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The Post-1990s Chinese Artists and Their Art: Xin Liu, Wa Liu, and Zipiao Zhang

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The Post-1990s Chinese Artists and Their Art: Xin Liu, Wa Liu, and Zipiao Zhang

Senior Project Submitted to The Division of the Arts of Bard College

by

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Introduction

Linear stories of Chinese contemporary art’s development have characteristically been formalistic ones. The domestic and international attention and narratives on contemporary Chinese art have not always been treated as essential to artistic progress. Art historians and critics in the West have generally given the genre of contemporary Chinese art a central role to play for political agenda. Concentrating on Chinese artists born in the 1960s and 70s whose young adulthood was in the transition of the Chinese government’s post-Mao dictatorship to the reform of the economy. While artists of the rising generation are surprisingly not receiving enough attention from the art history realm. This senior project concerns art produced by Chinese artists born in the 1990s who have been educated in the United States. By exploring the sources of inspiration of these artists and contrasting their work with other Chinese artists who were born in the 50s and 60s, we are able to examine the evolution of contemporary Chinese art. During the major social-economic transformation, many contemporary Chinese artists, such as Ai Weiwei, Cai Guoqiang, Gu Wenda, and Xu Bing, cautiously articulate the concept of a utopian socialist society in their specific visions. Some may take a more provocative position; while others sometimes create harmony as an approach to the concept. It is likely that the artistic intentions of these artists who experienced the 1989 Tiananmen incident create art with political ambitions. However, in the new decade of the 1990s, China’s economic reforms have already led to the formation of globalization. Artists who were born in the 90s live in a society that is led by economic reforms, in other words, a changed society that is composed of new social formations. Rather these young artists concern more about ideals of individual liberation and freedom which contrast with artists born in the middle of the twentieth century as individuals versus the state.
In the last decade, there was a new concept to refer to age groups in China as *dai*, which means generations. The icons mentioned earlier are often 60 *hou* and 70 *hou* (post-1960s and post-1970), and the three artists this paper discuss are all 90 *hou* (post-1990s). According to those born in the 1960s and 70s, who contributed directly during the opening policy, see the post-1990s youth as self-centered, materialistic, and superficial compared to members from the last century themselves. Thus, here comes a very distinctive difference between the two generations that is the subjectivity of creating art. The post-1990s come to the United States to explore diversity, cultural differences and broaden artistic tastes. Conversely, the older generation came to the United States to hold exhibitions or to teach. Although some of the big icons have lived in the United States for a long time and some of them are still living in the states, their styles and ideology were not influenced by Western art and education directly. The formation of artwork has always been complicated. Sometimes even the artists are not aware of the intentionality that they put in their work of art. The process of them being inspired in which whether it is knowledge learned from the school, the people they met, live, or work with, or the culture of the city they live in are all influential factors that will be elucidated in their works of art. This project will look at these young artists’ works and try to analyze all the possible influencers intentionally or unintentionally exercised by them.

Entering the twenty-first century, there are two important time nodes that created extraordinary changes in contemporary Chinese art. The first time node was when the Communists came to power in 1949. While the other was in 1989, the Tiananmen Incident. For thirty years after the establishment of the PRC government, the Party exerted tight control over the cultural life based on the Marxist-Maoist ideology that it is natural for the art of that period to be seen primarily as
a reflection of the expression of the political forces. This became obvious when Chairman Mao delivered his “Talks on Literature and Art” in Yan’an saying the principles of arts were to “serve the people.” During the 1950s and 60s, Chinese Art was divided into two major groups: peasant art and bourgeois art. The peasant art movement happened simultaneously with the Down to the Countryside Movement when art teachers were sent to the countryside to teach peasants how to paint. Most of these “peasant artists” worked for painting Communist propaganda for the Party. At the same time, the Central Academy advocated Guohua as bourgeois, an elite art form. Although it was controversial to promote Guohua because it had no use for the revolutionary communist society, leading Guohua masters and Maoist theorists claimed to only preserve the technique of Guohua and thus adapted it to depict modern life.

In the 1980s, the “New Wave” emerged that artists began reinventing their culture and artistic language. The most renowned contemporary Chinese artists of the current time performed a particular revolution in Chinese art history in which they represented an explosive answer to the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 70s. Their works often deliver the sense of loss and alienation as intellectuals being imprisoned to express their voices. In art, they showed depersonalized figures as well as the subversion of the big-character posters of the Cultural Revolution. Zhang Xiaogang, for instance, every single figure in his paintings is executed in the same way, emotionless, and the faces are identical. Zhang Xiaogang’s oil painting Family Series (1995) (Figure 1) reminds viewers back to the Chinese revolutionary past. The portraits were inspired by real family photos taken during the Cultural Revolution. The ghost look of the people suggests the horrible memories of collectivism. Xu Bing, on the contrary, focuses on the reform

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of Chinese characters. His installation, *Tianshu* (1987-1991) (Figure 2), known as “The Book of Heaven,” comprised long sheets of paper draped all over the space being exhibited. It is a project about language that consists of books and scrolls. The books and scrolls are composed of pictographs, the characters that Xu creates are similar to Chinese, but actually nonsense. He was inspired to do this project while living in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. Each graph is a thoughtful design of linear elements arranged within the rectangular parameters of Chinese pictographs. Xu worked for three years, creating over 4000 characters, carving wood blocks for each of the forms, and printing them in a Chinese-style four-volume set.²

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Figure 2 *Tianshu* by Xu Bing, 1987-91

The works of the older generation often paint in response to socio-political themes that are associated with the post-Mao era. While the younger generation of artists represents a new epoch, carrying marks of a new China with different realities. As the consequence of China’s Reform and Opening Up policy, the policies on culture and art have changed significantly over the last thirty years. The society is experiencing globalization, rapid urbanization, environmental crisis, as well as an intense digitalization. The artist Xin Liu is not only an artist but also an engineer, so her work is tightly connected with mechanism. Wa Liu majored in anthropology at
college and creates art with the help of neuroscience. Zipiao Zhang adopts the traditional Western painting technique to explore the meaning of self in this overwhelming society.

