Art in America

David Diao Hijacks the History of Modernism to Make It More Inclusive

Barnett Newman's abstract paintings—imposing monochromes interrupted by mysterious thin "zips" of color—have been known to inspire extreme forms of wonderment and veneration. Art critic Peter Schjeldahl reported in 1970, the year Newman died, that grown men sobbed in front of the artist's 1958–66 series "Stations of the Cross," a group of 14 paintings that ostensibly narrates Jesus Christ's last day but doesn't explicitly depict it. Three decades later, artist Andrea Fraser confessed to crying in front of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950–51), an iconic Newman painting owned by the Museum of Modern Art. "I started to weep," she wrote about her experience of seeing it in the museum. "I paused to get myself under control and continue on."

Newman preferred for his viewers to stand inches away from his paintings, so as to shut out everything in the world but his transcendent art. By just about any measure, however, few have ever gotten closer to his "Stations of the Cross" canvases than **David Diao**, who did not find the encounter quite so emotional.

Diao, a longtime Newman fan, helped move the paintings in 1966, when the series was shown for the first time at the Guggenheim Museum. Working as an art handler, Diao helped install the show and even met Newman in the process. Critics genuflected before these paintings, as though they were imbued with divine significance, but Diao recalled interacting with them as though they were nothing more than objects to be arranged in a room.

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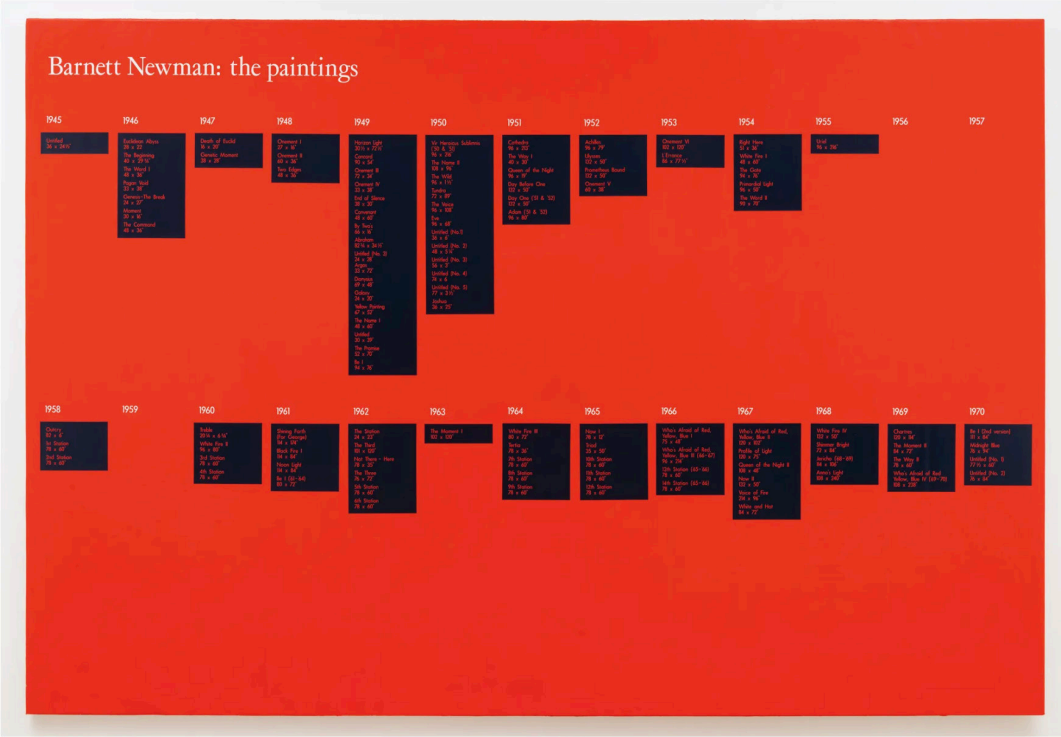
"I didn't treat them as sacrosanct, even though that's probably what he would have wanted," Diao told me recently. He fixed instead on Newman's unassuming surfaces, made by layering on oil and putting down masking tape to mark out where the "zips" would go. "I loved the matter-of-fact way he painted—it's somehow unfussy. It's just what needs to be done."

