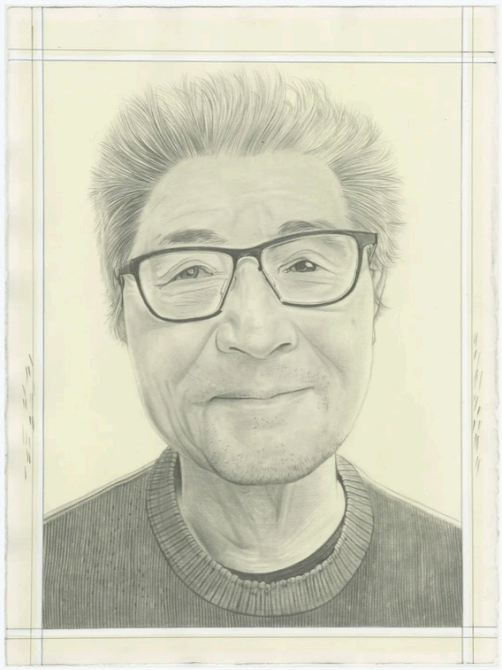
THE BROOKLYN RAIL

DAVID DIAO with Joe Fyfe



Portrait of David Diao, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

David Diao's current exhibition at Greene Naftali, *Put to the Test*, surveys his paintings from the early seventies through to the present. In December he sat down with painter and writer Joe Fyfe, who first met him in the early eighties and has kept up with him and his work since that time.

This is part of a much longer interview. It first focused on Diao's progression through various operations and factures as he came to terms with then-current late-formalist issues. Happenstance and his moves around Lower Manhattan dictated some of his decisions.

Fyfe and Diao then traced his development as an informational and conceptual painter, which comprises the largest portion of his career. Relying on the factual, he states that his subject matter must have a designated meaning. Diao's work has always been challenging. He continues his stated aim to test the limits of what is acceptable as a painting, historicizing as he moves forward, through both his personal history and that of the modernist project.

Joe Fyfe (Rail): I'd like to start with a history of your surfaces—rather than of your subject matter.

The Brooklyn Rail, February 2025

David Diao: Fine. There's always been a concern for the surface and the facture of the painting. I was influenced by what was going on around me. And in 1964, when I first arrived, everyone was still interested in stain paintings, which means people like Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis. It was thought that the paint embedded into the canvas was more one with it. So, my first paintings were all soaked in acrylic paint on raw canvas. Only much later did I come around to Barnett Newman's calling that "dyed cloth." My surfaces have moved from the stained ones to gradually having more buildup of paint. Since 1987, I started exclusively using a palette knife to apply the paint, creating a smooth, honed surface. Besides being sensuous and attractive to the eye, the smoothness facilitated the silkscreening that I came to do in some paintings.

Rail: I'm really curious to digress slightly—your area of study was philosophy.

Diao: Well, I guess if you want to think about philosophy, this would have to be a strain of empiricism, because you need to have some proof of something—that it attaches to some bigger thing than just what's there. Also the British language philosophers, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Only later, way after college, did authors such as Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes become available. The first paintings were all squares divided by diagonals. So, corner to corner, it was also very much influenced by Frank Stella, who was very important for most of us at that time, with his so-called "deductive structure." As a young artist, I thought I was besting Noland, because he only got the center and missed the corners with his targets, whereas I used the whole canvas.

David Diao, *My Favorite Image of Her*, 2016. Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas. Two panels: 100 x 42 inches each; overall: 100 x 84 inches. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali New York. Photo: Zeshan Ahmed.

Rail: I read an interview with him not long ago, he said he was trying to figure out how to make it as easy as he could for himself.

Diao: That's good. I probably do the same. So from the stain paintings, I moved to working with a window washer squeegee—a car washer. My landlord was a hardware store, Canal Hardware, and they would have buckets of these car window washer squeegees, which consist of a foam on one side, and a squeegee on the other side, with about a two-foot handle. So I started using that to push my paint around.

Rail: Both sides? Or just the squeegee—just the rubber side?

Diao: No, both sides.

