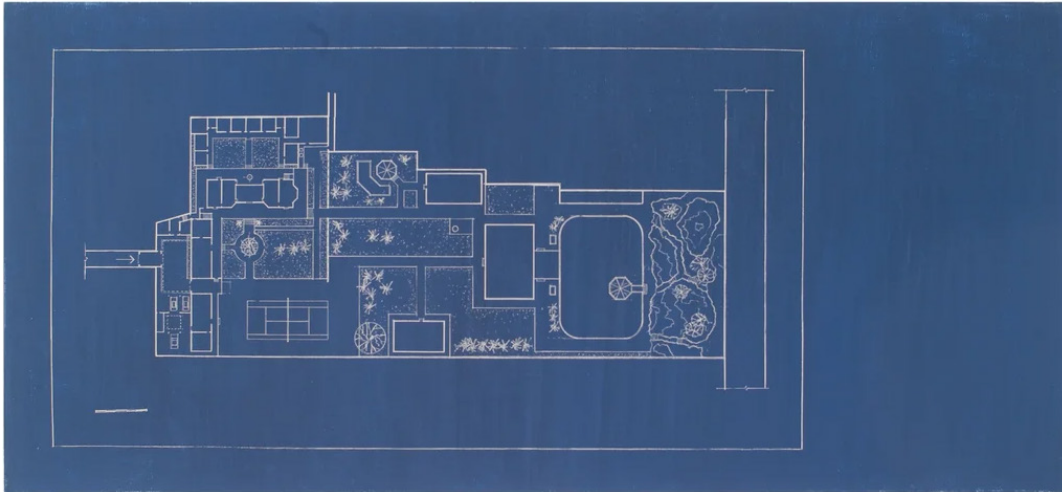


M+

David Diao: In Search of Da Hen Li House

26 Jan 2023 / by David Diao



David Diao. *Da Hen Li House* — From *Wo Ba*, 2007. Acrylic and screen print on canvas. M+, Hong Kong. © David Diao. Photo: Robert Puglisi

Artist David Diao recalls tracing his steps back to his demolished childhood home in Da Hen Li House

Everybody remembers their first house—a house that they no longer live in, a house that is lost in time and memory.

Until the age of six, I lived in a large, multi-generational Chinese home with my family and relatives. It wasn't an old house—it was built in 1936 on a property that once belonged to a Manchu prince, near the centre of Chengdu.

I left in a big hurry in 1949, rushing to the airport to be evacuated. This was a moment of chaos, as the Communists were practically at the gates of the city. My family was lucky to get on a plane because it was chartered by Scandinavian Lutheran missionaries to get their own people out. They knew my family and came to my paternal grandmother and said, 'There will be room for you if you make it to the airport.' So we did—my uncle, aunt, grandmother, and I got on the plane. As a high-ranking general, my grandfather had gone to Hong Kong

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some days before; he was quite afraid that he would be imprisoned or shot in Chengdu. I joined my grandfather in Hong Kong soon after and went to school there for several years.

My mother, on the other hand, stayed behind to weather the storm with her parents, who lived outside the main part of the city. My father was in the United States as a graduate student: he had just gotten his PhD in 1949 from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and was moving to New York to work in engineering.

I reunited with my father in 1955 with my grandmother and my uncle and aunt, who were twenty-six and twenty-four by that time. I was further away from my mother by another eight thousand miles. And then it was another three decades before I saw her again.



David Diao's studio on Franklin Street, New York in 1979. Photo courtesy of David Diao

I started making art right after college. I didn't really have an art background, but I had a great interest in painting. My models were people like Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and Barnett Newman. My work would have certain hallmarks of the New York School that I was influenced by and aiming to supersede.

If you want to be an ambitious painter, you'd better make some big works, and the subject matter had better be abstract. My earliest works were very much

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about how the paint got to the surface, but they were also performative about the process. There was the idea of taking mundane gestures and bringing it to the realm of painting.

