

## **“Island 6”: the aesthetics of paper and LED in a cultural journey of meaning**

*“Island 6” is an art gallery showing mixed media works by the Liu Dao art collective shown at Shanghai’s Island 6 gallery.*

### **SUMMARY**

An art exhibition of mixed-media works at Shanghai’s Island 6 gallery made us think about the aesthetics of paper and LED in a cultural circle of meaning.

Artistic signification is where culture and semiotics meet at their most ceremonial. Unlike branding, where semiotic mechanisms aim to be as clear as possible, art often relies in signifying contrasting meanings. Such is the case here with the playful juxtapositions of old and new through their form: paper and LED.

Paper, invented in China, stood as symbol of progress and cultural prosperity. Embraced much later by Western nations, it came to play a vital role in their rise. Literature, science and education would not have spread to the extent they did if it wasn’t for the book. Then, another of its ‘by-products’ arrived – the banknote: the smallest piece of paper ever glorified – to stand for the West’s final transformation into a financial empire. It took over from the book and created different values and belief systems. And now we might see it bring the empire to its knees. At the same time and in complete contrast, paper has also moved from ancient wisdom to signify – through the banknote – China’s current financial boom and personal affluence. In this part of the world it signifies China’s comeback to prosperity and the glory days of the ancient past, justifiably representing here Shanghai’s skyscrapers as monuments of power and success.

The light-emitting diode representing digital technology is also a symbol of progress and greatness. Whereas in the West, where it was born, it is now seen as the premonition of a dystopian future, here it is used to portray humanity. Adopted and glorified by the East, it stands at its mightiest and brightest filling Chinese days with the practicality and efficiency of the digital and Chinese nights with the vibrancy and playfulness of the neon. The people in the canvases are the protagonists, foregrounded and in advantageous disproportionate scale, playful and full of vitality, in constant motion and total control. They display a romantic innocence through their interaction with the buildings. LED here signifies blood pumping energy and glorified humanity. In a place where digital technology is welcomed with no questioning, it is viewed as an inextricable part of life with liberating characteristics. China embraces LED, receiving a reciprocating gift from the West, one that took a long time to arrive. The roles are reversed. The digital is viewed in China as paper would have been viewed during its early popularity in Europe.

The juxtaposition of the two techniques creates a dialogue of meanings, a debate for and against their associated grand inventions and their cultural paths. But it also comes to a conclusion through the contradictory but prevailing symbiosis of human (subject matter) and digital (form). The Chinese context offers a new way of seeing paper and digital and, through them, the state of contemporary Asia.

## FULL ARTICLE



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Art can create a sense of utter illumination, moments of firm belief that the universe makes perfect sense. As if everything is divinely explained within fractions of meaningful seconds. Such deep, primordial feelings of revelation take place via the power of artistic signification, where culture and semiotics meet at their highest form of expression. Unlike branding where semiotic mechanisms aim to be as clear as possible bound by a single minded meaning, art often relies in signifying contrasting ideas. Such is the case here with the works demonstrating playful juxtapositions between old and new, East and West, man and man-made, natural and technological. And they achieve this not only through their subject matter (what they represent) but also through their form (how they represent): paper cuttings and LED display. The subject matter consists of people 'playing' with Shanghai's buildings; but it is in the choice of the way that they are represented where the deeper meanings lie. In order to uncover these meanings we need to look at the cultural context of these forms, the narratives that have been created around them.

Paper cut design was invented during the Han Dynasty, a period of economic and cultural prosperity for China. It is inextricably linked with the invention of paper itself, a symbol of a period of progress and civilization, when most of the West did not exist as it does now. By inventing paper and printing, China created one of the most important evolutionary leaps in the history of mankind; a vital instrument for the progress of human knowledge. Embraced much later by Western

nations and mass produced into books, paper came to play a vital role in their rise and dominance. Literature, science and education would not have spread at the extend they did if it wasn't for book and paper. As the centuries passed, their association with progress was gradually demised through the invention and proliferation of mass media and digital technology. They ended up representing ancient wisdom, authenticity and nostalgia. Especially for the West, paper came to signify nature, traditional craftsmanship, and hand-made elegance. It speaks of earlier times where simplicity and naturalness were the prevailing values. Paper is seen as the most 'innocent' of forms emergently packaging food and similar products to highlight their natural ingredients, handmade process and delicate refinement. From such a – Western - point of view, the association between subject matter and form might seem odd. One wouldn't expect the most delicate and natural of art forms to be used to represent the powerful and technologically mighty that is Shanghai's skyline.