As someone who has overseas study experience, I am extremely interested in how artists deal with the issue of dual identity using their art. The artists selected all have study experiences in the United States. They have been trained systematically under the Western ideology of art, and this can be seen from the aesthetic of their artworks. These artists as Chinese, especially those who remain in the states after graduation, will always encounter the problem of finding their own identity and their own language to speak. When I was doing research for this project, I was able to become acquainted with a young Chinese artist whose name is Hu Shu. He was born and raised in the Southwest of China, Sichuan, and went to the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in 2009 and received a Bachelor’s degree in Fine Arts in 2013. Two years after graduating from the Sichuan Fine Art Institute, he went on pursuing knowledge at the Ecole Nationale Superieure des Beaux-Arts (National School of Fine Arts) in Paris and received a Master’s degree in Fine Arts in 2019. The conversation with Hu reinforced my assumption of artists’ sources of inspiration. He told me that everything he encounters in daily life is inspiring. The living environment is extremely important for him, and that is why he chooses to not live in his hometown after finishing his study in Paris. He believes that starting a new life in an unfamiliar city, living and working, will automatically stimulate sources of creation, and he is willing to invest his energy in feeling the differences between every place he has ever spent time in and comparing the stories and emotional experiences.³

³ Interview with Hu Shu by the author
Unlike the era when the icons were born, these young Chinese artists have already established their own visual languages that are more dynamic in practicing art as well as the intentional subjectivity. The art produced in the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century is often politically centered due to some extreme political collision of interests. The post-1960s and post-1970s artists were concentrating on satirizing the PRC’s cultural dictatorship and the revived Mao cult, exposing the sickness of the Chinese society, and proclaiming their response to the corrupted consumerism.\(^4\) However, since the Chinese government keeps economic development as the central focus, more families are now able to support their children to study overseas. The message presented by these young artists sometimes are more self-focused rather than being driven by political factors.

Xin Liu

Xin Liu was born in 1991, an artist who benefited from an education in the US has remained there, is also an engineer and currently the arts curator in the MIT Media Lab Space Exploration Initiative. Her signature project, Orbit Weaver, which was first performed on November 17th, 2017 in the parabolic flight operated by Zero-G Corp in Orlando, Florida is an ongoing project. It examines the interaction made between moving bodies in zero gravity. Liu claims the aim of this project is to “understand, create, and share the beautiful and sentimental moments of being weightless and lost in outer space.”5 Being inspired by the three-dimensional mobility of arachnids, Liu developed a hand-held device by studying how spiders move, and then reapplied similar principles to humans in zero gravity. Notably, as a particular point of inspiration, Liu cited a “ballooning” technique. It is a behavior in which spiders release one or more gossamer threads to fly through the air.6 The device the weaver holds in her hand is similar to a spider, the device will shoot a string out with a magnet on the tip to be attached to the surrounding surfaces. When the tip has censored the attachment, the device will rewind and drag the wearer with minimal impetus due to the zero-gravity environment. This project indicates the ability of human beings to regain control over their bodies and move freely through weightless space. In the video which documents Liu’s

first test of *Orbit Weaver*, she adds an inscription which is a poem by Walt Whiteman along with the graceful movement:

“A noiseless patient spider,
I mark’d where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark’d how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launch’d forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.
And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form’d, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.”

She also incorporates a Chinese version of the poem as part of the subtitles. I wondered why she uses a poem as more of a direct explanation of her project. She said it was a coincidence that she happened to read that poem by Whiteman in the process of completing *Orbit Weaver*. The poem, *A Noiseless Patient Spider*, explores the relationship between the individual self and the larger world. This inquiry of the relationship between self and the world is also what Liu wants to explore in her object. The poem depicts a spider being isolated in space but actively sending gossamer threads “out of itself,” seeking connection as it builds its web. The spider becomes a metaphor in this poem and the embodiment of Whiteman’s soul. The poem suggests every being in the world must use their skills to build connections searching for meaningful and emotional bonds. *Orbit Weaver* questions the relationship between human beings and gravity. Gravity will always be there no matter what, the weightless sensation is an emotional feeling rather than actual psychical weightlessness.

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The first performance of *Orbit Weaver* (Figure 3.1) of November 17th, 2017 was part of the

Figure 3.1 Xin Liu’s first Orbit Weaver performance, 2017, Florida

Figure 3.2 Illustration of how it works
inaugural parabolic flight launch initiated and supported by the Space Exploration Initiative, MIT Media Lab. The weightlessness was achieved by the airplane doing a parabolic trajectory. When the airplane free fell at 32,000 feet, everything inside the airplane experienced zero gravity. The zero-gravity flight comprised 20 paraboles and each of them only lasted for about 20 to 30 seconds. In this first performance, Liu floated gracefully while anchoring herself with Orbit Weaver. This first attempt was very successful, which one of the reasons I think was because of the tight integrity of ideology between the fundamental idea of Orbit Weaver and the goal of the Space Exploration Initiative. According to Maria Zuber, who is the vice president of research at MIT and one of the Initiative’s co-principal investigators, the idea behind the Space Exploration Initiative “is to think about operating in space in ways we haven’t thought about before, when space was just for research and experimentation.”