From about 1969 to 1973, I had a huge studio on the Bowery with concrete floors, a place where I didn't mind spilling paint because it wouldn't soak into the flooring. I would take these four-and-a-half-foot-long cardboard tubes, then I'd stick a bent electrical conduit inside the tube and use it as a handle. The tube was so unwieldy that there was paint slipping out at the far end. But that was an element of this way of working that I embraced.

By 1974, I wanted more control again. I decided to move to a more conventional loft with wooden floors but a much higher ceiling, so I went back to making paintings hanging on the wall. I was not interested in inventing shapes, and I never had any particular education in life drawing. I was left with plain geometric shapes: circles, squares, diamonds, parallelograms, half-circles, triangles. I would make a shape and then cover part of it with another—what you don't see as hidden, you can imagine as being completed underneath. I did them ad hoc and directly on the canvas—*alla prima*, as Newman would say later. Such were the paintings I made between 1974 and 1982.



David Diao with his family in Chengdu in 1979. The artist sits on the left beside his mother, while his brother and his brother's wife are on the right. Photo courtesy of David Diao

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I went back to China for the first time in 1979. It was quite an emotional trip. My mother and siblings had suffered a great deal because the government knew they had relatives in the States. There was a lot of guilt involved in going to see them.

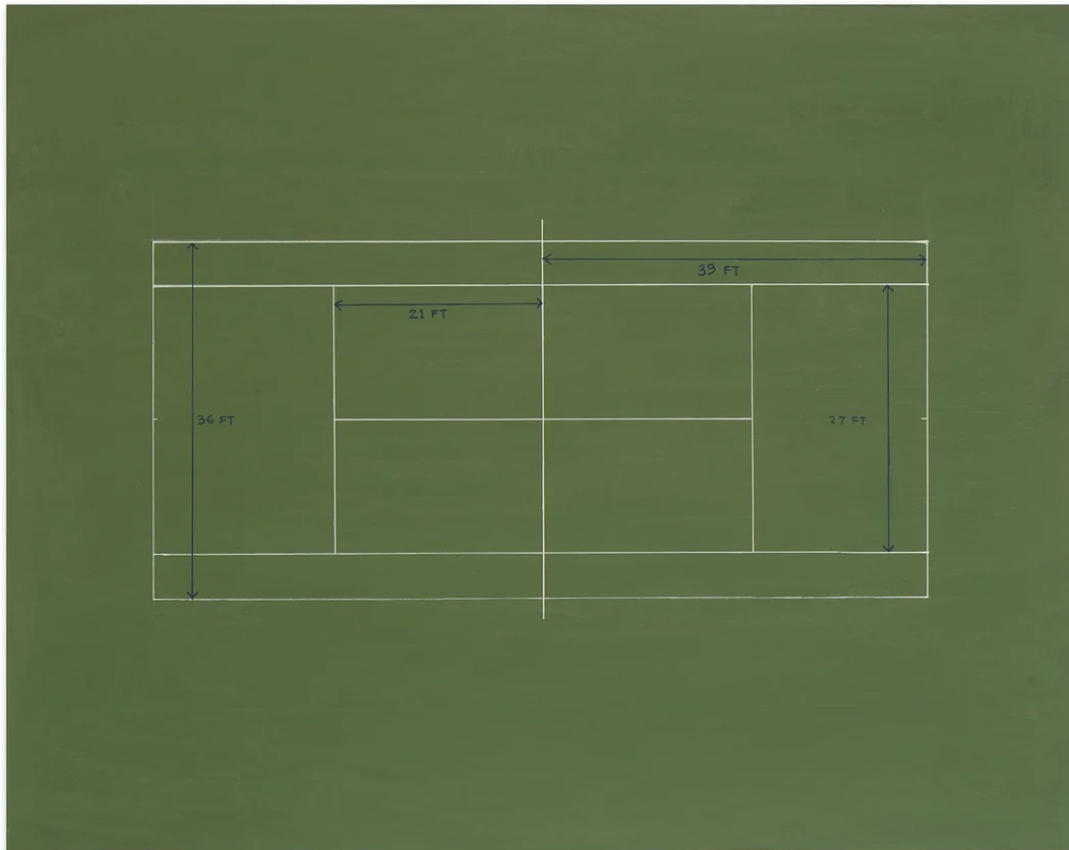
I hadn't told my mother and siblings when I was arriving. I just got to Chengdu and hailed a bicycle cab to their place. They were not expecting me, and suddenly I was there in front of their house. It was very dramatic. My brother was at work, so they sent someone to go and fetch him. He came running very excitedly to meet me, and my mother, who I hadn't seen in thirty years, was very gracious. There was no kissing or hugging, but you could see the emotion was there.