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But these works are born and live in China and therefore a different view of paper is demanded here; one that also takes into account the signification of another of its 'by-products'. The banknote, the smallest piece of paper ever glorified, can be seen as the proud symbol of West's final transformation into a financial empire. It took over from the book and created different values, priorities and belief systems. And now it is about to bring the empire down to its knees connoting its fatal demise. At the same time and in complete contrast, the banknote signifies China's current financial boom, individual emancipation and the resulting desire for personal affluence. In this part of the world it stands as a symbol for China's comeback to prosperity and the glory days of the ancient past. Under this different light then, we could justifiably see Shanghai World Financial Centre and the rest of Shanghai's monuments of success being represented by paper. For what else are skyscrapers than monuments of power, wealth and success that only the abundance of bank notes can bring.

The light-emitting diode, on the other hand, was discovered in the West by a British experimenter during the Industrial Revolution. Also born in a period of economic prosperity, it was widely developed much later being used in many applications (from traffic lights to neon signs) culminating with digital technology (LED optical signals travel through telecom fibres serving the ever-growing demand for broadband telecommunication and Internet). Also a symbol of progress and greatness of civilization, LED here symbolizes digital technology and the future. Digital

technology has been the bread and butter of Western technophobes and doomsday theories: the 'Matrix' in its primary form, the end of reality of real feelings, real experiences and real people. It signifies the virtual and the simulated seen by many as cold, numbing and artificial; the premonition of a dystopian future. Here though LED is used here to portray the human element; a representational choice that also seems odd at first glance.

But, again, this is China's future we are talking about. In an opposite cultural/geographical trajectory than paper, LED and digital technology went from being born in the West to being adopted by the East, where it looks like they are going to reach new heights - just as paper did in the West. It is in China where they are glorified, standing at their mightiest and brightest; filling Chinese days with the practicality, efficiency and progress of the digital and Chinese nights with the brightness, vibrancy, aliveness and neo-romanticism of the neon signs. The people in the canvases seem very real, playful and positive, full of vitality, in constant motion and total control. LED here signifies warmth, blood pumping aliveness and energy. In a place where the future is welcomed with no questioning, digital technology is viewed as a blessing, as an inextricable part of life. It acts as a constant reminder of the liberating characteristics of the digital era; a symbol of a time where everybody has a voice, access to information and the ability to be part of a global community. China embraces LED and digital technology; like receiving a reciprocating gift from the West, one that took a long time to arrive but is here now. The digital is viewed in China as paper would have been viewed during its early popularity in Europe. Under such a point of view then, digital technology represents human emancipation and optimism for the future. It is justifiably used to represent people in a joyful state.



The juxtaposition of the two techniques creates a dialogue of signified meanings, a debate for and against their associated grand inventions and the cultural paths they represent. But it also comes to a conclusion. And that can only be in favour of the alive and the digital that represents it. While the West hangs nostalgically on to the paper and its era, the East puts it in the background placing the digital at centre stage, up there with the human element. And humans are without a doubt the protagonists in these canvases. Foregrounded and in advantageous disproportionate scale. The contradictory symbiosis of human (subject matter) and digital (form) takes place in a

melodious and playful manner. People are depicted enjoying their habitat, looking relaxed and playful within their surroundings. They display a romantic innocence through their actions and interaction with the buildings. In fact, the way they are represented renders them as glorified signifiers of humanity.

The Chinese context demands such a way of reading the artworks. It sees digital technology as a way to thrive and make human conditions better. It promises a new point of view, a new way of seeing powered by the recent technological emancipation and the beginning of an upward cultural path. The works advocate such an attitude. They emit a certainty that this new technology can be used to serve humans well and help them make wondrous things. They stress the need to focus on the digital AND the human, the two walking hand in hand towards a new world, a new beginning. The cat that eats diodes sends out a message of hope; we should pay attention and let it point the way.