

David Diao, Becky Howland

March 1 - April 6, 2025

In the mid 1970s, David Diao and Becky Howland met at the Ron Clark-led Whitney Independent Study Program, Diao as a faculty member and Howland a student.

Around a decade later, Howland would premiere her series of sculptures modeled after electrical transmission towers at MoMA PS1 in Long Island City, objects which she once described as “omnipresent symbols of energy production, power distribution, and authoritarian control...unbidden figures marching all over the landscape”¹. Emblematic of Howland’s larger project of sardonic commentary on the quietness of power, the towers are sculptures whose formal elegance belies their charged subject matter. A co-founder of the artist-run venue and community center ABC No Rio, a project which itself evolved out of the legendary 1980 squatter-exhibition *The Real Estate Show*, Howland’s critical vision was born out of her early confrontations with corporate hegemony and its contaminating effects on community, culture, and the environment. Perhaps the most iconic image in her vocabulary next to the towers is the octopus whose tentacles hold in their vise-grip a knife, a wad of money, and a tenement building, an image which Howland wheat-pasted on the front of the building that housed *The Real Estate Show*. The sculpture on view is the smallest of Howland’s original seven transmission towers shown at PS1 in 1986.

Around the same time as Howland’s PS1 show, Diao, after two decades of exploring non-objective strategies in abstraction, would begin to infiltrate references to Modernism into his work, marking a turning point in his career. His 1984 painting *On Our Land*, his first after a two-year hiatus from painting, was also the first to directly appropriate found imagery, pairing a composition by the Suprematist Ilya Chashik from 1920 with the Palestinian flag. He has since produced an astounding body of work following this method, plucking material out of the scrap-heap of 20th century art history that, in the three decades hence, has ranged from the invitation card for Picasso’s 1939 MoMA retrospective *Picasso: 40 Years of His Art* (in which Diao swapped Picasso’s name with his own) to diagrams of the cemetery in Long Island where Jackson Pollock, Ad Reinhardt, Frank O’Hara, Lee Krasner, and Harold Rosenberg, among others, are buried. In each of Diao’s paintings is a marriage of form and content, the former nearly always guided by the latter, Diao’s tongue kept firmly in his cheek. The painting in this show, *Polish Constructivism (Blue 2)*, was made this year and is one of several in a series whose rigid, near-monochrome composition is a direct appropriation of Władysław Strzemiński’s *Architectonic Composition 9c* of 1929.

Diao and Howland both live and work in Tribeca.

¹ Becky Howland and Jocelyn Miller, “Power House: Becky Howland at MoMA PS1, Then and Now”, Medium, March 2017.

David Diao (b. 1943, Chengdu, China) lives and works in New York. His most recent solo exhibition *Put to The Test*, a survey of his explorations in color, was held at Greene Naftali, New York, this year. Institutional solo exhibitions have been held at the Gund Gallery at Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio (2017); Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2015); The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut (2014); The Glass House, New Canaan, Connecticut (2014); École National d'Art de Dijon, France (1992); and Musée d'Art Moderne, Saint-Étienne, France (1989). Notable group exhibitions include 80WSE Gallery, New York University (2024); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2023); M+, Hong Kong (2021); Le Consortium, Dijon (2019); Jeffrey Stark, New York (2018); Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (2014); and the 2014 Whitney Biennial. Diao's work is in the collections of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Blanton Museum of Art, Austin; Brooklyn Museum, New York; Le Consortium, Dijon; Fonds national d'art contemporain, Paris; Fonds regional d'art contemporain, Brittany, France; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; M+ Collection, Hong Kong; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Taipei Fine Arts Museum; Vancouver Art Gallery; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, among others.

Becky Howland (b. 1951, Niagara Falls, NY) lives and works in New York. Solo exhibitions of her work have been held at 247365, New York (2016); Willoughby Sharp Gallery, New York (1988); MoMA PS1, New York (1986); ABC Rio, New York (1983); and Fashion Moda, New York (1981). The towers have been exhibited in various contexts since their debut at PS1, including Still House Projects, Brooklyn (2015); New Museum, New York (2004); University Galleries, Illinois State University (1992); Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati, Ohio (1987); and Piezo Electric Gallery, New York (1987). Additional notable group exhibitions include Swiss Institute, New York (2024); Elston Gallery, New York (1992); The Museum of Modern Art, New York (1989); Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden (1986); Sidney Janis Gallery, New York (1985); Artists Space, New York (1984); and The Real Estate Show, New York (1980), among others.