In Lu Xinjian’s obsessively meticulous aerial paintings of cities on Google Earth, including San Diego, Los Angeles, Palm Springs, Napa Valley and Monterey, among other places in or near California, he reconfigures architecture, landscape, human activity and infrastructure to short, crisp yet exclamatory lines, circles and squares, that are woven into continuous and colossal networks, each reassembling a unique pattern of a cityscape observed from a Google Earth satellite. Main avenues, town squares, shore lines, zigzagging rivers and defining mountain ranges can all be distinguishably recognized after only a momentary glance of scrutiny.

The curiosity about the aerial view of our earth can be dated back to as early as the beginning of the 16th century, when Jacopo de Barbari created his renowned topography of Venice in 1500. Leonardo Da Vinci was arguably the first artist to introduce the term of aerial perspective. In his painting Madonna of the Yarminder (1501-1507), for example, Da Vinci paints behind Madonna a range of mountains on the horizon viewed from a high elevation. By blurring the mountains and depleting the colors, Da Vinci establishes contrast between the near and far to articulate distance. Meanwhile veduta painting was popular in Italy and the Netherlands. The essence of veduta painting was the principles of perspective, in order to represent landscapes in a faithful enough manner to allow the locations to be identified. It was not until the inventions of hot air balloons and aircrafts, that men were finally able to fly. Equipped with a photographic camera, Frenchman Nadar began to take aerostatic photographs in 1858. By the early 20th century, Futurist artists in Italy, led by Marinetti, were eager to translate their experience of flying above open spaces and the constantly shifting aerial perspective on canvas in dynamic terms. Among them was the pioneer painter Fedele Azari. To heighten dynamism and energy in his paintings, Azari, adopting Cubist techniques of divisionism, combined visual elements of light and color with geometric shapes and volumes of scenery and architecture to envision aerial views seen through a pilot’s eyes. It was revolutionary. At the same time, Piet Mondrian and the neoplastist movement experimented with even more simplified forms, straight lines and prime colors to bring forth a new visual utopia. Inspired by American Jazz, Mondrian’s Broadway Boogie Woogie (1942-43) employs staccato beats of color and lines to represent the visionary grid plan of New York streets, rapid traffic and bright lights of Broadway, seen from a high-rise building. Once one has seen Broadway Boogie Woogie, the view from a skyscraper down into the streets is changed forever.

Fascinated with the principles of reconfiguration from cubism, futurism and neoplasticism, Lu Xinjian first incorporated constellations from the night sky and city landmarks illuminated by neon lights into a grid, when he lived in a high-rise apartment building in South Korea in 2008. When he later discovered Google Earth, his perspective of cities was forever changed. Google Earth affords one an endless opportunity to zoom in or zoom out on any place on the earth without leaving one’s home. The satellite views of Google Earth enable Lu to survey today’s city blueprints and urban developments with the simple click of a mouse. Prior to the California series, Lu painted other cities in Asia and Europe, including Amsterdam, Beijing, Brussels, Kyoto, Milan, New York City, Shanghai, Singapore, Paris and Venice, among others.

During the course of rearranging data collected from the satellite pictures, Lu is careful to avoid illustrating specific features of the places, but to present his visual interpretation of modern urban planning in the context of globalization in accordance with economic and natural laws. Lu eliminates the painting elements of perspective, light and depth; he solely relies on color, lines and composition to fulfill his artistic vision. The painstaking technique of masking adds precision to his vocabulary. The result is an abstract and conceptual approach to topography that decodes the environments that we are presumably familiar with. Recognizable landmarks are reduced and transformed into uniformed geometric shapes and lines. The characteristics of each city are expressed in colors and the elaborate pattern.

City DNA San Diego, 2011, employs the color of aqua blue as the metaphorical background to reflect beaches and the surfing culture that San Diego is identified with. The vivid colors of white, yellow and fuchsia of the motifs are derived from the colors on the flag of San Diego. It tells a tale of vitality and prosperity. Circles and curvy lines symbolize nature; straight lines and squares imply man-made structures. The meticulous composition faithfully reflects the city’s unique structural layout, like DNA of living organisms, as the title suggests. However, the goal of Lu’s paintings is not for the viewer to simply identify specific features of the cities, but to reevaluate the perception of our existent spaces in relation to our planet.

It’s noteworthy that in Lu’s paintings, distinctions between nature and man-made structures are seemingly lost. It is difficult to pinpoint where a city’s interior begins and where a city’s exterior ends. The ambiguity suggests a concern of the intervention of human footprints and urban developments into the natural environment in today’s world that is hungry for energy, productivity and inhabitable land. Influenced by Rem Koolhaas’ theories, such as Delirious New York, Lu uses his paintings to discuss how modern city planning impacts the use of land and resources for residential, commercial, institutional, and recreational purposes. While promoting economic prosperity and logistic functionality, modern city planning also diminishes cultural and geological identities and transforms cities to highly efficient and productive machines. Lu remarks that by comparison, patterns of ancient cities
are often radiating and labyrinthian. Small blocks of neighborhoods in Rome, for instance, form an extensive and uninterrupted city. On the contrary, the blueprints of cities in the new world are conveniently gridded. Roads are long, straight and continuous from north to south and from east to west, in effort to improve transportation and navigation. In a city, such as Los Angeles, neighborhoods are widely separated and spread out by freeways, mountains, industrial plants, office districts and shopping complexes. Human activities inevitably become subject to mobility. Communities become disconnected. "Bigger, taller and faster" have become modern day's urban-branding strategies, famously implemented in cities such as Las Vegas.

The new series of paintings by Lu Xinjian, titled City NDA III, focuses almost entirely on cities in or near California. These cities are all younger than 250 years. Most people associate California with notions of sunshine, beach, liberal lifestyle and Hollywood glam. Lu, who has never visited California himself, shares this romantic perception. His benevolence can be easily observed in the cheerful color schemes of his paintings. However, upon a closer scrutiny, an irony comes to the viewer's attention: the layouts of most of those cities are stunningly homogeneous. It reminds us of what Koolhaas calls the generic city: "The general urban condition is happening everywhere, and just the fact that it occurs in such enormous quantities must mean that it's habitable... Architecture can't do anything that the culture doesn't. 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."(1)

Lu’s paintings can be viewed as critical but optimistic graphic narratives of our cities and a changing ecology derived from Google Earth. With each painting, he expresses his desire for possibilities of intelligent and spiritual urban living and the harmonic coexistence between the natural and the artificial, between economics and humanity, and between cultural authenticity and productivity.

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(1) Interview with Rem Koolhaas, in Wired 4.07, July 1996.