



Loy Luo: The Visibility of Thought

--An interview with Jonathan Goodman

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Abstract

This interview presents Loy Luo's artistic practice as a sustained inquiry into the conditions under which thought becomes visible through image, text, and action. Rather than framing art as a matter of style, identity, or representation, the conversation examines how abstraction emerges from lived existence, philosophical reflection, and embodied experience. Luo articulates a system in which abstraction and figuration are not opposing categories but relational thresholds, continuously negotiated through artistic practice. Central to the discussion is her critique of modernist abstraction, her rejection of purely formal or expressive models, and her proposal of abstraction as the descent of metaphysical structure into material presence. The interview further addresses questions of cultural attribution, artistic independence, and the construction of an artist-run space as a site of thought. Due to the limits of the interview format, this text functions as an outline of Luo's artistic thinking; more extensive theoretical elaborations can be found in her other writings. Taken together, the text situates art not as an object of interpretation, but as a generative structure through which existence, perception, and meaning are continuously reconfigured.

Keywords

Abstraction · Visibility of Thought · Lived Experience · Methodology · Individual Vision · Beyond Cultural Representation · Process-Based Practice · Image–Text–Action · Metaphysics and Materiality · Artistic Methodology · Cultural Misreading

Full Text: <https://www.loyluospace.com/the-visibility-of-thought>

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Biographical Note

Jonathan Goodman is a New York–based art critic and writer, known for his long-term engagement with modern and contemporary art, as well as his sustained attention to Asian art and culture.

Loy Luo is a contemporary artist based in New York. Her practice integrates painting, sculpture, installation, writing, and the operation of artist-run spaces, and is grounded in a long-term investigation of the philosophical and cultural dimensions of abstraction. In recent years, through what she defines as an Unpremeditated Actionist approach to artistic generation—together with spatial practice, exhibition-making, and interdisciplinary collaborations—she has expanded her earlier focus on individual artistic production into a broader inquiry into how art is generated within specific cultural, social, spatial, and institutional contexts.

All responses and theoretical positions in this text are authored by the artist.

Banner image: Detail from a view of the of a work of Loy Luo: Abstract Theater-B2, Oil on Canvas, 2025, 16x20in

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Loy Luo, *Abstract Theater-B2*, Oil on Canvas, 2025, 16x20in

Introduction:

This text is not intended to reiterate the artist's biography, but to enter the abstract system, methodology, and life-generating structure that shape Loy Luo's practice. Her work integrates abstraction, philosophy, text, and lived existence into a single field, and is fundamentally concerned with how thought becomes visible.

Half a year ago in New York City, I met Luo, who had come from Beijing and was pursuing a demanding artistic life largely on her own. What struck me immediately was not only the seriousness of her commitment, but the exceptional clarity with which she articulates her thinking. Luo is one of the most intelligent writers on abstraction and figuration I know, and she is equally perceptive when reflecting on the

relationship between her own cultural formation and Western artistic traditions.

Despite New York's claims of global openness, the city has historically paid insufficient attention to East Asian art. This is less a fault than a misunderstanding—shaped by expectations, work ethic, and the difficulty of recognizing practices that do not fit neatly into established narratives. What distinguishes Luo is her capacity to operate within the tension between artistic approaches formed in China and those developed in the United States, while grounding abstraction in lived, everyday experience.

As a critic, my task is often to clarify such complexities. Remarkably, in this interview, Luo accomplishes most of that work herself. There is little need for me to articulate similarities or differences between her practice and American contemporary art. As she points out, the persistence of such questions stems from an early historical encounter—now two or three generations old—when Chinese intellectuals offered brilliant reflections on advanced Western art practices. We no longer live in a moment when it is meaningful to ask a Chinese artist, “How Chinese is your art?” That question is rhetorical and carries an implicit prejudice, assuming a fundamental separation between Chinese and Western art. This assumption no longer holds.

While the intellectual foundations of Luo's work may be shaped by her experience in China—after all, she has lived in the United States for only six years—her practice cannot be reduced to cultural

representation. What emerges instead is a vision that insists on being read as individual rather than representative.

