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Flowing Still curated by Anqi Li

Tizzi Tan and Zim Yu

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Flowing Still

Time has parted company with meaning since the beginning of 2020. Running while standing still, too still to be flowing at all.

The shift in time appears perceptible everywhere. *Flowing Still* (深水流靜) is a duo exhibition in which artists Tizzi Tan and Zim Yu respond to this change through artmaking.

Although both are international students with families living on the other side of the Pacific Ocean, Tan and Yu made different choices when the pandemic hit: Tan returned to Southwestern China while Yu remained in Toronto. More than 10,000 km apart, however, both internalized this mesmeric state of time and used paintings and photography to share what they saw and felt.

The most apparent similarities between Tan and Yu are their use of colour and representative imagery. During the pandemic, time has often felt muffled. Voices cannot get out, and light cannot get in. Even though the concept of time itself can be abstract, the suspension of time is specific in the exhibited works as both artists take a realistic approach. Employing darker and less saturated colours, they convey this muffled state in their work.

Painting and photography can work in opposite directions: painters include relevant elements to build on a canvas while photographers eliminate irrelevant information to frame a photo. In *Flowing Still*, both artists play with reality and create visual representations of it. Yu dips reality in his imagination by highlighting geometric shapes or exaggerating colour contrasts to guide the wandering eyes across the canvas. Tan, a photographer, zooms in on details that resemble illusions between reality and fantasy.

The flowing stillness of time is more than private nostalgia. Looking at the market place, Denglu village, and the empty sidewalk chairs, Tan observes the outdoor space. To the piquant question, “there are already countless images in the world; why do you want to take more photos?” Tan has said: “Photography is my most instinctive reaction ever since I started intentionally observing the world. The connection between photography and reality is direct, and I like playing with reality. Sure, everyone can take photos now. I also take low-resolution photos on my phone because I want them to be grounded, approachable, and intimate.”

Going to Market Place with Popo (2018)

Going to Market Place with Popo was one of such projects that Tan documented with her phone. Like many international students, Tan usually spends the summer with her family, especially her grandparents. Tan often accompanied her Popo (grandma) to the market place and took photos of people she met during these short trips. Unlike younger generations, seniors in China still prefer grocery shopping at the market place where they can check the freshness of the vegetables at each stand, look for the perfect portion for the family, haggle

with the vendors, and even chat with strangers to find a good deal or a fresher option. Popo enjoys these personal interactions that make the frequent trips worthwhile.

The flowy fabric used in *Popo* leads to a tangible and intimate association. Flipping through the soft pages, it is easy to spot the gap between the boisterous scenes in *Popo* and the empty chairs in Tan's *The Remains of the Day* (on view nearby). Even though the primary colours remain bright in the photos, market places like this are disappearing in China as young people would rather shop online or at chain supermarkets. In *Popo*, the image-bearing textiles are turned over, and the vivid colours of fruits, vegetables, and seniors' clothes become muted. The lively market is covered underneath with the fabric's blank side blending into the white wall. Experiences become memories. Where will Popo shop in the future?

The Remains of the Day (2022)

Chairs are scattered all over Chengdu's sidewalks, often brought by local residents from their homes. Placed in the gray zone between private and public spheres, they are an extension of private homes into the public space. As anyone can use any of the chairs, the ownership is vague. Moving the chairs around, people from nearby neighbourhoods gather, chat, play majiang¹ or chess, or simply relax. With a fan and a cup of tea in hand, they while the summer away.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, city streets suddenly became empty. At the time, public gatherings, even outdoor gatherings, were no longer permitted. The empty street seemed even emptier with the chairs, as the chairs, placed close to each other, alluded to the animated old days. If a street had no chairs, it was just a quiet street. The empty chairs are the reminiscence of and contrast with the once lively community that bore the expectations of in-person meetups. Nevertheless, the original chair owners didn't take the chairs home. They knew that no one would be sitting in them any time soon, but they had a vague hope that they would meet in these chairs again.

¹ According to Cambridge Dictionary, majiang (or mah-jonga) is a Chinese game in which players pick up and put down small painted pieces of wood or other material until they have the combination they need in order to win.

a river waiting for falling pears (2022)

We all desired to escape the city and hide in nature at some point during the pandemic. Tan's *a river waiting for falling pears* not only seeks consolation from nature but also illustrates ways of being with nature. *a river* is an image-based project about Denglu, a village in Southwestern China with approximately 100 residents. Tan lived in Denglu for a month, but she does not pretend to know everything about it or conform to orientalist fantasies about remote Eastern villages. Instead, she records what she sees: the way nature and human experience intertwine. In other words, *a river* presents an alternative, a possibility to live "in an environment of self-sufficient subsistence." The colour green is present throughout this work. The green velvet tablecloth mirrors the colour and texture of moss on a winding staircase in the photo book. The moss grows to the edge of the human-travelled path, hinting at the close relationship between the villagers and nature.

Meanwhile, Yu's personal style differs from Tan's focus on open space. He paints people around him, sharing his feelings via subdued colours, varied brushstrokes, and lights and shadows. The connection between the viewer and the artist can never be guaranteed, and Yu's ambiguous representations may be interpreted in different ways. Still, his candidness opens his world to curious eyes.

the spin (2022)

the spin stands out from the primarily figurative collection. Capturing movement with two-dimensional painting can be challenging, yet Yu has chosen to describe a moment where time is whirling and unstoppable. Dividing the indoor paintings from the outdoor paintings, *the spin* functions as a visual portal between the world within and without. On its right, three paintings in dark colours divulge his private emotions. On its left, the swimming pool and Emma series represent Yu's observation of his surroundings.

