



LOY LUO THEORETICAL COLLECTION

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Loy Luo | Homeless, New York, 2020

Interview by Guiseng Zhang / Originally published on Insightart (Dec 2020) / Reprinted in Loy Luo Theoretical Collection, 2025

Abstract

“*Homeless, New York 2020*” documents Loy Luo’s artistic and existential reflections during the pandemic year of 2020. Originating from her self-imposed displacement in New York, the series examines loneliness, identity, and the fragility of existence through the lens of both performance and painting. It traces her transition from figurative documentation to conceptual expression, revealing how themes of homelessness, masking, and bodily presence become signifiers of the modern human condition. The article also reflects on the philosophical dimension of Luo’s creative transformation — from immediate emotional observation to abstract contemplation — and situates her “Homeless” exhibition as a symbolic encounter between art, death, and spiritual endurance in the time of crisis.

Keywords

Loy Luo; Homeless Series; Pandemic Art; Existential Reflection; Identity and Body; Abstract Transformation; Performance and Painting; New York 2020.

Full Text: <https://www.loyluospace.com/homeless-newyork-2020>

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Biographical Note

Loy Luo is a contemporary artist, curator, and writer based in New York. Her practice spans painting, sculpture, installation, and theory, exploring the philosophical and cultural dimensions of abstraction.

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Lonely people watch lonely people

"People braved the winter rain and literally risked their lives to come, lonely people watched lonely people, a troubadour sang and danced in front of paintings of troubadours." At the beginning of December 2020, in the not-so-luxurious room of Undercurrent Gallery in New York, Loy Luo's "homeless" series of paintings were laid out on the floor, like homeless people lying on the roadside under an overpass, waiting for the audience to arrive.

In January 2020, Loy Luo made a decision to temporarily travel to the United States, seeking a change of scenery. This was the beginning of a unique experience for the artist. After landing at New York's Kennedy Airport, she rented a car and drove to several cities on the east coast, where she began her avid tour of galleries and



museums. Originally, Loy planned to drive all the way to the west coast, but then came the news of the pandemic. Foreseeing the coming of an increasingly anxious world, she escaped to the mountains not far north of New York City, where she "sheltered" in the homes of several American families for a couple of weeks, feeling terrified.

In late February, in spite of her worries, Loy Luo returned to New York City with a desire for artistic exchange. After a lot of trial and



thought, she embarked on the 100 Portraits Project, a project to sketch people who wore or didn't wear a mask on the streets of New York in the midst of the coronavirus outbreak. On July 15, "The Other I," a performance exhibition of 100 portraits, opened at the White Box Art Center in New York for two months. During this period, Loy Luo started the preparation and creation of her next project - an expression of the concept of "homeless".

Luo began creating a series of homeless paintings while illegally living in her studio as a homeless person during the time of COVID-19. In the fourth month, the

partners of New York's Undercurrent Gallery approved the solo exhibition plan of "Homeless" and included it in the gallery's exhibition plan for December 2020. Undercurrent Gallery contributor Adriana Furlong wrote: As the city performs relentless alterations, its inhabitants strain to survive inside fragile micro-diasporas. Those who inhabit the chasm between public and private space embody an indeterminacy that, at best, defies co-option and, at worst, is testament to political failure. However, Luo believes from the perspective of personal experience that artists are born wanderers with their own psychological struggles, and because of that are more sensitive to the problems of their time than ordinary people.



Obviously, Loy Luo's faceless figures suggest a loss of both identity and dignity in the modern world, but when the artist saw a kind of sculptural majesty in "Quasimodo"'s hunchbacked body, and the 'Troubadour' standing lonely among the ruins of history, Loy was reminded of the meaningfulness of those whose existence is labeled as otiosity, which is discussed in classical Chinese philosophy. The intention of the works is not so much to emphasize the despair of those who are homeless.

