

TANYA LEIGHTON



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David Diao

Critical Painting and the Racial Sublime

Paul A. Anderson

David Diao began his New York artistic career in the mid-1960s as a minimalist painter taking up, by turns, such forms as synthetic color field paintings, process paintings exploiting non-traditional industrial materials, and hard-edged geometrical paintings. By late in the next decade his faith in the critical possibilities of inherited modernist vocabularies had collapsed. The potential of avant-garde painting returned for him, however, through an exploration of historicity within the vexed mythologies and inheritances of modernist painting. Critical painting held promise as an immanent self-critique of modernist painting. Bruce Ferguson lucidly described the historical focus of Diao's critical turn in the 1980s,

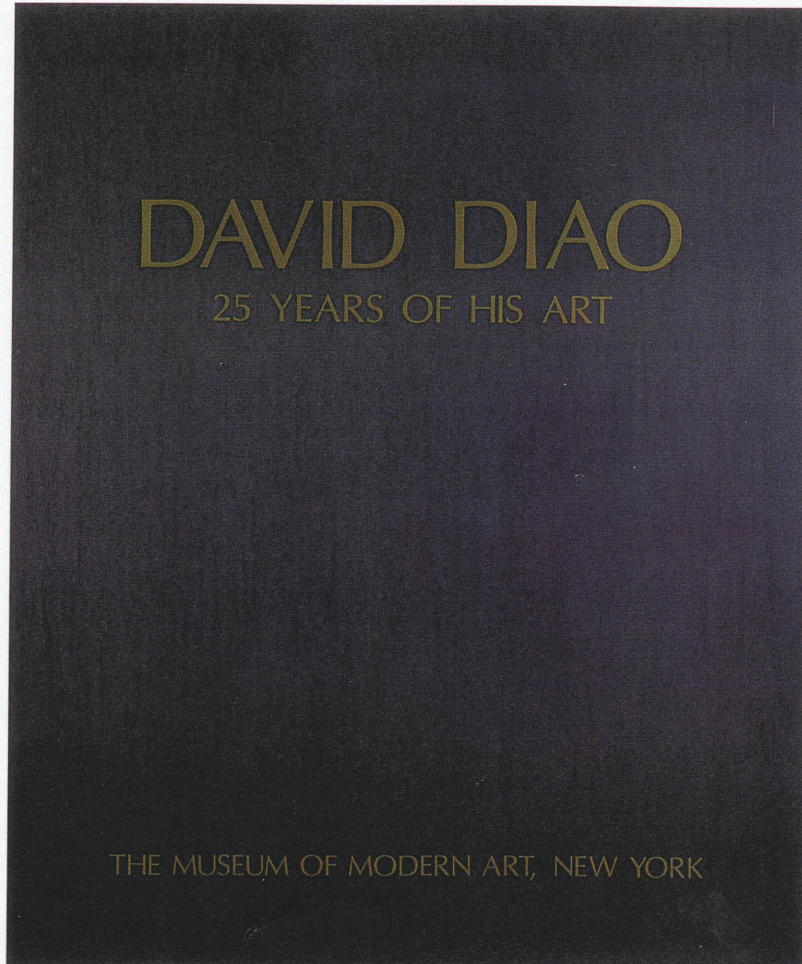
To return painting to a critical inquiry, Diao had to proceed through the dual ironies — an abandonment of painting and its reinscription as an acknowledged sign system only (disassociated from its disembodied and transformative paternity) *and* an announcement of painting's *life* (its history, a collective memory, a legacy of works and names). This reconstruction of painting is a recovery or revival experienced through a coloring of its own terms *within* the discourse itself. The third term was, of course, history, or more defensibly, historical inquiry, and in obeying this knowledge Diao effected a return to painting as ex-centric history painting *par excellence*.¹

Certain of Diao's recent works illuminate points of intersection between tropes of the sublime in expressionistic painting and fantasies of exoticized sublimity and racial otherness in powerful stereotypes. Diao, who is Chinese-American, approaches the latter topic through the example of stereotypical images of Chinese men in the American popular cinema. Slavoj Žižek's provocative formulations regarding the functions of the sublime in the imagining of racial otherness provide one theoretical point of entry into Diao's art. While Žižek's central case of racist ideology and practice is always European anti-Semitism, his work implies a general theory of the racist's jealous desire for the presumed secret and sublime pleasure (*jouissance*) of the racial other: "This supposed *jouissance* is one of the key components of racism: the Other (Jew, Arab, Negro) is always presumed to have access to some specific enjoyment, and that is what really bothers us."²

1 Bruce Ferguson, 'From vision to text: a re-action', catalogue essay, *David Diao*, Musée d'Art Moderne Saint-Etienne, 1989, p. 8.