To quote Liu’s words, “Why do we go to space? We have a dream, and the technological challenges are what we overcome to achieve that dream. I want to be able to move freely in 3D space, so I design the technologies that allow me to do that.”

I think it is too early to define or categorize the ultimate goal or destination of either Liu’s project or the Space Exploration Initiative. They are pioneers in this area. As Zuber suggests, space was just exclusive for scientists, but as more and more explorations happened in space, it would eventually become more available for commercial circumstances. Imagine being able to shoot science fiction films, such as Interstellar, in outer space. This idea may sound crazy, but after 2020 which was predominantly defined by the prolonged lockdown due to the pandemic, it seems like the perfect timing to rethink our existence in relation to science and space.

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9 Ibid
When I interviewed Liu, I asked her: “How do you define Space Art?” It is a very unfamiliar area of art for me, and for the art world, there is nothing quite similar to what Liu’s doing now. “Space Art,” she answered, “in the early stage inclines more towards Astronomical Art in which artists depict imaginative sceneries of outer space from a fine art perspective. But for me now Space Art is more about equity, humans, heavenly bodies, and most importantly, perspective.”10 From another conversation she made with Xin Wang earlier this year, she also expressed some similar ideas. She said if you google “Space Art” on Wikipedia, it is very much about visual artists depicting the vision of space exploration like images of Martian colonies, weightlessness, spaceships, etc. It was also called Astronomical Art, with notable artists such as Chesley Bonestell.11 These senior artists working in this genre of art define the aesthetics of space. However, the concept of Space Art is now gradually diverging into using space and environmental textures as the media for creation rather than building a theme on the topic of space. Transitions need to be made from astronomical art to art in space, and Liu claims that her role as the Space Art curator at MIT needs to make sure to take Land art, science fiction, lectures into account.12 Liu Xin’s perception of the world has dual facets: micro and macro. The micro perspective of the world is we as human beings eat, drink, sleep, walk, and laugh on this planet. While on the other hand, the macro perspective of the world is to realize that our existence is insignificant in endless space. The epistemological jump between the two is dangerous but problematic, and Liu’s job is to reconcile the two views to be better suited in-between. Liu’s interests are clear by now that everything associated with the body, sensations, 

10 Xin Liu, in discussion with the author, March 2021
12 Ibid
death, and the cycles of life. Before joining MIT, she got her bachelor's degree from Precision Instrument and Mechanical Engineering Department, Tsinghua University, and an MFA degree from Rhode Island School of Design. She is an alumna of the Media Lab's Fluid Interfaces group. Liu has shown her work internationally at events and venues including the Boston Museum of Fine Art (2016/2017), Sundance Film Festival (2017), Tribeca Film Festival (2017), OCAT Shanghai (2015), Eyebeam (2015), and International Symposium on Electronic Art (2013/2016/2017). As an HCI researcher, Liu has worked in institutions including Microsoft Research NYC, Microsoft Research Asia, Google ATAP, and TASML, and presented her research at international conferences including UIST, UbiComp, TEI, DIS, and Augmented Human.

Most of her projects involve mixing scientific research with personal narratives. Through this unconventional combination of science and art, she creates transformative and participatory experiences, and bodily objects to examine the constitution of subjectivity and effects. Being also trained as an engineer, she claims that “technology is her native language and craft in art practice.” The “language” of technology is reconfigured aiming not for the exploitation of scientific phenomena but for “the recovery of human feelings, affects, and emotions; not for hegemonic control of life but for the discovery of a bottom-up evolution through subjective experience.” This beautiful sentence is quoted from Liu’s website. I chose not to paraphrase it because I do not want to incorporate my personal interpretation of her intention of creating space art. However, from all of the research of her as well as the interview with her, I can certainly say

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13 Xin Liu, interview by Xin Wang, art-agenda, Art-Agenda
that she is innovative and insisting on ideas of her own. She is unconventional because people can hardly trace the sense of familiarity from her works, artworks we have seen before. Her projects are very active in triggering people’s participation both mentally and physically in order to create new connections between the audience and art.

On May 2nd, 2019, Liu’s wisdom tooth was sent to outer space. In 2018, her robotic sculpture was selected by the MIT Media Lab Space Exploration Initiative to be launched into outer space aboard Blue Origin’s New Shepard suborbital spacecraft. The collaboration culminated in Liu sending her lower wisdom tooth affixed on top of a small robot as part of Jeff Bezos’s rockets. The rocket flew all the way up to about 100 kilometers in attitude and experienced zero gravity for roughly three minutes. The capsule returned to earth with a soft landing. Liu named the small robot, EBIFA, which stands for “Everything Beautiful Is Far Away,” a song title by Grandaddy (Figure 4.1). The tooth rode with EBIFA in one of the components of the rocket's capsule, a part that reenters the atmosphere. Being contained within a vessel, the tooth was sent to the sky successfully with EBIFA. Programmed tiny explosives were attached to the robot for the purpose