Since 1989, Diao has been doing what needs to be done to Newman, whose paintings Diao has referenced both admiringly and acerbically in his own art. "I wish Barney were around to look at them," Diao wrote in 1991, when his work appeared in a group show at Sidney Janis Gallery in New York.



David Diao: *Barnett Newman: Paintings by Title & Size*, 1992.

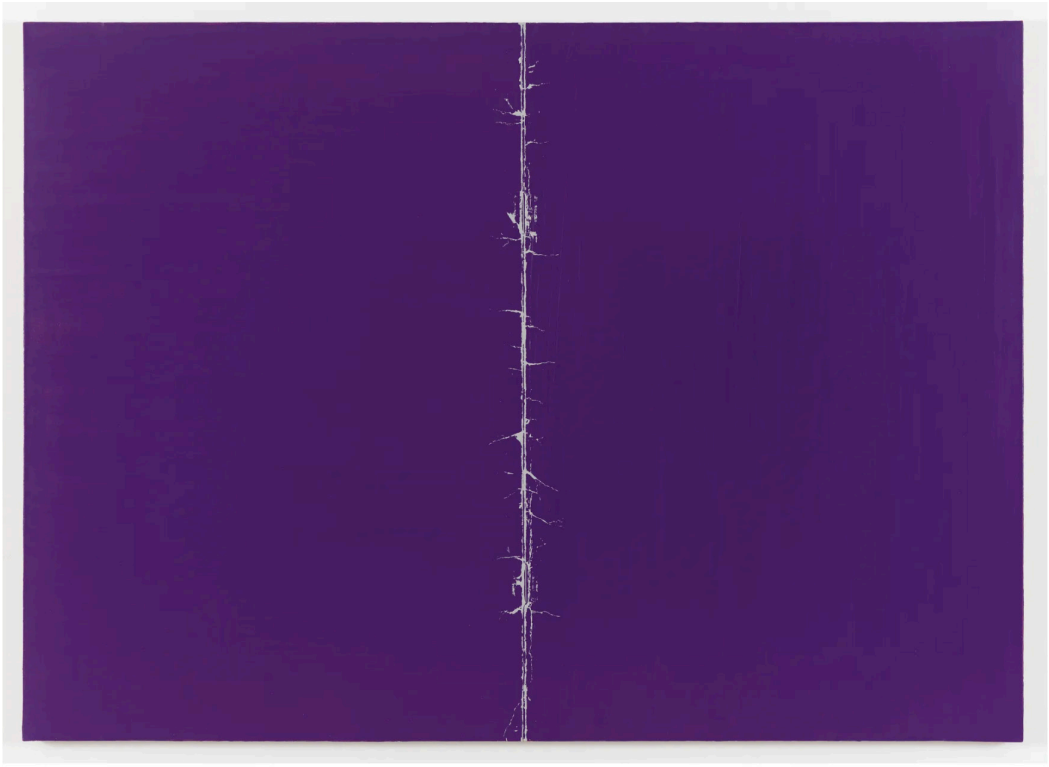
Photo Zeshan Ahmed/Courtesy Greene Naftali, New York

Diao's 1992 work *Barnett Newman: Paintings by Title & Size* lists all 118 of Newman's paintings, casting their names and dimensions against a blazing red background that recalls the intense crimson of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, which is inventoried here like an object on a checklist rather than a masterpiece. *BN: Spine 2* (2013), a purple monochrome with a spidery white line running down its middle, looks a bit more like a classic Newman, except that Diao's "zip" belongs to the worn fold of a book's cover—the book being the catalog for Newman's 1966 Guggenheim show, with a jacket also a glorious shade of violet.