2 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London, 1989, p. 187.

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MoMA 1, 1994, acrylic & vinyl on canvas, 72 x 60 in.

Racialized fantasies about secret and exclusive enjoyments as essential sublime qualities work to define the very attractiveness and threat of the perceived racial other.

The dramatic conceit unifying Diao's New York exhibition, 'The Bitter Tea of General Yen', is a confession of an artist's fantasy and a confrontation with the impossibility of its fulfillment. Among the thirteen pieces in the exhibition were seven paintings elaborating variations on a theme: invitations or prospective catalogue covers for retrospectives of Diao's work over the last twenty-five years. Worded texts appeared in the form of vinyl self-adhesive letters atop hand-painted acrylic backgrounds on canvas. The prestigious museums presenting the fantasized Diao retrospectives included The Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam), the Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris), and an unnamed Chinese institution. Diao has remarked that "As long as I could even imagine the Modern would do a show of my work, I could not do this project. It was only by realizing there is no way the Modern would ever support my work, that it freed me to just do it."³ Diao's paintings of fictitious invitations for retrospectives of his career provoke questions about the institutions that have most famously housed western modernist art, especially painting. How is the distance between an everyday object and the distinguished or even auratic work of art accounted for by discriminating collectors, curators, critics, historians and other viewers? Diao's self-institutionalizing paintings traverse and then backtrack across the distance between ordinary and auraticized objects with particular speed. Precisely because the exhibitions named are fictional, the invitations confronting us force questions about the conditions of possibility for such canonizing events.

³ Diao quoted by Kathleen Finley Magnan, 'The Bitter Tea of David Diao', *Asian Art News*, January/February 1995, p. 40.

Barnett Newman: *Chronology of Work*, 1990, 84 x 156 in.

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4 "I know that money is a material object like others, but still... [it is as if it were made of a special substance over which time has no power]'. Here we have touched a problem unsolved by Marx, that of the material character of money: not of the empirical, material stuff money is made of, but of the sublime material, of that other 'indestructible and immutable' body which persists beyond the corruption of the body physical... This immaterial corporeality of the 'body within the body' gives us a precise definition of the sublime object[.]'" Žižek, op cit, p 18.

5 Žižek, op cit, p 170.

6 Jean-François Lyotard, 'Newman: The Instant', in *The Lyotard Reader*, (ed) Andrew Benjamin, trans. David Macey, Basil Blackwell Ltd, Oxford, 1989, p 241. Lyotard notes the problematic continuity between the ahistorical trope of the sublime so crucial to the avant-garde and the "disappearance of the temporal continuum through which the experience of generations used to be transmitted" in 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde', also in *The Lyotard Reader*, p 210. The context of the symptomatic historical amnesia of postmodern culture provides a useful point of entry into the critical dimension of Diao's historicizing project.

