



LANTIAN D 蘭天

**HORTUS  
CONCLUSUS**

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LANTIAN D.

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## The Work of Lantian D.

One of the most basic things to understand about Lantian D’s work is that it is born out of an acute awareness of the weaknesses inherent in contemporary art. The sorry state of the contemporary artworld is even the theme of one her earliest paintings, *Crime and Punishment*, which contains some suggestive depictions of artists and intellectuals who may bear some responsibility for the present situation: Jacques Derrida, Marcel Duchamp, Tracy Emin, Michel Foucault, Clement Greenberg, Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, Charles Saatchi, and Andy Warhol are all depicted as witch-like creatures from one of Francisco Goya’s black paintings, alongside contemporary works by the Chapman brothers, Ron Mueck, and so on. A more recent portrait touches upon the same theme. *Decline* portrays a young boy guarding the precious Wallace collection of European art in London. The moth on the window behind the boy suggests that the collection is like an old garment that is no longer worn: tucked away in a stuffy environment, and out of tune with the surrounding culture, which, as the title suggests, is in decline.

Even when the world of art is not the theme, Lantian’s work can still be seen as a response to the deplorable state in which that world currently finds itself. More specifically, it can be seen as an attempt to return *real meaning* to art: a meaning that does not just exist in the head of whoever has been authorized to speak on behalf of the artist, but which can be found in the work itself. For a problem with many contemporary works of art is that they are, strictly speaking, meaningless. Of course, every contemporary artist will be able to come up with a story of how we should understand his or her work, but what we thereby come to understand usually is what meaning the artist wishes to assign to his or her work; not what meaning it actually *has*. In other words, we merely learn something about the artist’s own state of mind vis-à-vis the work. This, basically, is the charge of “humpty-dumptyism” that has been laid against contemporary visual art (in a recent article by Karen E. Gover).<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the charge would be a less serious one if, in general, the artist’s state of mind vis-à-vis the work was worth figuring out. Unfortunately, that does not seem to be the case. All too often, the artist’s state of mind does little more than to relate his or her work to a particular personal experience (usually, far from extraordinary), or to some very general topic that is “explored” or “questioned” by the work (usually, in some predictable ideological way, as Sohrab Ahmari has documented in his book *The New Philistines*).<sup>2</sup>

Some of the more obvious characteristics of Lantian’s work help to safeguard it against the meaninglessness that besets contemporary art. First of all, Lantian’s works belongs to established categories of art such as figurative oil painting and portraiture that come with their own, widely-recognized constraints and conventions. Hence, she herself is not the sole authority on what we should take her work to be, and what we should take it to mean. Moreover, Lantian tends to embed her work within the context of a series (*Passersby*, *Love*, and *Hortus Conclusus*), or a literary, philosophical or religious work that can guide our interpretation. For example, her work includes more or less explicit references to Dostoevsky, Orwell, The Bible, Nietzsche, de Beauvoir, Heidegger, Camus, and Coetzee. Finally, many of Lantian’s works are rich in detail. In some cases, it can be argued that the meaning of the painting is revealed by some detail; recall, for example, the moth in *Decline*. In other cases, the detail causes us to link works. For example, in one *Passersby* painting, *Whistler in Town*, a London painting by Whistler appears in the background and in the newspaper held by one of the passengers; in another *Passersby* painting, *The Second Sex*, there is an allusion to a London painting by Monet. Monet and Whistler were friends, and, like Lantian, they arrived in London as foreigners. Likewise, in the *Hortus Conclusus* series, the “2 + 2 = 4” inscription in one painting is echoed by the “2 + 2 = 5” inscription in another. The latter stands for the absurdities that totalitarian regimes tend to insist on in their attempt to realize a “paradise” on earth (“paradise” and “hortus conclusus”, which literally means “enclosed garden”, are etymologically connected). Of course, none of these characteristics, jointly or individually, ensure that an interesting work of art has been created. But all of them create mooring points for real meaning.

