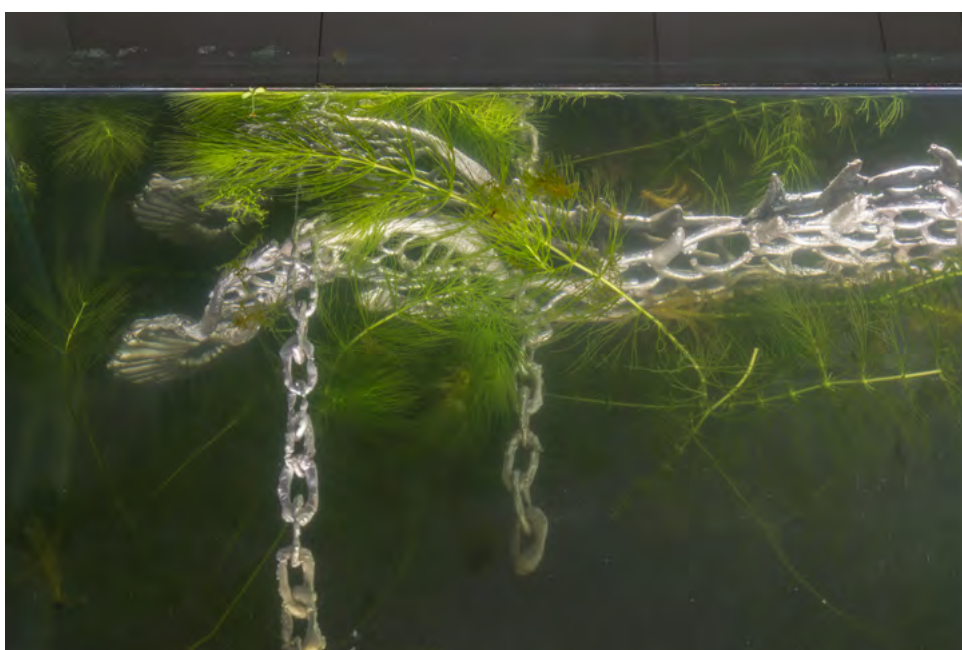


Contemporânea

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## The Afterlives of Images: Evian Wenyi Zhang's *Huàshēn*

Marta Espiridião



In the summer of 2024, Evian Wenyi Zhang had an unusual request from one of her paintings: she was to carve an object, similar to a trampoline, out of wild oak. Her hands were tracing forms she could not have anticipated, and only by the end did she recognise what had taken shape: the trampoline had become vessel, embodiment, *huàshēn* — the reincarnation of a deity. And although the whims of a painting are of no concern to us, the sensible attention provided by the artist to her artwork is of the utmost importance to her methodological practice.

Looking at Evian Wenyi Zhang's works feels like looking at an ouroboros. An image begets an object, an object begets another image, and something moves between them: be it attention, memory, matter or even spirit. Her latest exhibition's, 化身 (*huàshēn*), testifies to a cycle in which the immateriality of a look can be bound to a tangible object, and an object can be remade immaterial in the gaze of the beholder — marking a significant development in the work of an artist whose career (though still in its earliest chapters) has already traced an unusual path, steered by an unusual gaze.

Born in Shanghai in 2000, Zhang studied art history at New York University before working as an exhibition photographer for a gallery, where she was invited to contribute to a collective show with her first painting. Soon after, the paintings started to come out of the wall, taking up more space as

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they (un)folded into sculptures, and more cumulative lenses were added to the reality reinterpreted in her works. That is the short story. But if one were to think about it further, one could speculate that Zhang's earlier encounters with contemporary artworks were also mediated through the camera's lens — her attention trained on tracking how light falls on surfaces, how objects are framed, how images address viewers. Maybe this transition from documenting others' works to producing her own was not a rupture but a form of continuity: photography had already led her to see images as constructs, and then came the time to unmake and rearrange them.



Evian Wenyi Zhang, *化身 (huàshēn)*. Exhibition view at Pedro Cera, Lisbon, 2025. Photo: Bruno Lopes. Courtesy Pedro Cera.