Rail: So you had two different inflections.

Diao: I had places in the canvas where the paint was scraped away down to the substrate, and other areas where the paint was piled up like a geological formation. And this gave me another note, so to speak. Anyway, the idea of geological formations was somewhat influenced by Larry Poons, who had moved away from his grid-like "dot paintings," to very heavily-encrusted flows of paint. I decided to make my paintings also have a range from scraped, back to the raw canvas, to piled-up places of heavy paint. But the one thing that I've always had, until that moment and even later, is the idea of always treating the painting as a whole. Not dividing it up too much into parts or shapes, but to always consider using the whole canvas as one thing.

Rail: What do you think the reason for that was, though?

Diao: The notion of holism is very much in the literature. I mean, this is—everyone from Clement Greenberg to Lawrence Alloway talked about holism.

Rail: And older. The idea of a painting being a completely modulated surface—you know, without breaks—in some ways seems to be Cézanne's legacy.

Diao: Cézanne, on to Jackson Pollock, and everyone else. I also was very involved in the stretcher itself. So there were some paintings where I deliberately allowed the stretcher bar to kind of come through as a frottage. So that's a way for me to not only having two ways of dealing with the surface, but be able to think of the painting as having a front and a back.

Installation view, David Diao: *Put to the Test*, Greene Naftali, New York, 2025. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York. Photo: Júlia Standovár.

Rail: Without showing the back?

Diao: Without showing the back. The back is just an index of what happened in the process of painting. Then I actually decided to reinforce the idea of the stretcher structure. I would ask stretcher-makers to make stretchers for me with crossbars milled to an edge every two feet or so—stretching maybe ten to fourteen feet—so I would have thin edges under the stretched canvas to rub against. So I ended up with these paintings that could almost be like a palimpsest of a screen with vertical lines.

Rail: It's funny the way these issues—at least for me—are still interesting, even though they're very old issues.

Diao: They're very old issues. I guess I still consider them in some ways. Doing the paintings with the vertical lines allowed me to make these paintings that have elegantly vertical lines marching across the entire surface. But also, since that is the area where the stretcher bar is actually built up to an edge, I'm basically opposing the paint by pushing it across the edge, to create the line as a rubbing. That gave me ideas of movement: I would oftentimes use a sponge loaded up with paint and run it back and forth across the width of the painting. My gait and skipping transferred to the sponge, created wavelike marks and drips against the clear linearity of the vertical lines.

Rail: But wasn't there also something about this being a way of creating a bit of a distance between the author and the painting, as opposed to making directly autographic marks?

Diao: That's certainly something I dealt with in that we were trying to get away from expression and subjectivity, as exemplified by the de Kooning school of art. I was always drawn more to people like Mark Rothko, Newman, Robert Motherwell, and Ad Reinhardt as being more thoughtful, and not based on some kind of subjectivity or the sensibility of the artist himself.

Rail: Now, were they fairly monochrome?

Diao: They were generally towards monochrome, but made up of various colors. So it wouldn't be just absolutely red or green or blue. It would have an admixture of colors, but colors spread somewhat evenly, so it reads as a unity.

Rail: Were they subject to many revisions? Did they go on for a while, or not?

Diao: Well, not that many revisions. Also I was working wet into wet.

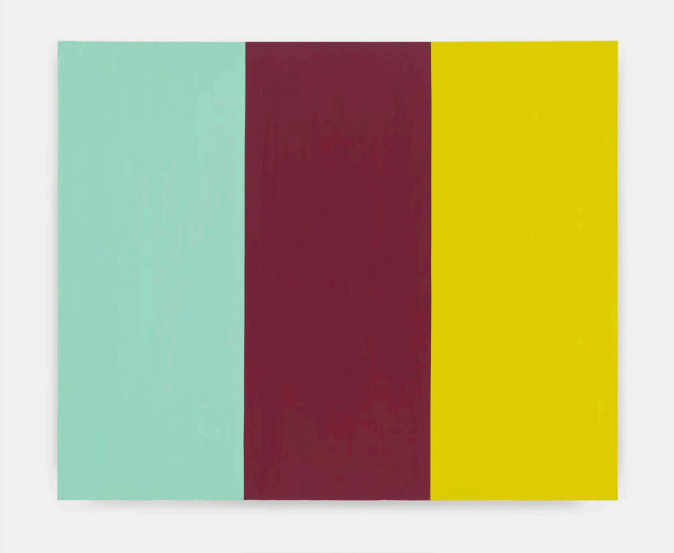
Rail: You kind of knew what you were up to.

