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An Auto-Ethnographic Research in *See and Gain*

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*Exhibition;
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ABSTRACT

The research applied the methodologies of auto-ethnographical research and case study on artist Jiaqi Li's solo exhibition at Studio Gallery in Shanghai, 2025. Three core characteristics distinguish this exhibition from traditional ones: a critical response to the digital media era, an artist-led collaboration model between the artist and the gallery, and multidimensional experiments conducted at exhibition openings and academic events. The exhibition drew on the theories of "simulacra", "post-internet art", and "trompe l'oeil", and responded to the gap between "images" and "reality". At the same time, the study elaborates on the practical process of artist-led exhibition placement, as well as how to transform the exhibition from a static display to a dynamic, multi-sensory dialogue field through the introduction of psychological experiments and a series of lectures. *See and Gain* is not only a milestone for the artist himself, but also provides valuable reference cases for the contemporary art industry ecology.

INTRODUCTION

See and Gain was the Chinese young artist Jiaqi Li's fourth gallery solo exhibition, and it was his second time presenting a solo exhibition at Studio Gallery in Shanghai, from July 5th to August 16th, 2025 (Figure 1). The critical response to the digital media era, the artist-led cooperative mode between the artist and the gallery, and the bold experiment on exhibition opening and academic activities were the three things that made See and Gain distinguished from other exhibitions.

A critical response to the digital media era is urgent. After experiencing the hype between 2020 and 2023, the public focused on contemporary artists born in the 90s. There are Yifei Sun, Hang Gao, Dalun Lao, Yuxuan Shao, etc. Growing up with digital displays, AI, and VR headsets, technology is profoundly changing a new generation on their perception of the world. In everyday

life, where the digital and the physical are increasingly intertwined, artists are emerging whose work is born out of an "internet state of mind" (Archey & Peckham, 2014). Jiaqi Li's work sits among them. Li's work is a playful yet profound investigation into the nature of reality and illusion. And he keeps asking a question of how one should define "reality" in a world filled with unlimited copies of the original and digital manipulation (Baudrillard, 1994). Also, it is an ongoing inquiry by centuries of artists and philosophers. In the post-internet era, it bears a new urgency.

A new cooperative mode between artist and gallery is essential these years because the industry is experiencing a harder time. According to a recent survey of global collecting, the bubble of the gallery industry has decreased to a certain extent in recent years, and we are experiencing a transformation in which collectors are more cautious than in the past few years (McAn-

Figure 1 | Exhibition scene of *See and Gain*
© Image courtesy of Studio Gallery and Jiaqi Li, Shanghai, 2025

drew, 2025). See and Gain has gained valuable feedback and contributed considerably to the industry. The artist-led cooperative mode has been proven to be effective. As a tradition proposed by Studio Gallery, this new cooperative mode best delivers artists' intentions through on-site practice and conversation.

A multi-dimensional presentation is another highlight in See and Gain. Focusing on a single piece of work would not be able to unveil the whole picture. There were around 20 pieces of acrylic paintings, digital prints, and videos exhibited. There were two academic lectures, "Printed 'Trompe l'oeil' and Our Pictorialized Lives" and "The Art Journey of Jiaqi Li from 2017–2025", demonstrating Li's research and practice, respectively. An experimental experience, "Rubber Hand Illusion", for the viewers at the opening provided a better understanding of Li's worldview. The combination of the work, the talks, and the activities was to challenge the tradition of exhibition openings, which was the loop of reception and PDF sales, and try to generate more academic influence.

A CRITICAL RESPONSE THROUGH ART

Theoretical Framework

See and Gain aimed to argue about our daily sensations and how we define "reality". There is a well-known advertising annotation, "the images are for reference only; the actual product shall prevail." Jiaqi Li has long believed that the gap between "images" and "reality" is deeply intriguing. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard provided a powerful insight into Li's work. In Simulacra and Simulation, Baudrillard (1994) argued that in a media-saturated society, people lost the ability, or it could be effortless, to distinguish reality and the signs or symbols that represent it. That explains the reason that signs and symbols are key elements in Li's

paintings. In Baudrillard's hyperreal world, images no longer refer to an external reality, but only to other images. It creates a self-referential loop that detaches us from any sense of the real. And Li is drawn to such a looping process of images being captured, re-presented, and re-captured or perceived. The reflections or mirrored images in Li's painting are a response to today's "spectacle" (Debord, 1967) of mass media being predicted decades ago.

