

# Zhang Xuerui

*In Search of Lost Time II*

Galerie Urs Meile Zurich

August 30 - October 26, 2024

Opening: Friday, August 30, 2024; 11 am - 8 pm

Reception: Friday, August 30, 2024; 6 pm - 8 pm

The artist will be present

Galerie Urs Meile is pleased to announce *In Search of Lost Time II*, the solo exhibition by Chinese artist Zhang Xuerui (b. 1979, Shanxi, China) at its Zurich gallery. This exhibition follows the thread of the artist's unique abstract painting showcased at the Urs Meile Gallery in Lucerne in 2019, providing a reflective summary of her recent works centered around the themes of "time" and "object." It is also a sequel and further extension of her 2023 exhibition at the gallery space in Beijing. Employing painting and installation as her mediums, Zhang Xuerui engages in a dialogue that encompasses her personal experiences, family history, the passage of time, memory, and emotion.

*"In life, it is difficult to achieve intimacy, and I hope to express it through painting."*

— Zhang Xuerui

Zhang Xuerui's paintings unfold a progressive course. Her early pure abstract paintings often capture the essence of human existence in nature, or offer the artist's personal interpretation of her natural surroundings through the lens of time. The evolving grid embodies shifting experiences over time, gradually giving rise to discernible elements that coalesce into a vivid tableau, drawing viewers into the artist's own domain. Her recent works shift to a narrative-driven approach, wherein the artwork becomes a significant vehicle for articulating her individuality and the collective experience.

A key component of this exhibition is Zhang Xuerui's latest series *Still Life · Chest*, which presents the open chest in a state of suspension within vibrant colors. These chests are imaginative constructs inspired by family lore, serving as vessels that embody relational dynamics, social context, and historical memory. One such chest was preserved by her grandfather for a family friend who fled away and once contained cherished antiquities and porcelain. Yet, during the harrowing Cultural Revolution, these artworks were either boiled or destroyed. The grandfather suffered persecution during this period, resulting in a loss of hearing. The descendant of that friend later sought the chest from Zhang's family but returned disheartened upon learning the truth, leaving the box as a remnant of the family history. In her mother's recollection, the box was large and heavy, projecting the artist's nuanced emotions, both the nostalgia for simple and beautiful interpersonal connections of the past, and lingering sentiment that remain after reconciling with harsh historical truths.

The *Investigation Grid · Sofa* series features a single armchair. In the artist's childhood, there was a sofa that belonged exclusively to her father, who forbade anyone from sitting on it while he was home. For the artist, this sofa symbolizes power, leaving a profound impression in her memory. Due to her father's preference for sons over daughters, Zhang Xuerui has long harbored fear towards him, leading to a distant father-daughter relationship. After her parents divorced, her father remarried, and their contact diminished until his health declined a few years ago, prompting him to reach out to the artist in hopes of mending their relationship. This repair is driven by both emotional needs and, more importantly, the practical need for care. Zhang Xuerui finds it challenging to fully forgive or ignore her father, offering limited responses while maintaining distance. This real-life dilemma is something the artist aims to express through her paintings. The recurring image of the sofa symbolizes her father or authority itself—sometimes clear, sometimes blurred—mirroring the flow of her memory and emotion.

Zhang Xuerui possesses an innate sensitivity to color, enabling her to enter a unique experiential realm through it. The grid painting technique represents her most comfortable mean of simplifying complex perception into daily practice. Through this labor, she seeks perfection, aspiring for an exquisite blend of sensibility and rationality that culminates in a concentrated spiritual essence. The color palette in the background follows a self-imposed limitation wherein she designates three "primary colors" to

three corners within the divided grid—these colors arise from internalized visual experiences expressed through unparalleled intuition. Subsequently, all the grids on the canvas are filled with shifting colors based on these three primary ones, creating subtle color gradations. This working method is inherently rational, as the three colors dictate the overall tone. The parts of the chests and sofas follow the rule as well, prohibiting the introduction of extraneous colors. The artist’s task is to merely determine their distribution and arrangement.

The installation *Some Day Some Month Some Year · Handwritten Letter* also draws upon the artist’s perception of the “object”. A “letter” serves as private medium for conveying information. Writing letters remains a cherished method of communication with close friends for the artist. She meticulously cuts heart-shaped prints from fabric and pins them onto paper, dyeing both the paper and hearts in various colors based on her creative state and the construction of the work. She believes that materials inherently carry meanings and emotions, as seen in the use of paper and pins in her work, which evoke a sense of pain.

In Zhang Xuerui’s explorations of “time” and “object,” the chests and sofas represent overlapping temporalities. The creative processes of the work series on display coincided with the time of isolation during the pandemic, prompting reflections on interpersonal relationships, family ties, and collective existence within a societal framework. In the exhibition space, these recent works depict ghostly figures through subtle, hazy tones, presenting familiar forms that manifest the joy and pain imparts to us.

Zhang Xuerui was born in 1979 in Shanxi, and currently lives and works in Beijing. She graduated from Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 2004. Her recent solo exhibitions include: *In Search of Lost Time*, Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing, China (2023); *River with Three Buoys*, Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing, China (2020); *The Everyday as Ontology*, Galerie Urs Meile, Lucerne, Switzerland (2019); *The God of Small Things*, Art Basel Miami Beach-Kabinett, Miami, USA (2018); *Colours in A Breeze: Zhang Xuerui Solo Exhibition*, Leo Gallery, Hong Kong, China (2017); *Zhang Xuerui: Recent Works*, Ginkgo Space, Beijing, China (2017). Recent group shows include: *The Trace of Civilization: The Great Art of Dunbuang*, Beijing Minsheng Art Museum, Beijing, China (2022); *A Descent into the Maelstrom*, Mangrove Gallery, Shenzhen, China (2022); *Letters from Beijing*, Gwangju Museum of Art, Gwangju, Korea (2019); *The Exhibition of Annual of Contemporary Art of China 2017*, Minsheng Art Museum, Beijing, China (2018); *Encounter Asia – Multi-vision of Youth Art*, the Museum of Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, Chongqing, China (2018); *Nonfigurative*, Shanghai 21st Century Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai, China (2015); *Negotiations – The 2nd Today’s Documents 2010*, Today Art Museum, Beijing, China (2010). She participated in Artist in Residence program “Kulturkontaka Austria” in Vienna in 2015. Her works have been collected by public collections including White Rabbit Gallery and Cruthers Art Foundation.