One of the first things I asked my brother was: 'Can you take me to Da Hen Li house?' For thirty-six years I'd been thinking about it, and it had been part of my fantasy and memory. Everything about my beginnings was somewhere wrapped up with that house. And it wasn't just fuelled by my own sentiments, but also the sentiments of all the relatives around me who bemoaned the loss of the house.

Much to my disappointment, my brother said, 'Oh, I can take you to the lot, but it's rubble-strewn.' They had recently torn down the house; when we went there, it was just mountains of debris. On top of a pile of dirt, there was a finial from a staircase. I picked it up, and to this day, I regret I did not keep it.

I was in Chengdu for quite a few weeks, and they took very good care of me and showed me around the city. Then I wanted to visit relatives in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou, so I took my mother with me on the plane and we travelled together for a couple weeks. We stayed in the same hotel and talked until all hours of the morning. After a thirty-year gap, there was just no catching up, of course. One of the first questions I asked her is: 'Why didn't you take me with you?' I was basically asking: Why did you abandon me? And she said, 'Well, you are the oldest grandson, and your grandmother would not have allowed me to take you.' And that was that.

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David Diao. *Da Hen Li House — Standard Measurement for Tennis Court*, 2007. Acrylic and marker on canvas. M+, Hong Kong. © David Diao. Photo: Robert Puglisi

From 1979 to 1982, there was a gap in my artistic production. People have connected those years of lassitude with my going back to China in 1979. It took me that long to have the festering guilt of seeing my family in dire straits. I got to thinking that I have the luxury of being an artist doing whatever I want, while they could hardly keep food on the table.

At the same time, there were formal contradictions in my work that I came up against and didn't know how to get over. I was hoping to do something brand-new with the immediacy of abstract expressionism and known geometrical forms. But the more I worked with those forms, the more I realised that people's reading of geometrical art as rational is not surmountable. And the more I worked with geometry, the more I realised that I was in the footsteps of other people who had used the same vocabulary, many of them European: the so-called avant-garde, the Bauhaus, the Russian Constructivists, De Stijl. So I

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so-called avant-garde, the Bauhaus, the Russian Constructivists, De Stijl. So I decided to delve back into the history of European geometrical painting. I went to Paris in 1983 for a sabbatical; I studied philosophy and didn't even try to paint.

