



Liu Shiyuan, *Almost like Rebar No. 3*, 2018, C-print in artist's frame, 50 x 62 3/4".

Liu Shiyuan

Tanya Bonakdar Gallery

Replete with footage of cloud formations, bird's-eye views of forest streams, and koi fish, all set to a kalimba-driven soundtrack, the initial shots of Liu Shiyuan's twenty-two-minute video *Isolated Above, Connected Down* (all works 2018) reminded one of the gentle scene-setting of a David Attenborough documentary. But the tone of Liu's video, which served as the cornerstone of the artist's debut solo show in New York, quickly departs from that of the beloved British naturalist, devolving into a dark comedy of manners that showcases the inanity of human social interaction. The two protagonists

of this story—portrayed by the brilliant Swedish actors Lisa Carlehed and Anders Mossling—spar verbally across a dinner table. Over forkfuls of food, they articulate diverging opinions on how to raise their child, the potential adverse health effects of chemically treated takeaway coffee cups, and the fates of bees. Throughout, they cite seminal twentieth-century museum and gallery exhibition titles and theoretical concepts from the annals of art history, philosophy, and political economics—all perhaps useful springboards for generating dialogue, but a gambit that serves more to baffle and distract than to engage viewers, even those who catch the references. Far more captivating is the dynamic between Liu’s couple. They bicker irrationally and viciously—as couples do. “You know what? Let’s switch seats. You are ruining the energy here. . . . You are turning this into the shitty corner,” declares Carlehed as the unnamed wife, her rant accurately illustrating how limited leverage of theory can be when domestic policies come into play. The video cuts away and ends with footage of a bee apparently gorging itself on nectar and then expiring. Bees, as any concerned citizen knows, are experiencing a worldwide die-off likely caused by pesticides, loss of habitat, and malnutrition, and their plight suggests a grave forecast for the ecosystem they pollinate. But, as Liu indicates, too much of a good thing can be just as deleterious as its lack.

Liu filled Bonakdar’s second-floor gallery with impeccably crafted photographic collages printed at 400 dpi to hyperreal effect. These presented a glut of images largely pulled from reject stock-image websites and thus available for use without copyright clearance. In contrast to the meticulously scripted and narrative-driven video, the collages seemed to have been assembled according to whim; their contents were thematically suggestive but nonprescriptive. The prints incorporate photographs taken by Liu together with masses of filmstrip-scale photographs from image-sharing sites. Many of these are consecutive stills from uncopyrighted video footage, presented in a grid format to foreground pattern. These eclectic collages suggest the near-limitless possibilities available to perusers of such sites, evoking a fictional, bunkered image connoisseur with infinite threads from which to pull, but no sweater. In *Almost like Rebar No. 3*, Liu contrasts a grid of multiple stills of a stock-image couple engaged in a heated argument with a commercial-reject photograph of two spooning croissants. The artist demonstrates how the emotional tenor of *Isolated Above, Connected Down* is flattened by the churning content mill that calls for endless pantomimes of it, only to unceremoniously relegate these representations to the digital trash heap in an implicit devaluation of the work involved in their production.

This exhibition was a reminder of the tenuous nature of an image’s worth—both emotionally, in its ability to elicit a response from its viewer, and monetarily, in its appeal to media outlets hoping to grab the attention of their desired demographic. From an embarrassment of riches, Liu creates juxtapositions that cumulatively infuse

the stock images with the feeling they have lost. One does not necessarily need to know that Liu was nursing when she came across the image of a baby and a nipple—according to her the most common image-search result when googling “baby breastfeeding”—to experience unease at seeing it paired with multiple images of a bird of prey in *Almost like Rebar No. 6*. The point, she seems to imply, is that while meaning is mutable, the human desire to communicate is as inexhaustible as the ocean of images that would dilute it.

—[Cat Kron](#)