"No one gets anybody's permission to be born. No one asks to live," Newman wrote in that catalog. "Who can say he has *more* permission than anyone else?" Such a remark might explain why, in 2024, when Greene Naftali gallery published a book about Diao's Newman-related paintings, the tome featured a violet cover much like the Guggenheim catalog, with one sly change: Diao's name appeared in place of Newman's. If Newman had permission from the art world to splash his name across the covers of books, certainly Diao deserved it as well.

ON AN OVERCAST SPRING DAY, Diao greeted me at his studio in Tribeca, in the building where he has lived and worked since 1974. Diao, who moved to New York in 1955 after spending his childhood years in mainland China and Hong Kong, wore a tattered crimson sweatshirt whose holes revealed a white T-shirt beneath. I told him that his outfit's red and white color scheme reminded me of Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. "Not really," he responded flatly.

"Not really" was a phrase Diao uttered six more times in our conversation, which repeatedly circled the notion of negation. Diao's works are laced with allusions—mainly to paintings by the likes of Kazimir Malevich, Robert Motherwell, and, of course, Newman—but when Diao makes his references, he does so by undermining his source material. He seems to express reverence for all these European and American painters before knocking them down a peg. "He's so quintessentially postmodern," said Philip Tinari, who curated a 2015 retrospective of Diao's work at the UCCA Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing.



David Diao: *BN: Spine 2*, 2013.

Photo Zeshan Ahmed/Courtesy Greene Naftali, New York

You could say that Diao is crossing out accepted historical greats—an act he performed literally for *Synecdoche* (1993), a print work for which he appropriated a Benjamin H.D. Buchloh essay on the painter Gerhard Richter that appeared in *October*, and then struck through Richter's name in red ink, as though he were an editor reviewing a manuscript. In its place, Diao scrawled his own name, effectively inserting himself into the very Richter-centric history that Buchloh constructed.

Richter started using a squeegee to craft his abstract paintings in 1980 and has been seen as a pioneer in that regard. But Diao began using squeegees to make his art in 1969 and hasn't gained much recognition for it. (Diao also claims to have used a squeegee before his friend, painter Jack Whitten, who engineered a device in 1970 called the Developer to pull his paint around.) Richter may even have seen early squeegee works by Diao in a 1973 show in Düsseldorf that included both artists; in any case, *Synecdoche* is easily read as an act of art-historical revenge. Diao, for his part, called the work a "corrective."

But he also expressed embarrassment over *Synecdoche*. "One of the dumbest things I have ever done is make that work," he said. (Diao's friend, artist Walid Raad, might disagree—he owns an edition of the print.) Prodded for more, Diao called the piece "sort of a bitter act"—while wryly praising it as one conducted at a "high level."

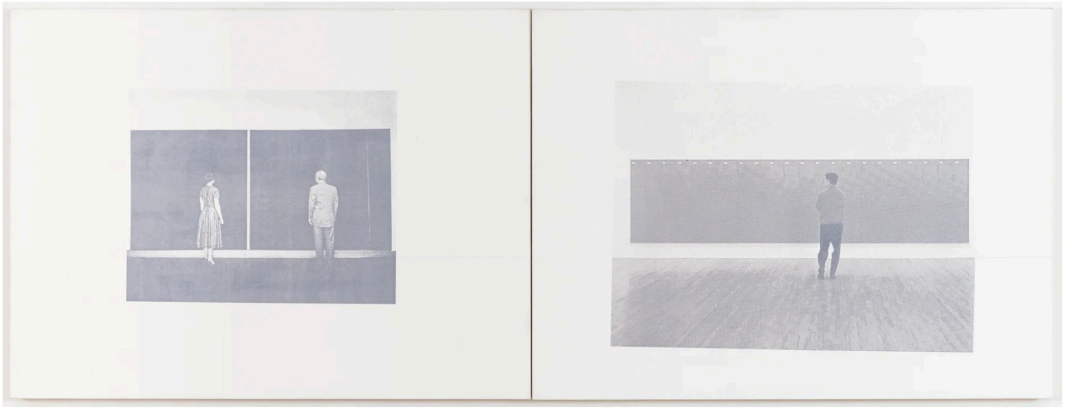
Diao's work certainly does have a mean streak. During the '90s, at the Jeu de Paume in Paris, he met the curator Catherine David, who at the time was in the process of organizing the 1997 edition of Documenta. According to Diao, she told him, "You're not really a Chinese artist," suggesting that, since he had made his name in the United States, he was an American artist, with no clear relationship to his homeland. The meeting inspired Diao's painting *Pardon Me Your Chinoiserie Is Showing* (1993), featuring those very words—pointedly playing on the phrase "pardon me, your slip is showing," meant to suggest that hidden inferences have been revealed—against an egg-colored background. David never publicly commented on the work, but as Tinari pointed out in the catalog for Diao's UCCA retrospective, curator David's Documenta did not include Diao. Tinari, noting the gendered dynamic at work in a slight referring to a woman's undergarment, also called the painting "arguably sexist."