Emma

emma (2020) was Yu's first painting after the pandemic began. Viewers are tempted to follow her gaze and find out what she is looking at with such concentration. The answer is on

the table: the void accentuated by the matte sculpture. The viewers are in Emma's presence but disconnected from her by her distant gaze. It's an intimate moment where one can sense her physical presence in the room but her absence as company.

In *emma II* (2021), Emma finally raises her eyes to look at the viewer. Yet her expression remains aloof and apathetic. The phone in her hand conveys conflicting messages. Holding onto her phone, Emma's attention to the viewer is only temporary. But the phone screen is turned off and reflecting her thumb. Could it be that she is ready for an invested conversation?

The swimming pool series

The swimming pool series introduces the other side of *Flowing Still*, which shifts from negativity to a more relaxed state. In *to the swimming pool* (2021), Yu illustrates a good time with friends. One girl lies back in a transparent float while the other has her back to the viewer as her body melts into the quiet water. The moment is transient, and the good times depicted here are unstable and will unlikely last. Time, like water filling the swimming pool, is accumulating in silence.

Indoor

Chaos, as indicated in the title *children of chaos* (2022), permeates the self-portrait. This painting pictures the time when one wakes up from an afternoon nap and is taking a moment to locate oneself. Composite light creeps in from the window without telling the time of the day. Even the look into the mirror shows an obscured face laden with disorientation and displacement – a profound loss of time and self.

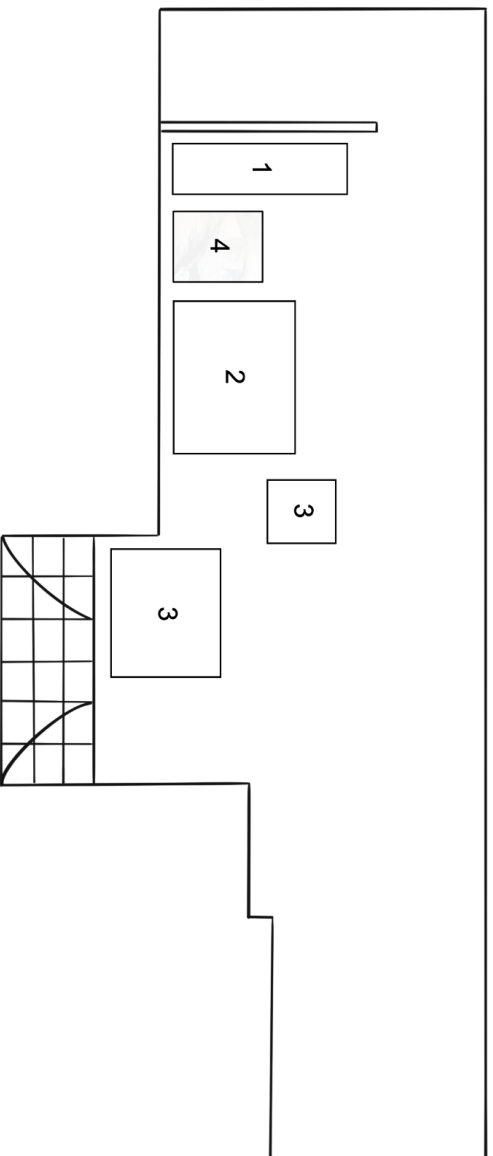
a pause (2022) is another self-portrait of Yu as he reads a book on the sofa. On the left, the paper towel symbolizes the mundane daily routines. His figure is elongated to demonstrate the stretching force of time's slow passage. In contrast, his dog Abao, unaware and unbothered by the shift in time, is depicted in standard proportions.

This difference raises a key question embedded in this exhibition: where does this sensation of “flowing still” come from?

Time in Denglu village was slow to begin with. The life presented in *a river* is so slow and essential that it is hard to tell whether the photos were taken before, during or after the pandemic. In urban settings, the contrast between life before and after the pandemic is more evident. The extensive addition to basic needs in a city, such as concerts, festivals, diner parties, shopping sprees and so on, generally promises people something to look forward to. When the pandemic took these add-ons away and left a void, endless time trapped at home replaced the supposedly endless possibilities. And another day is flowing still.

Time is an abstract concept, but Tan and Yu find ways to present it visually. And the works featured in *Flowing Still* are more descriptive than prescriptive, revealing how time is simultaneously condensed and extended. Their work is like a gentle nudge, reminding us of this paradox between the flow and the stillness of time.

- Anqi Li



Tizzi Tan

1. Going to Market Place with Popo, 2018, inkjet on fabric
2. a river waiting for falling pears, 2022, inkjet print on handmade paper, wood, and paint on laminate flooring
3. The Remains of the Day, 2022, inkjet prints

Zim Yu

4. at the pool, 2021, 36"x28", oil on canvas
5. emma, 2020, 30"x24", oil on canvas
6. emma II, 2021, 36"x28", oil on canvas
7. to the swimming pool, 2021, 28"x28", oil on canvas
8. a girl at the pool, 2021, 36"x36", oil in canvas
9. the spin, 2022, 48"x48", oil on canvas
10. Achilles ankle, 2021, 36"x36", oil on canvas
11. children of chaos, 2022, 36"x48", oil on canvas
12. A Pause, 2022, 60 x 34", oil on canvas