

FICTIONAL EXHIBITIONS: D'S PAST

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Photo: Li Mei

THE FIRST TIME you saw this installation was at the opening of his studio. It was in the back of the factory, where few guests ventured. You walked toward this corner and turned, arriving in a dark, low-ceilinged room. At first glance, the installation looked like a countertop in some bar, but with an air of alluring secrecy. Whoever heeded its call would inevitably want to scrutinize it closer. Its ellipsoid frame was lined with dim lightbulbs. The narrow counter would only accommodate one couple sitting facing each other, as if framing an ontological distance between the two drinkers: you are real, and the person opposite, your reflection.

You moved closer to look again at this huge, empty hole-pitch dark. The air above the bar shimmered from the interplay of the pale yellow lights, as if it were a face floating in the dark. In another moment, when the light bulb around the hollow space twinkled, it gleamed and lustered like a vanity table, and your gaze was directed into that mirror-like space existing only as an optical illusion, and the illusive self.

Thinking back to that dim room, its only source of light that row of bulbs, you feel particularly lonely. At times you really sensed something might emerge from that black, oval, velvety, empty hole—a sensation not unfamiliar to those who linger at bars. Visually speaking, this thing would possess a sensibility markedly different from what you have acquired visiting exhibitions of primarily material objects; for some people, the appreciation of art is gradually learned in the dusk of rumor and imagination, terror and hubris, and the mingling of wine glasses. Although D often mentioned that his work was about research based in nature, you quickly understood the spatial experience summoned by this work to be direct and immediate, bringing to mind libertine aesthetics, an aesthetics you recall as once being widespread. Should you look for its name in the dictionary, you would find it is called “fin de siècle.”

You concluded that this narcissistic bar-for-two was too autobiographical, confessional, blatantly naked—very much unlike D’s work. At the least, once D had allowed the audience to get to know him, he no longer revealed himself in his creations. Instead, he would make grand statements about textuality and whatnot, talking about finding symbols within the symbols. After the artist’s sudden rise to fame, people began to talk about him. In Hong Kong they said that he must have been practicing witchcraft, making offerings to the Toyol, or more politely, that he probably had a full-size portrait hidden somewhere, like that of Dorian Gray—a libidinal mirror infused with the public’s yearning to gossip about him.

You invited D to meet at a café. He came directly from the studio, looking casual. He told you that Dorian Gray, or “Du Liankui,” was the inspiration for the work. D was born in Taiwan, where he discovered a photocopy of a manuscript of architect Wang Ta-hung’s translation of Wilde’s novel. His creative translation changed the title from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to the Chinese *Du Liankui*, transposed the setting from nineteenth-century London to contemporary Taipei, and layered cautionary tales from traditional Chinese literature within (even the name Du Liankui felt like the name of a young female lead in a Chinese opera). In the process of comparing the two books, D became interested in Dorian’s ring, which did not appear in Wang Ta-hung’s translation. Rumor had it that the ring, a platinum thing encrusted with agate and diamonds, was described in a paragraph that was deleted before publication: in an act of highly symbolic and orientalist confession, Du Liankui took off the ring and saw his sins framed in its round void.

The artist was fascinated with this detail, with how materialism and desire fed one another. He commented that within literature, Wilde had created a three-dimensional character, but in the space of architecture, Wang Ta-hung had found a literary interpretation of symbols.

Subsequently, D transformed the spatial desire of the ring into his own creation, creating this bar, this vanity. He then talked about the exhibition he was preparing and asked your advice. "Should I mention Wang Ta-hung's text version?"

You didn't answer directly. You only said, "this piece is very naked, very frank."

As you said this you thought of something else. This kind of textual study seemed to reveal D's intelligence, but his true biographical self was quietly and inconspicuously waiting aside.

"That's the third time someone used the word naked to describe the work." He was curious why you also used it.

All of a sudden you couldn't articulate. Does the nakedness lie in the image of Du Liankui, or in the image of D's narcissism? "Maybe," you spoke while still thinking, "the first time, the nakedness was realist, and the second time was fetishistic, even pretentious."

Not long after, you met a friend of the artist who occasionally participated in his performances. That was when you learned that D chose this friend's name for the title of the work. The piece, no longer having anything to do with Du Liankui, was called *David, David*.