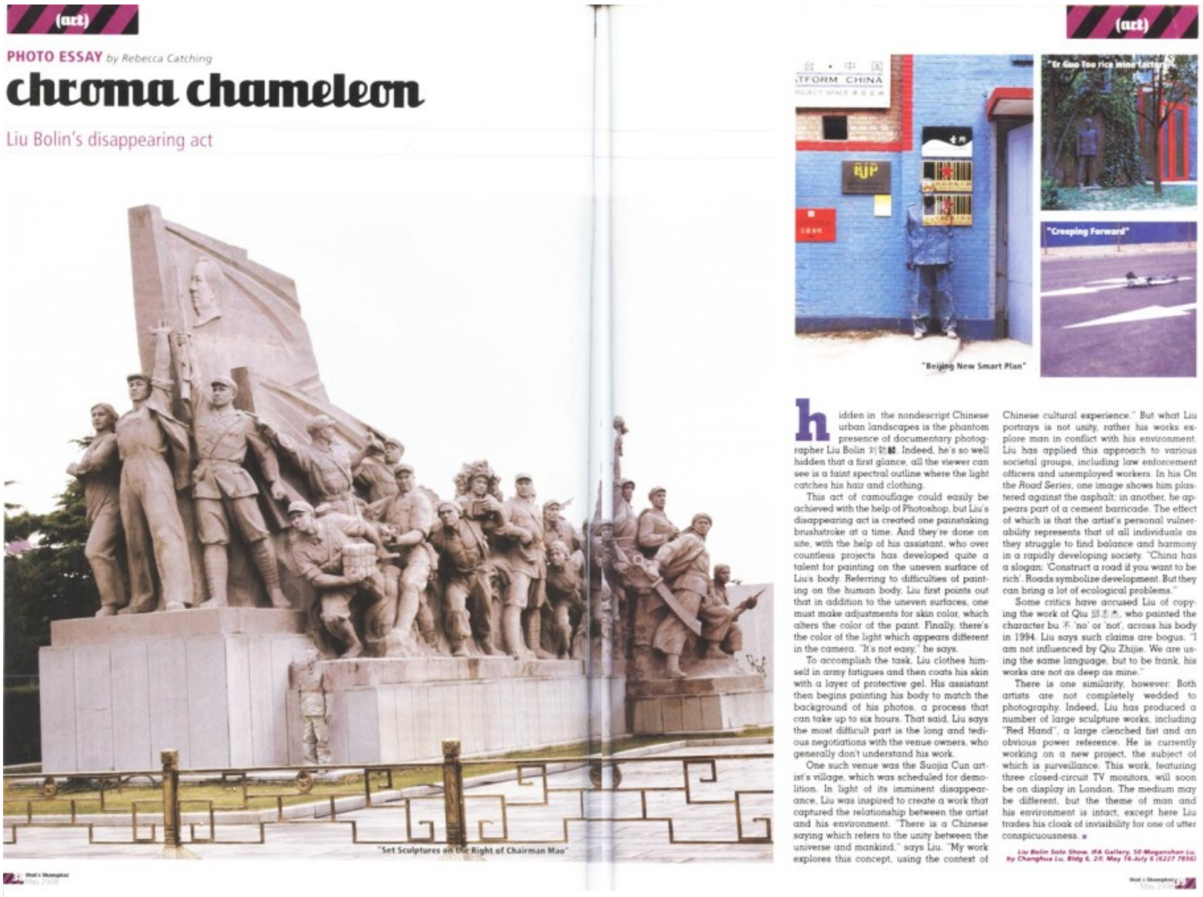

(act)

PHOTO ESSAY by Rebecca Catching

chroma chameleon

Liu Bolin's disappearing act

"Set Sculptures on the Right of Chairman Mao"

"Beijing New Smart Plan"

"Er Guo Tou rice wine factory"

"Creeping Forward"

hidden in the nondescript Chinese urban landscapes is the phantom presence of documentary photographer Liu Bolin 刘勃麟. Indeed, he's so well hidden that a first glance, all the viewer can see is a faint spectral outline where the light catches his hair and clothing.

This act of camouflage could easily be achieved with the help of Photoshop, but Liu's disappearing act is created one painstaking brushstroke at a time. And they're done on site, with the help of his assistant, who over countless projects has developed quite a talent for painting on the uneven surface of Liu's body. Referring to difficulties of painting on the human body, Liu first points out that in addition to the uneven surfaces, one must make adjustments for skin color, which alters the color of the paint. Finally, there's the color of the light which appears different in the camera. "It's not easy," he says.