Diao: Pretty much.

Rail: Yeah. So in some ways, there was an element of the programmatic.

Diao: Something somewhat programmatic, yeah.

Rail: Which is another word from that time, "program painting."



David Diao, *Tricolor 1*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 66 x 1 5/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali New York.Photo: Zeshan Ahmed.

Diao: Well, if you get the right idea, you got the paintings. Also it was "process painting." The painting shows the means by which its done. But back to the notion of surface. The car washing squeegee and sponge was about six inches wide, and I came to think that all the paintings were of a certain scale because of the squeegee's scale. That gave me the idea that I wanted to somehow scale up the mark. And I came upon a very useful thing on the street. My area in SoHo had lots of fabric houses and cloth people—you know, blue jeans, cloth, and all kinds of fabric. Every night they threw out bundles of these cardboard tubes. I decided, well, since the painting is so determined by the scale of the internal mark, I would make a big mark to elevate the scale of the painting. I would take these cardboard tubes and stick a length of aluminum electrical conduit into the opening, leaving a short length of it which I had bent slightly to use as a handle. Then by pressing my thumb on top of the cardboard tube extending in front of me with the electrical conduit stuck in it, I was able to extend my reach by the four-and-a-half-foot length of the cardboard tube. People tried to imagine how I used those cardboard tubes: they kept thinking that I was using it with two hands. But if I did that, I wouldn't have been able to reach the center of the canvas. In my case, I would work from the side, and I would be able to spread the paint the full extent of the painting, which is on the floor, by the way. Doing that kind of work involved fairly large amounts of paint mixed up and thrown on the canvas and then spread with this cardboard tube.

Rail: Did you make sure that the floor was level, or did you—

Diao: I didn't use the floor itself, which was concrete. Actually before that, in another studio, I made a table that was perfectly level, because that studio had a floor that sloped quite a bit, and by pouring the paint on, it would be moving by itself towards its lowest edge. So in that case, I made a perfectly level surface—8 by 20 feet—on which I spread the canvas. But at the Bowery, with the concrete floor, I was able to secure a bunch of very beautiful plywood, which is five quarters thick and 7 by 5 1/2 feet in dimension. And I had quite a few of those. They had come from the treasury box cubicles of a bank that was being renovated down the street, and I was able to salvage a good seven or eight pieces of it. By butting up these seven by five and a half pieces side by side, I was able to get a painting that's, say, 7 by 11 feet, or 5 1/2 by 14 feet. The canvas was stapled around the sides of the plywood which determined the dimensions of the painting. Greenberg was advocating painters to work on pieces of canvas and decide afterwards the exact edges of the painting by cropping. I was reluctant to do this.

Rail: Did you get up on a ladder and look down on them, à la Pollock?

Diao: Sometimes, but usually I was able to gauge what I was doing by just standing on top of it—not on the canvas, but off to the side. At first I was freely drawing with the cardboard tube, wielding it like a sword. But then eventually, the movement of the tube became just a single direction. Since I had a big flat surface, at one point, I thought about making two paintings at the same time—side by side on one piece of canvas—thinking that after I'm finished, I could cut it down the middle and stretch each side by itself. But of course, once I was working on the single canvas in two parts, they began to relate to one another, and I ended up with a double-sided painting. That became a fairly standard composition of a bunch of those paintings.

Installation view, David Diao: *Put to the Test*, Greene Naftali, New York, 2025. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York. Photo: Júlia Standovár.

Rail: A double-sided painting?

Diao: Two sweeps of paint on a single surface.