With these mooring points in place, Lantian is able to create paintings that are truly meaningful, in the sense that they express, and do not merely result from, a thought or feeling about something. For example, one readily understands that the strangers on the train in the *Love* and *Passersby* paintings have not been randomly selected, even if they are supposed to appear that way. Among the passengers one can recognize Lantian herself, once (in the *Love* series) embracing her ex-boyfriend, and once (in the *Passersby* series) sitting next to the philosopher and writer Roger Scruton, who was also the subject of one of Lantian’s individual portraits (a portrait for which she was awarded the main prize of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters). Apart from these easily recognizable people it probably is not necessary to recognize anyone in the paintings. Nor is it necessary to grasp what may have connected them in Lantian’s personal life. The true reason why they are there, and why they are depicted the way they are, can be found within the paintings themselves. For example, in *The Second Sex*, the central place is accorded to a mother who is breastfeeding her baby. Of course, this not an unfamiliar theme in the history of Western painting, but here the mother is entirely without glory. Her untidy, ungainly appearance is matched by the appearance of the man seated next to her, who might be the baby’s father,

or someone exhausted by a busy speaking schedule. Lantian’s gaze suggests that she does not find it a pleasing sight. The windows of the train look out on a scene that is remindful of Monet’s *Houses of Parliament* paintings, except that the Houses of Parliament have been replaced by identical-looking social housing blocks. In other words, outside the train, too, bleakness and banality have taken the place of something more magnificent. The other passengers to the right of the painter also seem to be absorbed by some obligation or other; for example, showing up for work, or buying someone a gift. And the obligations, whether they arise from biological needs or from social conventions, seem to wear everyone down. The only exception is the young girl to Lantian’s left, who looks at the other passengers in wonderment. Is it too far-fetched to see the three metamorphoses from Nietzsche’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra* depicted here: camel, lion, and child?

There will be better interpretations of *The Second Sex* than the one that has just been provided. But better and worse interpretations exist only where there is a real meaning to be captured. And the point of the interpretation was to show that Lantian’s work has real meaning, in contrast with many contemporary works of art. Whether that meaning has been correctly identified by the interpretation is another question. Most likely, the search for a correct interpretation will continue as long as the painting continues to intrigue us. One reason why it may continue to intrigue us is that its overall impression is difficult to summarize. The same can be said about Lantian’s other paintings. For example, although Lantian often includes less agreeable sights in her paintings (ugly people, an angry mother, a nose-poking man, a urinating chimpanzee), she does not exaggerate their disagreeableness, nor does she make them the sole focus of her paintings. The overall impression usually is a pleasant one. This is due as much to the content of the paintings as to the technical skill with which they have been executed (a skill that Lantian acquired without formal training and in an extremely short period of time).

In some, but not all, of her most recent paintings, Lantian appears to want to deemphasize her technical skill. The influence of Anselm Kiefer, whose paintings Lantian has recently come to appreciate, is noticeable. Stylistic differences *between* some of the *Hortus Conclusus* paintings also suggest that Lantian is still searching for a style, or perhaps searching for a *new* style to avoid building an entire oeuvre on repetition—a temptation that must exist in her case, given the recognition that she has already enjoyed. However, formal differences between the *Hortus Conclusus* paintings are balanced by recurrent motifs. Some of the paintings in this series portray reflections, but the most obvious motif is the enclosure, of course, and the focus on things (for example, plants) that are both natural and artificial. The theme of enclosure arguably runs through Lantian’s other works as well, as the confined space of a train is the setting of two earlier series of paintings (whose contrasting titles are *Love* and *Passersby*). But whereas the point of view on the enclosed space lies *within* that space in the aforementioned two series—the painter is travelling with the other passengers, and is also depicted as such—in the *Hortus Conclusus* series, the point of view on the enclosed space lies *outside* that space. Is it a coincidence that this external perspective on the enclosed space comes with a focus on the non-human world? Whatever the case may be, how the *Hortus Conclusus* series will be concluded is still an open question. But what is fairly certain is that something truly meaningful and truly beautiful will emerge.

<sup>1</sup> K. E. Gover, ‘What is Humpty-Dumptyism in Contemporary Visual Art? A Reply to Maes’, *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 52 (2012), 169-181.

<sup>2</sup> Sohrab Ahmari, *The New Philistines* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2016).