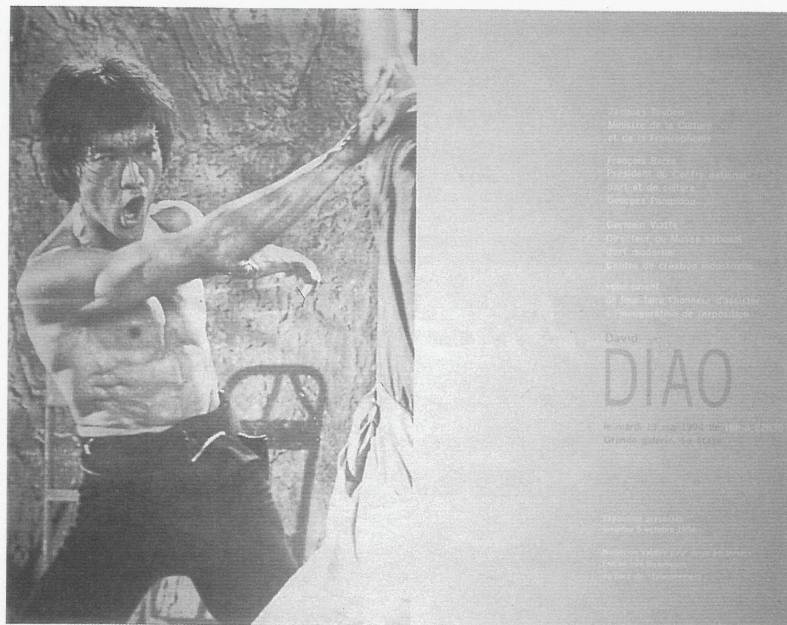
By asking us to linger critically over fictions of highly coveted invitations, Diao's painted invitations evoke what Žižek describes as the sublime "immaterial corporeality" of currency *qua* money.⁴ The vinyl lettered text of *The Board of Trustees*, 1994, announces a prestigious offering upon an acrylic background in a luxurious cream tone. "The Board of Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art requests the pleasure of your company to the opening of the exhibition David Diao: 25 years of his art on Tuesday, August 7, from nine o'clock until midnight [.]". Because Diao's paintings are large and very much *paintings*, they ask us to indulge in their seductively rich surface qualities. His self-conscious performance of the contradiction between the critical and the sensual in painting parallels Žižek's analysis of how racial stereotypes (as fantasies about the sublime pleasure enjoyed by the racial other) are the defining currency for the racist ego.

The evocations of sublimity and the sublime circulating in Diao's recent work constitute an unnamed and overdetermined point of concentration linking the possibilities of painting as a critical practice with the problematization of exoticizing ethnic stereotypes. Offering a Lacanian perspective on a familiar Kantian point, Žižek writes that the

sublime object is an object which cannot be approached too closely... if we get too near it it loses its sublime features and becomes an ordinary vulgar object — it can persist only in an interspace, in an intermediate state, viewed from a certain perspective, half-seen. If we want to see it in the light of day, it changes into an everyday object, it dissipates itself, precisely because in itself it is nothing at all.⁵

Žižek's Lacanian sublime object may be characterized as the unreachable and impossible kernel of the Real within the symbolic realm. Though in substance "nothing at all", the ever-present but always elusive sublime object constitutes the point of lack ordering the symbolic system. Through the necessary services of the sublime object, the fabric of the symbolic realm is structured around an irascible nugget of the Real. The pulsions of fantasy and impossible desire energize and perpetuate the entire dynamic system. Viewed from awry, from within the everyday life of fantasy driven by the endless variety of sublime objects, one feels the dramatic pull of desire as the call of necessity. These given forces bind together one's subjectivity. The prospect of complete demystification appears in psychoanalysis, then, as a profound threat to the ego's coherence, a coherence rendered through its particular codes of pleasure. From the renouncing sobriety of 'going through one's fantasy', as in the mythic *dénouement* of a successful psychoanalysis, what use is to be made of the hard won recognition of the impossibility of one's fantasies if their veiling of the traumatic nugget of the Real is accepted as necessary to the maintenance of the symbolic order? Žižek obsessively returns to this practical question from late Lacanian psychoanalytic discourse as if fully aware and troubled about its consequences for the applicability of his theory, not least to the project of radical ideological criticism. Diao's artwork implies a strategy involving a rigorous program of demystification matched with an ongoing fascination with the temptations of the sublime.