To accomplish the task, Liu clothes himself in army fatigues and then coats his skin with a layer of protective gel. His assistant then begins painting his body to match the background of his photos, a process that can take up to six hours. That said, Liu says the most difficult part is the long and tedious negotiations with the venue owners, who generally don't understand his work.

One such venue was the Suojia Cun artist's village, which was scheduled for demolition. In light of its imminent disappearance, Liu was inspired to create a work that captured the relationship between the artist and his environment. "There is a Chinese saying which refers to the unity between the universe and mankind," says Liu. "My work explores this concept, using the context of Chinese cultural experience." But what Liu portrays is not unity, rather his works explore man in conflict with his environment. Liu has applied this approach to various societal groups, including law enforcement officers and unemployed workers. In his *On the Road Series*, one image shows him plastered against the asphalt; in another, he appears part of a cement barricade. The effect of which is that the artist's personal vulnerability represents that of all individuals as they struggle to find balance and harmony in a rapidly developing society. "China has a slogan: 'Construct a road if you want to be rich'. Roads symbolize development. But they can bring a lot of ecological problems."

Some critics have accused Liu of copying the work of Qiu 邱志杰, who painted the character bu 不 'no' or 'not', across his body in 1994. Liu says such claims are bogus. "I am not influenced by Qiu Zhijie. We are using the same language, but to be frank, his works are not as deep as mine."

There is one similarity, however: Both artists are not completely wedded to photography. Indeed, Liu has produced a number of large sculpture works, including "Red Hand", a large clenched fist and an obvious power reference. He is currently working on a new project, the subject of which is surveillance. This work, featuring three closed-circuit TV monitors, will soon be on display in London. The medium may be different, but the theme of man and his environment is intact, except here Liu trades his cloak of invisibility for one of utter conspicuousness. ■

Liu Bolin Solo Show, IFA Gallery, 50 Moganshan Lu, by Changhua Lu, Bldg 6, 2/F, May 16-July 6 (6227 7856)

CHROMA CHAMELEON. LIU BOLIN'S DISAPPEARING ACT – THAT'S SHANGHAI

PHOTO ESSAY *by Rebecca Catching*

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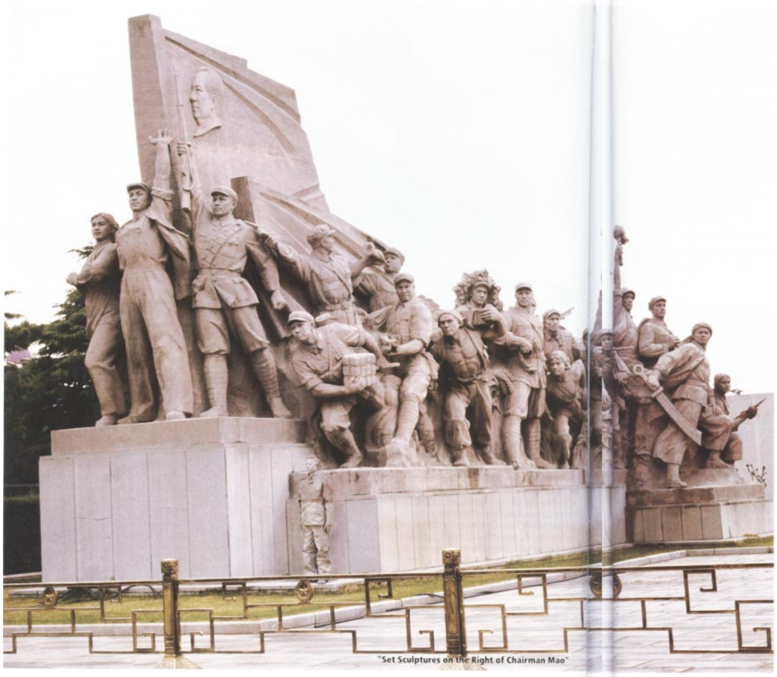
Liu Bolin's disappearing act



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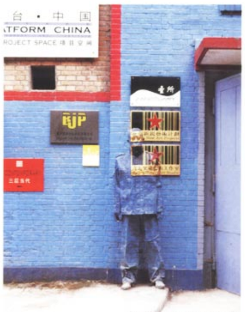

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