But Diao is self-aware in a way that underscores how his work comes from his own experience—and speaks for no one other than himself. This is the same artist who, three years earlier, made a painting titled *Mean Things*, in which a black monochrome is interrupted by barely visible text reading: mean things i said about other artists. (Beneath that is a gray monochrome with vinyl lettering that reads: mean things other artists said about me.) In his work, Diao fights fire with fire, wrestling his way into the canon by any means necessary. As artist Michelle Grabner, who included Diao in the section of the 2014 Whitney Biennial that she curated, put it, "He's basically giving us new histories."

THE PHRASE THAT DIAO USED to describe Newman's paintings, "matter of fact," could be used to describe Diao's attitude toward his own art. His vast studio is across the hall from his humble apartment, and he moves between the two spaces when he needs a book from his library or a bite to eat from his kitchen. (Diao is a passionate cook, and was even featured prominently in a 1981 *New York Times* article about artists' lunch habits that included his recipes for beef carpaccio and fusilli with fennel.)

Diao works alone in his studio, crafting multiple paintings at once. One work-in-progress in his studio this past March was part of a series about Gerrit Rietveld's *Berlin Chair*, an iconic piece of furniture from the De Stijl movement. Diao's painting featured hard-edged rectangles floating atop a blue background. "I basically took the chair apart and used each shape as a shape in the painting," Diao explained. The result looked a bit like an abstraction by Malevich. As for why the background was blue: "I was just trying to make an attractive color for myself." (The work's matter-of-fact title: *Rietveld's Berlin Chair parts making Suprematist composition*.)

Diao's art has been called "conceptual abstraction" by some because it cannot be analyzed only in formalist terms. The irony, though, is that, despite his work being deeply critical of a brand of formalism crucial to modernism, Diao thinks hard about how he applies his paint—a predilection not often ascribed to conceptual abstractionists.



David Diao: *Looking 1*, 2000.