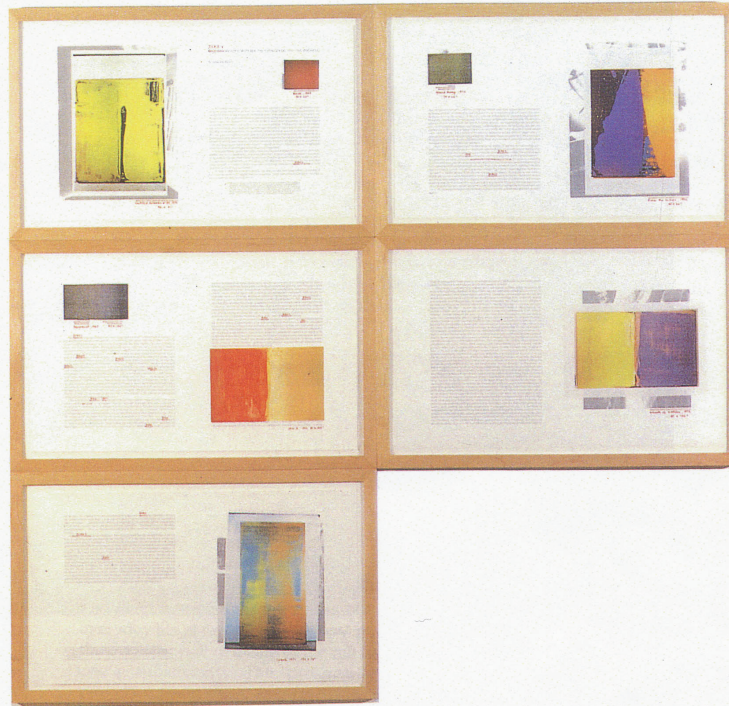
An earlier mural-size (84 x 156 in) painting by Diao, *Barnett Newman: Chronology of Work*, 1990, registers the mystical figures of sublimity in Newman's practice. Diao's thematization of doubleness in viewing with regard to Newman's canonical style provides a fitting parallel to Žižek's senses of fantasmatic "half-seen" and critical "light of day" viewing. Diao's painting foreshortens and interrupts the dramatic Newmansque effect of sublimity through the presence of mechanically produced vinyl self-adhesive letters and numbers. In a rhetorical reversal of Newman's contemplative painterly grandeur (itself achieved with the assistance



Carton d'invitation, 1994, acrylic, oil & vinyl on canvas, 76 x 96 in.

⁷ Compare the following characteristic quotation from Newman regarding the sublime's opposition to historical consciousness: "The question that now arises is how, if we are living in a time without a legend or a mythos that can be called sublime, if we refuse to admit any exaltation in pure relations, if we refuse to live in the abstract, how can we be creating a sublime art?... We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend,

of masking tape in the procedure of construction), vinyl lettering is substituted for Newman's characteristic narrow vertical stripes atop a monochromatic painted background, Diaó's stripes methodically list the dates, formats, and quantities of Newman's surprisingly small output. If, as Lyotard has suggested, the "purpose of a painting by Newman is not to show that duration is in excess of consciousness, but to be the occurrence, the moment which has arrived", then Diaó's revision of Newman's characteristic zip or rectilinear slash explicitly overturns their former rhetorical evacuation of historicity.⁶ Newman's sublime trope is revisited in order to outline its history.⁷ Cataloguing such painterly rhetoric through mechanically-produced vinyl, *Barnett Newman: Chronology of Work* considers the possibility of framing the famously unframeable sublime, the colossal object Kant defined in terms of the inadequacy of our faculties to comprehend it. Diaó has referred to the painting's effect, a homage with a critical historicizing difference, as a presentation of a "cheap sublime". The work also responds to the nostalgic or regressive temptations of contemporary painting through a kind of demystifying analytical dialogue extending an attempt to 'work through' rather than parody, resist, or uncritically repeat the dominant rhetorics of the modernist inheritance.



Synecdoche, 1993, collage, marker and silkscreen on paper, 5 panels, edition of 3, 7 x 7 ft overall.

myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of Western European painting... The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history." Barnett Newman, 'The Sublime is Now', 1948, reprinted in the anthology *Art In Theory 1900-1990*, (eds)

The five silkscreen and collage panels of *Synecdoche*, 1993, may constitute the most self-lacerating gesture of Diao's confessional works in 'The Bitter Tea of General Yen'. The artist has enlarged and framed a Benjamin H.D. Buchloh catalog essay on Gerhard Richter and penned a line through the middle of each mention of the German artist. Diao's own hand-written name appears in the space above Richter's systematically crossed-out, but not erased, name. Collaged color photocopies of Diao's paintings (along with hand-written titles, dates and dimensions) now appear in the spaces previously occupied by Richter's images. While the details of Buchloh's essay cannot be rehearsed here, Diao's exhibition thematically frames it for the viewer/reader as a canonizing performative ritual from the perspective of Buchloh's commitment to the historical avant-garde. The gestures of canonization appear as Buchloh applauds Richter's practice of deeply critical painting faithful to the best traditions of the historical avant-garde vis-à-