Looking ahead, I expect Luo's work to continue unfolding as a process rather than a position. Artists today are no longer transparent representatives of their cultures, but sites where multiple structures intersect. The future, as I see it, calls for more artists like Luo—artists capable of transforming similarity and difference into a shared world, one in which intelligence operates pluralistically rather than through overarching cultural categories.

/Jonathan Goodman



Loy Luo, Dementions 1, Mixed Media, 2018, 100x100cm

I. Life Trajectory and Existential Structure

Jonathan Goodman: How do you understand the relationship between life trajectory and the generation of artistic language?

Loy Luo: I have never regarded art as a language chosen in advance. Rather, I understand it as the externalization of life trajectory itself.

I grew up in China and spent nearly twenty years in Beijing living an almost purely spiritual life—a highly abstract world composed of ivory towers, studies, texts, and philosophical inquiry. It was there that I formed my metaphysical perceptual structure. During that period, art functioned primarily as a practice of compressing, filtering, and transforming lived experience into speculative form—a kind of visible speculation, imbued with warmth.

After arriving in New York, my existential structure underwent a fundamental shift. Life no longer allowed thought to hover above reality in a state of pure rationality; instead, it was compelled to enter bodily reality. Economic pressure, urban tempo, conditions of survival, and emotional intensity acted simultaneously upon the individual. As a result, my artistic language could no longer remain solely an expansion of concepts—it had to respond continuously to concrete situations. Even when returning to abstraction after adapting to the rhythm of the city, I was repeatedly pulled back into the bodily world. Through this constant movement, I came to realize that artistic language is not a tool for expressing experience; it is the structural generation of experience itself.

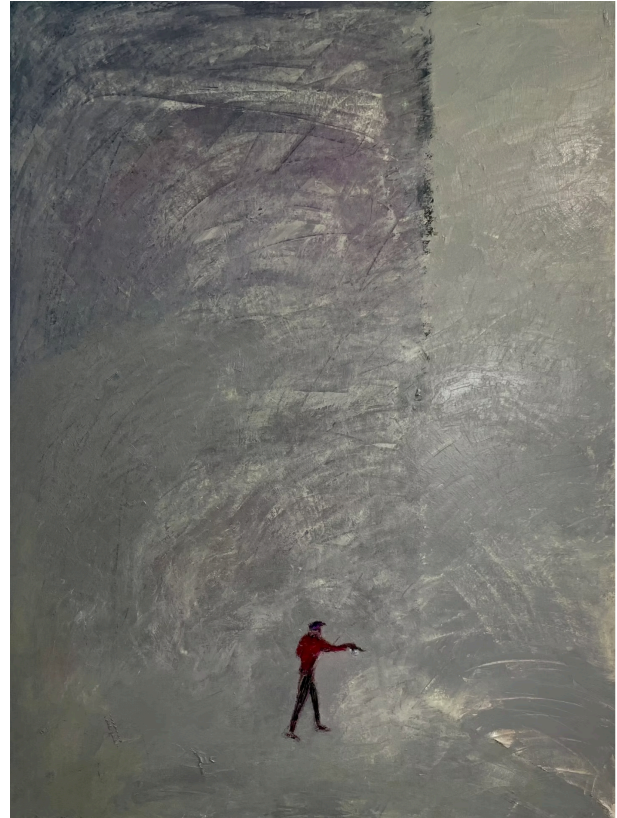
Jonathan Goodman: From the “safe ivory tower” to the “harsh reality of New York,” how did your existential structure change?

Loy Luo: The so-called “safe ivory tower” was not truly safe. It was a zone of intense self-discipline that concealed internal exhaustion. New York, by contrast, is chaotic, noisy, and neurotic—it tore me apart and rebuilt me.

In fact, the survival pressures faced by artists in Beijing are no less severe than those in New York. However, one’s native language, cultural familiarity, and social networks provide a psychological foundation that shields the individual from confronting existence as pure risk. New York offers no such buffer. The moment I set foot there, I gained an embodied understanding of Dada, Warhol, and conceptual art—not as stylistic affiliations, but as an ontological awakening. Skyscrapers became the “weight of the world,” pressing directly upon the individual.