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**2+2=4**, 2017  
Oil and chalk on canvas  
146 x 97cm

*As though such a stone wall really were a consolation, and really did contain some word of conciliation, simply because it is as true as twice two makes four.*

— **Dostoyevsky**, *Notes from Underground*

**A MIRACLE**, 2017  
Oil on canvas  
130 x 97cm



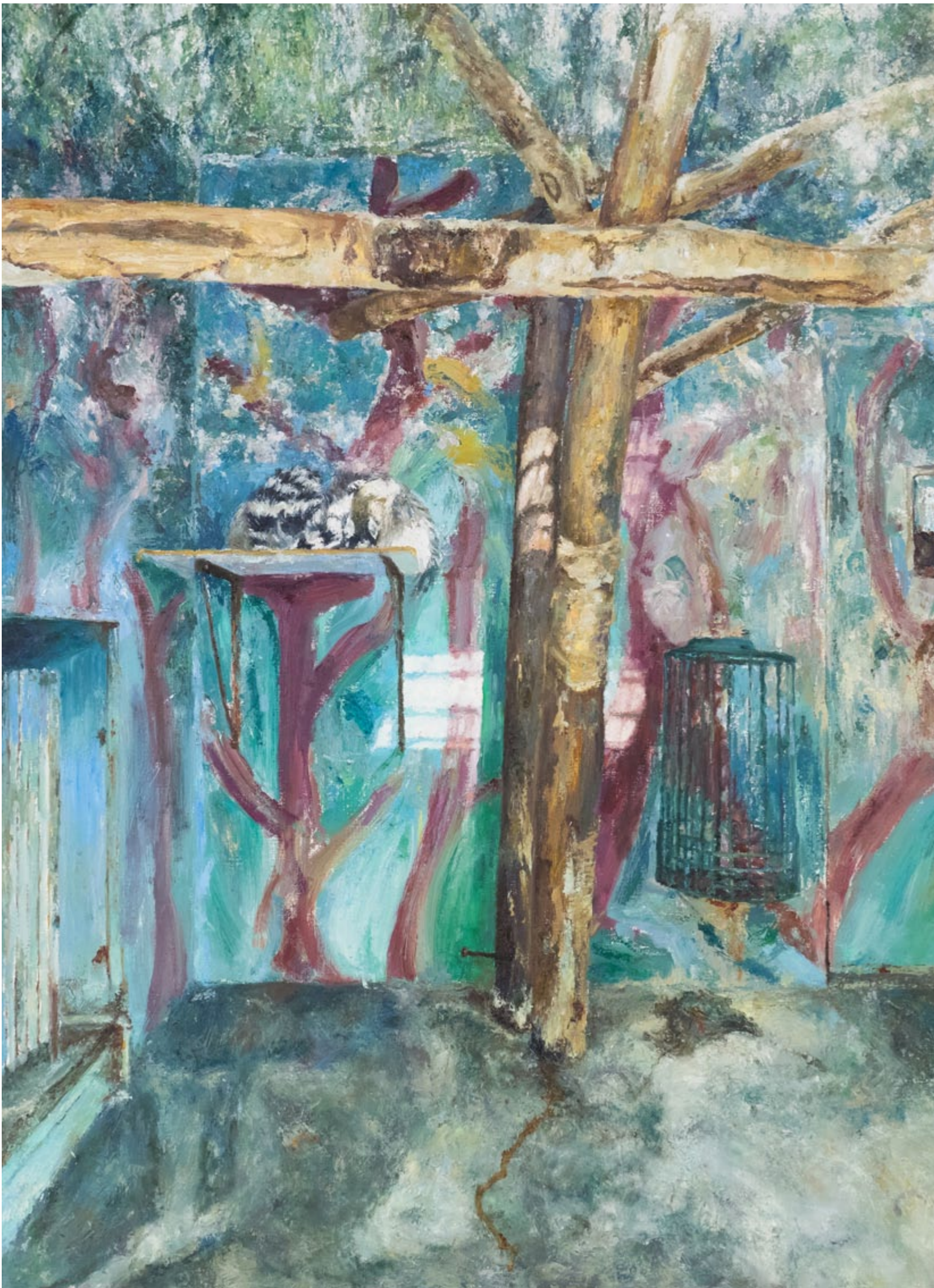


**LE SACRE DU PRINTEMPS, 2018**  
Oil, acrylic, emulsion, and ballast on canvas  
130 x 97cm



**AN ELEGY, 2017**  
Oil on canvas  
130 x 97cm

**PARADISE (WALLED GARDEN), 2017**  
Oil on canvas  
130 x 97cm



**ECCE HOMO, 2017**  
Oil and semen on canvas  
101.5 x 56cm



**THE OUTSIDER, 2017**  
Oil on canvas  
130 x 97cm



**FORGETTING OF BEING, 2017**  
Oil on canvas  
146 x 97cm



OVER YOUR BODY, BARS GROW, 2018  
Oil on canvas  
146 x 107cm



○ 點  
的鬼  
走路非常小心  
它害怕摔跟頭  
變成  
了人

— 顧城



**The ghost  
of zero hour  
walks with extreme care  
fears it will trip over  
and turn into  
a human**

**--- Gu Cheng**





**CRIME AND PUNISHMENT: ELEPHANTS IN THE ROOM**, 2013  
Oil on canvas  
41.6 x 183cm

*The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity. — W. B. Yeats*

LOVE, 2017  
Oil on canvas, in two parts  
Each 90 x 60cm





**LOVE**, 2016  
Oil on canvas  
50 x 225cm



LOVER, 2016  
Oil on canvas  
50 x 225cm



**THE SECOND SEX**, 2015  
Oil on canvas  
40.5 x 137.2cm



**PASSERSBY: NO.16 WHISTLER IN TOWN, 2015**  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 40cm



**PASSERSBY: NO.15, 2015**  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 40cm



PASSERSBY: NO.14, 2015  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 40cm



PASSERSBY: NO.13 FAKE SUN, 2015  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 40cm





PASSERSBY: NO.12, 2014  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 40cm



PASSERSBY: NO.11, 2014  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 40cm



PASSERSBY: NO.10 BUTTERFLIES, 2014  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 40cm



PASSERSBY: NO.9 AMOUR IN CINEMA, 2014  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 40cm