Rail: So what were you feeling when you were doing these? I mean, did you feel like you had a critical relationship to painting when you were doing these, or was it exhilarating, or was it both of these things simultaneously?

Diao: It's somewhat satisfying to see that much color happen all at once, and using an instrument that I didn't have to wash afterwards. They just were discarded. So I'm like Kenneth Noland. I also want to do as little work as possible.

Rail: [*Laughs*] Also it's simply about how when you're dealing with a painting, every decision can be can be a major decision.

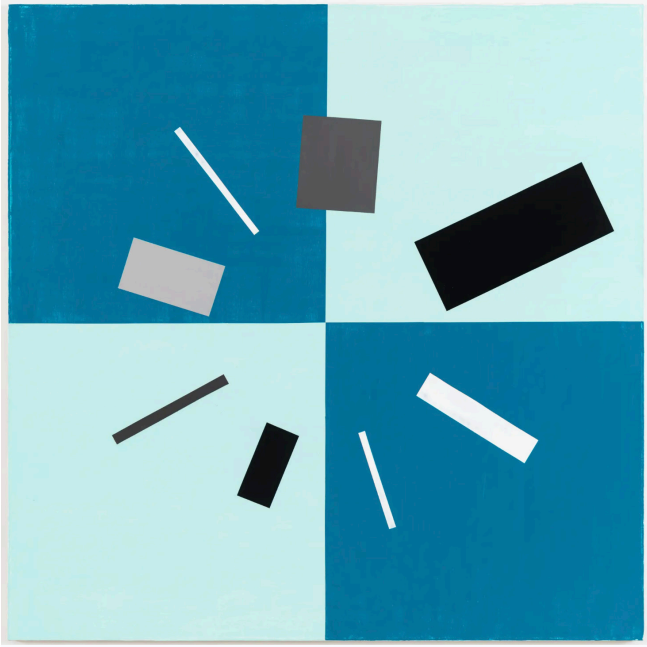
Diao: It can. One curious thing about those large cardboard tube squeegee paintings is that every color you see, I intend for you to realize that it went all the way from top to bottom, so that, in a sense, the shapes are made from colors coming through open areas from the layer below.

Rail: But don't you think that you were making an authoritative painting that was also anti-authority?

Diao: They're definitely anti-authority, because the way of putting the paint on is very crude and immediate. It's not based on hand-to-eye coordination and particular skill. Later on, people use the word "de-skilling."

Rail: Maybe we should back up for a minute to go from the cardboard paintings—

Diao: The cardboard squeegee ones to the geometrical ones in 1974. That happened very organically. I moved to a new studio on Franklin Street, which is where I am now. Unlike the Bowery studio, which had a rough concrete floor, this place had nice, beautiful hardwood maple floors, and very high ceilings. I've been trying to get up off the floor for some time anyway, because I kept thinking, "Oh, this is the method that Pollock originated, and I'm just taking it without any effort." So I was trying to find a way to get back to the wall. By hanging the painting I'm working on directly on the wall, I had a one-to-one relationship to it.



David Diao, *Rietveld drives BMW*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali New York. Photo: Zeshan Ahmed.

Rail: You managed to kind of get rid of the focal points when you went to the floor, which is one of the things that Pollock did. But once you go back to the wall, you're dealing with focal points again, right?

Diao: Right, and all notions of composition and all that come back.

Rail: Right. So anyway, here you are trying to get off the floor. Actually, with a very pragmatic reason, because you had nice floors.

Diao: I didn't want to ruin the floor. But then once I was up from the floor, I was left with what the subject of the painting would be, what shapes to make.

Rail: It's funny though, that instead of an artistic reason, a lot of the time one prefers a pragmatic reason. Like, "Oh, good. I have to get off the floor because it's a nice floor." That is seen as a more legitimate reason than some sort of artistic reason or authorship reason.