The pandemic of 2020 further intensified this experience. For the first time, art ceased to be my primary concern; survival itself occupied my consciousness. A drawing

initially sold for \$20 or \$50, later for \$200 or \$300—figures that directly corresponded to food, shelter, transportation, and the ability to continue working. Art was no longer separate from life; art was life, and creation became a sequence of survival decisions. In this condition of no retreat, my existential structure was fully opened, allowing me to enter a more complete and genuine state of balance.



Loy Luo, Me'less-5, Oil on Canvas, 2025, 36x48in

II. The Philosophy of Abstraction: Why Is Your Abstraction Fundamentally Different?

Jonathan Goodman: Why do you insist that your abstraction is neither Expressionism nor Formalism?

Loy Luo: In 2018, during a public lecture at Jinji Lake Art Museum in Suzhou, I titled my talk Not Expressive, Not Beautiful, Not Clever—a concise

articulation of my position on abstraction. This was not a rhetorical negation, but a methodological distinction.

First, my abstraction does not belong to Abstract Expressionism in the sense of the 1960s. The issue is not whether emotion is intense, but the epistemological assumption that emotion itself provides direct access to truth. Emotion is part of experience, but it does not automatically constitute truth. Immediate emotional intensity often carries contingency and self-amplification. For feeling to acquire intellectual weight, it must pass through time, sedimentation, and repeated self-calibration.



Loy Luo, Stillness-Modest-4, Mixed Media, 2016, 150x120cm

In this respect, the classical Chinese aesthetic principle of “joy without excess, sorrow without harm” has exerted a lasting influence on me. It is not emotional suppression, but a judgment concerning measure, restraint, and spiritual endurance. For me, art is not a mechanism for emotional release, but a path toward regaining inner equilibrium. Having exhibited pronounced manic tendencies earlier in life, it was artistic discipline and long-term practice that taught me how to transform psychic energy from explosive states into sustainable forms of existence. Thus, I choose quiet, continuous release rather than momentary intensity.

Second, my abstraction is not formalism. The problem here is not the importance of form, but whether form is mistaken for an end in itself. When form becomes self-sufficient, the spiritual structure of art is hollowed out. The traditional Eastern wariness toward “beauty” arises precisely from this concern—not a rejection of form, but a refusal of form replacing spirit. Maxims such as “great skill appears clumsy” and “great sound is rarely heard” articulate a conscious resistance to virtuosity and surface autonomy.

I once attributed the stagnation of modern Chinese art in stylistic imitation to a misreading of the principle “serve the belly, not the eye.” Upon reflection, I realized that the issue lay not in tradition, but in whether artists possess the capacity to continue transforming it. In fact, many contemporary Chinese artists are actively extracting new perceptual structures from traditional culture.

Third, when contemporary Chinese art was largely driven by concept-first practices, I maintained a distance from forms of conceptual art that prioritize wit, irony, or linguistic effect. The issue is not concept itself, but when concept precedes experience and detaches from bodily and existential conditions, it quickly becomes institutional language rather than a site of thought. Based on my study of abstraction, I regard true abstraction as an extremely pure form of conceptual art—one rooted not in strategy or language, but in the Platonic realm of Ideas.

Thus, my abstraction is neither emotional discharge, nor formal manipulation, nor intellectual display. The fundamental question I pursue is how abstract ideas can find the forms most adequate to their manifestation. This is my response to Plato’s original challenge—that art can only imitate the shadow of truth.

Jonathan Goodman: How do you understand the generation of images from the metaphysical to the material world?

Loy Luo: True abstraction is not imitation, but a structural process of generation—the descent of metaphysical origin into the material world. This “descent” is not mystical rhetoric, but a structural metaphor describing how Ideas leave experiential traces at the sensory level.

I distinguish three levels of abstraction:

- 1, The level of world-origin,
- 2, The level of formal synthesis and aggregation,
- 3, The level of emotional rhythm and intensity.