Figure 4.1 EBIFA
of detonation in order to set EBIFA and the tooth free in outer space, floating in the compartment and eventually falling apart. A camera (Figure 4.2) was placed inside the compartment to capture the moments of EBIFA and the tooth “wobbling free, clanking into the walls, and thunking into the ceiling.” By the end of the flight, Liu collected all the disassembled parts and re-create several artworks with other materials collected from the New Shepard. Unfortunately, the actual performance was not executed exactly the way Liu wanted it to be. The robot was originally covered by crystalline textured shells (Figure 5). When the team loaded the robot, one of the extractors fired in Liu’s hand, which eventually the team decided not to include the glass in order to secure the success of the launch. Liu later expresses that it was a “painful decision.” The outer space performance was exhibited in a 2-channel installation and VR experience where the audience takes the tooth’s perspective to witness the journey. There are two projects made with the fragments collected from this launch. Falling (2019) (Figure 6.1), is composed of two renderings of Liu’s open mouth made with resin and glass teeth and supported by aluminum brackets of the same type that were used for the capsule’s camera mounts. Steel chains (Figure 6.2) hang from the maws which vividly presents the viewers a

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silence of restraint. The open mouth seems to utter soundless words. The other project is called *Teratoma* (2019), the sculpture is a ceramic piece printed by 3D technology. Similarly, there is a glass tooth affixed on steel chains started from the inside of the tumor and stretched out hanging on the surface.
The zero-gravity experience in 2017 was transformative for Liu by which, for the first time, she truly experienced the existence of gravity and the feeling of being detached. As I mentioned before, the feeling of being detached is an emotional perception. This idea is further being used in the *Living Distance* project in which Liu did not experience outer space herself, rather her wisdom tooth traveled all the way up to somewhere unknown for her. The tooth is Liu’s avatar to space. Her story along with this project was never about two perspectives. Liu saw things from the tooth’s perspective, and the tooth is her. She said “It doesn’t matter if it’s a dream when you’re seeing the mouth or the dream of being in the infinite darkness. They’re similar, and virtuality feels like probably the only media that makes sense for that interpretation.” For the tooth, its life has always been living in infinite darkness in its owner’s mouth. They come to life, they work, and they eventually decay. This is also the cycle of almost every living thing on earth. You think Liu’s project is absurd, but it is truly melancholy to realize one’s cycle of life and one’s inevitable death. Liu’s intention of sending her avatar at any condition was not to conquer the universe and to be a hero. Instead, her project shattered humans’ fantasy of being the main protagonist of the whole universe. We are nothing more than a tooth being tossed among the stars, bang around, and cling to our fragmenting shelters, and all we can do is to do our utmost to soften our fall. Liu has been constantly reminding us of the morality of our lives and the cost of ambitions. But who cannot say that Liu gives this inanimate object a new life, to be able to rebirth as a being with some meaningful contents? By the end of the film, Liu says “this is the first time I feel I have total freedom to produce and create a piece that is true to my heart. Living

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19 Yxta Maya Murray, “Yxta Maya Murray on Xin Liu,” Yxta Maya Murray on Xin Liu - Artforum International.
distance is a story of living and somehow coming back. I think it is a story. It is my story.” I think even the artist at this stage cannot distinguish herself from her wisdom tooth.

Liu’s creations always started with her own experiences being tight with her culture, her root, and who she is. “There is this Chinese saying that when kids lose their teeth if it is a top tooth, you bury it under the ground, and if it is a bottom tooth, you toss it up to the ceiling.” This is cited directly from the film Living Distance: A Performance in Outerspace being said by Liu. It explains the absurd idea and behavior of sending a tooth into outer space. Additionally, there is a saying in Chinese that “distance creates beauty,” which coincides with the name of the robot that “everything beautiful is far away.” In the same year of 2019, Liu created A Book of Mine (Figure 7.1), a 900-page long book that presents Liu’s entire genome in base pairs. Volume X is

Figure 7.1 A Book of Mine, prints on accordion-bound rice paper, 2019

Figure 7.2

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20 Yxta Maya Murray, “Yxta Maya Murray on Xin Liu,” Yxta Maya Murray on Xin Liu - Artforum International.
one part of the entire book that presents Liu’s X chromosome. The DNA was sampled and sequenced in December 2018, and the reads were mapped to the Human X chromosome reference sequence UCSC hs38. The bases that are covered by Liu’s sequencing are annotated in black, and those uncovered in grey. The book is glued together by plenty of 120 feet rice paper with DNA sequences printed on them. The artist can do 16 pages each time by folding the paper eight times and connecting them with glue, then repeating (Figure 7.2). Liu relates her inquiry of her DNA with astrology, a process of seeking answers about who she is.

What is fascinating about Liu is her conjunctive role of being both an artist and an engineer. I still remember in the Living Distance film she said “you don’t ask a painter why you paint.” Technology is her language to use as an artist. Sometimes people’s vision is restrained by the confined doctrines that are being promoted. Liu claimed that the audience decides who she is, but in my opinion, Liu’s projects are mirrors that can reflect the inner self of the audience. One thing you must admit is that her work is philosophical. It seems to concern the artist’s personal issues and conflicts of being a human on earth, but the approaches are delicate and unreal that challenge viewers’ binary perspective of rather being science or culture. As the history of human civilization develops, the boundary between the polar opposites will be wiped out, and this is what the artist is trying to pursue.

