

**ON SHOW**  
LI BINYUAN, ABSORB

**OPENING**  
FRIDAY 10 MAY FROM 20.00

**VISITING ADDRESS**  
TORENALLEE 40-06  
5617 BD EINDHOVEN

**Editor's note**  
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1/3

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**PRESS RELEASE**

# ABSORB LI BINYUAN

**From streaking internet sensation to next generation torchbearer of Chinese contemporary art in PS1, all within five years: Li Binyuan's career is moving fast. And rightly so. The actions that gained him attention are driven by an undeniable urgency, no matter how pointless his performances may seem. They express the intense emotions and experiences of someone who does what he has to do. Li is constantly trying to relate to his surroundings, to time, to life itself. In the works he shows in MU from 10 May to 30 June, Li Binyuan often measures himself against water; the element of recovery, of uncontrollable violence, of rhythm, transformation and reflection.**

*Drawing Board*, for instance, shows him at a broken dam, holding up a wooden board against a gushing current of water. The action evokes images of loneliness, of taking a stand. Holding one's ground until you're overcome by exhaustion. In the back of the mind, the strong current turns into masses and masses of people drifting along. Li opposes this stream; it's not about stopping them but about standing out as an individual, one single person.

It is tempting to relate the work of Chinese artists to social changes. When Li Binyuan leaves through the classic 'Odes of Poetry' under a waterfall until it falls apart in *Book of Songs*, you might think of Mao's Cultural Revolution that raged for ten years, all but obliterating China's traditions. But perhaps Li just saw beauty in the combination of fast running water and an ancient anthology of poems, expressing it in this spontaneous image that makes time tangible and still lets it slip away?

#### **About MU**

MU is an explorative presentation platform that operates in a rich international network of creatives who define the liminal space between 'what art is and what art can be'. MU initiates, produces and presents rather new works, and surrounds it with an extensive and interdisciplinary secondary program targeted to a broad and rather young audience. MU prioritises introduction to, understanding of, elaboration on, and experiencing hands-on creation, of art. MU is curious for talent, and challenges talents to be curious. MU provides a platform for artistic research, and development of artists and designers, and helps them to profile themselves internationally.

MU is located in a former Philips factory at Strijp-S in Eindhoven, The Netherlands.



Meanwhile, the way the text disappears in a faraway distance on a separate screen seems to be a reference to Star Wars (with The Force as a kind of Qi that is present throughout the universe). Li knows his classics. Bas Jan Ader, Marina Abramovic. And of course the artists of the Beijing East Village collective who started to use the human body as a medium in the nineties. There is a wonderful image they created stacking ten naked bodies: *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain*. The traditional landscape would never be the same again.

This feeling, that something essential has changed, becomes stronger over the years in Li's work as well. In 2015, his gestures seem to make the water rise and fall in *Kung Fu*. A wink at *Wuxia* films. At the same time, state control is never far off. Fantasies of unlimited power connect with a strong desire for harmony with nature. But when Li climbs a tree somewhere at the coast to perform *Sea Bird* in 2018, his arms and legs stretched like a bird on the wind, he actually seems to become one with the elements.

A central work is *Freedom Farming* from 2014. Li travels to his home village in Hunan province, where his father has left him a plot of land. In a performance lasting for two hours, Li tries to reconcile himself with the death of his father and the impossibility to continue the tradition. Again and again he jumps up, only to fall back in the mud. His attempts to detach himself from this patch of soil are being witnessed by his mother and her fellow-villagers, who understand nothing of his art.

Although physical exhaustion often appears in his actions, Li is less extreme than his predecessors. They responded to the ideological turnabout under Deng Xiaoping – towards 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' or rather ruthless state-directed capitalism. Suddenly, to be rich was glorious. It led to unprecedented economic growth and openness to the West, but resulted in the violent suppression of the protests at Tiananmen Square in 1989. The Beijing East Village collective was formed shortly afterwards and became synonymous with iconic images like Zhang Huan's *12m2*. In 1994, in the middle of summer, he sat in a filthy public toilet for forty minutes, with countless flies swarming over his naked body that was covered in fish oil and honey.

Some of the most shocking works were gathered in *Fuck Off*, a show organised by Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi to coincide with the 2000 Shanghai Biennale. Ai presented photographs of his own performance *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*. He Yunchang showed *Dialogue With Water*, in which he hung directly over a river, suspended head-first from a crane, to cut the water in half with a knife, while blood from two cuts in his arms was flowing downstream.

Li, who graduated from the prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, refuses to be intimidated by the previous generation. In *Raise Up Ai Weiwei*, a performance from 2012, the slender Li carried his world-famous and rather heavy colleague in his arms. His own break-through followed one year later, when images of him running the streets of Beijing naked at night, carrying a sex doll or a large crucifix, went viral. Li became the 'streaking brother' and went on to prove his talent with the solo *I Have Issues*.

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Even Zhang Huan, considered to be one of the most influential Chinese artists, doesn't fill Li Binyuan with veneration. "I don't have a thorough understanding of Zhang Huan, and I don't know him particularly well" he said in 2018, talking about their joint exhibition at the New York PS1. While Zhang stopped making performances in 2006, and has sixty assistants executing ever-larger sculptures in his Shanghai workshop, Li seems to continue working modestly at an extraordinary oeuvre, in his own multi-interpretable language.

Take the addition he shows in MU to *Until the Bridge Collapses*, a series of actions that he started in 2012. Each year, he returns to a small concrete bridge over a river, which he crosses by turning one cartwheel after another, up and down, exerting pressure on the structure until he can no longer stand up straight. Over time, you can see the bridge crumble but, of course, nor does Li get any younger. People passing by seem to find it all a bit odd.

To be alone or connected with others, to move along or to resist: what are the forces at work in life, in society, and how do you relate to them? What can one person achieve and how is the significance of your actions measured against eternity? With simple means and gestures, Li Binyuan poses complex and yet universal questions. He doesn't have any clear-cut answers – no one has.

– With great thanks to Liu Gang of The Pin Projects