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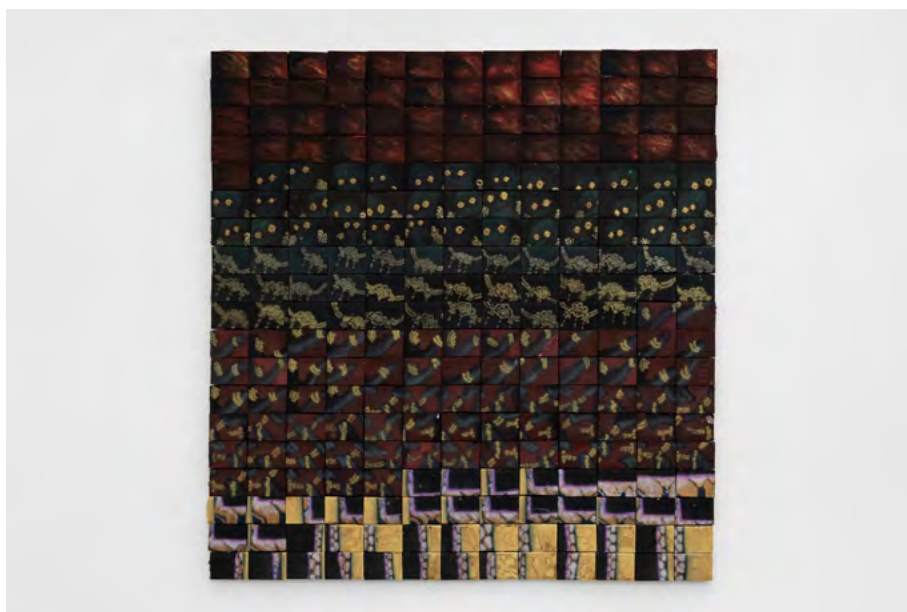
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By constantly inquiring how images are constructed, Evian Wenyi Zhang goes against the categorisation of images that so frequently limits how we look, loosening the bounds on images by deconstructing them to the smallest fractions of attention. When I encountered her paintings at Pedro Cera, the first thing I was reminded of was film frame sequences. I had read little on the artist's thematics or references, as I try to look at new artworks without pre-conceived ideas or narratives, and it was only when I reached the end of the first (and biggest) room, grabbing a few papers where one could see the referential objects, that I understood what it was that I was looking at. (Pictures of) Objects transmuted into flashbacks, a whole fragmented into detached framings of its own details — trying to retrace the process, I imagined the artist looking around the object with a camera, zooming in on details and resting her eyes for some time in each, designing a sequential organisation for the images, making a movie.

Zhang's approach to what could be a form of image-based appropriation is rooted in a forensic-like meticulousness, with the patience and care of a clockmaker. She is not actually reproducing images through paintings, but dissecting them by tracing the pathways of her own attention when her eyes scan their surfaces. Each small canvas in her grids represents what she terms an "area of interest": an instinctive point of visual fixation, which is then isolated from its original context and re-presented as an autonomous unit of perception. These units, with an almost pixelated surface that reminds me of the tactility of digital screens, are then arranged into compositions that function less as pictures and more as mapped records of the act of looking itself.

A careful methodology, embedded in her ritual-like painting, takes cognitive research into saccadic movement as a starting point: this is the rapid, twitchy motion the eyes make, even when observing a static scene. Zhang's grids delineate the movement of her discontinuous attention — which cares little for pictorial conventions that structure formal representations of the world — by gathering its fragmented pieces: the remains left after an image has been digested, the taste it leaves on the tongue. This metaphor of digestion is Zhang's own, as she describes this grid system as a kind of "smoothie blender" that fragments and recomposes images into new visual forms.



Evian Wenyi Zhang, *Fudō Myōō (Achala Vidyaraja), The Immovable Wisdom King*, 2025. Acrylic on cotton canvas. Photo: Bruno Lopes. Courtesy of Pedro Cera.