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23 Living Distance: A Performance in Outerspace
Wa Liu

Different from the previously discussed artist, Xin Liu who was interested in the conjunction of engineering and art, Wa Liu is particularly involved with the field of neuroaesthetics, a scientific approach to the study of aesthetic perceptions of art, music, or any object that can give rise to aesthetic judgments. She works to develop an unpredictable way to interpret aesthetic experiences. *Ants* (2016) (Figure 8) is one of the artworks in her *Selfie Series* project. This work is done in mixed media using a color photograph of the artist as the base, she recreates the portrait of her. She appears at the center of this work. On her face, she painted patterns with

![Image](https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=neuroaesthetic)

Figure 8 *Ants*, mixed media, 2016, 45x45x10 cm

25 https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=neuroaesthetic
acrylic paint that suggests the “no signal” design on old televisions. Then she attached pumpkin seeds to the surface around her head as well in the upper left corner and the lower half of the canvas to suggest a group of ants, a reference to the title of the work. (Figure 1) I intentionally selected this work for extensive analysis because it makes me think of the behavior of ants and their relation to human beings. The history of my interpretation of the project has origins in my elementary school days when I was asked to write short essays, and there was always a sample essay that talked about ants and their behavior. After all these years, I still find similarities between ants and human beings. For example, ants have a social division of labour; there is no absolute hierarchy. However, the limited intelligence of ants does not allow them to realize the existence of humans as a threat to their existence on earth. In this way, the metaphor of ants alludes to human existence. Looking at the cyber world, this observation suggests people’s dependence on what the authority has provided us.

In this 2017 Selfie Series project, Wa Liu combines photography, paintings, and found objects to denote the potential influences of social media on individuals' personalities. The artist states that: “Art-making for me is a process of self-definition. Stimulated by the pop culture of the ‘selfie,’ I combined photography and ready-mades to reflect on the shifting boundaries between individuals and society. The commonplace objects, like keyboards, needles, embroideries, and beads, are suggestive of the overwhelming information and traditional cultures.” This series is composed of different portraits of her shown in a provocative way, that is she is more or less hidden among the commonplace objects that she used to make these images. The project

comprises eight works in total that employ keyboards, embroideries, acupuncture needles, and bullet cases (Figure 9). Such objects suggest the overwhelming information that surrounds people on a regular basis. It is clear that Wa Liu as an artist notices the mild everyday transformations that people experience and unconsciously internalize. In her words, the “external influences and social expectations”\(^\text{27}\) in our dispositions and behaviors will gradually culminate to an immense degree. Her writings present a neutral attitude toward the possible influences of social media, but her works demonstrate the soul of constrained, repressed, and suffocated people who have access to social media but are unable to fully express themselves or benefit from its usage. I see in her work that she recognizes the endless control of people by the authority, governments, capitalists, etc. Simultaneously, her mixed media works deliver a sense of helplessness in their current circumstances. Although she is confronting the camera and

![Image of Liquid Crystal, 2017, mixed media, 45x45x10 cm](https://www.liuwastudio.com/selfie-series)

Figure 9 *Liquid Crystal*, 2017, mixed media, 45x45x10 cm

directly making eye contact with the viewers, she is always disguised, masked, and veiled by different textured materials.

Wa Liu, born in 1994, is an artist whose work encompasses installation, moving image, and painting. She received her B.A. in Anthropology and Art from Yale University in 2017 and currently works in New York and Beijing. Her anthropology educational background urges Liu on continuing deploying euro-technology to construct immersive and interactive environments and exploring the subjectivity and plasticity of human emotions and perceptions. Her works have been exhibited globally by prestigious museums and galleries. She has organized five solo exhibitions until 2020. The first solo exhibition by Liu was in 2015 called Tree of Life (performance) at Yale University in New Haven. In 2017, her project Still was exhibited at Harvard University in Cambridge. Ever since 2017, Liu has held solo exhibitions annually. Glimpse: a passing look (2018) was held at Sabsay Gallery in Copenhagen. Two solo exhibitions were organized in 2019. One was Glimpse at Asia Now in Paris and the other one was Moon Milk at ART021 in Shanghai. Most recently, Liu held a recurring Moon Milk (2020) exhibition at Madeln Gallery in Shanghai. Built upon posthumanism, her multidisciplinary practices reimagine human agency at a time when feelings and desires could be quantified, predicted, and affected by neuroscience. Her works adopt fluid and decentralized perspectives to interrogate the power dynamics between humanity and technology.

Following the Selfie Series project in 2017, Wa Liu continued her collaborative artistic style and further developed her artistic practice with scientific breakthroughs in collaboration with brain research. Her original and interdisciplinary art investigates the nature of human consciousness
and by interacting with the audience by using EGG. EGG is a shortened name for electroencephalography, an electrophysiological monitoring method to record the electrical activity of the brain. It is a technique that uses an electrode headset to measure brain activity that focuses on electrical signals. It not only virtualizes an emotional response but also communicates meaning, which frequently comes from memories. People who are very inquisitive about visual art, music, or poetry might share similar neural features. How does EGG work in the creation of art? During the cognition of visual art, EEG signals can give new information about the dynamical cooperation between neuronal assemblies. The EEG technology can be used to get more knowledge about how people are affected when they go through and react to an exhibition.28

Wa Liu created a multimedia installation, Still (2017) (Figure 10), via EGG with other collaborators. The project was first premiered at Yale University on April 14th and then shown at Harvard University on April 28th. The project is interactive for visitors because they are one part of this project. Visitors are equipped with a brainwave sensor when they enter an enclosed dim room. A book is provided for visitors to read. It is a book with hand drawings of the artist’s childhood and youth, and it delineates how “memories unravel and form a loop.”29 On the table, a lamp and sound equipment, imitating the sound of vibrating leaves, are also presented. As the viewer begins to scroll the book, a lamp lights up and the vibrating ripples slow down as a result of the viewer’s rising attention level. The artist describes the experience as being “accompanied by the sounds of glass harmonica and piano, the whole ambience is vibrating: ripples are

28 Else Marie Bukdahl, “Liu Wa’s Interactive Art Form: A New Contribution to Neuroaesthetics”
29 Ibid
expanding across the ink; a plant is vibrating; and its shadow on the wall is shaking.”