**PASSERSBY: NO.8, 2014**  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 40cm



**PASSERSBY: NO.7, 2014**  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 40cm



PASSERSBY: NO.4, 2013  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 40cm



PASSERSBY: ANNA K., 2015  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 40cm

## She Is Outside of My Experience

I’ve known Lantian for four years now. Watching her skills and resultant body of works grow, I’ve been joyfully shocked again and again. Joyful at seeing truly good paintings – an exceedingly rare occurrence these days – while shocked at the contradictions inherent in them (the contrasts brought by her).

My first impression of her was of youth and beauty, belonging to an individual unconcerned with worldly matters. Her paintings then were already full of life, so it was very hard to believe that she was only a beginner, let alone a self-taught one. After talking with her, I was amazed by the breadth of her knowledge - a polymath! She has a solid and holistic understanding of art history, and her passion for art moved me. The recent work, ‘Over your body, bars grow’, shocked me once more. I find it unbelievable that a young woman can paint the vicissitudes of life with such decorous command! She is outside of my experience.

**The following records a short exchange between myself and Lantian:**

*Li Xiaolin:* From ‘Passersby’ to ‘Love’, your passenger series are vivid and intriguing. The works were getting more and more mature. Why did you stop, and with a sudden change of style, start ‘Hortus Conclusus’?

*Lantian D.:* I felt that I was about to repeat myself. Art cannot be repeated. Repetition in art becomes kitsch. I am always looking for a more direct and more sincere way to express myself. On the surface, it seems that my so called “style” has changed, yet I am not very concerned about “showing a consistent style” (laugh, I am not designing a product line), all I want is to sincerely express. Sincerity is above style, because it gives birth to style. In art (in the normative sense of the word), it’s impossible for a true artist “not be him/herself”, because he/she is absolutely him/herself. If one stays true to oneself, the works are inevitably unified. Style should not be the creative intention but a natural consequence.

