

in the results of political decisions whether we like it or not.

Christian Viveros-Faune argues in the introduction to 'Social Forms: A Short History of Political Art' that since the Enlightenment in Europe there have been two overriding ambitions of modern and contemporary art: the trope of the artist as historian and the artist as activist. He analyses activist work by Goya, Turner, Jenny Holzer, Guerilla Girls, Ai Weiwei, Francis Alys and Barbara Kruger to illustrate his thesis, his notion of 'epoch-defining political art.'³

Now in her eighties, Kruger can still make us care about the trials and tribulations of this world. Through humour, she navigates the intricate web of communication, revealing the threads that connect us and those that separate us.

- 1 "Barbara Kruger Artist Bio," *The Broad*, <https://www.thebroad.org/art/barbara-kruger> (accessed 10 October 2025)
- 2 Waitoller described it as such when she took me on a guided walkthrough on the 7th July 2025
- 3 Christian Viveros-Faune *Social Forms: A Short History of Political Art* (David Zwirner Books, 2018) 5.

[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.14324/111.444.2396-9008.2394](https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.2396-9008.2394)

Still Mad: Ding Hongdan at MAMOTH London (10 Nov 2024 – 14 Jan 2025)

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Entering MAMOTH Gallery's 'Still Mad', one immediately encounters a vibrant clash of realism and spectacle. The solo exhibition by Ding Hongdan – the culmination of her residency in the gallery's upstairs studio – is a phantasmagoria of bright oils, larger-than-life figures, and pop-cultural apparitions. Born in Beijing in 1995, Ding trained in oil painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts under Liu Xiaodong, a renewed socialist realist painter, before relocating to London for MAMOTH residency. Working between Beijing and London, she fuses academic realism with pop-surrealist colour to chronicle Gen-Z diasporic life.

Over several months of in-situ creation, Ding transformed quick sketches and private observations into polished tableaux that pulse with youth-driven energy. The result

is a show that not only displays a new body of works developed during her London residency, but also foregrounds the temporal process behind it. Each canvas carries the imprint of its making: layers of immediacy and duration, private gestures become public performance.

MAMOTH's residency allowed Ding to paint London life as it unfolded, echoing an almost plein-air energy yet filtered through a distinctly twenty-first century lens. Armed with strong academic training in realist oil painting, she focused on capturing her contemporaries' lived and psychological states within a new city. But unlike the traditional modes of socialist realism that once shaped Chinese art, Ding's vision is playful and suffused with pop culture. Whereas socialist-realist painting in the Mao era naturalised state ideology by depicting idealised workers in muted, monumental tableaux, Ding subverts that legacy by saturating her canvases with high-key colour and individual self-curation,

replacing collective virtue with diasporic self-performance.¹

Her practice is also intrinsically time-based: she begins with quick watercolour or ink sketches drawn from live sittings or from her phone snapshots, preserving spontaneous moments. These sketches – intimate, gestural, almost diary-like – serve as ephemeral transcripts of immediacy. Over subsequent weeks, they evolve into full-scale oil paintings, gradually accumulating the deliberation and density that define her current style. In that protracted process from sketch to canvas, one senses a dialogue between the fleeting moment and the permanence of exhibited works.

Ding's in-situ production effectively turns her creative process into a private performance. Though the studio upstairs remains mostly invisible to visitors, its presence is keenly felt in the final display. Each painting bears the residue of sustained effort, countless small interactions with friends and strangers, and a practice shaped by daily immersion with both the work and its surroundings. What emerges is the result of a months-long durational act that transforms casual friendship into painterly labour, unsettling the romantic myth of effortless youth. For those interested in time-based media, the show demonstrates how even the ostensibly static medium of painting can encode temporal processes. The private gesture of a quickly scribbled face eventually becomes a larger-than-life portrait that invites public attention.

One outstanding work is *Stranger* (2024). Depicting a group of young, fashion-forward individuals in a domestic setting, the composition evokes both a spontaneous photograph and a film still. The figure in a hot pink suit dominates the foreground,

gazing outward with a blend of defiance and self-awareness, while other stylishly dressed friends linger behind in mid-conversation. A translucent, ghostly silhouette hovers in the background near a chandelier, introducing a sense of narrative ambiguity: is it a presence from memory or a pure flight of fancy? The painting resonates differently for anyone who recognises the sitters as mutual friends of the artist. For an insider, the pop-infused theatrics become anchored in actual lived relationships, transforming it from a seemingly fantastical work into a stylised record of real acquaintances. Yet the layered composition, radiant palette, as well as the ghostly figure, also keep *Stranger* firmly in the realm of fiction. Ding dramatises routine social interaction, turning her subjects into characters in an durational performance. The canvas therefore exposes a tension at the heart of post-socialist portraiture: private memory is packaged as export-ready spectacle, and the viewer becomes complicit in that transaction.

If Ding's academic training in realism provides the scaffolding, her love of pop-cultural references and cinematic grammar injects a feeling of mischievous unreality. From cartoonish bunnies to neon hair and meme-like imagery, her works speak to an overload in our present attention economy. Still, her precise brushwork and carefully observed details ground these paintings in a recognisable world. The painting *Caught by the Tides* (2024), for instance, casts a friend, also an artist, as a swaggering figure inspired by Hong Kong cult film series *Young and Dangerous* (1996–2000), while the background consists of swirling wave motifs that echo both Chinese ink painting and anime storms. Another work presents an oversized self-portrait of Ding, placed in a theatrical scenario that winks at art historical

nudes. These cinematic or fantastical flourishes do not negate realism so much as expand it, adding an emotional vibrancy and narrative depth. The viewer is invited to piece together a loose storyline, as if multiple frames of a film were collapsed into one.

Ding's London stint places her squarely within what cultural theorist Stuart Hall calls a 'diasporic double consciousness': a continual negotiation between the pull of home and the possibilities of elsewhere.² In *Stranger* and the related canvases, that tension surfaces in the ghostly pink figure and in casual references to Tower Bridge: markers of London seen through Beijing-trained eyes. Rather than staging diaspora as loss, however, Ding treats it as generative friction: intensely local friendships, global pop memes, and prismatic colour collide to produce an aesthetic that refuses either nationalist nostalgia or total assimilation.

'Still Mad' is a fitting demonstration of how a residency can yield an art that is at once reflective and immediate, deeply personal yet open to broad interpretations. By bringing her drafting table, her friends, and her multifaceted references into a single creative space, Ding has produced an exhibition that holds time at its core. Each painting is a result of a durational practice that transposes fleeting impressions into sustained compositions, merging the diaries of everyday life with the scale and craft of contemporary painting.

1 Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 185–210.

2 Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora,' in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222–37.