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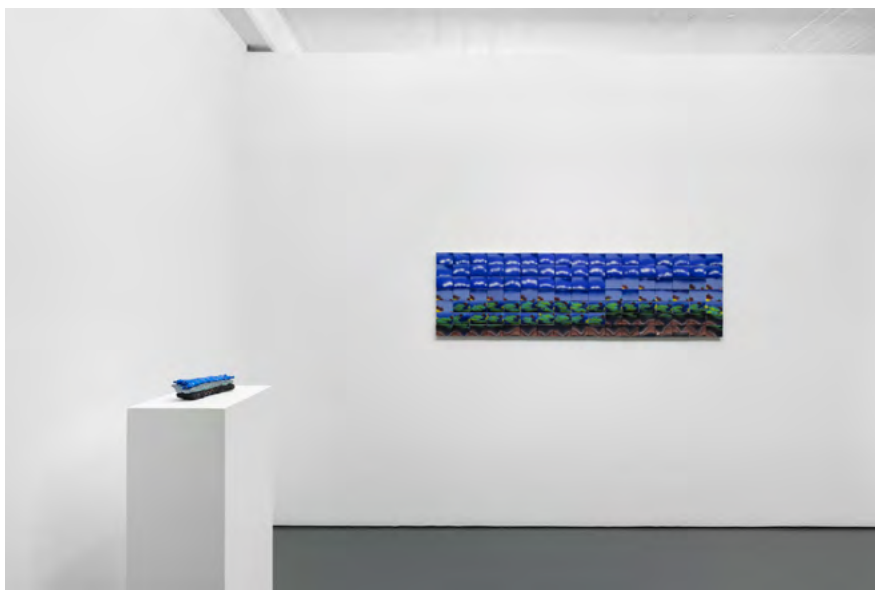
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The press release for Zhang's exhibition at Pedro Cera Gallery overlaps her paintings' structure with Rosalind Krauss theorisation of the modernist grid, which rejected formal representation to embrace the pictorial autonomy that could come from abstraction — meaning that a painting invoked nothing beyond its own surface. This ostensibly exhausted device seems revived by Zhang when she turns it toward the aftermath of representation: somehow refusing referentiality but preserving its residues, like ghostly imprints of afterimages, processed by the machinery of attention and then spat out fully transformed. But besides this, I believe that, in Zhang's work, the role of the grid goes beyond its capacity to abstractly extrapolate figuration, as it becomes a way of appropriating aesthetics to represent her self: after all, the grid is about patterns and repetitions, two key aspects in the building of any identity.

While earlier works drew from the artists' personal archives as source material to glimpse at the spatial relations within images, which she would then compress into paintings, the works presented at Pedro Cera Gallery mark a significant reorientation of her gaze. For *化身*, the artist turned to the online repository of two Western museological institutions, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin. With this, the referent was moved to the vast archive of objects labelled as "Asian" that circulate within these museological systems, where we see their meanings refracted through successive (and cumulative) regimes of acquisition, classification and display.

Zhang had already anticipated German museums to have a more overtly anthropological positioning, especially when framing "Asian" collections within explicitly educational narratives, separating Western observers and non-Western artefacts by drawing the line of collective history. Observing the collection from Berlin, she found this tendency toward the didactic (although without the expected orientalist framing) in the choice of objects and in the construction of their historical and geographically-specific narratives. By contrast, the MET's collection revealed a very different genealogy: assembled mostly from donations of wealthy Western collectors (rather than from systematic acquisition programmes), its objects are instead reflective of both private aesthetic preferences and trading systems in place.



Evian Wenyi Zhang, *化身* (*huàshēn*). Exhibition view at Pedro Cera, Lisbon, 2025. Photo: Bruno Lopes. Courtesy Pedro Cera.

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Born in China, educated in New York and currently based in Berlin, Zhang finds herself gravitating toward Western selections of Chinese and “Asian” art. By her own internal examination, this could stem from the intersection of her western art historical training, the distance from the cultural contexts that originally produced the objects she sees, and some level of internalised orientalism. But it is also entangled with much longer, and heavier, histories: a Western taste for “Asian” art, shaped by centuries of extraction and appropriation, has itself become part of an aesthetic inheritance for artists (like Zhang) coming to terms with the refracted lenses through which they encounter their own culture and heritage, standing in this liminal positioning of having to recover something that got astray from its own universe.

We are not talking about restoration, though: Zhang does not attempt to return these objects to an imagined state of “original” meaning, and that is why her methodology might be metabolic rather than ethnographic. After deep-diving into the museums’ online image archives — already totally removed from the physicality of the objects they represent — each photograph is subjected to her attention-tracking protocol, which isolates the points that draw the eye and recomposes them into a grid. The resulting paintings are not representations of “Asian” artefacts, but maybe abstract presentations of Zhang’s own perception of Western ideas on “Asian” artefacts. As stated in the press release, they stem from the “displacement and reinscription that arises from a continuous movement of translation, similar to an incarnation in which each image is reborn in the form of another”. Like the objects they encapsulate, images are vessels too — bears to question whether they contain what they were intended to, or what we wish to see upon gazing at them.