In a post-internet world, Li's work is also a reflection of our times. Post-internet describes a world where the internet has become an invisible force that shapes our perception of the world (Mosco, 2017). If Baudrillard diagnosed the cultural syndrome we are in, then "post-internet art" is the artistic practice born from this syndrome. And post-internet art is "a response to the internet culture, no matter the medium of the work. (Olson, 2012)" It is art that acknowledges the internet's profound impact on our social, political, and aesthetic lives. Yue Chen (2025)commented on Issy Wood's work that it is difficult to depict a scene to reflect our times, but depicting the "subtleties" of emotion would be more effective. Li's work is also an example of this sensibility. His collection of images from a wide range of online and offline sources, his use of a graphic design aesthetic that resembles 2000s web design, and his interest in the circulation and mutation of images are all hallmarks of a post-internet artistic practice.

The way Li processes the reflected or mirrored images, as mentioned earlier, is heavily influenced by a painting technique – trompe l'oeil. There has been an ongoing inquiry in art practice into using 2D images to create illusions. Trompe l'oeil, as an art technique with a long history, deceives viewers into believing that the painted objects actually exist. Trompe l'oeil has a long history in art. Zeuxis once depicted a bunch of grapes that birds flew down to peck at them. Parrhasius paint-

Figure 2 | Jiaqi Li, *Prince Trompe L'oeil*, **Acrylic on canvas, 140×100cm, 2025**
© Image courtesy of Studio Gallery and Jiaqi Li, Shanghai, 2025

ed a curtain so convincing that Zeuxis tried to pull it aside. This is known as the origin story of trompe l'oeil, which dates back to ancient Greece. And one of Li's works, Narcissus's Love (2025), directly responds to this history. By the Renaissance, illusionistic techniques were widely employed in mural and architecture. For example, in a Roman palace, the 17th-century architect Francesco Borromini painted sculptures and shrubs that follow the perspective lines to make a gallery appear visually deeper. Only by 1800, the term "trompe l'oeil" was formally coined by Boilly (Ihringová, 2021). Trompe l'oeil also offers a lens to examine our daily perception. Roger Caillois and Shepley's (1984) research into insect mimicry in biology challenges assumptions about camouflage and echoes Baudrillard, showing that the mechanism of deception does not truly fool predators, but it is an "impulse to merge with the environment". Similarly, trompe l'oeil deeply binds with its surroundings. In psychology and anthropology, scholars claim that trompe l'oeil requires psychological imagination to complete the illusion (Ferretti, 2020; Jiménez, 2013). Li's work, Prince Trompe L'oeil (2025) (Figure 2), which depicts a girl fan holding a cardboard cutout sign of a prince, is a response to the psychology study as well.

Related Work

In See and Gain, Li began to draw inspiration from the spirit of "Trompe-L'oeil" and explore the connections between concepts such as reality, virtuality, Simulacrum, reflection, and appearance. He integrated popular character images into the exploration and research of these concepts and cleverly presented them in his paintings with his unique humor and wisdom to form unexpected visual combinations. But, "what is reality?" is Li's long-time inquiry.

Li developed a profound interest in "vision and perception" during his student years, with his artistic trajectory unfolding across distinct phases. From 2017–18, he designed and wore "mall camouflage" for performance photography, responding to a socio-security incident. In 2018–19, he produced over 50 hollow paper sculptures using digital printing techniques to isolate objects' surface patterns. His 2020 project involved patching damaged walls and pavements in Chicago with color-printed paper fragments. During 2021–22, he painted television packaging boxes in oils on canvas, folding the canvases into three-dimensional box forms. Since 2023, he has returned to acrylic painting and readymade objects, exploring commercially packaged imagery from movies and advertising. Li has long believed that the gap between "images" and "reality" is deeply intriguing. It seems we have arrived in the world foretold by Baudrillard, one where "images replace reality", yet these two systems still appear unable to fully substitute for one another.