*Li Xiaolin:* In Latin, Hortus Conclusus means “enclosed garden”, why did you translate that to “imprisonment (囚)” in Chinese?

*Lantian D.:* Human “人” is enclosed by “口”, hence “囚” – calligraphy and painting, text and picture are one, unified. “囚” is not only the translation of ‘Hortus Conclusus’, but also encapsulates the entire exhibition, it suits the other series ‘Passersby’ and ‘Love’ as well. Because “jailing”（outside the “口”）and “jailed” (inside the “口”) are interchangeable, the meaning depends on one’s perspective.

*Li Xiaolin:* What do you hope to explore in ‘Hortus Conclusus’ the new series?

*Lantian D.:* First, the language of painting, from the most technical point of view: new materials such as emulsion, acrylic, ballast etc; new techniques such as painting with palette knives etc. But above all, there is a search for meaning. I am experimenting with ideas as my “new materials” - in philosophy, literature, religion, history and of course, in poetry - I am looking for my “painting materials” in culture. For instance, speaking of the concept of “口” (enclosure): Pandora’s box contained all kinds of “evils”, Pandora opened the box, death and many other evils were then released into the world. She hastened to close the box, but the entire content had escaped except for one “evil” that lay at the bottom: “hope”. I find this myth so fascinating, “hope” was one of the “evils”. By drawing a border between one thing and the other (in this case “enclosed by the box”), something new occurs - an “evil” becomes “hope”.

*Li Xiaolin:* ‘Over your body, bars grow’, the new work created in Hong Kong captures the vicissitudes of life with such decorous command, it’s hard to associate the work with your age and life experience. The earliest painting ‘Crime and Punishment’ once gave me similar bewilderment. Is the new work related to your personal experiece in Hong Kong?

*Lantian D.:* Yes and no. The individual is never so self-expressive as in self-forgetfulness. Art is confidentiality in the open, naked and majestic. Because an artist can only draw on his/her personal knowledge and feelings, the more sincere, the more private the result. However, by breaking down, refining and reorganizing that “privacy” into the artwork, the result becomes “naked and majestic” (as the Chinese saying goes). Lastly, to paraphrase Francis Bacon, “I painted my most despairing work in my greatest happiness.”

*Li Xiaolin:* What are your ambitions for the future?

*Lantian D.:* To maintain my fervour until the last minute.

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### 她在我經驗之外

認識蘭天四年，看著她作品的成長，一次次感到驚喜。驚的是她的差異性，喜的是她畫的真好，這年頭好畫不多。

初見的印象是年輕貌美，不諳世事的輕狂； 作品極生動，不太相信她那時才剛開始畫畫，而且是自學的。聽她說話，更是驚訝她豐富淵博的學識、紮實系統的美術史基礎、以及對藝術近乎癡狂的熱誠。她在香港的新作《在你身上，囚籠生長》又一次讓我驚喜，一個女孩子畫出這麼滄桑厚重的作品有點不可思議！她是我經驗之外的人。

以下摘錄一小段訪談：

李曉林：地鐵人物系列從《過客》到《愛》， 生動精采，也越畫越老練。為什麼忽然停下，風格驟變，創作新系列《囚》？

蘭天：我覺得再畫下去就要開始重複了。對我來說，藝術是不能重複的，一重複就媚俗。我一直在找尋更直接真誠的表達方式，表象上也許看似風格不一，但我並不太在意所謂的“個人風格”（笑，我不是設計商品的），我只想儘量真誠的表達。“誠”在 “風格”之上， 真正的藝術家是走不出自己的，他是一個純粹的自我。只要足夠真誠，作品就是統一的， “風格”是自然而然的事。

李曉林：拉丁文 HORTUS CONCLUSUS 的直譯是“封閉的花園”為什麼翻成“囚”？

蘭天：“人”被“口”圍住，書畫同體。“囚”不只是新系列的名稱還是整個展覽的名字，因為用在《過客》與《愛》也是合適的。囚（ “口 ”外面）和被囚（ “口”裡面）不過視角不同罷了。