When the visitors fully concentrate on reading and looking at the book, everything will become still and peaceful. As they proceed to finish the book with declined attention levels, the lighting dims and triggers distracting movement in the ambience again.

Figure 10 Still, EEG-based brain-computer interface, lighting control system, painting, music, mixed media, 6 x 4 x 4m; 20 x 13 x 13 ft (W x L x H), 2017

The intention of the project is to change the environment. The cycle is exactly our life cycle. We start our journey in this world without knowing anything, and then we become mature and knowledgeable, then we age. The artist said that the project shows that: “each spectator is a performer. Each experience is a unique artwork, as the viewer shifts the role between viewer and performer.” As we encounter the artwork, visitors are playing multi-roles as the spectator and the

30 Ibid
performer. The experience of being actively involved in artwork like this inspires visitors to revive their own memory of childhood.

In the following year, Wa Liu became even more actively engaged in neurotechnology and the technique of EGG. She created two even more immersive and impressive projects called *Glimpse* in 2018 which are *Glimpse: A Passing Look* and *Glimpse: A Grain of Truth*. The two projects are done in the same way, and the only difference between the two is the visuals. Similar to the project *Still*, viewers are also required to wear the electroencephalogram headset to enter the exhibition accompanied by music. The headset will measure the viewer’s concentration and relaxation levels as they look at the paintings on the wall. As the viewer’s mental status changes, the illuminating lights will change in between colors of red, green, and blue according to the changes of the mental status. Every time the color of the lighting changes, the paintings viewers see on the wall are also modified. The music in *Glimpse* is composed by Sam Wu and played by the pianist Chuhan Zhang and the cellist Men-Fang Zhang.31

There is nothing more evident than the visual language in Wa Liu’s work, so the best way to interpret her work is through visual analysis. For instance, the first section of the *Glimpse: A Passing Look* (Figure 11.1) viewers are confronted with a swaying boat floating on the sea, while people of all age groups try to be rescued. When the light is red, we are more concentrated on the depiction of the people. Their faces and bodies can be seen so clearly and we can feel the eagerness for survival from the facial expressions and bodily languages. When the lighting turns blue, all the people appear as black silhouettes, which seem very creepy, and they disappear into

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31 Else Marie Bukdahl, “Liu Wa’s Interactive Art Form: A New Contribution to Neuroaesthetics”
the sea. As the color changes, viewers’ intentions immediately shift to the background of the painting. The moon in the upper right corner painted with cool blue tones depicts a rather unpredicted atmosphere of the future of these people. Another example that stands out to me the most is the lady one (Figure 11.2). The section depicts a young lady wearing a mask sitting on the edge of a traditional Chinese house where weeds are overgrown. When the green colour dominates the scene and the character becomes gloomy silhouettes, when more details of the house are revealed, it is clearly on the verge of collapse.

Figure 11.1 Glimpse: A Passing Look

Figure 11.2 The Lady one
For the content of the project, she searched online for related images and took photographs in the street, and invited models to pose for her as the first stage of visualizing the theme. After assembling the materials, she did sketches to determine the whole composition of the painting as well as each small section. The sketches were first on paper, then on small canvases, and the process was never done on computers or through photoshop. Building visual evidence from reality, Wa Liu blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction. However, being fully immersed in the exhibition, how can people separate reality and the imagined elements depicted in those paintings while realizing that our true reality is actually shattering into what we consider to be an apocalypse? The Glimpse projects encompass an invite into an instantaneous and sensory relationship with the chaos happening all over the world. They interact directly with the visitors’ senses and provide inspiration to continue the incomplete portion of the imaginary world to be visualized.

Although the original plan for Glimpse was to use 3D sculptures or ordinary objects to create an uncanny environment, the artist finally decided to paint everything in acrylic. She wanted to be part of the object because painting is not restrained by physical limitations. As being inspired by socio-cultural anthropology, which she studied at Yale University, she combines the methodology of science with the technique of academic art to create an illusory experience concerning a recurring problem in our society, excessiveness in waste and information. Through communication with the artist, she told me that neuroscience and anthropology for her are like the two sides of a coin that represent science and humanity. They are on the opposite sides as for

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32 Else Marie Bukdahl, “Liu Wa’s Interactive Art Form: A New Contribution to Neuroaesthetics”
common understanding, but when it comes to decoding human nature, their ways of interpretation can be unified in an interesting way.\textsuperscript{33}

Masha Faurschou, the founder of Sabsay where Wa Liu exhibited the \textit{Glimpse} project, complimented her work as being a “bright example of graceful overlaying of the traditional and the cutting edge. The development of contemporary technology has marked a new era of completely different media within the arts. It is interesting to see how young artists so fervently immerse into the technological opportunities.”\textsuperscript{34} The artworks presented by the two artists Wa Liu and Xin Liu demonstrate young Chinese artists’ ambition in cooperating new technology with techniques of fine art.