In addition to questioning "what is real" in visual perception, Li also applied this spirit to other details. For example, he used AI to age his own photos and created a virtual persona called "Old Li" as his image on social media platforms; feminized his own photos and created "Baowen He" as his writing secretary. So much so that some collectors ask, "Is Li really 69 years old?"

Li never tires of fabricating facts. In Down and Out Designer (2020), he plays a fashion designer whose inspiration has been stolen in response to a funny incident where an old work of his is identical to a product on the market. While gaining brand popularity, it also promotes its own works to a certain extent. The most direct inspiration for his work was comedian Nathan Fielder. Fielder played a surviving passenger in an aviation accident in the video work Blow Out (2007). The combination of authentic information from the Discovery Channel and some of Fielder's comedy performances makes it difficult to distinguish between truth and falsehood for a moment. But some performance traces suggest our answer. And the audience also gained comedic effects and reflections on life through questioning and enlightenment.

Method and Technique

Collage as a Method

Li's artistic practice is based on a clear and unique creative method, with the core of integrating collage and appropriation, and using it as the main method to engage in dialogue with this image-saturated world and indistinguishable facts.

Collage is the key to understanding its creative methodology. From cubism in the early 20th century to the present day, collage as an artistic technique has always posed challenges to authority, originality, and media purity (Taylor, 2004). However, Li expanded the significance of collage. In his practice, collage is no longer a literal cutting and pasting of paper-based materials; it transcends a formal technique and sublimates into a conceptual tool. It essentially involves the strategic combination of materials from different sources. That is because Li has been trained in an art studio that focuses on conceptual art and installation art. He is familiar with the nature of materials. And during his training as a student, he tends to combine different materials to create an installation. That, to him, is another form of collaging. The objects of its collage span different visual languages (painting and photography), different dimensions (two-dimensional and three-dimensional), and different sources (handmade and industrial ready-made products).

This expanded collage concept directly serves his practice of appropriation techniques. He did not create new images out of thin air, but chose to enter existing, vast public image database – especially popular culture image database – for selection, extraction, and reorganization. His collage materials include Disney princesses or superheroes; these highly recognized symbols have become the "material" for his collages. His appropriation is not simply copying, but a deep and personalized translation. For example, in Angel Takamiy (2025) (Figure 3), Li depicts an angel referencing Cherub Playing a Lute (1521) by Rosso Fiorentino. However, the angel holds an electronic guitar with a shape of an angel, which is identical to Japanese singer Toshihiko Takamizawa's guitar "ESP Ultimate Archangel". During the circulation of different images, he "embedded his philosophical reflections on reality and illusion into broader cultural references" (Studio Gallery, 2025). This combination creates a strong visual and conceptual "friction", forcing the audience to question how images are constructed, the truth under, and the meaning of representation. Through playful and absurd recombination, he stripped away the original commercial and ideological attributes or context of these symbols. Thus, his works are a mixture of painting, sculpture, and installation, echoing the idea of the historical avant-garde artist who wishes to bridge the gap between art and life (Krauss, 1986).

Materiality and Color Choice

Electronic visualization is dominating people's eyes. But Li believes that there should be a return and emphasis on touchable materials in artwork. His self-aware exploration of materiality is influenced by his training as a student as well. As collaging different materials is important, this focus on materiality has taken his works beyond pure visual exploration and into contemplation of texture and presence. In a documentation film, he showed that his hands were in the process of making wooden frames, mounting canvas, and applying base material. The thickness of the pigment stack or the gloss of the ready-made product has become a crucial part of its artistic language. He is against virtualization and de-materialization. The physical present is a statement in a digitalized world.