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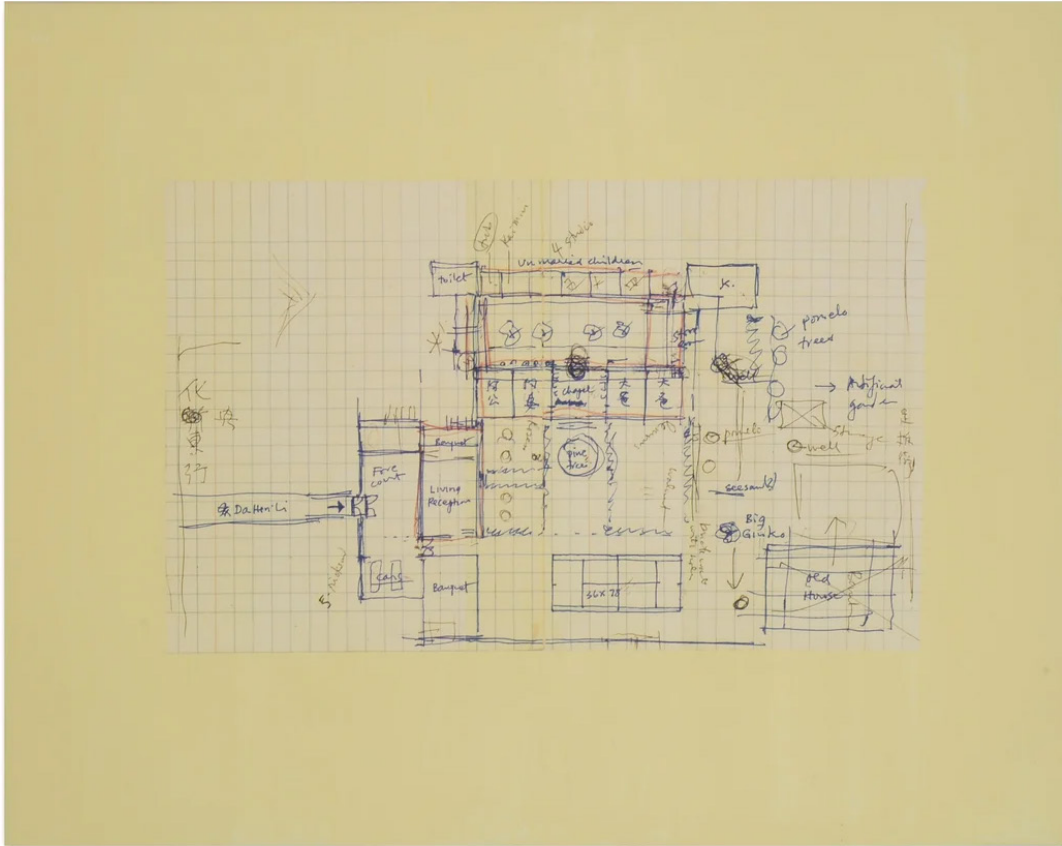
In 1984, I came back to New York and was trying to figure out what to do next. As it turned out, I was swept up in a march on Fifth Avenue with Palestinian people talking about liberation. They were passing out a flyer which consisted of the Palestinian flag, which has a red triangle pointing down with black, white, and green stripes underneath. I hung that flyer on my studio wall for some time.

It was about this time that I encountered Camilla Gray's book *The Great Experiment in Russian Art* from 1962. I had a lot of affinity and interest in the Constructivists: Kazimir Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky. There was a drawing that was just an inverted triangle with the point downward and some lines across it. And lo and behold, I saw the two inverted triangles: one on the Palestinian flag, and one on the drawing. I decided to pair them and called that painting *On Our Land* (1984).

From there, I somehow decided I could use a photograph of the Malevich show in 1915 in Saint Petersburg, where he has this black square in the far corner of a ceiling and a series of paintings hanging salon-style on either side. I projected the photograph onto a canvas, drew all the lines and painted them in, and then slid the projection so that the image was slightly off the first projection in a different colour. The painting was called *Glissement* (1984). Most of the time, I don't have any ideas. So, whenever I do have an idea, I'm so excited. It started

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with just one, but then another one came along, and then I had an idea for yet another one, and before I knew it, I had a group of maybe a dozen paintings on the same subject.



David Diaio. *Da Hen Li House — From Er Niang*, 2007. Laser print on paper and acrylic on canvas. M+, Hong Kong. © David Diaio. Photo: M+, Hong Kong

It was not until 2007—almost three decades after my first return visit to China—that I dealt with the subject of my childhood home. I'm slow, I guess. The reason I even picked up *Da Hen Li House* at the moment I did was because my friend Zhao Gang had moved back to China and was taking care of the Courtyard Gallery in Beijing. When I went to visit him in the early 2000s, he wanted to do a show of my work with my first individual outing in China.

When I started *Da Hen Li House*, I had no idea that it was going to become twenty-eight paintings. It was all done in one year, and for most of that year, that was all I worked on.

