

Art in America

REVIEWS MAY 19, 2017

David Diao

NEW YORK,
at Postmasters

by Tatiana Istomina

David Diao:
Arrive/Depart, 2016,
acrylic on canvas, 42
by 100 inches; at
Postmasters.



In his recent exhibition at Postmasters, David Diao utilized his usual vocabulary of modernist tropes and infographics to revisit his own childhood. Titled "HongKong Boyhood," the show focused on the years 1949 through 1955, which the artist, then aged six to twelve, spent with his family in Hong Kong after they fled the Communist takeover of mainland China and before they immigrated to the United States. "HongKong Boyhood" served as the second chapter in an autobiographical narrative that began with Diao's 2009 Postmasters exhibition, "I lived there until I was 6 . . .," which centered on the artist's early life in China.

Hung near the entrance to the gallery for "HongKong Boyhood," the large, horizontally bisected canvas *Arrive/Depart* (2016) provided a timeline for the period explored in the show. The upper half, painted bright orange, contains only two notes—ARRIVE LATE OCT 1949 and DEPART AUG 5 1955. The lower, gray-colored half is packed with items from world history and culture: the beginning of apartheid in South Africa, Barnett Newman's first solo show at Betty Parsons Gallery, the Korean War, the publication of Anne Frank's diary, the establishment of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, Rauschenberg's erasure of a drawing by de Kooning, the murder of the fourteen-year-old African-American boy Emmett Till in Mississippi. Compared to the busy lower portion of the painting, the nearly empty upper half could be viewed as a chronicle of the artist's childhood as an uneventful stretch of time marked only by the family's two moves. Next to this work was *A Child's World* (2014), which shows a schematic map of the part of Hong Kong where Diao's family lived. Blue numbers mark the most important locations of Diao's world then: home, school, and church. In the rest of the exhibition, each place was evoked in one or more canvases.

...

...

The school theme, for instance, was elaborated in half a dozen paintings. *First School (Elvy's)*, 2016, is a gray monochrome covered with faint smears of white paint to resemble a blackboard; it also features a sign with the school's name and address rendered in green paint and vinyl lettering. As do many of Diao's paintings, the piece seems to point toward other, well-known artworks—in this case, Cy Twombly's "blackboard" paintings. But unlike Twombly, who reveled in the sensual delight of his gestural chalklike marks, Diao reproduced the blackboard as a stock symbol of school drudgery. *I Was Caned by the Headmaster I* (2016) alludes to Mark Rothko and Andy Warhol. The vertical canvas features, on a bright orange background, two horizontal rectangular shapes: a purple monochrome and a silkscreened photograph of a school official with a cane in his hands.

Diao has devoted the nearly five decades of his career to date to appropriating and recontextualizing the language, history, and mythology of modernist painting. His practice involves a delicate and artistic interpretations. His stance seems to be a mixture of personal admiration and intellectual detachment and distrust.

Diao's presentation of his personal history in "HongKong Boyhood" conveyed a similar blend of affection and reserve, intimacy and distance. The true subject was not so much Diao's firsthand experience as a boy in Hong Kong, but the biography of the Chinese-American artist David Diao, as reflected through the lens of a historical narrative. Following in line with Diao's previous autobiographical works—such as those in which he documented his professional résumé, sales records, and studio sizes, half-ironically and half-seriously inscribing himself in art history—the new paintings continue the construction of his artistic persona, with all the omissions and generalizations of a modernist myth.