

Zhang Xuerui: In Search of Lost Time
by Fiona He

"The chest is a repository for emotions."
—Zhang Xuerui

"All intellectual activities are intrinsically linked to certain histories and eras,"¹ remarked Fei Hsiao-tung, a Chinese sociologist renowned for his committed investigation and study of the shift of modern Chinese lived experience. Zhang Xuerui's latest solo exhibition, *"In Search of Lost Time,"* also unfolds within a family narrative spanning nearly a century², in which the lives of four generations somehow mirror the fluid transformations of modern China's rural-urban relations, and social bonds composed of consanguinity, geo-relation, and kinship passed down by way of oral history, offering the artist's infinite room for imagination.

Social structures are inherently abstract, arising through elusive interrelationships between beings, while each individual operates firmly within its organized trajectory, following an unseen order within the established framework. Through a feminine approach, Zhang Xuerui traverses through time, and in the process of reconciling memory, experience, and imagination, she leaves on her canvases time-graced histories, commemorations, and her quest for eternalizing the immaterial. A "chest" that chronicles the life histories of several generations materializes into the overarching theme of this exhibition in a similar abstract mode. Zhang Xuerui extracts the chest-like "symbol" to evoke associations and fictive narratives, through which this symbolic figure also triggers latent memories expanding into broader social and historical contexts that have been filtered and refined over time.

Her artistic practice seeks to establish unique logic and methods of artmaking by intentionally setting up various constraints. Her exploration of objects, matter, and materiality underscores an intention to trace transience and temporal modality. By adopting artistic media from painting to sculpture and installation, Zhang uses objects and painting methods to reflect on relationships between the self and others. She conceives her artworks as a conduit of artistic discourse and life spectacles where one discovers history, memories, present, and future.

1 Fei Hsiao-tung, *China's Gentry: Essays on Rural-Urban Relations*

2 The story the artist relayed to the author is summarized as follows: In the 1930s, my great-grandfather came across a lost old man on the riverbank in his village. The old man came from Henan to look for his son, so my great-grandfather, out of goodwill, took him directly to the place he was looking for. Back then, transportation was only available in the form of horse-drawn carriages, and it was quite a journey. When he arrived, the old man's son expressed his gratitude and asked if there was anything he could do for my great-grandfather. The old man's son, Mr. Yang, was a local magnate who ran a factory in the area, and my great-grandfather told him that one of his kids was working as a farmer without a job. Therefore, Mr. Yang pull some strings and landed him a job, and this kid, who ended up working in the factory for more than two decades, happened to be my grandfather. In the 1950s-60s, when Mr. Yang was about to retire and moved back home, he left several huge chests of his collection at my grandfather's home. These chests were custom-made according to the size of a horse-drawn carriage. At the time, supposedly for security reasons, the majority of his collection, including thread-bind ancient books and porcelains, was stored at my grandfather's home. Afterward, Cultural Revolution happened. My grandfather had been working for more than two decades in his son's factory and had accumulated some savings, which automatically promoted him to the status of well-to-do middle peasant. Some people from his village were jealous of him, and my grandfather was publicly criticized and humiliated, leaving him deaf as a result. My grandmother was horrified and worried that the artifacts in the chests would be confiscated, putting our entire family at risk. She simply boiled all the books in the collection. All the porcelains were smashed and buried overnight. After the Cultural Revolution, Mr. Yang's son came to claim his dad's collection. My family showed him the empty chest and explained the situation. He left with disappointment, leaving the chest at my grandfather's house. Until almost the nineties, there was a national trend to rediscover antiquities, during which buyers would knock on people's doors to acquire antiquities. My grandfather showed the collector the chest. Although the chest was worn out, the collector still offered good money for it. Perhaps the wood used to manufacture the chest was rare.

Suspended in pictorial space, the figurative symbols in the series of *Still-Life · Chest* canvases present themselves as oddly familiar open chests that defy the rules of realistic depiction, while their symbolic value encapsulates multiple modalities of time and space. When Zhang relayed her family story to the author, the specific events, settings, dialogues, and epochal backdrops of such story are merely summarized in a few lines. Visual expression and language possess the same effect of simplification and distancing. The artist's intent of prioritizing the chest in this series of paintings aims not to retell the story but rather, to extract the varied symbolic meanings of the chest as a rare family possession in that particular era to activate, unravel, and extend into the viewers' imagination of their situation.

The secluded spaces compartmentalized by the raw linens bestow the gallery a sense of a household setting, while the deliberately empty space, filled only with paintings, produces an ethereal quality, in which the situated "chests" conjure up moments related to different individuals associated with the symbol. Painted in an ambiguous, gradient palette, the paintings from the Chest series crystalize collective memories in the form of a household object familiar to countless families, reinforcing the social relationship it delineates by re-enacting a bygone scenario. The backgrounds mediated by the artist's acute perceptions superimpose multiple temporalities, engendering infinite possibilities for recalling, constructing, repairing, and reconstructing moments of personal emotions that have not yet been reconciled.

Zhang Xuerui posited her "chests" towards the viewers at a 45-degree angle, a relatively personified treatment of the objects' spatial relationship. If we consider these chests as a stand-in of the artist's family story, this series could perhaps be viewed as a kind of portrait. In traditional portraiture, the 45-degree pose reveals a rather relaxed psychological state of the creator—it's neither a frontal depiction nor does it offer a 90-degree profile of the sitter. Frontal portraits often symbolize some sort of insurmountable privilege, lending it an air of unneglectable "presence," or "affront" even. Zhang's handling of the chest's angle circumvents such aggressiveness, especially for audiences who have received formal training in painting. This angle is, in fact, the most optimal for observation, allowing the object to showcase an abundance of visual effects under different lighting. In other words, by presenting the "chest" symbols through a more comprehensive angle, the artist lays bare the emotional entanglements and relationships that lurk beneath, as well as the multifaceted exchanges of affection, emotion, and disappointment between the two families in the story.