The latter two have been extensively developed by Formalism and Abstract Expressionism. The first level—the abstraction of origin—was inaugurated by Malevich, yet remained underdeveloped due to theoretical fragility. My practice begins precisely at this level.

In Western metaphysics, the origin of the world is inherently invisible, leading Plato to argue that art can only imitate the imitation of Ideas. Abstract art, however, is not imitative; it presents the structural residue of Ideas as they descend into materiality. The image is no longer representation, but remainder.

For this reason, my abstraction always carries warmth and an ontological orientation. Art is human art, produced by bodies, hands, and materials. Regardless of whether its source is emotion, knowledge, or metaphysics, when it appears as art it inevitably bears human temperature and the imprint of material existence.

By contrast, modernist “cold abstraction” remains representational at the level of appearance—it abandons figurative imitation but still depicts an externalized image of spirit. What concerns me instead is not depicting spirit, but capturing the existential trace left after its descent.

III. The Metaphor of “Two Cities”: The Boundary Between Abstraction and Figuration

Jonathan Goodman: Why do you move back and forth between abstract and figurative practices?

Loy Luo: In *The City of God*, Augustine proposes that human beings simultaneously inhabit two cities: the City of God and the earthly city. In more accessible terms, this means that human existence is inherently dual—spiritual and corporeal at once—governed both by transcendent law and by worldly regulation.



LoyLuo, Line Domain-2, 2025, 11x14in

For art, I tend to understand abstraction as a response to the transcendent dimension of existence, while figuration points more directly toward material life, desire, and affect. In my own practice, abstraction corresponds to the city of

spiritual transcendence, whereas figuration aligns more closely with the city of bodily and worldly desire.

For a long time, I believed that remaining permanently within the spiritual city represented the highest form of artistic purity. New York fundamentally altered this belief. I came to understand that a complete human being must possess a dual citizenship. To remain confined within only one city—whether spiritual or material—is not a sign of purity, but of limitation.

Jonathan Goodman: How are abstraction and figuration pushed toward their respective boundaries by your internal philosophy?

Loy Luo: This question touches the core of my theoretical framework and completes its internal loop. If we simply equate abstraction with spirit and figuration with matter, the distinction becomes overly crude and conceptually insufficient. In reality, neither abstraction nor figuration operates in isolation.



LoyLuo, Abstract Theater-B30, 2025, 11x14in

Figurative art has never been limited to the depiction of bodily existence. Throughout art history, particularly during the Renaissance, artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo sought to approach the divine precisely through the human body. Figuration, at its highest level, has always carried a metaphysical ambition.

Likewise, abstraction—if confined to a purely spiritual realm without approaching material thresholds—cannot manifest itself. A purely metaphysical abstraction that never descends toward the material world remains inaccessible and inert.

For this reason, both abstraction and figuration must move toward their respective limits. When I work at the deepest philosophical level, my images become purely abstract. Yet my bodily existence inevitably responds to such heightened spiritual activity, much like the sensation of recognizing one's own presence within a dream. Conversely, when I confront the tragedies and intensities of lived reality, I require figuration so that the wounds of the world may leave visible traces on the image.

However, these traces are not mere emotional discharge. For worldly experience to acquire depth and necessity, it must be pulled toward a higher register. What matters most is not the selection of a single language, but the continual return to the boundary itself—where meaning accumulates through repeated contact.

IV. System Theory: How Do You Construct Your Own Artistic System?

Jonathan Goodman: If your practice could be described as a “school,” what would be its core principle?

Loy Luo: It is not a school, but a continuously generating system of thought. If one insists on identifying a principle, it would be this:

Images must arise from the deepest natural growth of life itself, not from stylistic imitation or conceptual predesign.

Each of my series—Yijing, Stillness, Suspension, Abstract Theater, Palimpsest—constitutes the spiritual structure of a particular phase. These phases do not progress linearly; they negate, revise, and reconnect with one another. I do not imitate predecessors, nor do I repeat myself. I allow life itself to determine what the next work must become.

Jonathan Goodman: You describe critique as a “step.” What is your critique of traditional abstraction?

