

A16

## Appearing, And Disappearing, At Ground Zero



By ADRIANE QUINLAN

At 9:40 a.m. Thursday, a man stood across from the World Trade Center site covered in paint. With his whitened face, he looked, thought Koos Koning, a Dutch tourist, as though it were Sept. 11 all over again. "Maybe he came out of the World Trade Center with a white face and ashes." Really, the man, Liu Bolin, is a Chinese artist whose latest project — "Hiding in the City" — consists of painting himself and his clothes to resemble his setting so meticulously that he blends into the background. The resulting photographs look as though Mr. Liu has evaporated into British phone booths, Italian ruins and Chinese stadiums. This was his first trip to disappear in New York — for a show that opens at Eli Klein Fine Art in Soho on Wednesday — so his gallerist sent him a list of ideas: Grand Central, the Stock Exchange, a taxi and a bodega. Mr. Liu was insistent.

"I thought about where I wanted, and here is the first place that came to my mind."

His work is all about disappearance, and it seemed particularly fitting to blend into a space known for a building no longer there — especially Thursday morning, when it was foggy, and the Freedom Tower going up behind him seemed to vanish into the air.

Mr. Liu, who is lanky and chipper, arrived at the intersection of Cedar and Greenwich Streets at 7 a.m. wearing a regulation Chinese military uniform (he likes them for the starchy canvas texture and the tall collars). His entourage included a gallerist who ran out to buy Red Bulls, two young painters and an intern who scrubbed paint drips with pampers wipes.

It was a hoot for the men of Engine Company No. 10, on their stoop eating cereal, watching the crazy man get dabbed with paint.

First, Mr. Liu's assistants — trained in realist painting at the same traditional academy he attended — covered his body with tones matching what was behind him. A gallerist took a digital photo of Mr. Liu from the right angle and showed it to him. He nitpicked: the buildings should be better separated.

When Mr. Liu was covered, he looked like a man who had stepped out of a Rothko. His shins were painted in a gray field — the tones of the sidewalk — a blue fence ran across his abdomen, and above that the iron lat-



PHOTOGRAPHS TOP AND ABOVE BY ANGEL FRANCO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Liu Bolin, a Chinese artist, is covered head to toe in paint by his assistants, to blend into a scene at ground zero. He said he did not tire of standing: "There's something spiritual that keeps me calm. When you think of all the things that happened here." This was Mr. Liu's first time disappearing into a New York setting, and he did so at several locations in Lower Manhattan. His team's skill in blending him into backgrounds in other locations can be seen in the examples of his work, below.



tices of the Freedom Tower in the fog were presented as a mass of grayish rust among the white of the sky.

With the base layer in place, Mr. Liu marked the placement of his feet and dried off. He teetered back and forth, windmilled his arms, and drank Red Bull through a straw. He doesn't tire of standing: "There's something spiritual that keeps me calm. When you think of all the things that happened here."

It was in 2005, when the Chinese government raided an artists' village, that Mr. Liu started the project. He said he chooses sites that show that "there is always conflict between the individual and society." Art critics have seen in his work a commentary on individuals overlooked in cities, or on countries that "disappear" their citizens — as China had jailed dissident artist Ai Wei Wei, released just Wednesday.

Mr. Liu said he knew that to be a Chinese artist making political work was risky; the State could clamp down any time. "You never know when it will happen," he said, "But you have to prepare for it."

Elsewhere on his New York trip, Mr. Liu has blended into the bronze bull at Wall Street and into the Kenny Scharf mural at Bowery and Houston, as well as into a magazine rack at the gallery that shows his art.

On Thursday, once his paint had dried, Mr. Liu stood in place and let his assistants get down to the details. They concentrated on line-work — crisscrossing Mr. Bolin's form with lines corresponding to the edges of the sidewalk or the levels of the buildings. A final touch was writing "9/11" on Mr. Liu's sleeve — which corresponded to a sign on the National September 11 Memorial & Museum, which is

under construction.

It was most difficult to get the straight lines of the buildings. Drawing on crinkly fabric is tough enough, explained assistant Han Xu, but "his body is a 3-D model and we have to put it in a 2-D field."

By 9:55, the illusionists were satisfied. Light meters were tested, interns were dispatched to keep the street clear. Two construction workers stopped in the street to watch, briefly holding up a moving van that ruined a few shots. By 10:15, the shoot was over.

Mr. Liu peeled off his face paint, stripped off his jacket, and stood scrubbing at his blank face in the window of an F.D.N.Y. van. His jacket lay on the subway grates. Would he just throw it away? Oh no, he said. "This one is very meaningful to me."