Diao: I guess I tend to stay away from all those highfalutin ideas. But, once I'm up on the wall, I didn't know what exactly to paint, so I started with very basic thinking of using just regular geometrical plane shapes: squares, circles, diagonals. And I think a kind of influence for me at that moment was the paintings of Al Held, which I admired a lot. It had the immediacy of Abstract Expressionism, but it also had some programmatic idea of structure and forms. And so I started doing these paintings with circles and squares and so forth. But these were all done without prior studies.

Rail: They were just improvised on the canvas, and then eventually came to a conclusion? And that's probably how Held's worked.

Diao: Exactly. He didn't plan it. I mean, his later work, which is more complicated geometrically, he plotted out beforehand. But the classic ones I'm thinking of, like *The Yellow X* (1965) and *The Big A* (1962) and *The Big D* (1964), some of those paintings were done *alla prima*.

Rail: That's also when you got rid of the cardboard tube, because to paint directly on the wall vertically, you can't really use the cardboard tube. So they were back to just regular brushes.

Diao: From 1974 until '86, I was using brushes, flat three-inch ones.

Rail: But you were still masking edges and things.

Diao: In those days, I was using regular tape to mask off each edge, each shape, because I wanted to look at each shape and color by itself, without it being sullied by forms adjacent. Now I use strips of Frisket normally used to make stencils for car painters. It is so thin that there isn't that bump on the edge from regular masking tape.

Rail: One difference between that group of work and Al Held's is that, because of your holistic approach, there aren't the kind of jumps in color that you get with Held. Even though they're colored shapes in the paintings, there's a kind of continuity from color tone to color tone in your work that that's different from Held's work.

Diao: No, some work had radical jumps. The thought was to use a full palette including black and white. I admired Stuart Davis for example. The thing I liked about Held's is the immediacy of Abstract Expressionism married to something more structural, and that's why I painted those paintings without prior studies. One shape would overlap another shape, and maybe a third shape might enter in. Well, in some ways, I use the geometrical forms as a way of dealing the viewer in, because it's not some made up shape. It's a shape that everybody knows, so when I overlap a shape and leave parts of it exposed, it alludes to the entire shape underneath. That's a way of allowing what's invisible on the canvas to also matter in the painting.

Rail: Well, you never really dismissed European painting.

Diao: I mean, I loved Piet Mondrian at that time. I hadn't really gotten to know Kazimir Malevich yet. Camilla Gray's book from 1962 was an eye opener.

Rail: That's what I was about to ask. Whether the geometric paintings led you into—

Diao: It did, ultimately. But initially, there wasn't that much information on the Russians. There were a few paintings in the MoMA, but they were deemed less important.

Rail: But it took a long time to digest.

Installation view, David Diao: *Put to the Test*, Greene Naftali, New York, 2025. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York. Photo: Júlia Standovár.

Diao: It took a long time for me to realize the geometrical forms I'm using are the very same forms that they used, but they used it for some kind of utopian way, and I was using it more as just a given—something I didn't have to invent myself.

Rail: Because when you ended up using all these tropes from Constructivism, et cetera, they were pointedly historical.

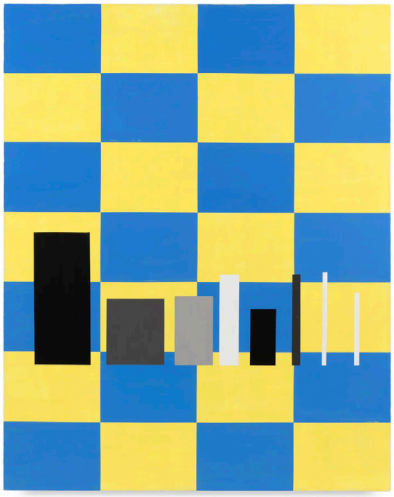
Diao: Definitely, yeah. Very specifically to that end, I came across—using the endlessly reproduced photograph of Malevich's show in 1915 as a substrate or template for a whole group of paintings.

Rail: Yeah, I remember those paintings. They were before "The Little Suprematist Prisons"? Or at the same time?

Diao: One year before. Given the photograph—with twenty-one paintings hanging on two walls, with a black square in the corner—I was able to exploit the paintings as free-floating images on the wall, without their containing frames. Or I could use the frames, or I could flip them, mirror them, and double them. So that ended up in quite a group of paintings, and it was my kind of return to making work.