Instead it is loneliness tempered with a bit of resilience; not overly strong, perhaps, but somehow always warm and optimistic in the face of this turbulent world.

The back of the art: death, existence, expression



Living through a pandemic in a foreign country has given Luo a different perspective on death and existence. Through observing human nature during this hard time, she felt that a person's spirit could suddenly break down and become obsessed with the body. She gained an understanding of the last psychological struggles, shadows, distortions of the dying, and a sympathy for the fragility of life. It also makes us more determined to recognize that all the promotion of war and violence is man's greatest evil - an evil that leads human beings to lose the connection to their spiritual selves and instead act like animals.

The new cognition can also be used to explain the change of her creative appearance in different stages. Loy Luo

said she started the "100 People Portrait Project" with great enthusiasm because she feared that individuality would be lost to the community during the disaster. In the initial atmosphere of horror, she did not realize that there is a problem with equating a person's individuality only with their appearance. However, she tried to depict each unique face with a sincere reverence for life. Perhaps it was her obsessive-compulsive stubbornness and excessive earnestness which also formed another kind of spiritual characteristic, a kind of simple emotion similar to the presence of the body.



Luo conjectured that people's perception of the spirit is closely related to the fear of death. The more afraid people are, the more likely they are to fall into the world of appearances. The safer they are, the closer they are to the purer spirit, the reality of appearances is not so important. She said that when the sudden threat of life and death is at hand, people may rely on the



attachment to the physical appearance to divert and disperse the inner fear; And when the threat is reduced or people have adapted to the terror, they are able to experience their true emotions and try to express them. Only when they feel more secure can they revive their thinking on the value problems that life always faces. At this time, artistic expression begins to become calm, abstract, or really profound.

A painting exhibition that is not a painting exhibition

The experience in 2020 has led to the change of Loy Luo's creative concept, state and form. We can see that the three consecutive solo exhibitions she held after coming to New York (one of which is an online exhibition) are not abstract art as she did before. However, Luo stressed that her new works are not just pieces of Figural art that may be understood by many people, it is not even representational expressionism. She says, the pencil portraits and homeless-image-themed paintings, in the exhibition, are outside forms, behind which are some concept or performance art. These paintings are elements of a complete system.

In "The Other I" show, she reminded us to pay attention to the video installation works which recorded a performance on the street in the outbreak as well as the newspaper ready-made works displayed in the show which remind us of the close connection between the works and the temporal context. She disclosed that behind the "Homeless" exhibition was the simulated life situation of her own illegal homelessness that had been going on already for half a year. At the same time, the details, in the exhibition, also reflect the intention that treats the paintings themselves as ready-mades, maybe bodies glimpsed in passing.



Exhibition postures: expressionism, freehand style, semiotics

Loy Luo said the biggest gain of the exhibition was her communication with visiting artists from New York. To Luo's

delight, she saw the attention, seriousness, which is harmony with the atmosphere of the show. In addition to the artist neighbors from Dumbo Art District who attended the opening ceremony, Sergey Kir and other visitors said that they came to the show because they saw some art media posts, and they shared with Loy Luo some media information that she did not know. Artists also shared their feeling about Loy's art: James Howard Collins, Markus, Nikol 'a Mironovic thought the paintings full of emotion; Vytenis Jankunas, John Ensor Parker said the images were full of meaning; Mark Crawford, John Mazlish said the images were reminiscent of Goya and Munch; Paul Chepolis talked about the ingenious convergence of abstract and representational elements in the picture; Michael Ser, Philip Rothenberg appreciates the conflict and harmony between different materials; Queenie Wang asked if the artist had a background in Chinese splash-ink brushwork, etc.

