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LADY GAGA in MUDLER
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THE VANISHING

LIU BOLIN'S INTRIGUING SELF-PORTRAITS ELICIT QUESTIONS ABOUT THE ARTIST AND INDIVIDUAL, AS WELL AS A FEW HOW-DOES-HE-DO-IT GASPS OF WONDER

At first, the trompe l'oeil self-portraiture of Beijing-based artist Liu Bolin's "Hiding in the City" series seems like a profoundly more sophisticated version of Where's Waldo? But as you look beneath the intricately camouflaged surface—each image features the artist painted from head to toe, blending seamlessly into backgrounds ranging from a bulldozer to a

wall of graffiti—you're drawn into a deeper appreciation of the work's political critique. Liu began making the series in 2005, after the International Arts Camp at Beijing's Suo Jia Village, the largest artists' community in Asia, was demolished by the Chinese government. "I was there at the time, and I started to do this series [to protest] the government's atrocities," says Liu. "I wanted to use my work to show the state of artists in our society, and to call attention to the fact that their living spaces had not been protected."

While the political content of his work lends it conceptual gravitas, Liu's aesthetic is imbued with a wry humor that serves as the spoonful of sugar that helps it go down. As demonstrated by the anonymous Tank Man, who remained defiantly stationary in the face of an army tank during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, merely standing still can be an act of revolution. "Investigation of social politics has always been the main theme of my work," Liu explains. "The stillness of my body during the production of the work is a silent protest. I'm fighting for freedom, for the social status of the artist, with my body."

Fighting with the body is something Liu does with aplomb. The photographs from the series are so bewitchingly well-crafted that one assumes the magic hand of a retoucher must

have been involved. But this is far from the case. "Before we shoot the photo, I stand still, and my assistants apply the paint on me and try their best to paint me in the same color as the background," Liu explains. "Then we use the camera to record it. I need very strong willpower to steady myself. I feel like I am fighting against my nature, fighting with life, and I have to stand in stillness for my faith and ideals."

The recent art boom that has made many of China's artists increasingly well-known in the global art market has only intensified Liu's devotion to flipping the pretty, polished coin of commerce to reveal its tarnished underside. "The individual is still experiencing the history of our politics," he says. "China has experienced tremendous fortune and global attention in the past thirty years, but our political atmosphere has not changed." **Aimee Walleston**

Hiding in the City No. 83-Supermarket, 2009
Artwork Liu Bolin

Liu Bolin's "The Invisible Man" runs June 29-August 28, 2011, at Eli Klein Fine Art, New York. See more of Liu Bolin's work on vmagazine.com