Charles Harrison and
Paul Wood, Blackwell
Publishers, Oxford,
1992, p 574.

vis the symptomatically conservative 'affirmative culture' stance of art world institutions. What appears to be most troubling for Diao is how Buchloh's essay, 'Richter's Work Between the Synecdoche and the Spectacle', tracks a number of turns in Richter's practice uncannily similar to Diao's own earlier critical confrontation with such problems as the "tyranny of the hand" (Breton) and gestural expressivity in painting as markers of fetishized psychic depth or authenticity.

Like the invitation paintings, *Synecdoche* may be interpreted as a wilfully grandiose expression of an artist's resentment. The exhibition's title points to the artist's sour grapes but also suggests a humorous capacity to play with — not least by *generalizing* — the discomfort of confessed vanity. As a Chinese-American artist, Diao cannot but expect the imaginative substitution of his own 'bitter tea' for that of the Chinese film character General Yen. The title piece offers

Five Year Plan/Amsterdam, 1994, acrylic & vinyl on canvas, 58 x 58 in.



⁸ Formulations here about race and the aesthetics of the sublime are especially indebted to the writings of Paul Gilroy. See especially 'Art of Darkness: black art and the problem of belonging to England', in *Small Acts*, Serpent's Tail, London, 1993, pp 74-85; and *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double-Consciousness*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1993.

⁹ The pitfalls of both racial essentialism and anti-essentialism are explored in *The Black Atlantic* where Gilroy elaborates his own "anti-anti-essentialism". At the center of Gilroy's positive construction of black racial identity as deeply hybridic (and thereby not essentialist in terms of ahistorical cultural holism) but nevertheless unified is a black diasporic aesthetic. Gilroy theorizes the crux of this aesthetic in terms of the "slave sublime". In contrast to Žižek's confrontation with anti-Semitism, a vision of sublimity (incorporating the historically-specific memory of the terror of slavery) is not dismantled by Gilroy but instead underwritten as a crucial and empowering binding agent in cultural identity. For a contrasting view, consult the strenuous articulations of racial anti-essentialism in Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House. Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1992.

an enlarged silkscreen image of a black and white photo still (reproduced in vertical triplicate to mimic the process of film projection) hand-tinted in a 'bitter' light green. The image depicts a scene from the 1933 Frank Capra film *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*. In the image, a secretive-looking Chinese general, stereotypically marked by a Fu Manchu mustache and extravagantly pronounced and slanted eyebrows, sits between two Caucasians. Holding what must be an important scroll, he is observed by a nervous-looking stocky white male official (played by Walter Connolly). A third figure, a blonde American woman (played by Barbara Stanwyck) apparently on much friendlier terms with General Yen, is dressed in a Chinese robe and sitting on the arm of his chair. She peers over his shoulder to read the ciphers on the scroll. General Yen appears to be performing the stereotypical work of the Chinese as a racialized Other: in all the world, we have been trained to believe, no one is a greater keeper of secrets than the Chinese. For the suspicious eyes of the westerner ever demanding that all the world's codes be rendered legible and explicable for him, General Yen's sublimity resides in his enviable but enraging inscrutability.