Another novelty presented at Pedro Cera is Zhang’s sculptures, born from the paintings themselves as much as from her sensibility and intuition. After completing a grid and putting away all its sources and referentials, the artist turns her attention to what she describes as the painting’s “material imagination” (which, I speculate, might have to do with how the painting would feel itself to be). Either by looking at the painting as a new image in itself, or by listening to its mysterious requests, the sculpture that emerges is not an illustration of its respective painting but its materialisation, its incarnation. An object is turned into an image which is turned into a painting/surface which is turned into an object (or sometimes, as in previous works, again into an image) — the same perceptual-visual event, rendered in different substances with overlapping lenses, continually transformed as it crosses media and materialities. In a way, this deconstruction-reconstruction exercise is as devotional as it is analytical.

The works of Evian Wenyi Zhang are recordings of fascination, of the eye’s involuntary capture by every inch of an image that speaks to the mind for no particular reason. Registering the ways a dot continues to trouble the eye long after the whole image has faded into a small canvas, she apprehends its details again and again, each time fractionally altered as if counting the seconds that pass between each sip, extending rather than resolving their grip. By refusing to hierarchize her focal points according to conventional measures of significance — treating a fold of fabric with the same *gravitas* as a body part or a ritual gesture — these frames unsettle the categories through which images are typically sorted and evaluated. They seem to propose both an alternative gaze and an alternative “order”, derived not from institutional taxonomies or canonical conventions, but from the organic rhythms of embodied perception. — it is more about intuition and an unbridled connection between the eye and the mind.

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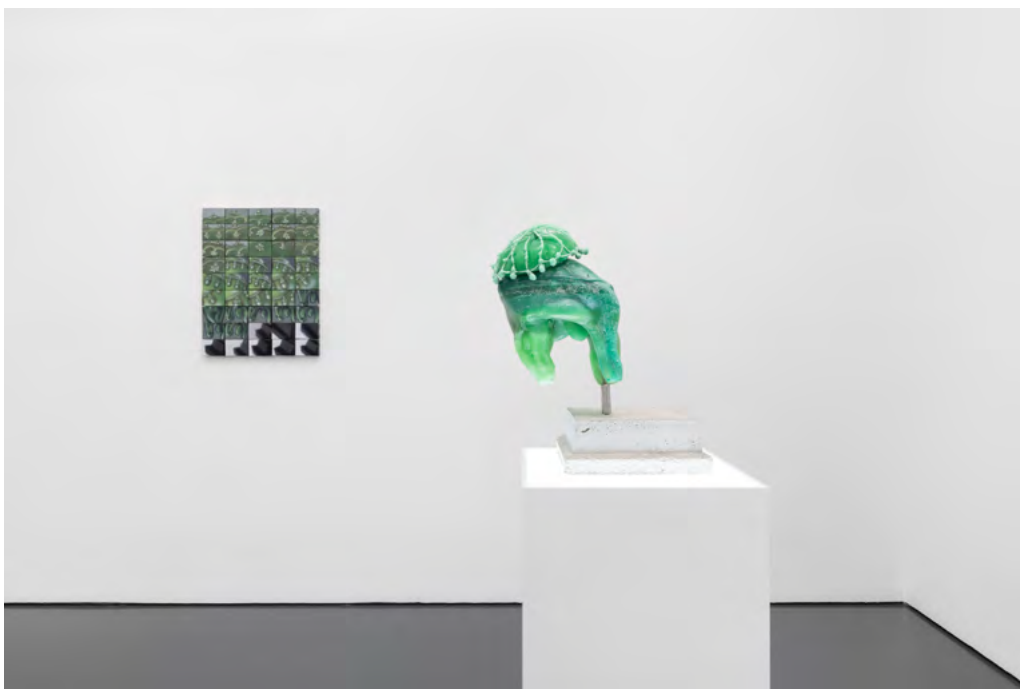
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Zhang is well aware that the gesture of looking is political, and that is made explicit in 化身.