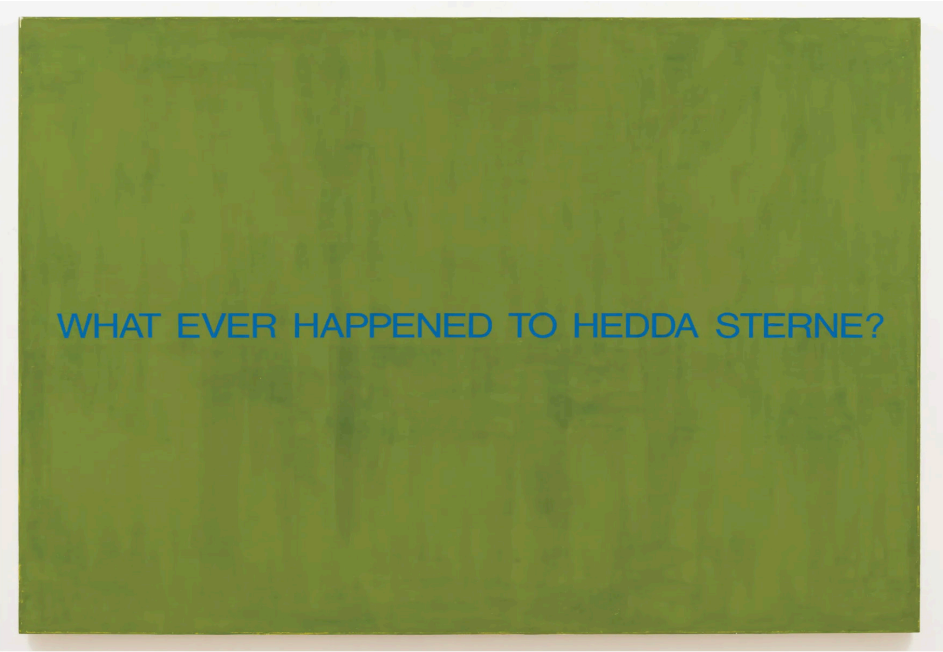
Courtesy Greene Naftali, New York

He begins by priming his canvas with gesso—"mostly to bury the weave," he said—and then uses a palette knife, rather than a brush, to slather his surface with acrylic, a fast-drying material once considered déclassé. Unlike Newman, who applied his paint so that it appeared smooth, Diao leaves his backgrounds uneven, allowing strokes to remain visible. "I don't want it to be polished," Diao said. "I want it to be factual and material."

He walked me over to a maroon canvas whose surface included white areas where the gessoed canvas peeked through. In its center was a white square bearing a statement that Newman once exhibited in 1951, to accompany a show at Betty Parsons Gallery: "There is a tendency to look at large pictures from a distance. The large pictures in this exhibition are intended to be seen from a short distance." Diao rendered the text so small that one must stand inches away in order to read it. As I leaned in closer to see the words, Diao smiled and said, "Get a kick out of this."

THERE ARE 15 ARTISTS in Nina Leen's famed photograph of "The Irascibles," the group of abstract artists who boycotted the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1950; 14 of them are white men. Diao has spent a lot of time poring over this image, which first ran in a 1951 *Life* magazinearticle that popularized the term *Abstract Expressionism*. "That photograph is very important," Diao said, "because you could tell who was important within this group." He pointed out that you can find Newman front and center because "even though his paintings were not respected very much, he was known as a good spokesperson and a good writer."

But Diao has focused more of his attention on the group's sole female Irascible, positioned all the way in the back: Hedda Sterne, whose abstractions resemble buildings that are still under construction. Diao has long wondered why critics paid less mind to her, and in 1993 even painted a work called *What Ever Happened to Hedda Sterne?* "I like the idea of the margins," he said. "Something from critical theory that really stuck with me is the idea of the supplement: what's not in the main text but is right there, in the shadows on the side, wanting to be part of what you're talking about."



David Diao: *Whatever Happened to Hedda Sterne*, 1993.
Courtesy Greene Naftali, New York

Diao's background places him outside the main text of Western art history. He was born in 1943 in Chengdu, China, and was raised by a wealthy family in what he described as a "grand house" with "many modern aspects," including a tennis court, that differed from other nearby homes with pagodas and other traditional structures. It was a comfortable space to live in, but not for long.

In 1949 China was convulsed by the culmination of a revolution that resulted in Mao Zedong's formation of the People's Republic. Diao's grandfather was a former general in the Kuomintang, the losing side in the civil war. Fearing retribution from Mao's regime, his paternal grandparents fled to Hong Kong with Diao, who brought along just a single suitcase. "We were lucky to be able to get on a flight of Norwegian missionaries who had chartered a plane to evacuate their own people," Diao said. His mother, brother, and sister did not make the journey. His father, Kenneth Kai-I Diao, was already in the US, having been stranded after earning his PhD in structural engineering from what is now the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Diao joined him in New York in 1955, taking up residence in Queens.