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I have very few photographs of the place, so it was an empty slate for me to impose on. The first painting was just a plan of the tennis court with its dimensions. That's the avenue from which I could approach the subject, because as a child, I didn't have an accurate sense of scale of the houses, of the rooms, the spaces, the grounds. But the tennis court is a standard dimension. From there, I was able to extrapolate the scale of the building and the gardens.

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From a very young age, I had been immersed in Da Hen Li's fantasy and mythology from my elders. The fact that I'm so obsessed by this lost house is because I had to grow up hearing their sense of loss. But when I asked my family to share their memories of the house for this project, I had a very difficult time. I had to ask again and again and again. On the whole, I must say they didn't want to go back there.

Of the three people I asked, the one who was most intransigent about doing anything was my architect uncle. He was the eighteen-year-old son of my grandparents who had the most to lose from the revolution, because he would have been living a very nice life if the Communists hadn't come. I managed to get him to do a first sketch of the house on the back of an envelope. I grabbed it, did scans of it, and used it as a collage element on a good ground, and that became one of the paintings called *First Sketch* (2013). From there, he finally gave me a more architecturally inflected drawing, which is the blue painting (*From Wo Ba*) in the series. That's probably the most accurate one.

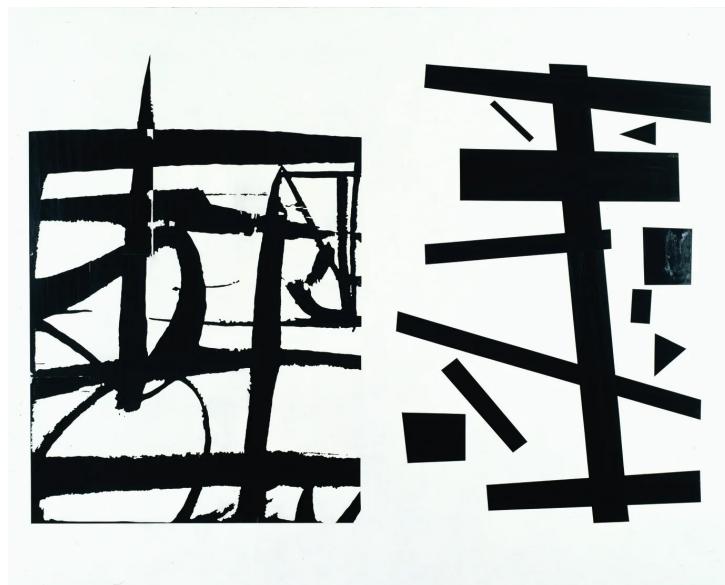
I had to also beg my ninety-year-old uncle to do it because he was not in great shape. His drawing of the house was way off in terms of the scale.

The third one was from my youngest aunt, who was sixteen when we went to Hong Kong. She and I were very close, because she was the youngest and we

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played together a lot. She ended up marrying somebody in Germany, so she wasn't in New York much. Then one time she was visiting, I sat her down, and we did the drawing together. The interesting thing about her intervention (*From Er Niang*) is that she remembered the roses in the garden.

Basically, a lot of doing these paintings was to provide evidence that I didn't just make this up out of whole cloth. That, in fact, this house had existed materially at some point. When I discovered that Wang Yu, the father of Jung Chang (author of the bestselling memoir *Wild Swans*), was the head of the newspaper that took over the house, that added another real-world element. All the things I painted, whether it's the masthead of *Sichuan Daily*, the ginkgo tree, the plot lands, the deed—everything is to support and give evidence that the house existed.



David Diao. *Cardinal Rule: Beware of False Friends*, 1988. Acrylic on canvas. M+, Hong Kong. © David Diao. Photo: Robert Puglisi

All the methods used in *Da Hen Li House* are ones I have been using for my other works. It was a natural evolution, my past interests incorporated into *Da Hen Li House*. My use of Chinese text has to do with a perverse part of me that always wants to go against the grain. There is a kind of animus against the use of text in paintings—if you're a real abstract artist, you don't use something literal like the alphabet. Very early on in my career, I decided I could break that sanction.