Figure 3: Jiaqi Li, *Angel Takamiy,* **Acrylic on canvas, pencil, 120×80cm, 2025**
© Image courtesy of Studio Gallery and Jiaqi Li, Shanghai, 2025

At the same time, his vivid, bold, and dazzling color system creates the visual impact of his works. Influenced by his father, Hollywood movies such as The Matrix (1999), Fast & Furious (2001), Jurassic Park (1993), and True Lies (1994) became Li's childhood visual aesthetic accumulation. The fictional, fantastical, and dramatic "Hollywood" aesthetic is embedded in Li's works. Meanwhile, the screen, as the objective environment of this generation's upbringing, becomes an important stylistic feature in his artworks. Besides, his palette was also significantly influenced by Internet culture, graphic design aesthetics, and 2D comics in the early 2000s (Studio Gallery, 2024). The high saturation, high contrast flat color blocks together create a visual style that is both retro and futuristic. "Like moths to fire." Li once said. As screens greatly change people's color

feelings, his aesthetic choice is not accidental; it accurately captures a common sense in the post-internet era: a visual experience that is both charming and illusory, shaped by the screen light sensation.

In many works, Li has demonstrated his delicate realism painting ability. In Nada Had To Choose (2025), Picasso's Breadman Illusion (2025), and The Principle of Symmetry (2025), he explored a method of using transparent colors such as Indian Yellow Hue and Transparent Red Iron Oxide for skin tone, which showcases both the facial structure of the characters and the delicate transition of light.
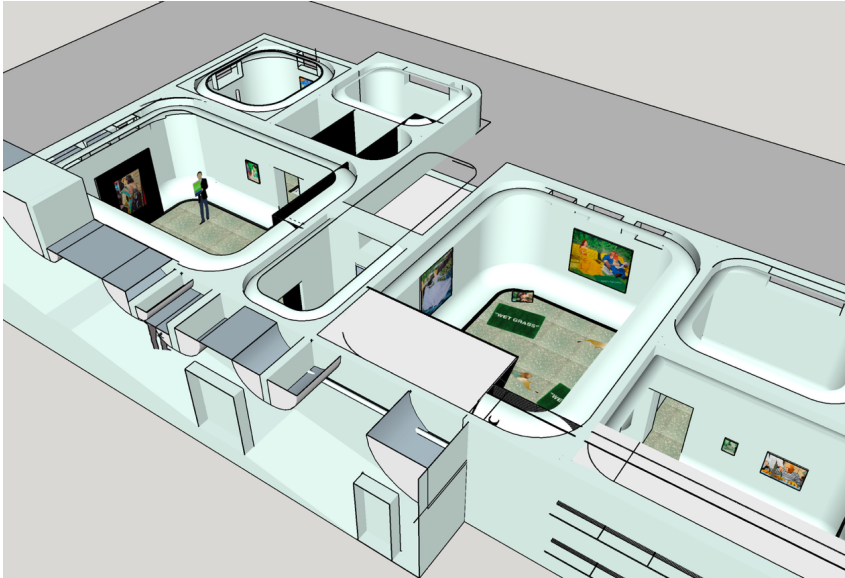
Figure 4 | *See and Gain* **exhibition planning model in SketchUp**
© Image courtesy of Studio Gallery and Jiaqi Li, Shanghai, 2025

THE ARTIST-LED COOPERATIVE MODE

As the first commercial gallery in Shanghai to support international artist residency, Studio Gallery, established in 2016, has always advocated a model of "artist-led" cooperation. This collaborative concept is fully reflected in See and Gain. This cooperative mode encouraged the artist not only to provide works, but deeply involved in the curation process, planning the exhibition scene together with the gallery. That is because the artist knows their work best. This proposal comes from Celine Zhuang, the founder of the gallery, whose been training as a sculptor during her student age as well. In the conversation between the artist and the gallery, both parties agreed that the gallery space should not passively serve as a "white cube" (O'doherty, 1999), merely transporting and displaying works from the artist's studio. On the contrary, the core purpose of curatorial activities is to present the exhibition logic clearly from all aspects. Only that can maximize the power of the works.