Loy Luo: Traditional abstraction represents a monumental achievement in art history, both in practice and theory. My critique does not deny its importance; rather, it addresses the fact that its contribution is often misunderstood or underdeveloped.

Much of contemporary abstraction remains confined to stylistic variation and formal diversity. Theoretically, abstraction is frequently reduced to surface language; practically, it becomes a matter of design rather than creation.

I believe abstraction’s true contribution is structural. It fundamentally redefined the function of art—not merely as representation or emotional expression, but as a mode of inquiry into the most basic questions of existence and the relationship between human beings and the world.

At the methodological level, several problems persist:

- 1, substituting design for creation.
- 2, deriving abstraction through inductive reduction of reality, resulting in ambiguous “semi-abstraction”.

3, conflating abstraction as a concept with abstraction as a process.

4, adopting non-preconceptual methods while relying excessively on mysticism, musical rhythm, or affective triggers.

My work attempts to respond to these unresolved issues by restoring abstraction to its ontological seriousness.

V. Image, Text, and Action: The Structure of Actionism

Jonathan Goodman: How do your works move freely among image, text, and action?

Loy Luo: In my practice, image, text, and action do not emerge sequentially. They exist as a trinity—interpenetrating and mutually conditioning one another.



Loy Luo, Window-Boundary Marker 2, 2021, Painting Installation, 78x30in

Action is thought assuming risk within reality.

Text is the reflective structure through which experience folds back upon itself.

Image is the compressed residue of what cannot be fully articulated.

None of the three holds priority. They operate simultaneously across different existential planes, correcting and restraining one another so that thought

does not solidify prematurely into form or rhetoric.

VI. Beyond Cultural Labels

Jonathan Goodman: How do you understand the integration of Eastern and Western culture within your mental structure?

Loy Luo: I rarely engage with the question of “East versus West” anymore. That problem has already been resolved for me. The cultural qualities present in my work are not declarations of identity, but natural manifestations of internal structure. My earlier engagement with Eastern and Western traditions was an effort to construct my own mental architecture. Over time, I realized that culture operates less as an external identity marker than as a selective internal formation.

Before coming to the United States, I may have felt compelled to assert difference through Western intellectual frameworks. Once immersed in the West, the Eastern substratum surfaced almost uncontrollably—not as strategy or heritage, but as an inclination formed through long self-cultivation.

Cultural depth does not reside in form, but in proportion. When the internal proportions are sufficiently expansive, the individual becomes the site where culture itself takes shape.

VII. Independence, Space, and Survival: The Body in Reality

Jonathan Goodman: Why is your independence not a pose, but a condition of existence?

Loy Luo: I do not intentionally position myself as independent. In fact, I value moments when independence is unnecessary, and I welcome meaningful collaboration. My difficulty lies in the fact that I am deeply immersed in my internal world, while entering external systems requires time, alignment, and support.

At the same time, my work demands a relatively enclosed state of concentration. As a result, I often appear independent. In truth, I am simply working—using whatever resources are immediately available to transform thought into artworks or exhibitions.



Loy Luo, Eye1, 2023, Oil on Board, 48x48in

VIII. Future Generation: After the Avant-Garde

Jonathan Goodman: Where do you believe your future work will move?

Loy Luo: I do not consciously pursue the avant-garde. That term often reflects an imposed historical posture rather than genuine necessity. What concerns me is whether art can meaningfully enter the human spiritual world—offering care, companionship, and illumination.

All avant-gardes eventually become obsolete. Enduring art, however, continues to enter human consciousness across centuries, gaining depth through time.

I do not predefine the direction of my future work. Each phase of life generates its own questions, and the artist merely responds—using artistic means—to the world in which she is embedded.



*Loy Luo, Poem-Withered Leaves1, 2025, Bronze, 15*15*60cm*

With time, I expect my language to become more precise and my methods more restrained. I remain vigilant against the dulling of sensitivity through familiarity. Whether a work is truly complete cannot be determined immediately; I am willing to

wait until the works themselves, through time, confirm their necessity.

Closing Statement

After the avant-garde, art no longer proves where it stands—it proves whether it is worth being returned to by time.

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