The sizes of the *Still-Life · Chest* canvases vary, as Zhang Xuerui believes these variations epitomize the perceptive and cognitive discrepancies of several generations towards an identical event. From the author's perspective, it further maps out Zhang's imagination of the emotional connection between different characters in the story and the "chests." According to the artist, "I think each painting conveys a unique feeling or atmosphere. Much like how Monet painted some 200 canvases of water lilies—a good subject deserves to be painted repeatedly. It shows up all the time in your impression and perception, but the feelings aren't always the same. Repetition is an important element in my creative process because every repetitive act fails to repeat itself each time." The artist, unburdened by the facts of a family story passed down through word of mouth and its blurry boundary between facts and fiction, is inspired to reshape this second-hand memory through her imagination. Hence, the chest becomes the entrance for the artist to outline the relationship between the characters in the story, picture the social context in which the event occurred, and project ripples of sentiments and emotions.

The selection of colors on the background of the painting continues her previous approach of setting up a specific method for rendering its color scheme. Zhang assigns three primary colors for the three corners of the picture and divides the overall image into a square grid. Each square is filled with a blended color from these "three primary colors" of the painting. Traceable in nature, their varying ratios create a subtle gradation of color. This harmony of colors is essentially a process of reconciliation and chance, a process that warrants emotions to dissolve in reality, one at a time, through imagination, reality, and construction. Whether this process is intense, passive, counterproductive, or active, the artist can always conclude on the canvas with a state of tranquility.

Here, the author notices from these rigid grids a social identity that comes to represent a fixed model of social behavior—an intangible identity imprinted onto our psyche that disciplines and constitutes our

actions in the manner of framework and rule. What each character charted in the oral history has accomplished under the great tide of time through different social classes and roles were insignificant struggles within their constraints. This echoes the subtle color changes that occurred in the grids—as if each individual is attempting to grasp and observe within his/her framework every change, thus constituting the overall narrative in a wider scope.

Our perception of color is inextricably connected to our environment. For Zhang Xuerui, the ability to accurately translate subtle color changes onto canvas is a result of the impression left on the artist by the nearly immutable environment in which she grew up. Having spent the majority of her childhood in the countryside, Zhang considers it a time marked by a scarcity of images. Although there was a television set at home, the contents shown on the screen were often monotonous, limited, and even backward for the artist. The tenuous deviations were, however, a marvel in a seemingly unchanging landscape, as the slight color differences visible to the naked eye offer the most intuitive way for the artist to observe the passage of time. For example, the path leading to the river 500 meters away from the artist's childhood home provides her an opportunity to observe the varying lighting that obfuscates and illuminates the river surface at different hours of the day; whereas the vegetation in the woods evinces the seasonal changes through a vibrant chromatic experience. The artist's habitual observation of the changes in nature not only established her understanding of time and the laws of nature but also indulged her in a certain sense of serenity, wherein the “beauty“ of nature, impossible to replicate by any artificial means, deeply informed the artist's aesthetic. Just as Agnes Martin incessantly searched for “the sublime” through the media of painting, even with her back to the world, the beauty embedded in the artist's memory will always remain.

In the recent works of Zhang Xuerui, the grids begin to break freely away from their formal constraint. The color scheme of these grids still obliges the same logic of employing blended colors from any three primary colors, yet their position interferes with the supposed balance of the gradation. The disruption of order in these works inevitably echoes the drastic development of one's surroundings. As the reform and opening up gradually spread to more regions, the rural area where the artist lived began to depart from her childhood impression. “For example,” as the artist recalls, “more people built their houses and started businesses in the village. It was also at the end of the 1980s when the Strike Hard Against Crime Campaign pervaded the countryside. It was particularly memorable for me to witness the thieves who were arrested went through prosecution. All these events contributed to the restlessness within me. Overall, the environment I grew up in was relatively peaceful.”

The order of things seemingly represents a form of persistence for Zhang Xuerui, whether it is her singular mode of easel painting or her reassembling of pre-existing material features. The series *Some Day Some Month Some Year · Handwritten Letters* on view contains heart-shaped patterns cut out from commonplace fabrics, which are then arranged in a fashion that mimics the format of a handwritten letter, each pinned with a tack on a backing paper of the same color as the fabric. The audiences are bound to fail from discerning any specific contents of these suspended hearts, but the approach of these works, like Zhang's other works on canvas, appears to plunge them into the emotional turmoil one often endures through reading a handwritten letter.

Whether it is testing out colors in grids of different sizes, or disrupting the pre-existing order that constitutes the inner logic of a readymade product to reconstruct a tempered pattern, Zhang Xuerui injects a precise deconstruction of perception into each unit, where minute individuals coagulate into a collective. It is a gradual, step-by-step passage from the singular to the whole, and from the individual to the community. Under the surging tide of time, our material lifestyle has undergone dramatic changes, but our culture still managed to preserve the intrinsic values and modes of tradition. Zhang Xuerui's creative process utilizes painting to respond to the “constant” under certain perpetual shifts. Perhaps it is also through such a process that the artist accomplishes the repairing, imagination, and reconstruction of her fragmented memories, repositing in the demise of time those emotions that have long been ineffable—the most precious truths of human nature.