\textsuperscript{33} Interview with Wa Liu by the author.
Zipiao Zhang

*Lily 02 (2020)* (Figure 12) is one of Zipiao Zhang’s latest artworks which first appeared in an exhibition called *In The Name of Flower* at Mingzhu Gallery in Shanghai. As the title suggests, the artist painted a lily flower in an abstract way. It is an oil painting on canvas in the size of 95 by 110 centimeters. This painting is impactful in a way that the whole canvas is filled with the flower. We are forced to confront the only protagonist in this painting and the artist’s inner self. The color used is very interesting that the background is in mild pink which allows more vivid colors to be used to highlight the details of the lily. Lily flower is a symbol for lesbians in China, and when people want to refer to someone who is lesbian they will usually say the person is a *baihe*, lily flower. Although the artist has never mentioned this symbolism in her works via press works, the implication is clear. Her work delivers a unique feminine quality. She explains her interest in flowers saying that “flowers and human bodies are both about living beings. For example, the structure and textures of muscles and veins of the human body are comparable to
the rhizome and veins of the flowers. Rather than considering my paintings as the human body and flowers, I am actually depicting the state of life. Speaking of flowers, people would associate them with the traditional symbol of beauty. On this basis, I hope to express a sense of conflict and contradiction. My works hope to present a more comprehensive and tenacious state of life.”

In her work, the stereotypical weak feminine qualities, such as being fragile, sensitive, and true to emotions, are transformed to be the definition of beauty.

Influenced by the culture of YouTube, Instagram, and other social networks, as a post-1990s, Zhang Zipiao reconsiders the condition of the globalized everyday life in her creative process indirectly. The painting surfaces reveal direct or nuanced erotic scenes and propositions, suggesting the artist’s affirmation of her ever-shifting position when it comes to subject matters. In her recent paintings, she takes personal life experiences as a starting point, returning to the subject matters of portraits and still lifes, to reflect on universal physical and spiritual connection through painting, a medium based on the body. The artist immerses herself in online culture and observes common objects in everyday life. Her individual experience under a globalized culture is constantly applied to her works in her trademark playful, disrespectful fashion. Zhang has always been exploring her language, which reveals a continuous penchant for direct and superficial stimulation.

Zipiao Zhang was born in 1993 in Beijing. She received a BFA from the Art Institute of Chicago in 2015. She now returns to her hometown where she lives and works. Her first solo exhibition

Sexy Hysteria was held in 2015 at Ying Space in Beijing. She has been active in presenting new works to the public. Over the next few years, Zhang held annual solo exhibitions at different galleries. Her solo exhibitions include Shallow Painting 101 (2017) held at Star Gallery in Beijing, The Ultimate Moist! (2018) held at WHITE SPACE BEIJING, Cutthroat Kitchen (2019) at Mine Project in Hong Kong, and Blooming (2020) at WHITE SPACE BEIJING. Besides solo exhibitions, Zhang was also involved in several group exhibitions. In 2016, she first exhibited her works in a group exhibition called Abstract Q&A at Star Gallery in Beijing. In 2018, she presented her works at Gallery Vacancy in Shanghai for Condo Shanghai: I Mean It When I Say XXX exhibition. Her works were part of the A White Space Odyssey (2019) exhibition at WHITE SPACE BEIJING in Beijing.

Her painting style has changed throughout the years after her graduation from the Art Institute of Chicago in 2015. Between 2016 and 2017, she achieved a consistent style in painting, but each individual painting is not cohesive to be viewed as a series. The year 2018 is when she performed different styles the most. From that point, the canvases of her work become purer in shapes and colors. Moreover, she abandoned painting with written texts on her work. This uncertainty continues to 2019 which we can see from the objects depicted, banal and ordinary things. In 2020, she focuses on only portraying flowers, different kinds of flowers. We can see from this point, her painting style has become very stable as well as the color usage.

I am very interested in her early works, which I feel to be more vigorous and dynamic. One thing that I am curious about the most about her early works is the inclusion of written texts in both English and Chinese. However, I was only able to find one artwork that includes Chinese characters, which is titled, A Box of Stuff (2018) (Figure 13). This is a life-size oil painting on
canvas. The height of this painting is 172.5 centimeters and the width is 139.5 centimeters. The composition of this painting is fairly simple. As the title suggests, the box is portrayed in the lower center with packed stuff inside the box. The whole image is depicted as very flat with no depth of field. Thus, other than the main subject, a box of stuff, the background, and the foreground only occupy a very small portion of the canvas; while the box and the stuff inside it dominate most of the canvas. The lower half is painted in white which gives a stark contrast to the upper half of the painting that utilizes multiple colors. Zhang’s selection of colors follows the

![A Box of Stuff](image)

Figure 13 *A Box of Stuff*, oil on canvas, 172.5x139.5 cm

color basics. If we pay attention to the color usage, she does not apply a wide range of colors on the canvas. Rather, she uses the three primary colors, red, yellow, and blue as the three major
colors. Three secondary colors, orange, green, and violet, are also applied to adorn the background as well as the details of the stuff. The box is clearly out of proportion compared to the size of the floorboard, thus the size of this box is huge. It is also convinced from the stuff inside the box. There are legs painted in yellow, a presumably lobster in red, a fish in blue, possibly a plant leaves in green, a rounded shape that looks like a skull in grey. There are two Chinese characters written on the side of the box facing the viewers. The upper part of the characters is hidden behind the closing part of the box. I make out the characters to be “Qing Yuan,” the direct translation is “be willing.” However, the term can also be interpreted word by word: “qing” translates to “attachment” or “feeling,” and “gan” translates to “feel,” and “sensitize.” What is the meaning of only showing the lower part of the characters? Is there a reason to paint it vague?