By applying this methodology of deconstructing the act of looking to museum collections — shaped by colonialist pulsions for acquisition and archiving, tainted by an overarching orientalist fascination —, Zhang does not attempt to turn the wrongs into rights, or to reclaim the objects she sees. She does, however, subject them to the same treatment applied to her own photographs, and with this, they become not illustrative examples of a Western idea of “Asian” art, but openings for the possibility of conscious attention — images in their own right, equally or more deserving of the careful, obsessive gaze enacted in her practice. She is not trying to resolve these tensions (that would maybe be a pointless endeavour); her interest lies in making them visible, tracing how they imprint on the surfaces of images and objects, and, inevitably, on our perception.

Suffice to say, Zhang’s work does not promise to restore images to the state of innocent presence that might precede their fall into reproduction and circulation — as it does not dare to imagine that painting might arrest the endless flow of images, nor wrap it in any stable meaning. Instead, they invite a greater awareness of one’s own attention, which bears special importance as we are more and more enmeshed in what is called an “attention economy” — attention is now time, visibility, money and reach (and someone somewhere is profiting off ours). By transforming the involuntary sparks of perception into deliberate acts of making, by recognising and outlining the pattern of one’s own gaze, the pattern itself becomes practice: an ongoing experiment with what it means to see, and how to make (in)visible the act of seeing. The images, having passed through so many transformations and eyes and lenses, are ready to be born again.



Evian Wenyi Zhang, *化身 (huàshēn)*. Exhibition view at Pedro Cera, Lisbon, 2025. Photo: Bruno Lopes. Courtesy Pedro Cera.

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Evian Wenyi Zhang, *Pesos*, 2025. Angle connectors, elastic cords, metal wires, nail gel, plastic beads, polyester filling, stockings, strings, wax.  
Photo: TrevorGood.

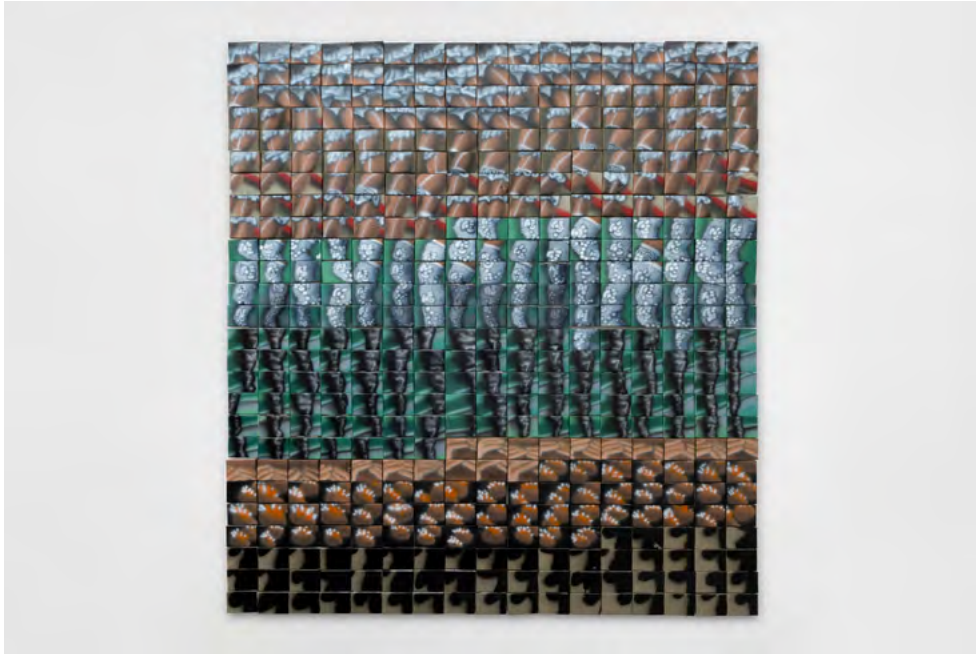
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Evian Wenyi Zhang, *Pesos*, 2025. Acrylic on canvas (442 units). Photo: Trevor Good.

*Cover Image*

Evian Wenyi Zhang, *Mirror with dragon* (detail), 2025. Stainless steel stand, aquarium, tin, air pump, algae, spotlight. Photo: Bruno Lopes. Courtesy of Pedro Cera.