

PRESS RELEASE

VIVIEN ZHANG | SOFT BORDERS ON VIEW | 20 JAN – 5 MAR 2020

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Lawrie Shabibi is delighted to present *Soft Borders* – an exhibition of new works by Vivien Zhang. Zhang is a London-based artist who, having lived previously in Beijing, Nairobi and Bangkok, makes abstract paintings that play with fragments of memory from place and time, and evoke opposing senses of familiarity and strangeness. Her practice reflects the dislocation experienced as a third-culture citizen and also her innate engagement with the digital and online realm – where time and place is navigated both physically and in the cyber domain.

Zhang's paintings present a cultural and geographical fluidity that questions the multi-layered nature of contemporary culture, the casual appropriation of visual tropes today, and the challenges and paradoxes of our information age. Zhang's interest lies in the collection and assembly of motifs from a variety of sources including ancient text, architecture and science. Recurring figures in her works include "manicules" found in early European manuscripts, Solomonic pillars found in Baroque churches, and the mathematical shape Gömböc. These are combined using bright colours and dynamic abstract forms that appear as if by accident on the canvas, suggesting both order and chaos that comes from interrupted memory and the visual experience of digital technology.

For *Soft Borders* Zhang produces eight new paintings that expand upon her investigations of the fluid and arbitrary nature of memory where boundaries do not exist. A number of paintings return to her earlier works where the Central Asian kilim is used as the starting point. Zhang's interest in the kilim is spurred by the fact that the names of kilims traditionally are not bounded by national or tribal borders, but rather according to wider locations – and yet kilims are to be found all over the world and away from their original context. This relates to the setting of Dubai: both because of its geographical position as a gateway to Central Asia as well as the fluid makeup and transient nature of its population.

In the painting *Soft Borders, 2020* the image of kilim appears dominant, although on closer inspection, only fragments of each pattern materialise, the composition is quite fractured, and its pyramid-like pattern alludes to an AI anatomical map devised by the AI Now Institute (NYU) and specifically the Sierpinski fractal. This raises the question of how much information is needed to represent something and what assumptions come with perception. Across the painting Zhang inserts black and white drawings of mountains reminiscent of Chinese landscape paintings, but in actual fact the mountain peaks trace country borders where there has been political conflict: borders between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; North and South Korea; China and India; and finally Russia and the Crimea. This is Zhang's most overtly political painting in the exhibition, alluding to geopolitical border conflicts that arise out of what are natural geological formations and the global migrant and refugee crisis.

In *Spiral Columns (Red Venom)*, 2020 and *Spiral Columns (Marble Messages)*, 2020, Zhang re-introduces the Solomonic or “spiral” columns first inserted in her works in 2017 and which appear to emerge out of colour-radiant and iridescent digital planes. Spiral columns exist in Roman and English churches, engravings, and in numerous Baroque paintings and came to Zhang’s attention when she spent one year living at the British School at Rome. The first such columns that caught her eye were the spiral columns at St. Peter’s cloister which had existed in the old basilica and are said to have been brought from Jerusalem via Greece. The recycling of material from older buildings in the East and placed in the West signals the passage of architecture and its arrangements through world cultures appearing centuries later and continents apart: like Zhang’s own belief in the insistence of forms and objects transcending time in eternal repetition.

In the large-scale painting *Cultivar Bearer (Woven Portals)*, 2020 Zhang introduces images of the rose-apple that haphazardly bounce across the canvas. Native to South-East Asia, the fruit draws upon the artist’s personal memories of her time in Thailand and China. Painted against a backdrop of horizontal colours that are pixelated, the painting’s composition is a reminder of our digital world, appearing almost like a screenshot of a video game. Adding to the dynamic effect are a series of loops that recur in the kilim patterns and that also references the arch, a revered shape in architecture that dates back to 2000 BC but was perfected as an architectural structure by the Romans. The painting’s choice of images reflects the way in which our own memories work (bouncing from one recollection to another often by chance) as well as how images appear across our screens in ostensibly random ways.