Inciting criticism though a comparative juxtaposition of the rhetoric of sublimity in modernist painting with that of sublimity as a marker of cultural difference, Diao's work seems far less ambivalent about the attractions of the latter than that of the former. By the 'racial sublime' I mean to refer to the problematic within cultural studies research regarding the aesthetic topology and lineage of various constructions of racial otherness.⁸ Considering the case of the contemporary theorization of black identity, one might follow Paul Gilroy in outlining distinctions between "Africentric" essentialism, a fully demystified and post-racial anti-essentialism (whose most influential proponent may be Kwame Anthony Appiah), and Gilroy's own position of "anti-anti-essentialism". Gilroy's theorization of diasporic black identity in *The Black Atlantic* is anchored in a positive aesthetic crystallized in a complex structure of feeling and set of inherited conventions he refers to as the "slave sublime". Those of a more anti-essentialist bent who consider the deconstruction and dismantlement of concepts of ethnic authenticity and distinctly integrated racial identities as, at least prospectively, liberatory gestures might appreciate Žižek's sense of how the object of sublime fascination (racialized or otherwise) exists "only in an interspace... in the light of day it changes into an everyday object, it dissipates itself, because it is in itself nothing at all". In a manner even more vigorously demystifying than his historicizing revision of Newman's courting of ahistorical sublimity, Diao's invocations of sublimity in Chinese identity suggest an anti-essentialist critique overwhelmingly focused on disabling western stereotypes of cultural difference.⁹ Unlike Gilroy's reconstructive invocation of the "slave sublime" as an empowering marker of black culture's role in the West as a "counter-culture of modernity", Diao's efforts function more as critical challenges to lingering expectations about cultural difference.

Diao's *Carton d'invitation*, 1994, self-critically explores a fantasy through a silkscreened film still image of a half-naked Bruce Lee. As an imaginative substitution for the artist and his portrait, Lee's arresting image dominates the French invitation to a fictitious Diao retrospective at the Centre Pompidou. The invitation painting's design and wording were appropriated from an invitation to a Joseph Beuys retrospective. In contrast to the visible crossing-out procedure of Richter's name in *Synecdoche*, *Carton d'invitation* has Diao exchanging his name for Beuys' and substituting the film still of Lee for the original invitation's photo of the ever-dramatic Beuys. Beuys' name and image have been entirely erased from the invitation. Evoking a kind of racial fantasy scenario even as it references

the appeal of archetypes of post-war western artistic heroism as anti-modernist modernist shamanism, the painting summons the logics of both expressionistic and racialized sublimity. To some extent, the late film star has risen before us as within a dream. Diao offers up Lee as a kind of alter ego, raising the possibility of a fantasy relationship with Lee as a more aggressive Chinese icon and also as a shamanistic culture hero (hence the relevance of the Beuys source of the French invitation). Lee's ferocious and ritualized kung fu pose brings to mind the atavistic physicality of grandly gestural expressionistic painting as well as a fantasy of the powerful and mysterious racial other. Close examination of Diao's canvas reveals that behind Lee one finds a background highly suggestive of a painterly text, a rough-hewn monochromatic play on texture thick with highly gestural brush strokes. Through this Bruce Lee fantasy, the 'action painter' of Abstract Expressionist myth has been reborn for the post-Greenbergian, post-modern era of mass culture referentiality and the "new cultural politics of difference" (Cornel West).

In the fantasy scenario about Bruce Lee, Diao's provisional ideal ego substitute is found working with the pleasure of Lee's celebrated and intensely virile style. One can imagine the impossible fantasy figure refusing formal caution and regularity and responding directly to drives far more primal than those embraced in the self-reflexive procedures of Diao's actual practice of critical painting. Bruce Lee appears as a regressive fantasy double in the history of modernist painting: a famous and deceased mass culture hero is ironically appealed to and given free reign to paint again with the shameless sublimity of the Abstract Expressionists.

T.J. Clark's recent interpretation of the vulgarity-cum-faux-sublimity of Abstract Expressionism as the symptomatic triumph of petty-bourgeois psychological realism powerfully historicizes the particular class dimension of this impossible fantasy. His recent essay 'In Defense of Abstract Expressionism' focuses on the defeat of high bourgeois detachment and irony within New York post-war modernist painting at the hands of a decade's reign by a victorious petty-bourgeois vulgarity. The codes of the latter appeared in the crisis rhetoric of heroic individualism and authenticity expressed through humorous and hot-blooded sincerity and vast, boldly gestural canvases. Symptomatic of the drift of American society overall, the art world's ruling bourgeoisie could maintain its hold on legitimacy only by allowing a historic movement representative of the petty-bourgeoisie to articulate and, indeed, set the terms of the dominant rhetoric of the cultural moment in its own image.¹⁰