Diao attended a Lutheran boys' school in Westchester County and, upon graduating, enrolled at Kenyon College in Ohio. "I initially went as a pre-med student, more or less to please my father, but I did so poorly in the first year in chemistry and mathematics courses that I nearly flunked out," Diao said. "It was the philosophy department that rescued me." He took classes on the rationalists and the empiricists before moving on to a seminar on Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose writings taught him that, as he put it in an interview in 2015, "if you look at something with a certain lens, you see it in a certain way. With a blink, you see it in another way."

Diao moved back to New York in 1964, this time to live on his own. To pay the rent for his $43-a-month fifth-floor walk-up, Diao took a job at Kootz Gallery, which shot to fame during the '50s after showing Hans Hofmann, a core figure in the New York School. Diao worked there as a handler and cleaner until 1966, the year that Hofmann died and the gallery closed. Then he took work at the Guggenheim and Richard L. Feigen & Co. All the while, in private, Diao was starting his own practice.

He began in 1966 with Frank Stella–like paintings before making soak-and-stain works inspired by Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis. Gradually, people started to take note: Diao featured in the Whitney Museum's painting-themed 1969 Annual (a precursor to the Biennial) and exhibited work at Paula Cooper Gallery in 1970. Moving to roomier living spaces also allowed him to enlarge his canvases, some of which he painted on the floor à la Jackson Pollock.

He created the squeegee paintings, then started to use a larger tool: cardboard tubes found discarded on the street, which he ran across his wet paint in two sections from his canvases' center. These works looked a bit like open books, so Diao named them after such titles as *The Wealth of Nations*—a gesture that went against the grain at a time when many other artists left their work untitled, to discourage any association between their art and the outside world. But Diao seemed to imply that his paintings *were* related to the culture, even if they were not figural. Diao said he grew interested in how "language can always play a part in anything visual, or even emotions," a topic he continued exploring in a group of hard-edge abstractions he named after films by Jean-Luc Godard (*Made in U.S.A.*) and Josef von Sternberg (*Morocco*).

In 1979, as soon as Americans were able to visit China as tourists after a diplomatic shift, Diao returned to his homeland for the first time in 30 years. He found his family living in what he described as a "hovel, with dirt floors and no plumbing." He was shocked: He had not written to his mother because his fluency in Chinese had faltered while abroad, and though his father had sent money back and maintained communication, the family was no longer rich. "The country was very poor," Diao said. "My family was no better or worse than your average folk in Chengdu." Diao's jarring reunion with his family coincided with the beginning of a break from making art. "I'm sure there's an enormous amount of survivor's guilt," Diao admitted. He thought, "My poor family has suffered so much, and I have the luxury of living in America and being free to do whatever I want."

Diao began to drift around, spending a year in Paris, where he read up on French critical theory. He didn't return to New York until 1984. That year, while walking down Fifth Avenue, he happened upon a poster for a pro-Palestine protest and decided to paint the Palestinian flag, rendering it alongside a composition recalling a Suprematist drawing by Ilya Chashnik that also features an inverted triangle.

"I wasn't thinking of Palestinian liberation," Diao said, though he did concede that he "may share some of the anger" voiced by the demonstrators. He titled the work *On Our Land* (1984). "It was a way of saying: What is our land? Is our land the land of Suprematism and high art, or is it the land of a subjected people?" The work was a breakthrough for Diao, who found the drive to paint again and hasn't stopped since.

David Diao: *On Our Land*, 1984.

"THE IDEA OF DISPLACEMENT, whether in Palestine, Bosnia or Sudan, is the same," Diao told *Art Asia Pacific* in 2008. "People think it won't last forever but then it lasts a lifetime." That may be why Diao's work has long maintained a connection to his native China, where his work has received more institutional recognition than it has in the US.

Diao's references to his homeland tended to be oblique until 2008, the year that the painter Gang Zhao organized Diao's first show in China, at Courtyard Gallery in Beijing. The exhibition featured a group of works known as the "Da Hen Li House" series (2007–08), for which Diao painted timelines, texts, floor plans, blueprints, and diagrams that excavate the history of his family's Chengdu home, which was demolished in 1949 and then rebuilt as an office for the *Sichuan Daily*, a state-run newspaper. The series charts how personal history gets swept away by national progress. *Red Star Over Tennis Court* (2008), for example, contains only the contours of the sporting surface once sited near Diao's home. The tennis court is rendered so sparely that it could be mistaken for a modernist experiment in geometry; a People's Republic of China flag in the center and its title reveal that this abstraction does not exist in a formalist void.

