

Lu Xinjian

CITY DNA III

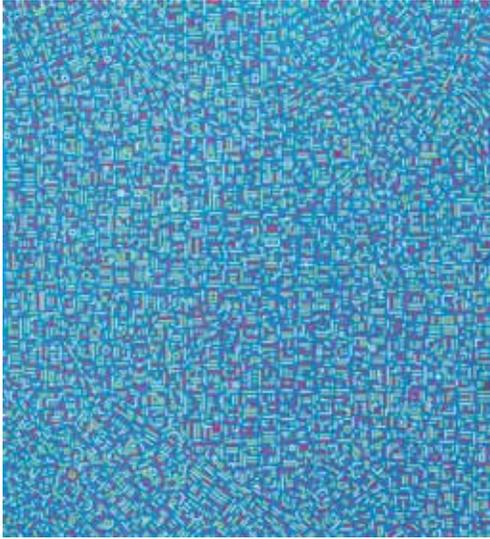
LU XINJIAN

City DNA San Diego

2011

Acrylic on canvas, 168 x 154 cm.

Courtesy the artist and Fabien Fryns
Fine Art, Los Angeles.



In 1858, Felix Nadar floated above Paris in a hot air balloon to produce the world's first aerial photographs, instantly transforming the way we viewed and conceptualized cities. Today, Chinese artist Lu Xinjian uses a recent innovation, Google Earth, to traverse the globe and comment on the way we think about its metropolises. Lu maps top-down views of cities around the world and transcribes his findings into abstracted cityscape paintings. At Fabien Fryns the artist presented the third incarnation of his cityscape series, "City DNA III" (2011), with renderings of Las Vegas and a number of Californian locales including Los Angeles, Hollywood and San Francisco.

Lu makes work that holds relevance and interest across cultures; he is a product of the global world, democratized through technology as much as mobility. Born in China's Jiangsu Province in 1977 and currently based in Shanghai, Lu received his masters in Interactive Media and Environments at the Frank Mohr Institute, Netherlands. His five-year-old painting practice calls on the tools of his former trade: he uses Adobe Illustrator and a cutting plotter (a machine used to cut intricate designs) to achieve the bold, graphic aesthetic of his acrylic-on-canvas works. For subject matter, Lu retrieves a satellite view of a city using Google Earth, simplifying the topography into basic geometric shapes on his computer. Discernible landmarks and forms are further reduced and rendered almost unrecognizable as Lu plots and paints the shapes on a monochrome background in a limited, three- or four-color palette.

The ongoing "City DNA" series, initiated with *City DNA New York No. 1* (2009), owes a clear debt to De Stijl, the abstract art and modern architecture movement promoted by artists such as Dutch painter Piet Mondrian. Coining the term

"Neo-Plasticism" for his new distilled aesthetic, Mondrian wrote in 1919: "As a pure representation of the human mind, art will express itself in an aesthetically purified . . . abstract form . . . in the straight line and the clearly defined primary color." Lu found particular resonance with Mondrian's seminal *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942–43), in which an overhead view of Manhattan is reduced to primary colors and pulsating rectangles, squares and lines, embodying the energy and essence of the city's jazz beats and urban bustle.

In Lu's first city works, viewers can trace the outlines and shapes to recognizable landmarks—the arterial roads leading up to the Colosseum in Rome, for example. The game-like diversion led Lu to rethink his strategy and zoom out the view in Google Earth for successive works, as his desired intention was the anonymity of worldwide locales, and not to capture nostalgia or emotion.

As the title of the series suggests, Lu has developed a uniform visual language reminiscent of the genetic code in a strand of DNA—in the paintings, curved and circular patterns symbolize organic, natural bodies, while straight lines and squares denote man-made structures. The ten works, apart from variation in color, look very similar to one another in form. But, as the vivid shapes vibrate and hum on the bright monochrome background, evoking the pulse of a populated city, they are far from monotonous. The canvases are human-scale in size and seem to envelope the viewer in urban sprawl.

Though he has traveled extensively throughout Europe, Lu has never been to many of the cities depicted in his "City DNA" series. He did not attend his show in Los Angeles, despite the fact that it was his first solo exhibition in the United States and his biggest career moment to date on the world stage. Indeed, these indications of unadventurous tendencies support the theory of the "generic city" proposed by Rem Koolhaas, Lu's second greatest inspiration, who is quoted in the exhibition catalog: "We all complain that we are confronted by urban environments that are completely similar. We say we want to create beauty, identity, quality, singularity. And yet, maybe in truth these cities that we have are desired. Maybe their very characterlessness provides the best context for living."

Is Lu presenting us with a standardization of cities? Perhaps it is this "characterlessness" that lends the paintings a certain vacuousness, despite their visual impact. But rather than being an alienating factor, the faceless sameness of Lu's cities provides a sense of familiarity, as the images reflect the 21st-century urban environment we have built for ourselves.

JENNIFER S. LI