

*The* CULTURE





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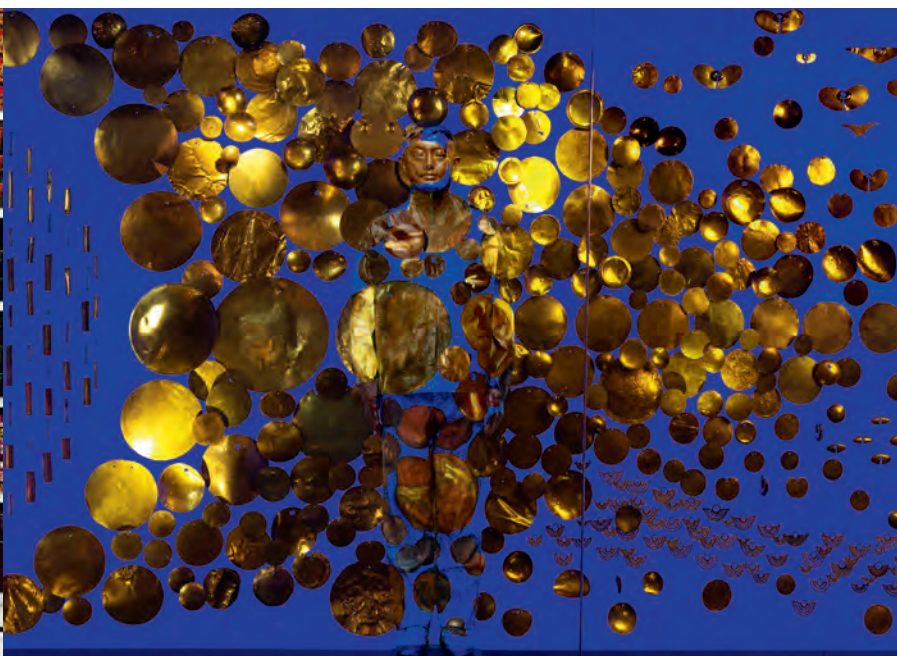
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*Hiding In The City - Red No. 2, 2012, Liu Bolin*

*Liu Bolin, the quiet Asian artist with a loud message, talks to Claire Turrell about what makes him shout.*



From left: *Instant Noodles* by Liu Bolin; *Hiding In Colombia - Gold Museum*, 2013, Liu Bolin

**T**he sleek New York-style loft in the Five Ring Art District of Beijing doesn't look like an artist's studio. In fact, it looks more like an office for a dynamic IT start-up. Whitewashed walls and polished wooden floors fill every room, and the atmosphere seems to appear calm and businesslike. Only the racks of red Chinese lanterns and large wooden tables covered in drying pieces of painted fabric reveal who really works here from morning till, well, after dark.

At one of the tables is Liu Bolin, 44, one of China's most well-known contemporary artists. He's busy slicking another layer of paint on one of his now-famous canvas suits that helps him camouflage himself with his surroundings. Over the past decade, Bolin's career has seen an extraordinary rise. His first *The Invisible Man* painting was done as a protest to help save the art college where he'd worked for 10 years. Now, he is being invited to paint himself into urban backdrops all over the world, from the Bird's Nest stadium in Beijing, to an aircraft carrier on Hudson Bay, New York.

What's more interesting is that he achieves this without the help of any digital retouching. He seamlessly hides himself in front of landmarks, water, and even other artists' artworks with the help of a canvas suit, brushes, and acrylic paint.

The Asian artist just showed at New York's Klein Sun Gallery. Titled 'Art Hacker', it featured his appropriation of classical masterpieces such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, juxtaposed with a photograph that depicted the tragedy of the 2015 Tianjin Explosions. Bolin is also quick to point out that his work involves both sculpture and photography "because the body used in the works is very important."