Cascading shapes also make their mark in *Under the Moon Bean*, 2019 which appear against the backdrop of a splintered red, green and white kilim-like pattern devised by the artist using ‘brace’ brackets from programming languages. The round shapes bring to mind grapes – perhaps because of the images associated with kilims and feasts in ancient miniatures from Persia – although their colour and texture is more like the barren landscape of the moon. These round three-dimensional organic forms contrast with the flat digitized background creating two different kinds of space that reflect our own interface with the online world.

Vivien Zhang’s paintings are games of visual hide-and-seek: in their abstract surfaces you might find motifs and images from different times and places challenging you to take a closer look. Her practice deciphers memories of images and motifs that appear on her paintings as if by chance, conveying our disrupted world. Meticulously painted by hand, Zhang’s simulation of the painted image is a contradiction to production in a computerized world. In fact, her skill is in her use of the rudimentary material to create paintings that arouse the experience of our hyper-digital age.

VIVIEN ZHANG

Vivien Zhang (b 1990, Beijing) is a London-based artist who grew up in China, Kenya and Thailand. Zhang is named on the 2017 Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia list, and is the recipient of the Abbey Award 2016–17 at the British School at Rome and the Chadwell Award 2014–15. She received her MA in Painting from the Royal College of Art (London) after completing her undergraduate at the Slade School of Fine Art, UCL (London).

Vivien Zhang’s work reflects disjunctions one experiences as a third-culture citizen and also as a digital native. Her paintings present a cultural and geographical fluidity that interrogates the palimpsest nature of contemporary culture and the paradoxes of our information age. Zhang collates motifs from personal and collective shared experiences and manifest them in various combinations in her paintings. These motifs often occupy multiple contexts or cultures, or share properties of ambiguity. Assembled in the space of her canvases, the motifs collide and defy their origin

interpretations, generating open networks (Umberto Eco) and “alternative landscapes” for an imagined generation of third-culture inhabitants. Examples of these motifs include the mathematical shape Gömböc, Central Asian kilims, “manicules” found in early European manuscripts, and spiral columns in Baroque churches.

Vivien Zhang’s works have been exhibited internationally and are in the Andrew Xue Collection (Singapore), Aspen Collection (UK), Star Museum (Shanghai), Swarovski Archive (Global), and White Rabbit Collection (Sydney) amongst others. Zhang’s recent exhibitions include *Codescape* (solo), Long March Space, Beijing; *Echo Chamber* (group), Plus-One Gallery, Antwerp; *Generation Y* (group), Platform Foundation, London; *Uzumaki* (solo), House of Egorn, Berlin; *Digital Natives: Vivien Zhang and Thomas van Linge* (duo), The RYDER, London; *All As Long Distance Neighbours* (group), SOYUZ, Pescara; *Beyond Borders* (group), Blain|Southern, London; *Cavity Drift: Vivien Zhang* (solo), Galerie Huit, Hong Kong; and *Saatchi New Sensations 2014* (group), Victoria House, London.

LAWRIE SHABIBI

Lawrie Shabibi is a contemporary art gallery housed in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue. The gallery supports the long-term development of the careers of young international contemporary artists, with a focus on those from the Middle East and North Africa, and more recently diasporic artists within the UK. From its inception, the gallery has also organized art historical exhibitions, working with an older generation of artists from the Middle East and North Africa region. By holding a regular programme of exhibitions, screenings and talks, publishing catalogues and participating in international art fairs, Lawrie Shabibi has in the space of eight years been a forerunner in the development of the contemporary art scene in Dubai. As of 2020 Lawrie Shabibi will have a UK outpost at Cromwell Place in London.

FOR GALLERY INFORMATION

lawrieshabibi.com

FOR IMAGES AND PRESS INFORMATION

Diana Stellman

diana@lawrieshabibi.com

+971(0) 4346 9906