Rail: With "The Little Suprematist Prisons" you "mated" two different works. You crossbred two historical paintings.

Diao: Exactly. Which I wanted to make even more specific by doing "The Little Suprematist Prisons", which were a group of smaller paintings to be hung salon style. And also, I was



David Diao, Rietveld's Berlin Chair parts in Katsura 2 - blue and yellow, 2021. Acrylic on canvas, 77 x 60 inches. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York. Photo: Julia Standovár.

Rail: I want to explore the kind of hermeticism in your work in relation to modernism and art history and/or your own history.

Diao: Well that's why I mentioned the Russian advertisements. Because it's a way of bringing the high down to the low, somewhat.

Rail: Or, just opening it up—

Diao: Opening it up to other things.

Rail: So, the surface—were the "Little Supremacist Prisons" brushed and taped?

Diao: They had smooth palette-knifed surfaces.

Rail: Ah. So that sort of began around—maybe it began with the room—

Diao: No, the rooms were painted by brush early on then switched to knives. What I wanted was a very factual, well-painted, intentional background. Nothing wishy-washy about it—nothing painterly—just solid paint. And then I was working on a painting which is called *Skating on Thin Ice* (1987). The images come from Vilmos Huszár's small painting of skaters in the wintertime. I took that image and projected it twice, and then enlarged it to eleven feet wide. And it's a very funny image for me, because you first only see squares and rectangles, then see that the geometrical shapes form people who are skating on ice.

Rail: And this turned into a big painting.

Diao: This turned into an eleven-foot-wide painting. And what's interesting for me is using the palette knife to make the hard ice-like surface. I began to think that the way of making the painting is already in the title: *Skating on Thin Ice*. It's also a way for me to acknowledge that my reliance on hard edge geometrical shapes and references from art history is kind of skating on thin ice.

Installation view, David Diao: *Put to the Test*, Greene Naftali, New York, 2025. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York. Photo: Júlia Standovár.

Rail: And also this—let's call it ice—whenever you do a painting, does it begin as this monochrome? It's always introduced onto a monochrome?

Diao: Yes, for the most part, they're monochromes, but they do sometimes go on two or three color grounds. I prepare and paint the ground first, and that could take a lot of time, because just to get to use color, I need to bury the weave. I want the resulting surface to be flat as Formica. I would do a thin coat of gesso with a brush, a full coat of gesso with a brush, and then multiple layers of white paint by palette knife before applying color.

Rail: By this time you have found that this sheer surface done with a palette knife suits you, and you have begun on a lengthy series of paintings that have been called "conceptual" but might also be called "informational": certainly the Newman paintings that chart his production, the scales of the paintings in relation, etc.; but also other graphically or diagrammatically depicted situations, as various as where artists are buried in Green River Cemetery in Springs, extant Marcel Breuer houses in the Northeast, the dimensions of the tennis court in your childhood home in China.

Diao: You know my work quite well. The photo of Malevich's Suprematist paintings is endlessly reproduced. It is considered a matchless document of the beginnings of abstraction. I chose to use it precisely for its historical importance. A painting of any random cemetery would not have the resonance as one where our heroes are buried. Numbers and charts have designated meaning. They are what they are: factual.

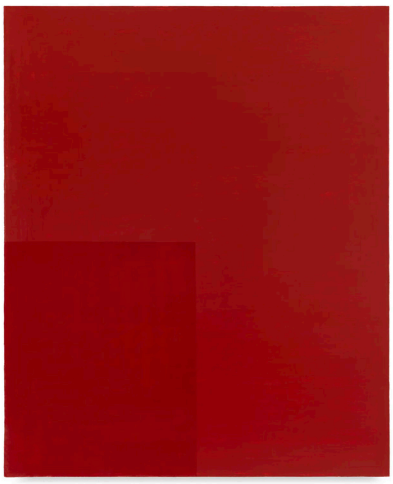
Rail: So I guess a departure from historical modernist themes of one kind or another is the Chinese history—personal history?

