of the raw material - bronze and gas - was low and we could produce a lot. But for the last five years the oil price went up and we found it very hard to keep the business going and the market for sculpture was bad. That is one reason that I have moved away from sculptural work. When I choose the subject for my work I also think about the medium. Through making the sculptural works I learnt new ways of working with materials.

For the last 4 years I have used photography. It's a good time to work in photography because more and more people are using digital processes. This means I can get a very cheap analogue camera from the market and as a sculptor I know about welding and how to put things together. So I work with different

lenses, films and chemicals and I find this very interesting. I use the photograph, not like a photographer would, but like a printer would. What fascinates me about photography is the chemical reaction. You click and this image is produced on the negative film and from that you print on paper. It's about time and process.

**So do you buy the old cameras you use in the market? The old analogue cameras?**

Well no one is really using the old cameras anymore. You can't buy the film, so I convert the old cameras and lenses and build new cameras, which for me is fun. I can really play with the cameras and lenses but I'm not a technically trained photographer. I learn from doing it.

Your photographs suggest an interest in traditional Chinese landscape painting, particularly the pictorial aspects of Chinese landscape painting. Can you talk about this?

I use a camera, not an ink wash but the use of grey tones is very strong for me. The grey tones come from the environment, Beijing is not like Melbourne. Beijing is very harsh, dusty and in winter it is very cold. In the studio we do not have enough heating in winter and the summer is steaming hot. It is a huge contrast.

So what I try and do is to show this in the works. As a photographer I accept this process. I set up my own darkroom and process photographs that aren't perfect – this way I have more control. A lot of people – foreigners – think that I am influenced by western artists, Gerhard Richter or someone like that, but I would say that I'm more influenced by the Chinese traditions – the five tones in black and white. I like what happens to the paper and sometimes the negative when it gets scratched or gets marked; all this is like the traditional Chinese splashing of ink on the paper or scrolls.

**Like a controlled accident?**

You can control or not control, the balance is important. But you have to have a broad heart to accept what happens – this notion actually is quite oriental because you have to let it happen. That is how I see myself as being different to a photographer, because a photographer could not stand those water marks, those accidents. But that also teaches me, the whole process teaches me.

**In your *Korean Subway* series and the bike series you photograph forms in movement in an urban space. The works suggest a broader idea of how individuals exist in a cultural space.**

In China today it is not like before, it's much busier. So my photographs try to show this movement, the speed, moving from one place to another. I'm fascinated with this. Personally I have had to move a lot. From my studio, the arts centre, artists are moving all the time. So these photographs from the Korean Subway series show people moving fast in the subways, everybody is using mobile phones, there are more and more cars and bicycles. It's all high speed so I try and show this in the photographs.