

Beijing to Cleveland: Liu Wei Reveals Invisible Cities to Us



Cleveland Museum of Art

Oct 18 · 6 min read ★

By Yi Cao, curatorial assistant, moCa Cleveland



Installation view at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Image courtesy David Brichford for Cleveland Museum of Art.

Open now, the CMA presents *Liu Wei: Invisible Cities*, a collaborative exhibition with the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland. This is the first solo US museum exhibition

devoted to internationally renowned artist Liu Wei. Works are displayed concurrently at both institutions, offering an expansive view of the artist's diverse practice. In the essay below, moCa Curatorial Assistant Yi Cao, who worked closely on this exhibition, discusses the artist's career, and the moCa Cleveland/CMA collaboration.

. . .



Installation view: Liu Wei: *Invisible Cities*, moCa Cleveland, 2019. Photo: Field Studio

An artist who lives and works in China, Liu Wei creates work that transcends geographical boundaries, alerting the audience to the complex human experiences in our cities' hidden conditions and invisible constructions. On view at both the Cleveland Museum of Art and moCa Cleveland, *Liu Wei: Invisible Cities* features both a range of works from nearly 15 years of his artistic career, as well as new installations specifically created in response to the architecture of the exhibition spaces. At the opening event of the second part of the exhibition at CMA on Oct 11, 2019, CMA director Bill Griswold said "We are thrilled that, in this project — and, increasingly, in others — we are partnering with our friends at moCa. Here in Cleveland, collaboration is a widely shared objective. But, for countless reasons, it is not always easy to achieve. But we could not imagine better partners. Nor can I think of a venue more appropriate for Liu Wei's geometric abstractions or architectonic installations than the galleries in moCa's

dramatic Fashid Moussavi building.” moCa Cleveland Director Jill Snyder explained, “It is the third exhibition project that the two museums have formally collaborated on. We look forward to see how the exhibition sparks ideas and fosters dialogue in our city.”



Installation view at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Image courtesy David Brichford for Cleveland Museum of Art.

In fact, the exhibition’s title is in dialogue with Italo Calvino’s 1972 book, *Invisible Cities*, which recounts a fictional conversation about 55 imagined cities between Marco Polo and the thirteenth-century Mongol Emperor Kublai Khan. Just as the book is a poetic analysis of power and domination in city constructions rather than one of physical and ideological references, so too is Liu Wei’s work. The CMA’s installation is anchored by *Panorama №2* (2015–16), a recent gift from Richard and Michelle Jeschelnig.



Installation view at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Image courtesy David Brichford for Cleveland Museum of Art.



Panorama №2, 2015–16. Liu Wei (Chinese, b. 1972). Oil on canvas; 350 x 200 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. Richard Jeschelnig and Mrs. Michelle Shan Jeschelnig, 2017.103

The painting is a large-scale diptych that evokes a fast-rising urban skyline of cities like Beijing. In dialogue with this and another recent painting is a constellation of seven large-scale building-like sculptures made of rawhide dog chews, *Love It! Bite It!* (2014), featuring a dystopian city that manifests remnants of persecution by the powers that be, the passage of time, and decay. Liu Wei provides a metaphor: “What you can’t see is a big dog in the room, chopping and gobbling its big toys. The dog’s hunger for food is the same as a human’s desire for power.” The installation converses with other examples in the museum’s contemporary art galleries. You might encounter the “invisible big dog” corrupting the “power” in President Reagan’s portrait in Rachel Harrison’s *Hans Haacke with Sculpture* (2005), the silent grid in Agnes Martins’s *The City* (1996), and, perhaps, the biomorphic figures in Elizabeth Murray’s *Keyhole* (1982).



Installation view: Liu Wei: *Invisible Cities*, moCa Cleveland, 2019. Photo: Field Studio

Liu Wei poses a central question to his audience: “Who possesses the power to make people believe in things that can’t be experienced in person?” At moCa, Liu Wei’s creative investigation into scientists’ definition of the utterly imperceptible microworld