Diao: That was something that was foisted upon me by circumstance. I was given a chance to have my first show in China—so I said, "Well, if I'm going to show in China, I should try to meet my audience halfway." So what could be more germane than trying to recreate my time when I lived in China? Which was from when I was born until I was six. And I've had an ongoing fascination with the demolished house that I was born into, which had a tennis court, and so I decided to make a group of paintings to try to recover the scale and sense of that place. And since we left China as refugees, we have actually no photographs of that house, and my childhood—childish—sense of proportion, I knew would be wrong. So I went to my relatives who were older than me, my uncles and aunts, and implored them to draw up their memories of the house. And one of them was an architect, so his was the most accurate. The others were a ninety-year-old uncle, and an aunt.

Rail: So was this when you were in China?

Diao: No, I was in New York.

Rail: So there were relatives that were already here.



David Diao, Polish Constructivism – Red, 2024. Acrylic on canvas, 66 x 54 inches. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York. Photo: Julia Standevär.

Diao: They were all over here, except for my mother and brother and sister. So I made paintings based on their renderings of the place. The tennis court came to stand for the house. And in addition to that, there's a very famous book, *Wild Swans;* the woman who wrote the book—about her father and family—her father was the editor of the *Sichuan Daily*, which was the party newspaper that took over our house. So I was able to quote some of her text as paintings. So anyway, that grew into a group of about thirty paintings over a period of a year. They were fairly small paintings. A few years later I made a series of paintings based on the five years I spent in Hong Kong. Again there are few real documents to mine. When I came to make the paintings invoking my lost home, I was lucky that a tennis court has specific dimensions and borders.

Rail: Another thing about your later work, for me, is the multiple avenues of meaning, let's say: the historical, the personal, and the merging of typography, graphic and architectural sites and symbols, modernist design; also, the poetry you find in the ephemera surrounding historical modernist moments, for example, the fonts of some of the early catalogues of canonical painters. I'm thinking of your "Newman, De Kooning" paintings in particular. But along with this, I lately have been enjoying the idea that you are, underhandedly, advancing the project of the hard-edge painting, not an idea that is currently on everyone's lips, I'll admit.

Diao: A group show at Postmasters early on was titled *Meaningful Geometry*. The paintings I was making spawned the show.

This way of working however does make it difficult to always have something to paint. I am always racking my brain to find another image to exploit. With the assist of the Russians I was able to bring words and language to the work, overcoming the prohibition against their use in abstract painting. Typography is considered. Works referring to MoMA and Alfred Barr had to use Futura because that is the house font. Barnett Newman cries out for one with serif.

Half of me wants to believe that I am going backwards with the recent three color paintings as they seem to have no specific reference. But then I think they open up a conversation with a host of other painters who have used this composition: Ellsworth Kelly, Blinky Palermo, Brice Marden. Even so, these are more formal.

Rail: In what way, do you think?

Diao: Well, they're devoid of icons or obvious historical references. I mean, these two-color ones with the corner cut out. If you don't know a specific work of Władysław Strzemiński, you don't know the reference, except through the title. It's only a few years ago that I have come to think I might be able to make geometrical paintings plain and simple again, because even a square or circle comes with a historical trail of prior meaning. And with the body of my work in mind, the viewer has to see that even a monochrome painting doesn't stand alone for me, but can refer to every other monochrome made.

Rail: This current exhibition, though it shows selections from over fifty years of work, includes this brand new, very abstract and quite minimal, "Polish Constructivism" series. Does the title, *Put to the Test*, particularly apply to this recent work?

Diao: The title of the show comes from a caption for a cartoon by Glen Baxter, "The enduring qualities of Dutch design are put to the test." It shows two men in a fight, one wielding a normal chair and the other Rietveld's *Red Blue Chair* (1918–23). It drew my attention because I have endlessly referenced Rietveld, especially his "Berlin" Chair in my paintings. I also like the sound and sense of this. I thought it advances the idea that I would like to put forth that making art is to push the boundaries and test the limits of what is accepted.