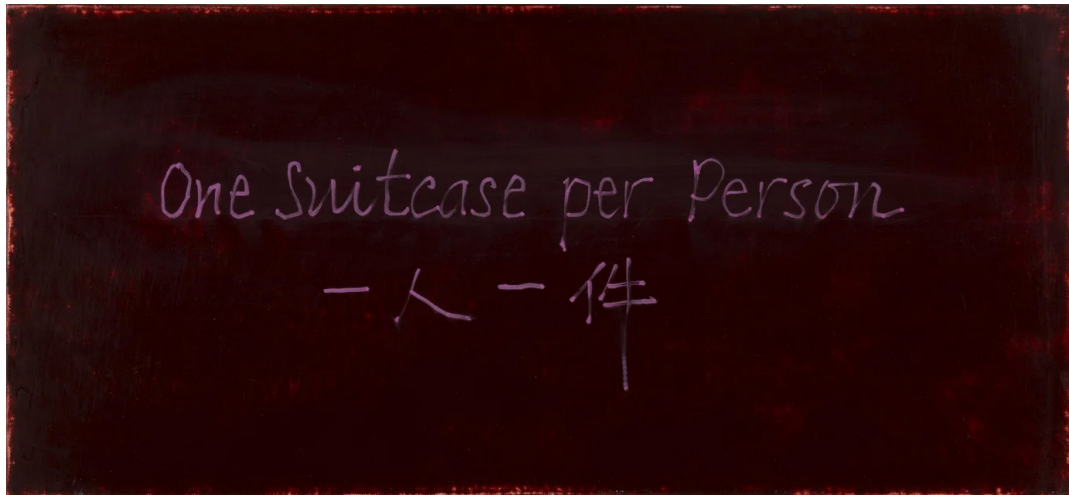
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In fact, I've benefited from my little knowledge of Chinese, because the beauty of Chinese art is that the same instrument is used to write and paint, so there's no distinction between painting and writing or image and text. For me, that was a great plus that I could borrow from.

I'm also very aware of my surfaces. I'm not just randomly brushing something on and then it's done. I really want the surfaces to be material, factual, and substantive. I don't even begin to put colour on until the texture is completely covered with layers of white paint, and I end up with an almost waxy, honed surface.

If I need a realistic image of a space or person, I usually go to a photograph and make a silkscreen print. But if you look closely, you'd realise that even the silkscreens are printed on perfectly flat, Formica-like grounds.

All these elements—the language, the flat grounds—are in the last painting I did for this group: *One Suitcase per Person* (2011). Its colour references Chinese lacquered luggage. I made that after all the paintings had been sent to Beijing, and I brought it myself on the plane for the show.



David Diao. *One Suitcase per Person*, 2011. Acrylic and marker on canvas. M+, Hong Kong. © David Diao. Photo: M+, Hong Kong

In exhibitions of *Da Hen Li House*, the viewer never gets the whole. You only see little snippets and in parts. You could make new groupings every time.

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I like the idea that things don't have to be spelled out, and things that have a duration in the world will have tentacles reaching out into books and articles and people talking to one another. All the discursive elements around a work are part of the work. If people don't get to see the whole thing, they might read this text, for example, and that will give them an angle they might not have seen before.

Talking about this group of works now makes it come alive for me. In a way, a person may be a hundred years old, but in his memories, what happened when he was six could well be yesterday. Time is an elastic band that stretches, but goes back to some point of origin, I suppose.

In another way, painting this group of works exiated something for me. I was more obsessed by the memory of the house before I did this series. Some friends of mine in New York who came to see the second version of this series, *I lived there until I was six*, would say, 'When I first met you thirty years ago, you were talking about this house.' But I think in some ways it's done. I'm not so caught up in thinking about that house anymore.

—as told to Pauline J. Yao