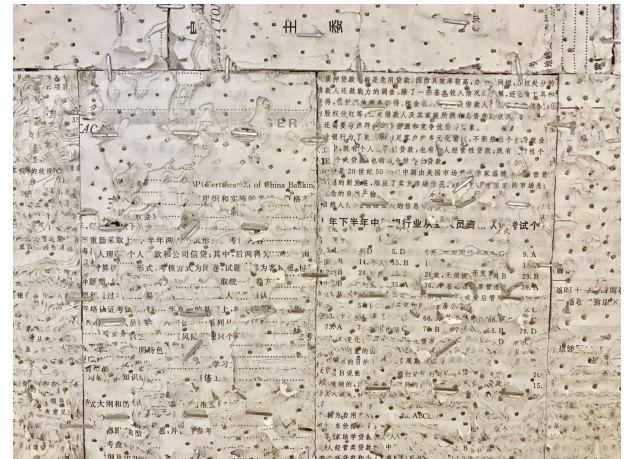
can be found in his new work *Microcosm* (2019). The 15-by-18-by-13-foot glass cube contains curving polished metal plates and showcases the artist's own imaginative and dynamic microworld — one that employs color, shape, and light to distill emotions of fear, unease, and astonishment from human's perception of dense scientific interpretation. The industrial materials in the installation not only remind us of the urbanization process, but also echo moCa's unique architecture, a mirror-finished cube clad in black stainless steel with a facade that reflects changing light and weather, and the surrounded city landscape.

This connectivity is also present in Liu Wei's paintings, whose chopped geometrics and layered components link to the surrounding sculptural installations to produce a unified spatial experience across mediums. Walking around the galleries, visitors have the sense of being immersed in a bustling city through the complex and systematic structure of digitally executed lines and patterns in the paintings. The paintings beckon us to consider the vast opacity of the city: the complex and varied life teeming behind seemingly endless concrete and stone, the constrained visual plane at the ground level amid towering vertices, and the saturation of data transmitted through the internet. Digital technology, coupled with the artist's broad imagination, brings the face of a rapidly transforming city like Beijing to the canvas. To complete the exhibition experience, visitors are asked to travel between the CMA and moCa. This half-mile exposure to the actual city of Cleveland urges visitors to reexamine the local realities in the artist's distinctive sense of disruption and reconstruction.



Installation view: Liu Wei: *Invisible Cities*, moCa Cleveland, 2019. Photo: Field Studio

This perception of the real world in an interruptive way can also be found in the installation *New World* (2019). Here, the artist regroups his *Antimatter* sculptures made of electric appliances individually cut and deconstructed in 2006, in order to form a new body of work. Liu explains the original work, “That was when second-hand everyday household items appeared in the market for migrant workers to access for the first time in the rural-urban fringe in the city of Beijing. It meant a whole new world to them!” Liu inverted the inside and outside of air conditioners, microwaves, and refrigerators in order to expose only the most basic functions that the household items can provide to satisfy human needs: weight, volume, and speed. In this manner, the piece unmask the complex and rooted human social hierarchy that underpins the rapid development of cities.



"Liu Wei, detail of *Look! Book! (2014)*. Image courtesy of Yi Cao.

“Cutting,” a signature practice for the artist since 1998, is also employed in the installation works *Look! Books* (2014) and *Library V–III* (2014), in which the artist experiments with the use of compressed print materials and books as a medium for sculpture. Majestically standing in front of viewers, the meticulously carved sculptures, made up of a variety of geometric forms, present a forbidding, challenging landscape of monoliths that rise from the ground like an impassable mountain range or a complex acropolis. As Liu explains, “Books are the carriers of knowledge, but also a reliable source for people to collectively make sense of the past, present, and future realities of a city. Using ‘cut’ to destroy books is a symbolic way to interrupt knowledge systems.”



Installation view: Liu Wei: *Invisible Cities*, moCa Cleveland, 2019. Photo: Field Studio

In a local Cleveland context, moCa's Chief Curator Courtenay Finn points out, "The change of the city is reflected in the change of physical space, whether it is the decline of industry, the transformation of architecture, gentrification, or the fact that people have formed different movement paths due to race in the history of the city." The exhibition does not discuss the history of identity or ideology, but rather what is expressed and hidden as we move forward. Liu Wei's work echoes Polo's description of cities as "fantastical, beguiling spaces where things are never as they seem," forging a path for us to see invisible truths in the collision between rapidly changing urban fabrics and increasingly incomprehensible reality.

. . .

Liu Wei: Invisible Cities is on view at the CMA through Sun, 2/16/20, and Sun, 1/5/20, at moCa Cleveland.