

Vivien Zhang: Lorem Ipsum

Opening: July 10, 2021

Long March Space, Beijing

Vivien Zhang's second solo exhibition at Long March Space, *Lorem Ipsum*, opens on Saturday 10 July, 2021. The exhibition presents 26 recent paintings and explores the artist's recent experiences, introspections, and responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. The paintings are a re-examination of space and time, and further interrogate the processes of reclaiming and recycling in the artist's practice. In addition, they continue Zhang's exploration of her interests in geopolitics, questions around identity (particularly of Asian descent), and our information society.

The title of the exhibition, *Lorem Ipsum*, derives from the artist's *Placeholder* series, created this year. The subject matter of the *Placeholder* paintings references a Chinese archaic system of sequential counting (known as the "ten heavenly stems", whose use is similar to that of Roman numerals), and echoes the concept of lorem ipsum in its conception.

"Lorem ipsum" is a piece of dummy text that has been widely used in the print and publishing industries since the 15th century. It takes the form of a passage in scrambled Latin, hence rendering the content of the passage meaningless and absurd. This allows designers to focus on layout, formatting, and type designs without being distracted by the content of the text. This state of existence – seemingly normal in appearance but futile and stagnant in actuality – is analogous to Zhang's immediate experience, and how her perspective on time, space, the creative process, and the everyday has undergone a shift in the past year in the context of living in London.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, Zhang's experience of time has become increasingly fragmented and is now defined by epidemiological terms such as "10-day quarantine", "14-day quarantine", "lockdowns", "first-wave", and "second-wave." Daily life – and time in general – seems to have broken down and been abstracted into independent segments. These segments are detached from linear temporal progression and act like "dummy variables" or "placeholders", such that their continuity has become disrupted and, like lorem ipsum, they are seemingly interchangeable at will. These artificially imposed parameters have allowed Zhang to perceive the paradox and misalignment of various polarities – for instance China and the United Kingdom, Asia and the West, the past and the future, and time and space. In response to these perceived fractures, Zhang has begun scrutinizing the ways we observe and count time, prompting also the *Placeholder* series.

The *Placeholder* series contains ten works in all, each corresponding to a character from the archaic counting system of "ten heavenly stems": 甲 ("i"), 乙 ("ii"), 丙 ("iii"), 丁 ("iv"), 戊 ("v"), 己 ("vi"), 庚 ("vii"), 辛 ("viii"), 壬 ("ix"), and 癸 ("x"). Drawing reference to this system of ordinal counting holds two levels of meaning in Zhang's work: firstly, as ordinal numbers, the characters have most commonly been used to count and record time; the artist's own life planning during the pandemic has largely relied on "counting days", and thus for Zhang, the counting system has become

symbolic of the state of being. Secondly, having been largely replaced by modern numerical decimals, the “ten heavenly stems” are relegated to use as a kind of “dummy variable” in modern society. Consequently, they have come to represent the artist’s thinking on the substitutability and displacement of time during the pandemic. Works in the *Placeholder* series are composed of a combination of Chinese calligraphy, patterns inspired by Central Asian kilims, and notation commonly used in programming languages. This series marks the first time that Zhang overtly employs Chinese calligraphy in her work. It is a fresh, key path for the artist as she continues her inquiry into questions of identity (in particular, identity of Asian descent), induced by changes in the pandemic.

As the pandemic continues to unfold, the everyday is filled with a sense of suspension and instability. Zhang’s routine has undergone a dramatic shift – from a habitual drift between cities and places, to now finding herself trapped in a fixed and cyclical space, moving repetitively between “Point A” (home) and “Point B” (work). As a result, Zhang’s practice has become introverted and introspective. Motifs and elements regularly employed in Zhang’s work (such as the Gömböc, the Möbius strip, price tags, map projections, and fragmented hand shapes) have formed a growing vocabulary in the artist’s practice. Over time, through processes of reproduction, distortion, and deconstruction, the motifs have become what the artist refers to as “gestures”. On the canvas, these “gestures” go through further processes of recycling, transformation, and renewal, ultimately forming a new open network.

Thus, another important aim of the exhibition is to illustrate the methodological development of Zhang’s work: namely, the artist’s conscious and meticulous recycling and reclamation of previous motifs and inspirations, all the while simultaneously drawing on the principle of lorem ipsum in the course of composition. For example, *Spring (Inverted Arc)* (2021) is a direct translation from *Inverted (Spring)* (2021): the concave triangle found in the latter is derived from the convex triangle in the former. Further inside the exhibition space, *Re/Calibration* (2021) – the largest painting in this exhibition at 3.8 x 2.2 meters – recycles and interweaves elements from an earlier painting, *Palmier Calibration* (2019). Furthermore, *Geoblaze* (2020) and *Atlas Nimbus* (2021) are continuations of Zhang’s interest in map projections from the last century. They are a means for the artist to interrogate geo-relations, geopolitics, and questions around identity, and attest to her concerns over the politicization and manipulation of the pandemic.

Concurrent with the exhibition, Long March Space will also present *Vivien Zhang: Context and Method* in the gallery’s Artist Room. This micro-project will sample fragments from Zhang’s London studio space – including drafts, notes, and traces of “physical residue” from corners of her studio. They will provide a glimpse into the artist’s work setting and methodology in preparation for *Lorem Ipsum*.

About the Artist

Vivien Zhang (born 1990, Beijing) grew up in China, Kenya and Thailand, and currently works and lives in London. She received her MA in Painting from the Royal College of Art (London) in 2014, after completing her undergraduate degree at the Slade School of Fine Art, UCL (London) in 2012. Zhang’s paintings present a cultural and geographical fluidity, which interrogates the palimpsest nature of contemporary

culture and the paradoxes of our information age. As a digital native, Zhang explores being a passive recipient in a growing digital world, and makes apparent the fragmented and sporadic ways in which we consume information. One device used is alternating painterly layers – a direct response to the superimposed nature of digital media. As we experience an expanding abundance of visual materials, Zhang queries the artist' authorship and authority in the use of their derivations and iterations, as well as the contradictions of this information age.