

On the way

Nearly five metres of painting, and at first glance almost nothing: a white cloud floating across the silent expanse of a canvas left largely bare. Yet as the viewer draws closer, faint traces gradually appear, suggesting contours, distant mountains, waves. Shaped by water running across the surface, these unexpected forms sketch out a subliminal landscape.

Created for her first solo exhibition in Paris, this monumental work by Luo Mingjun is striking in its extreme sparseness, which contrasts with the immensity evoked by its title: *Mountains to Cross, Seas to Traverse*.

To cross, to traverse: two verbs that run deep in Luo Mingjun's life and work.

Long before leaving her country at the age of twenty-four, Luo Mingjun was already on her way. In 1979, as China was only just emerging from the Cultural Revolution and had recently reopened its universities, she entered the Hunan Academy of Fine Arts. Teaching remained strictly academic and grounded in Socialist Realism: art was to serve the people, depict workers and peasants, and place the individual within a collective history. From the early 1980s onwards, some young artists began seeking ways to break free from this ideological legacy. A co-founder of Group O in Changsha in 1985, Luo Mingjun was one of the few women involved in the early Chinese avant-garde, embracing new forms — installation, performance, collage — and exploring new possibilities for artistic freedom.

In 1986, Group O set out to retrace the route of the Long March, crossing China in the footsteps of the Red Army, but this time in pursuit of an artistic revolution. On the Tibetan Plateau, Luo Mingjun met a young Swiss adventurer who would become her husband. The encounter abruptly changed the course of her life. Already teaching some classes at the Academy of Fine Arts and on the verge of securing a position there, she was refused permission by the university to leave China for a stay in Switzerland. Marriages to foreigners were still exceptional at the time. She resigned, giving up the academic career that was only just beginning. Her departure also took her away from Group O and from the creative ferment surrounding this pioneering generation of Chinese contemporary artists.

With a small backpack as her only luggage, she left China for the first time and settled with her husband in Biel. Upon acquiring Swiss citizenship, she automatically lost her Chinese nationality. An entire world now lay behind her: her teaching career, her artistic circle, her familiar surroundings. In a country she did not know, whose language she did not speak, everything had to be rebuilt. She could not then foresee how deeply this uprooting would come to permeate her work.

Yet none of this history is told directly. Luo Mingjun's work is neither narrative nor illustrative. It proceeds instead through sedimentation: lived experience settles, changes, sometimes fades, then resurfaces in another form. "I never set out to create a style; my life shaped my art," she says. The biographical, the intimate and the everyday form the very substance of her work — another way of breaking with the education of her youth, which subordinated the individual to the collective. For Luo Mingjun, however, the personal is never self-contained: a modest object or an ordinary gesture can condense multiple layers of meaning that reach far beyond it.

The two large paintings from the *No Return* series presented in the Paris exhibition are among the artist's most striking works. She portrays herself from behind, walking towards a space without boundaries or destination. In *No Return I*, her figure recedes into dazzling light. The ground dissolves into a white expanse faintly tinged with blue; the horizon has disappeared, and the figure itself seems to be overtaken by the light. In *No Return II*, the same walk continues into the night. The black coastline absorbs part of her body, while the silhouette barely stands out against a vast depth of midnight blue. From one canvas to the other, from blinding light to darkness, Luo Mingjun moves through a space without points of reference. Only the act of walking remains: moving forward without knowing where our steps will lead us.

These two works were created during the Covid years, when Luo Mingjun, unable to travel to China, contemplated for the first time the possibility that she might never see China again. Yet "no return" reaches beyond these circumstances to touch on a deeper experience: every departure makes it impossible to recover things exactly as they were. We may return to a place, but never quite to the place we left, nor to the person we were when we left it.

The cloud is one of Luo Mingjun's recurring subject and embodies this shifting and elusive identity. Belonging nowhere in particular, it moves, disperses and takes shape again. This state of suspension becomes a form of freedom: the possibility of being here and elsewhere, of changing without ever allowing oneself to be assigned to a single place.

The bowl belongs to the repertoire of elemental motifs that has emerged in the artist's paintings in recent years. It appears weightless in a bare, silent space. This everyday object, so familiar as to become almost invisible, is always depicted as empty. Its form, in its extreme simplicity, belongs to a history stretching back millennia: that of Chinese porcelain, whose bowls and cups, traded and coveted, circulated for centuries between China and Europe. Beneath their apparent ordinariness, a memory far greater than themselves comes to the surface.

Cloud and bowl are two complementary poles in Luo Mingjun's pictorial grammar. Both float in emptiness, removed from any context, with neither ground nor horizon to anchor them. Yet their natures differ: the cloud changes; the bowl endures. The metamorphosis of

one is answered by the permanence of the other. The bowl, no less, travels through time and across borders.