The intention was to treat the entire exhibition as an organic whole, as a single artwork. And the curation started with putting artworks into a gallery model in SketchUp (Figure 4). Jiaqi Li placed over 20 pieces of his artworks in different media across four gallery halls. The main hall at the entrance contained various larger paintings depicting princes and princesses. One other larger hall featured works focusing on reflections, mirrored images, and commercial representation. One smaller hall exhibited three works with the theme of Picasso and his bread-shaped hands. And the last smaller hall with Angel Takamiy enhanced the spiritual vibe with a church arrangement.

There was a back-and-forth negotiation between Li and the gallery that lasted two weeks. And after Li arrived at the gallery space about one week before the opening, more adjustments were made according to the reality. For example, the sticker with the words "wet grass" was changed into Greenland's shape, for multiple reference meanings. Light Steel Keel Composite Wall was constructed on-site to create a floating illusion of the artwork. And a table made of PC Sunlight Plates was used to mimic a water reflection for the work Narcissus's Love. The overall lighting was bright with small windows open, so there was natural lighting as a supplement. We agreed that nurtural light would allow all color to perform their best. In a way, the light outside the windows is utilized to echo the content of a few works (e.g., car back lights echoed with the red color on Prince Trompe L'oeil, and the shade of leaves echoed with the context of Wet Grass Accord).

A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL PRESENTATION

Based on the artist-led cooperation model, See and Gain was able to break through the limitations of static display and present itself as a cross-media, dynamic, and bold experimental exhibition. Its multidimensionality is first reflected in the composition of the exhibition content: in addition to Li's artworks, the exhibition included experimental experience activities on the opening day and two academic lectures. Several events aim to transform the exhibition from a static display into a dynamic and dialogical field.

As part of a presentation strategy, the "Rubber Hand Illusion" experience activity on the opening day aims to reproduce a classic psychological experiment proposed by Botvinick and Cohen in 1998. This experiment is used to study the mechanism of human self-perception of the body (body ownership) (Kammers et al., 2009). At the scene where the artist served as the experimenter, volunteer participants were induced to incorporate their rubber hands into their own bodily perception by synchronously stimulating their real hands outside

their sight and their rubber hands in their sight. When the experimenter (the artist) finally hits the prosthetic hand with a hammer, it triggers a contraction avoidance reaction of the real hand of the experimental subject. Over 10 people participated in this experience. This event extends the theme of the exhibition from "viewing" to the level of "full-perception".

The dimensions of exhibitions are also expanded through the construction of theory and discourse. The special lecture "Printed 'Trompe l'oeil' and Our Pictorialized Lives" on July 4th, 2025, showcases Li's academic research beyond artistic practice. He explores how the technique of (printed) trompe l'oeil has transformed from art to a popular visual tool (such as forest textures on construction site fences), and analyzes its history and related contemporary art practice. The other event, "The Art Journey of Li Jiaqi from 2017–2025" on July 5th, 2025, reviewed how Li lived and worked across Beijing, Glasgow, and Chicago, and developed an interest between "vision" and "reality" through humorous and absurd techniques (such as the "collage" method). The talk showcased his interdisciplinary thinking between sculpture, paper, and painting.

In terms of other documentational materials, they show Li's ongoing research on perception and reality. Paper and video documents included his video essay Effective Ineffectiveness: Facts About Space Collage (2020), the journal article Research of Social Visual Phenomenon: Space Collage (2022), and a university seminar presentation titled Printed Trompe-l'oeil: Urban Visual Tricks (2025).

CONCLUSION

See and Gain, as a milestone solo exhibition for Jiaqi Li, was a novel experiment in three aspects: the critical response to the digital media era, the artist-led cooperative mode between the artist and the gallery, and the bold experiment on exhibition opening and academic activities. As a young artist, Li actively embraces our times. The artist-led gallery cooperation mode maximized both parties' potential. The bold experiment on the opening reception, other well-designed activities, and post-documentation provided a vivid example of a young artist's hard work for the industry ecosystem.

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