

Evian Wenyi Zhang

化身 (huàshēn)

November 6 — January 17, 2026
Lisbon

The title first came to mind when I was asked by one of my paintings to hand-carve this trampoline-like structure made of wild oak. At some point I realized I was carving the limbs of this Buddhist deity; and when I was casting the brass joints, I realized they were his golden jewelry—a message of invincible power. I imagined him to be entitled to transform into any state of being. The trampoline, therefore, is his 化身.

– Evian Wenyi Zhang

Studying what she identifies as *politics of appearance*, Evian Wenyi Zhang presents a new body of work under the title 化身 (huàshēn) – loosely translated as "incarnation" or "embodiment" – through her iconic grid-based methodology of reading images, giving shape to the incarnations of the lonely deities residing within the diasporic objects of “Asian” origin that have circulated globally, imprisoned and redefined by Western museums. In a dialogical discourse whose harmonious aggregation leads to a meticulous interrogation of the mechanisms underlying the functioning and agency of the image itself, as well as the broader aesthetic-conceptual concerns that underpin it, painting and sculpture delineate the field of relations to which Zhang’s work is dedicated in her first solo exhibition at Galeria Pedro Cera, marking the artist’s debut in Portugal.

From the outset, 化身 (huàshēn) carries a philosophical depth evident in the etymology and grammatical structure of the word itself, as 化 (huà) denotes transformation or conversion, while 身 (shēn) designates the body as a vessel of presence. Together they suggest a passage from an immaterial condition to a tangible form, a movement that not only resonates with Zhang’s artistic process, but which also sees her new series of works as spectral embodiments of the colonial gaze. Grounded in a structure of continuous mutation, her systematic approach begins exactly with an exercise in arbitrary appropriation and recomposition, drawn from the online imagetic repertoire of “Asian” artifacts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (Berlin). Through this selective gesture, Zhang utterly enacts a political intervention that exposes the mechanisms through which such objects were originally acquired and classified under the auspices of an orientalist fascination, reclaimed since the eighteenth and nineteenth by the newly formed museological institutions which until today continue to preserve the posthumous memory of these same implications.

Particularly enticed to the Met Museum collection, Zhang observes how that might be a result of a more aesthetically oriented selection of objects, compared to most of its counterparts. Through this distinction, she exposes the irony underlying her preference for Western “ways of seeing” (born from the subjective taste, but also from the spoils, of the European collector) which differ entirely from those emerging from the geographical contexts that originally produced them, and from her own heritage as a Chinese artist. Living outside her native context, Zhang inevitably observes her own culture through a refracted lens shaped by the inherited echoes of trade. As such, while her earlier references were sourced from more casual or everyday contexts, in 化身 (huàshēn) Zhang turns to a distinctly different set of materials – publicly accessible and functionally didactic images of collective historical knowledge – that are subsequently reworked through analytical methods of sensory, emotional, and even forensic nature, defined by what the artist describes as “areas of interest” or focal points.

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In this sequential arrangement of ocular saccadic movements¹, where small canvases are mounted on metal structures, Zhang opens the way to a repertoire of perceptive possibilities in which the original object reorganizes itself through “statistical tabulations”, applied across the various methods and materials she selects. Deriving from an analogous methodology, each sculpture equally arises from processes of reorganization tied to what the artist perceives, senses, and recalls, drawing on a heterogeneous assemblage of readily available materials that, in some empirical way, echo the forms, textures, colors and, most importantly, the perceptual or emotional feeling of each already-deconstructed painting, while simultaneously diverging from their initial referents to become entities altogether different. As such, painting and sculpture converge as small visual microcosms that slip beyond their semantic context, transforming instead into subjective fixations born from arbitrary discovery.

If, on the one hand, Zhang’s work constitutes a system of elemental deconstruction and repetition that results in a rigorous investigation of the image itself, on the other, by introducing new and sundry production methods, she reincorporates a heritage legacy through the use of traditional Chinese techniques and materials – such as the employment of negative space – thus situating 化身 (*huàshēn*) at the intersection of a broader phenomenological, aesthetic and cultural questioning. Furthermore, by adopting the original titles of the objects that inspire each work – titles that, in themselves, constitute merely descriptive, and at times reductive, constructions arising from the unawareness of their cultural and historical contexts– Zhang creates a project that is, to a certain extent, not only visually but also anthropologically and ethnographically expansive, echoing the aims articulated by curator Clémentine Deliss in *The Metabolic Museum* (2020). In this work, Deliss carefully outlines the contours of the experiential enterprise she carried out during her directorship of the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt, envisioning an anachronistic and anomalous space that would invite non-unitary reflection through artistic or investigative practices. By distancing the collection’s objects from prior epistemologies in which the museum is understood as the holder of truth, Zhang’s project emerges as a contiguous force advancing Deliss’ vision, creating its own metabolism within the collections of the aforementioned institutions.

Just as Deliss proposes a transformative scenario, Zhang conceives a project of 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. Described by the artist as a kind of “visual version” of Tarek Atoui’s *The Reverse Collection / The Reverse Sessions* presented at the Dahlem Museum in Berlin– in which the artist recorded ancient, ethnic instruments to engineer new ones from their sounds – Zhang’s process arises from a collection of visual fragments through which she reconstructs new bodies that carry their formal reverberation. Like “deconstructing a poem to write another one using the same characters”², Zhang’s works reveal the fragility of (historical) image-making and consumption, allowing them to unfold within a continuously transforming field of sensorial experience.

1 The informational processing guiding the selection and identification of “areas of interest” in each work derives from cognitive mechanisms that accompany rapid variations in vision even when observing a static object, instating a form of “embodied perception” that dissolves the Cartesian dualism between mind and body. Rearranged in grid tabulations, Zhang’s process echoes the modernist grid system identified by Rosalind Krauss in 1979 (“Grids”, *October*, vol.9: pp.50-64), where she describes a visual formation that rejects representation in favor of formal autonomy. In Zhang’s work, the grid becomes a tool not only for organizing visual material but also for generating perceptual relationships that emphasize the autonomy of each element while simultaneously allowing new forms and resonances to emerge.

2 Quote taken from an email sent by Evian Wenyi Zhang to curator Clémentine Deliss in the context of the presentation of her new project at Galeria Pedro Cera.