李曉林： 你希望在《囚》系列中探索表達些什麼？

蘭天：繪畫語言當然是一點，好比油畫之外的其他材料，新的畫法.. 但在這之上還有對含義的探索。概念上也在實驗新材料：哲學、文學、宗教、歷史和詩，我在試著從文化史上找尋創作材料。比如 “口” 這個概念。潘多拉的盒子裡裝的全是“惡”，盒子一開，都跑出去了。蓋子關上，只留住了盒底的“希望”。很有意思的神話！ “希望” 是 ” 惡 “，被盒子“口”圍住後，與其他“惡”區分開，於是產生了新的性質。

李曉林：香港新作《在你身上，囚籠生長》滄桑厚重，很難與你的閱歷年齡相聯繫，早期的《罪與罰》也曾帶給我類似的迷惑。新作與在香港的個人經歷有關麼？

蘭天：有也沒有。人在忘卻自我的時候才能真正表達自我。藝術是光明正大的隱私。藝術家唯一可用的不過是個人的所知所感， 往往越真誠越私隱。但隱私經過破碎提煉重組進作品，會變得光明正大。套畫家培根的一句:我在最快樂的時候畫了最絕望的畫。

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<div>李曉林</div> 對未來有什麼樣的抱負？	
<div>蘭天</div> ：初心不改。	

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<div>李曉林</div> 中央美術學院版畫系教授	<div>中國美術家協會水彩藝術委員會副主任</div>



## Biography

Lantian D. was born in China. After studying commerce and filmmaking in Sydney, she moved to London to study Chinese art history, after which she devoted herself to painting full time. In less than five years, Lantian has been selected for multiple major art competitions in the UK, including the BP Portrait Award at the National Portrait Gallery, several annual exhibitions of the Royal Societies (RP, ROI, RBA, SWA), the Lynn Painter-Stainers Prize at the Mall Galleries, and the National Open Art competition at the Royal College of Art. In 2016, she won the Ondaatje Prize for Portraiture, the major prize of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters. Lantian also received two grants from the Canadian Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation for promising young artists.

2018 April 25 - May 19 Solo Exhibition 'Hortus Conclusus', Lingnan University, Hong Kong

**2017 May 19 Won The Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grant, Montreal**

2017 May 4 - 19 Royal Society of Portrait Painters (RP), at the Mall Galleries, London

2016 July 28 - August 7 Society of Women Artists (SWA), at the Mall Galleries, London

**2016 Won The Ondaatje Prize for Portraiture, the major prize of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters (RP)**

**2016 Highly Commended by The De Laszlo Foundation Award at the Royal Society of Portrait Painters (RP)**

2016 May 5 - 20 Royal Society of Portrait Painters (RP), at the Mall Galleries, London

2016 March 17 - April 2 Royal Society of British Artists (RBA), at the Mall Galleries, London

2016 March 7 - 13 Lynn Painter-Stainers Prize, at the Mall Galleries, London

2015 October 21 - November 1 National Open Art Competition (NOA), at the Royal College of Art, London

**2015 October 7 Won The Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grant, Montreal**

2015 June 5 - 13 Society of Women Artists (SWA), at the Mall Galleries, London

2015 April 17 - May 31 BP Portrait Award (tour), at the Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Wales

2015 April 16 - May 1 Royal Society of Portrait Painters (RP), at the Mall Galleries, London

2015 March 11 - 21 Royal Society of British Artists (RBA), at the Mall Galleries, London

2014 December 9 - 21 Royal Institute of Oil Painters (ROI), at the Mall Galleries, London

2014 15 November 27 - April 12 BP Portrait Award (tour), at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery

2014 October 4 - November 16 BP Portrait Award (tour), at the Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens

2014 June 26 - September 21 BP Portrait Award, at the National Portrait Gallery, London

2014 June 26 - July 5 Society of Women Artists (SWA), at the Mall Galleries, London

2014 May 8 - 23 Royal Society of Portrait Painters (RP), at the Mall Galleries, London

## EDUCATION

2012 Postgraduate Certificate, Chinese Art History, The University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies

2008 - 2009 Master of Media Arts and Production (Film), The University of Technology Sydney

2005 - 2008 Bachelor of Commerce (Marketing and French), The University of Sydney

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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