The “Da Hen Li House” cycle was acclaimed upon its debut, and was later shown in New York by Postmasters Gallery, which mounted nearly all Diao’s New York solo exhibitions during the ’80s, ’90s, and 2000s. Many works from the series have since entered the collection of Hong Kong’s M+ museum. Yet Diao declined to presume why the series met with so much praise in China, saying only, “people got the emotional aspect of it.” Zhao averred that critics and artists responded to the cycle because it showed Diao grappling with his identity as a Chinese person living outside the nation from which he hailed. “At the end of the day, you have to look at yourself in the mirror,” Zhao said. “‘Okay, yes, I am [in] diaspora.’ You have to acknowledge that fact.”

Diao had acknowledged that fact before, though rarely so directly. One 1974 painting shares its title with Carol Reed’s 1947 noir film *Odd Man Out*. “Obviously, that’s already implying my outsider status,” Diao said. But few viewers would have gained as much from the painting itself, which looks like any other hard-edge abstraction of its era. Some works from the ’90s more clearly contend with alienation: One series of paintings from 1992 translates the term “Yellow Peril” into a variety of languages, from Dutch to Chinese, suggesting that anti-Asian racism can be found just about anywhere—even in China. But these works have not been seen so widely.

David Diao: *Odd Man Out*, 1974.
Courtesy Greene Naftali, New York

Still, Diao insisted that his work had always commented on his identity. “I hope these things might be quite obvious to somebody who is paying attention,” he said. Some people in the US are clearly doing just that: *Odd Man Out* was included in “Legacies: Asian American Art Movements in New York City,” a 2024 show held at NYU’s 80WSE space, and a 2025 exhibition at Greene Naftali, the New York gallery that began representing Diao two years earlier, featured the “Yellow Peril” paintings alongside works referencing Malevich, Pollock, and others.

Until the ’90s, few critics engaged with Diao’s Chinese heritage, focusing mostly on his references to American and European modernists. And even once Diao made his relationship to China a more explicit element of his art, it was clear that some American reviewers struggled to understand why. In a positive 1995 *Artforum* review, David Rimanelli addressed a Diao painting purporting to be an invitation to a MoMA survey for the artist, with his name slanting to form two pairs of slit-like eyes. Rimanelli admitted to being “ignorant” of Diao’s biography, then went on to write that Diao’s “fake-stupid” art adopts “the pose of a disabused and disinherited smartie.” Could responses such as this be indicative of why Diao has never been granted a retrospective in the US? Tinari speculated to me that “racism is part of it, but only a part. He’s been conscientiously unfashionable at different moments, as much as [his work] does look ahead of its time now.”

Diao, for his part, has never waited for recognition. In 2013 he made another painting advertising a faux retrospective at MoMA—the museum did not acquire a painting by him for 11 more years—and he has continued to make works that situate himself within an art history that typically excludes him. “So much of my work is trying to write myself into the history of modern painting because they won’t let me in,” Diao said.

One such work is *Looking I* (2000), for which Diao silk-screened two images: one showing Barnett Newman and an unidentified woman gazing at one of Newman’s expansive paintings, the other showing Diao admiring one of his own creations. As with many other works in his oeuvre, the painting suggests, as art historian Michael Corris has written, Diao’s “need to trespass on the ground of modern art in order
to be able to continue to tell other stories about modern art.” Here, Diao might be seen as mimicking Newman—and in a sense even taking his place.

But Diao seemed to imply that he hadn’t thought so hard when he silk-screened the latter picture, which he said was shot “by happenstance” in his studio. He grinned, and added, “I want people to laugh, to not have to take it so seriously.”