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Stay Connected: Art and China Since 2008

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Technology & the Internet

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Lu Pingyuan (born 1984 in Jinhua, lives in Shanghai)

James Stanley—The Seventh Earl of Derby (1607–2016) (2016)

In 2016, Lu Pingyuan arrived in Manchester for a residency at the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art (now esea contemporary). While visiting the nearby town of Bolton, the artist claimed to have captured a four-century-old ghost and sealed it in a shiny metal canister.

“Mr. Ghost,” as Lu called him, had a rather illustrious past. He was James Stanley, seventh Earl of Derby, and was born in 1607. Captured after the defeat of Royalist forces during the English Civil War and sentenced to death in 1651, Stanley reportedly had his final meal at Ye Olde Man and Scythe, a public house in Bolton, before being executed outside its doors. His spirit, so the legend goes, never left, becoming one of the pub’s most famous “regulars.” Allegedly, he was even caught on security camera footage which went viral online.

Lu Pingyuan has long been fascinated by ghost stories and folk legends. He writes his own ghost stories (*Story* series, 2012–), recounts them to children (*Where Is Grandma?*, 2014), and once claimed to have dreamt of the late artist On Kawara, who instructed him to continue the *Today* series on his behalf (*On Kawara: Today Series*, 2014–). During his residency in Manchester, Lu sought “supernatural material” as inspiration and fixed his attention on the ghost of James Stanley. Employing what he describes as a “space-shifting technique,” Lu proclaimed that he had sealed the entire haunted pub into a canister. He then engraved the years “1607–2016” on the canister, marking the span of Stanley’s earthly existence.

This act did not go unnoticed. Days later, *The Bolton News* ran the headline: “Ghost of Ye Olde Man and Scythe ‘stolen’ by Chinese artist.” The story took on a life of its own. The incident underscores a certain historical irony when considered alongside the history of British soldiers and explorers looting Chinese relics, silver, and minerals—including symbols of temporal sovereignty, cultural identity, and spiritual significance. Here, what Lu traps in the canister is not only a ghost but a slice of time and space itself. In the Western-dominated art world, Chinese artists are often expected to present recognizably “Chinese” images. By stealing a British ghost, Lu reverses the colonial logic, past and present.

Lu’s project invites numerous questions about the nature of artistic creation, specifically the difficulty in delineating between contemporary art, history, the media, and belief in the supernatural. For Lu, ghosts and art are elusive, mercurial, and difficult to grasp. The artist strategically reclaims and re-activates a traditionally repressed realm, turning the ghost into a rhetoric that crosses borders and languages. Lu warns: “Please do not open this canister lightly.” The warning feels more like an invitation to join in a game of stories, memory, phantoms, and identity, to step inside the tale and inhabit one of its roles—believer, skeptic, or conjurer.

(NXY; tr. BYH)

James Stanley—The Seventh Earl of Derby (1607–2016)

Text, metal container, 2016

Selected Exhibitions

James Stanley—The Seventh Earl of Derby, solo exhibition, the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art (now esea contemporary), Manchester, August 5–October 16, 2016.



James Stanley—The Seventh Earl of Derby (1607–2016) (2016)

1 Portrait of James Stanley, the Seventh Earl of Derby 2 The “ghostly” image of James Stanley discovered in Ye Olde Man and Scythe pub 3 Email from Richard Greenwood, owner of the pub, to the artist 4 Exhibition information for Lu Pingyuan’s solo exhibition in *Manchester Evening News* 5 Report from *The Bolton News* about Lu Pingyuan “stealing” ghosts 6 Displays about James Stanley’s personal history in the pub 7 The process of making metal cans 8 Labels on the metal cans 9 View of Lu Pingyuan’s exhibition 10 Address of Ye Olde Man and Scythe pub as recorded by the artist 11 Email from Daniel Holland, reporter for *The Bolton News*, to the artist 12 Metal cans at Lu Pingyuan’s solo exhibition 13 Exhibition poster

Acknowledgments

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