

REFRAMING THE NARRATIVE

A new generation of East Asian creatives is finding its artistic voice

By HELENA LEE

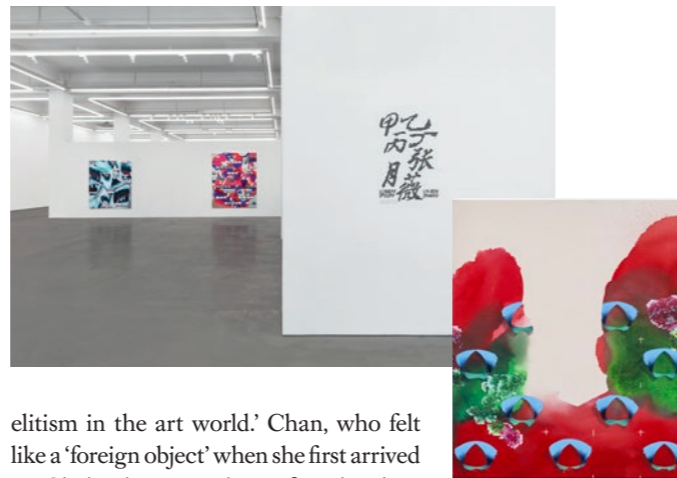
The Covid-19 pandemic has thrown many issues into sharp relief, not least the treatment of those of East and South-East Asian heritage, with an increase in hate crimes fostered by the anti-Asian rhetoric from the likes of Donald Trump. However, it has also given rise to a new generation of East Asian artists who are pushing and questioning the boundaries within which their work is judged.

'I am no longer silent!' is the opening line of a manifesto behind the artist Xie Rong's work. 'I wish to share my story and use my art to echo the social movement.' It accompanies a portrait of the artist (also known as Echo Morgan), in which her face is painted white, with the campaign line #StopAsianHate emblazoned in blue – the colours a nod to Chinoiserie – over her features.

Xie, who was born in China's Chengdu, and studied at Central St Martins and the RCA, began drawing parallels between her own life and that of her great-grandmother. 'She was the first person who told me what racism was,' explains Xie, 'and how love and compassion can heal hate.' The video and performance artist is now working on a piece that reflects on her ancestor's love story with an American man, but through the lens of the derogatory name-calling she herself has experienced as a result of the pandemic. 'This year was revolutionary for me,' she says. 'The more I read, the more I realised that our modern history was mostly the history of Europe. I was brought up in a communist kindergarten, but I believe in democracy and freedom of speech. I felt very sad, powerless and lost here, the centre of proud capitalism.'

The Hong Kong painter and digital artist Kristy M Chan also questions the cultural framing of the way art is consumed. 'While it may not be normal to be exposed to East Asian culture, most are not given a chance to learn about it,' Chan says. 'Education in history is often Eurocentric, art history even more. There's definitely

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elitism in the art world.' Chan, who felt like a 'foreign object' when she first arrived in Cheltenham aged 16, found solace when she studied at the Slade School of Fine Art. She now makes large-scale oil paintings that contemplate the idea of migration and the changing perception of what 'home' is. 'The feeling that a person or place or object gives, and that shifting notion of home, are fascinating to me.'

Vivien Zhang, a London-based artist, whose accolades include being shortlisted for Saatchi's New Sensations, has felt the burden of expectation of being from China. 'I remember that people would comment not on the brushstrokes but the "calligraphy" in my work,' says Zhang of her paintings. However, though she avoided traditional motifs in the past, she recently started using Chinese characters in her work in an act of reclamation. In her Beijing show 'Lorem Ipsum', her paintings reflect Zhang's experience of time, fragmented and defined by terms now familiar to us – 'quarantine', 'lockdown', 'first wave' and 'second wave' – and look at what she refers to as a 'misalignment of polarities', such as China and the United Kingdom, Asia and the West, localities assumed to have ideologies that are pitted against each other.

By imbuing contemporary meaning into art that subverts expected and traditional ideas, there is a hope that viewers will see a different and vital narrative. 'I do believe that though the incidents that occurred last year were heart-wrenching and revolting,' says Zhang, 'they have ultimately prompted more conversations for the East Asian community to have a voice.'

Xie Rong, Kristy M Chan and Vivien Zhang will be in conversation with East Side Voices at Shoreditch House for Soho House members on 14 October (www.sohohouse.com).

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Left: Xie Rong in her work 'Stop Asian Hate', London (2021). Above: her performance piece 'Sea' (2019). Opposite, from left: Vivien Zhang's exhibition 'Lorem Ipsum' at Long March Space in Beijing. Her 'Pour (Spring)' (2021)



Clockwise from left: 'To(e)tally (K)not' (2021) by Kristy M Chan. 'Re/calibration' (2021) by Vivien Zhang. Chan's 'Wheeling My Bike from East to West' (2020)