He quickly discovered this when he created his first *The Invisible Man* painting where he stood among the rubble of the Beijing International Art Camp. To show his anger, he camouflaged himself in grey paint and photographed himself standing among the ruins of the school he once adored. As simple as this artwork appeared, Bolin soon discovered that this "Where's Wally?" style image would gain more traction than a visible protestor with a banner. The fine art graduate, who had already gained some fame in the city with two successful sculpture and metalwork shows, was undergoing a sea-change. The tall, leather jacket-wearing artist was a rebel, but with a cause.

With his new style, the artist says he adopted military-style techniques. When giving a TEDx Talk, he joked that he was inspired by using the methods of a sniper: "When applying make-up, I used the sniper's method to better protect myself and to detect the enemy as he did."

After this first image received such success, Bolin decided to use the same technique to help speak on parts of the community who were as confused about the world as he was. He used his *The Invisible Man* shots to show how lives had been shattered when China became a market economy; and how 21.37 million people lost their jobs in China between 1998 and 2000. He painted these ghostly figures on the walls of the factory where they used to work—the people who had been left behind. Bolin knew that at any time he could be stopped by the government, but he decided to push on.

Bolin found a way to let people enjoy his work and comment on what he was passionate about. However, he was no longer happy to stand against

graffiti-ed walls and among rubble. He was now challenging himself to present even more intricate works on a much larger scale. When one of the Chinese food scandals broke, he created a mock-up of a supermarket in his studio, and camouflaged himself against racks of brightly coloured soft drinks, pots of noodles, and vegetables to campaign against their alleged cancer-creating contents.

This was before he decided to leave the safety of his studio in the Five Ring Art District (where he could control all factors) to take on more global concerns. It was then that his famous *Hiding In The City* series was born. The insatiable artist travelled to New York to camouflage himself in front of an aircraft carrier in the Hudson River, and Europe, where he painted himself into the sinking architecture of Venice. Not only were these locations more intricate, they were, once again, affected by nature—light, wind, rain, sun, and even snow could play havoc with a shoot. “The biggest challenge I met was shooting at the Bird’s Nest stadium in Beijing,” reveals Bolin. “As soon as I arrived it started to snow. All of the cameras started to freeze. I finally had to finish this piece empirically.”

Bolin, however, revels in these challenges. With each location, he will start by photographing the background so that his assistants have a template to work with. He will choose the right camera angle,

and then after an intern has been sent to keep any unwanted interlopers away, he will cover his skin in a gel mask to protect it from the paint. After donning a canvas suit that has been marked out into a grid, Bolin will invite his assistants (who trained at the same fine art college as him) to paint his body, face, and hair to match the background. The artists help Bolin track the works progress by taking snapshots of him on their phones and showing them to him as they go along. “I have to be careful to choose a background where I can successfully use this stealth technique,” says Bolin. “The finished piece needs to look convincing.”

Bolin can’t afford to move and ruin the photograph. He has to stand from between three to 10 hours in front of a location as his assistants paint his skin and hair to make the precise colours of the background. During this grueling process, the artist goes into a meditative state. “Even though I am motionless, I stay motivated because I am fighting for what I believe in,” he says. After creating more than 100 *The Invisible Man* pieces, he is now encouraging others to take part. Having more people hide in the scene, he believes, makes the shot more powerful. And even though these volunteers can be standing for up to four hours at a time, it hasn’t discouraged them from undergoing the same treatment. Not only did 100 people spend hours queuing up in New York to become part of a Bolin piece, but fashion designers like Angela Missoni, Alber Elbaz, and Jean Paul Gaultier agreed to be painted by him into their works, as did the rock band Bon Jovi.

However, it’s still in Beijing that he has created his favourite works so far. “Each work I’ve created comes with different challenges,” he says, “but the two that stand out for me the most are the laid-off workers and the supermarket series. This is when I started to face the problems of social development brought about by China’s economic development.” While he has attracted criticism for his more commercial pieces, Bolin still remains driven by areas that he believes are in contrast to the development of mankind. He doesn’t seem to worry about there being a shortage of material for him as he adds, “There are many things we create that curb the human’s survival factor.” ■

Tianjin Explosions, 2016, from the ‘Art Hacker’ exhibition