The overblown Lee fantasy collapses under the scrutiny of Diao's self-critical awareness of its appeal to a stereotypical other. Beyond the ethnic-autobiographical dimensions of the Lee-Diao substitution in the fantasy scenario, one can hardly avoid assuming a related condemnation of the success and evacuated criticality of contemporary neo-expressionism. Diao's painting practice eschews the tempting pleasures of alchemical or magical senses of painting even as it continually calls attention to the appeal of painting's vaunted potential for sublimity. The paintings' hybridic de-auratizing effects (eg Diao's signature style of texts in vinyl stickers on top of polished monochromatic acrylic backgrounds) systematically restrain any unchecked indulgence in the pleasures of such fantasies. Diao's recent work also asks viewers to consider linkages between seemingly disparate kinds of critical concern with the sublime. What are some of the paths by which we move from the mystifications of the apolitical sublime of post-war New York painting (be it Newman's contemplative sublime or Pollock's primitivist gesturalism) to the sublimity often coded into ideologies of racial otherness (whether coded critically or affirmatively)?

¹⁰ "We are used to an art that always sets off again in search of the *true* underlying the tawdry, and where the tawdry may divulge the true (to the artist) just because the tawdriness is someone else's, out there in the mass or the margin. But Abstract Expressionism does not go elsewhere for its language, and at its best (its most appalling) it seems in search of the *false* underlying the vehement, where the point is that cheap vehemence, or easy delectation, are what painting now is — the only values, the only forms of individuality, that it can stage without faking. Only those Abstract Expressionist canvases will do that are truly consumed with their own empty intensity, with painting as posturing, with a ludicrous bigness and lushness and generality." T.J. Clark, 'In Defense of Abstract Expressionism', *October* 69, Summer 1994, p. 30. It is interesting for our purposes to note Clark's comment about Barnett Newman that "The trouble with Barnett Newman is that he was never vulgar enough, or only vulgar on paper". *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Žižek's note about jealousy over the other's exclusive and sublime pleasure extends a succinct introduction to the puzzle of General Yen as the stereotypically inscrutable Chinaman. What is that particular pleasure he enjoys in holding the secrets contained in his mysterious scroll? The official-looking white American man looms over him in pursuit of these secrets. Clutching the secrets the white man wants, General Yen is, for us, the subject-presumed-to-know. He is holding secrets and finding enjoyment in his assigned capacity for hiding them. Like Newman's sublime painted zip, the racial other is presented as having no history, as retaining instead only essential defining characteristics. General Yen's name, of course, invites at least a double-reading: more than one particular character, he is also the object-cause of our desire or yen in general, that thing we shall never reach. Not least of all, General Yen's name also references one of the particular desires represented by Diao's set of mythic invitations as invocations of what passes for legitimating currency in the art world's commodity-exchange system.

The truth of the title image of 'The Bitter Tea of General Yen' is that the Chinese man depicted could not for long bear the desires held about his sublimity as a racial other. Holding no great secrets, he is not, at last, inscrutable. The white westerner's transference must be broken as the assumption of the Chinese man's essential identity as a keeper of secret knowledge is renounced upon the recognition of his lack of sublimity. Indeed, Diao's thoughtful choice of the film still illuminates the larger point. In this case, the clothes had no emperor: Capra's General Yen was only a costumed white actor, Nils Asther. As with expressionistic painting viewed in the skeptical light of Diao's critical painting, the figure holds nothing aesthetically magical, nothing sublime. "Fantasy," according to Žižek, "is basically a scenario filling out the empty space of a fundamental impossibility, a screen masking a void."¹¹ With the truth about General Yen exposed, viewers' eyes are instructed to turn back upon their own operations of fantasy and identification. At that point, Diao's critical painting crosses paths with psychoanalytically-informed investigations of racism and racial fascination to aid in the disclosure of the pleasures in ideological attachment. His recent paintings help illuminate the subterranean passageways connecting the rhetoric of ahistorical sublimity in the history of modernist painting to the controversial theoretical and ideological work of locating dimensions of sublimity in the very historical construction of 'racial otherness'.

¹¹ Žižek, *op cit*, p 126.