Visitors were sensitive to the style of the exhibition and felt that resting the paintings essentially on the floor was appropriate to the theme of "homeless"; There are also the wooden blocks under the paintings, the names of the paintings written on the ground with a ink brush, and other unobtrusive but ubiquitous Chinese calligraphy elements, which were identified and mentioned by the viewers as symbols with special meanings. It seems that the conscious use of semiotic methods of interpretation is common in New York art circles. For example, the black curving strip on the left of "Red Wall" was seen by Steve West as a crutch so large that the homeless man in the corner could not reach it. Or the fuzzy blue figure in "The Bronze Sleeping Buddha" is read by Scott Endsley as a protector, even though this

interpretation may be contrary to the artist's original intention.



Whenever she passed the street corner near the gallery with a graffiti on the wall and the poster of the exhibition below it on the ground, Loy was reminded of Adriana's opening line of the exhibition preface: "How long, and to what degree, must a being imprint itself upon the geometries of our lived architecture before imparting suggestions of a warm body?"

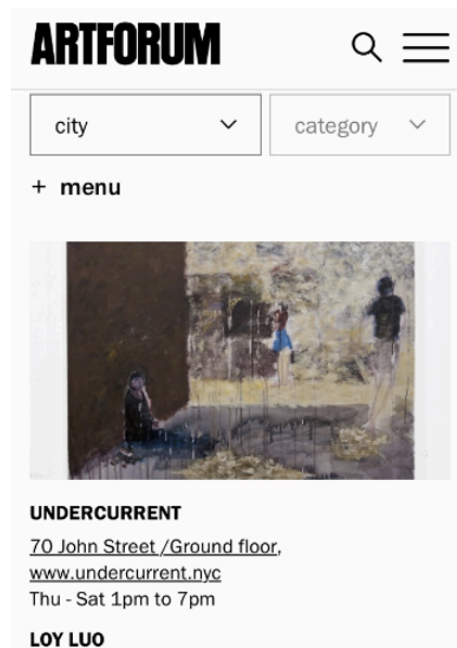
She says that in the context of contemporary art, to capture the signifier which originated from the individual life experience of the artist but also resonates with the external world requires the artist to be honest with him- or herself and sensitive to the time. "Mask" and "homeless" are the signifiers with rich levels of meaning in the current time, in her eyes.

How far is spring

Some lines from The Book of Songs, a collection of classical Chinese poems, say, "When I left there were budding willows by the road; when I returned, rain and snow". Although in January when Loy Luo left China, it was far from willow to bud, the

world was still peaceful. But when her visa expired here in July 2020, the pandemic was at its peak after nearly five months from its start in the U.S., so she could not go back to China and had to extend her visa for six months. And then, although she had planned to return after the Homeless exhibition, she discovered the flight she had booked three months in advance was cancelled because of the renewed pandemic. Spring seems far away in New York in January, but Loy's harvest is still very warm.

Both Luo and the gallery owners were happily surprised by the art media's coverage of the "homeless" exhibition opening: Artforum, Artcard. Cc, Artindumbo, allevent. In, larryqualls.blogspot.com,



twocoatsofpaint.com, expoartist.org, inoox.com, etc., as well as pushed forward by some social media. Chinese art critic Xia Kejun and artists Dong He and Li Zhenzhong - hosted by Duan Yongchao - had an online art exchange with Loy Luo under the organization of the Chinese NGO CoolReeds.

It is very encouraging to note that Undercurrent had sent out a general notice for interested artists to apply for future shows there around the same time as Homeless opened and ended up receiving almost 70 returns. It could be noted that non-profit galleries in the United States offer exhibitions to artists they believe are excellent - not necessarily because they are well-known or popular - and also that the daily tours of the galleries are conducted by volunteers, which people believe can better maintain the purity of art.

Although New York City is certainly suffering under the effects of the pandemic, the gallery received a generous donation from art patron Christopher Pelham at the beginning of the exhibition, and continued to receive requests of pieces from the show for collections up to the end of the exhibition. On the day of the show's departure, a patron and friend from upstate New York drove to the gallery to help take Ms. Luo's work and luggage to a new studio temporarily provided for her to embark on the next phase of her creativity.

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