Another artwork that I want to compare with A Box with Stuff is an earlier work done in 2017, Plastic Bag (Figure 14). It is an oil painting on canvas and the size is 160 centimeters by 140 centimeters, so it is also a life-size painting. The whole makeup of this painting is similar to the box painting. The plastic bag is prominent in the middle of the canvas and takes up 90 percent of the space. There is no indication of either foreground or background unlike the pattern of floorboard indicates a sense of being in a room. This painting is almost Pop-like, the background is painted in neon yellow, a very striking color to be used on the background. Supposedly, in the plastic bag, the artist painted bananas and a shrimp. On the plastic bag, an orange circle is painted and below it says “BEND ME.” The first reaction can be very frustrating because the written text seems to have zero connection to the whole painting. The text personifies the plastic bag and suggests the fragility of it. According to an artist’s interview, Zhang said: “my early
works on canvas were not related to social media. People’s misconceptions might have come from the hashtags in my works. These words were not intended to convey textural meaning, but the alphabetical structure and composition were adopted as painterly components, which complete the structural demand of the canvas.”

![Plastic Bag](image)

Figure 14 *Plastic Bag*, oil on canvas, 160x140 cm

Zhang’s works are intriguing in a way that viewers are able to figure out the exact painted commonplace objects despite that they are abstract. They are reflections of the artist’s memory, you know what has happened in the past, but you cannot always remember every detail. The

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artist states that “there are a lot of random thoughts on my mind, often these thoughts spark appealing inspirations, and I would translate them into the subject matter for my paintings. Later on, this transformed into the choices I make on visual components. The spatial relationships once they are cut open, the structure, and texture interest me. I am not too concerned with the imagery of the texts, but its spatial structure and linear composition stimulate my creative impulse.”

In other words, we should perceive the written words simply as a pattern, which are not associated with any social or cultural contexts.

This is a very interesting comparison with Xu Bing’s Tianshu. It is surprising for me that the artist chose not to use a pictograph language, Chinese characters, which makes more sense if she only appreciates the structure and compositions of texts. Similarly, Xu Bing utilized written language as an artistic approach rather than a communicating language. Xu Bing created his own language to substitute the direct connection and engagement with the world and his inner self. It is a very hard task to fully grasp the informality that Xu invested in Tian Shu. One way to interpret it is through the social aspect. The project may appeal to many Chinese people born in the 50s and the 60s who share the same experience of disconnected religious and political traditions of the past. Xu wants to emphasize the fear of being controlled by the government and accepting a sudden change of what had been considered as truth and traditions. In contrast, Zipiao Zhang’s works present a new perspective of how young artists with Western educational backgrounds see the usage of written language.

Since 2018, the artist started to concentrate on portraying different textured surfaces using a very primitive painting style. Juicy fruits, vegetables, flesh, skin, and flowers are all presented by the

38 空白办公室，“One Day 2020: 张子飘.”
artist through her own lens. She usually works alone and does not make any sketches before painting. “The abstract lines and random elements on my mind are then organized and discovered as I paint,” said by Zhang, “and eventually, become the final work on canvas.” Her fetish of commonplace objects was shaped when she was young. She used to smell her mother’s clothes to put herself to sleep because she missed her mother whose job was a doctor and worked many night shifts.

Western art influence is extremely obvious in Zhang’s works. She expressed her appreciation of Francis Bacon and Louise Bourgeois in an interview with Madame Figaro. It is because she also creates art starting from her very own feelings and experiences. She believes that creating art with your soul is the only way to communicate with the viewers in parallel space and time. The art-creating process for Zhang is complicated and conflicted. She is constantly learning and perceiving through art, but at the same time, she also produces space for others to reconsider the meaning of these painted ordinary objects.

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Conclusion

In the aftermath of Tiananmen in 1989, the government officials realized that they needed a solution for their legitimacy crisis, particularly in earning the youth's trust. A concept of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" expanded to embrace the cultural and economic forms from the West that were previously unaccepted by the Communist Party. In practicing this strategy, the ultimate aim has been to make China rich and powerful. A portion of the Chinese needs to enter the middle class in order to position China to a better place for global competition. The post-1990s have much more freedom in deciding how they want to live because, in terms of income, employment, housing, as well as personal and family success are steadily improving. These children from the middle class have the chance to choose whether they want to stay in China or study abroad in the United States. Thus, for the post-1990s, their ambitions can be achieved in various areas. Moreover, their participation in politics will be private through friends, family, or via the internet. Their pursuit of party membership has been unnecessary to increase their chances to live a better life.

The works of the three artists discussed ideally present the fact that social changes have influenced young artists' choice of life and their attitudes toward art creation. Their works are all self-centered but expressed through different media. Xin Liu's dual identity of being both an artist and an engineer is something that would not be possible at all for the post-1960s and 70s. Her works seem to be concerning a very big question of human existence. However, the curiosity came out of her own desire in discovering outer space in relation to self-discovery. Sending one of her wisdom teeth to space is a very intimate experience and that experience not only examines
the bigger question of human's insignificant existence but most importantly, it is a journey only for her to discover the root as a human being.

Wa Liu's work is even more obvious in supporting the fact that young artists' works of art are self-associated. The artist herself is one of the media to be used for artistic creation. Her inner voices are important. She told me when we had the conversation that she understands herself the best, and her identity and experiences reflect the multi-aspects of society. Thus, it is so natural for her to start a project and be the main protagonist.

Zipiao Zhang works as an artist in more of a traditional way compared to the other two artists. She does not hesitate to talk about her own feelings and inner struggles as she's constantly perceiving all kinds of information. Her attitude toward art is interesting because she thinks she does not choose to be an artist, but art chooses her. It was shameful for the older generation to admit that they do not have any caring feelings toward other members of the society and not to have an ambition. But the younger generation cares about themselves and their true feelings. More and more young people neglect the so-called social norms that still exist but to keep true to themselves. These young artists are more willing to explore self-liberation rather than getting involved into broader political issues.
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