In painting, Luo Mingjun draws remarkable visual intensity and resonance from a highly pared-down vocabulary. This aesthetic of restraint contrasts with the diversity of media she has explored over the course of her career. Painting, drawing, photography, installation, video and performance: her practice has continually moved along multiple paths.

This freedom is also evident in her relationship to language and to her own cultural heritage. Paradoxically, it was only after leaving China that Luo Mingjun turned to ink and calligraphy, engaging from a distance with a tradition she had scarcely explored before. Yet this was not a matter of reconnecting with a lost identity. In 1992, she transcribed the first eighteen chapters of Laozi's *Dao De Jing* in calligraphy across three museum walls. Before long, the text fragmented and expanded into space until it covered the floor. The characters themselves were broken apart, eventually becoming illegible.

"I don't want to be the Chinese woman the West imagines me to be," she says. The point is neither to reject this heritage nor to allow herself to be confined by it, but to engage with it on her own terms. Between two languages and two artistic traditions, Luo Mingjun thus creates a language of her own, in which heritage is not a territory to return to, but material to pass through and transform.

This resistance to any prescription, whether conservative or "progressive", also extends to the roles assigned to women. In the Maoist China in which she grew up, "women hold up half the sky", yet the proclaimed emancipation remained subordinate to the collective project. Years later in Europe, when a gallerist advised her not to paint flowers precisely because she was a woman and doing so would be "anti-feminist", Luo Mingjun did exactly the opposite: she painted the roses in her garden, followed by the great magnolia tree growing outside her studio. Native to Asia but now deeply rooted in Switzerland, the tree became a quiet echo of her own story: one of displacement that does not preclude the possibility of flourishing on new ground.

From one cultural system to another, Luo Mingjun refuses to let anyone else decide what a woman, a Chinese woman or an artist is supposed to do — or not to do.

The series of eight small paintings *Red Pins*, presented in the exhibition, distils these different dimensions. A modest everyday object, the pin belongs to the domestic sphere traditionally associated with women. It can wound, but it can also fasten, connect and repair. Stuck into a military map, it marks positions, territories already taken or yet to be seized. Luo Mingjun has often used pins in her installations to join fabrics, objects, or Swiss and Chinese identity papers. The colour red adds further layers of meaning to the

motif: associated with celebration and happiness in China, it is also a political colour deeply embedded in the collective imagination of her generation. The pin also echoes the “nail spirit” (钉子精神), one of the Maoist expressions that accompanied the artist’s childhood. A tiny everyday object thus becomes a point of convergence between the intimate and the collective, the feminine and the political, injury and repair.

From a pin only a few centimetres long to a cloud several metres across, the scale changes radically, but the economy of the image does not. Whatever the size of the canvas, just a few forms are enough to evoke what passes through a life, without ever confining it to a narrative.

Water is another recurring motif in Luo Mingjun’s work. In *Fragmented Light*, it becomes an almost abstract surface crossed by reflections and vibrations of light. Elusive and always in motion, it shares with the cloud the ability to transform without ever becoming fixed.

This indeterminacy also belongs to the image itself. Layer by layer, Luo Mingjun covers, veils and lightens, allowing some elements to appear while others survive only as traces. Between appearance and erasure, figuration and abstraction, what remains visible seems less to emerge from the canvas than to resist its own disappearance.

As Luo Mingjun pares her visual language back ever further, she brings the image to the threshold of dissolution. To erase, however, never means to eliminate, but to leave just enough for something to surface again. Form thus hovers between presence and absence, like memory itself, which preserves as much as it transforms and forgets.

Perhaps it is in these tensions that the singularity of Luo Mingjun’s work lies: beneath what seems to vanish, an extraordinary density; beneath calm, a form of rebellion. Her painting is one of withdrawal and silence; its power derives precisely from this restraint.

A bowl, a pin, a single cloud, or a figure seen from behind walking through the middle of nowhere: with very little, Luo Mingjun opens up a vast field of meaning.

Her paintings, however spare, carry within them the complexity of a life. They are the work of a woman who grew up in Maoist China, took part in the avant-garde movements that emerged after the Cultural Revolution, left her country, and changed both language and territory. From her years with Group O, Luo Mingjun retained an undiminished curiosity and a taste for experimentation; from her path between China and Europe, the determination to chart her own course.

Across this trajectory — from the collective and artistic emancipation of the 1980s to an emancipation that is profoundly personal — one imperative remains: never to leave it to

others to define her place. Asked what drives her to continue creating today, Luo Mingjun answers in just a few words: “to become even freer.”

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