

# Shellie Zhang

## *Aesthetic of Surfaces*

Bradley Museum

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*“Camouflaged in a loud reoccurring floral motif, Aesthetic of Surfaces reflects on the markers of Chinese femininity in a globalized context. How are these motifs produced, made, sold and worn? What are the distinctions of high or kitsch taste? And how are these symbols then interpreted through the Western lens where East Asian femininities are often hyper-exoticized? Rejecting colonial orientalist views, the installation utilizes flowers as a vessel for diasporic feminine markers to bloom and take up space.”*

--- Shellie Zhang

Shellie Zhang's *Aesthetic of Surfaces* examines the many ways that complex notions of identity and place are translated or mistranslated through mass produced goods. Her series of images and vinyl wall-paper installations featured within this exhibition depict merchandise collected from Chinatowns that feature ornate Chinese floral motifs and brocades. These patterns have been cycled through commodities ranging from high fashion to kitschy collectables. Shared between these many uses of Chinese floral patterns is an uneasy question of intentionality. What do these designs tell us about the tensions between homage and appropriation? Given how widespread considerations for cultural appropriation have become, at least in certain contexts, Zhang's project also seems to question why these considerations are so-often not extended to Chinese material culture?

In some ways, Zhang's project reflects on The Met's 2015 exhibition *China: Through the Looking Glass*. The exhibition is described as an exploration of:

"the impact of Chinese aesthetics on Western fashion and how China has fueled the fashionable imagination for centuries. In this collaboration between The Costume Institute and the Department of Asian Art, high fashion is juxtaposed with Chinese costumes, paintings, porcelains, and other art, including films, to reveal enchanting reflections of Chinese imagery."<sup>1</sup>

Hugely successful and aptly titled, the exhibition offered a range of materials including film clips and haute couture that showcase a Western fixation with an arguably narrow interpretation of Eastern culture and aesthetics. The exhibition's high spectacle approach included such highlights as an advertisement campaign for Yves Saint Laurent's "Opium" perfume and Alexander McQueen's 2011 bodice made from blue and white Chinese porcelain shards. As Zhang explains the exhibition not only alludes to the tension between tribute and appropriation but also to complicated dynamics of trade and cultural exchange.

Quite literally in the midst of conversations about opening this exhibition the police seized thousands of suspected counterfeit goods from Markham's Pacific Mall. This was not the first raid on the mall but it is arguably one of the larger ones to transpire in recent years. CTV News quotes Const. Laura Nicolle as saying that very lengthy investigations started in April and that the York Regional Police "received numerous calls from area residents concerned about the mall."<sup>2</sup> *Aesthetic of Surfaces* brings the Pacific Mall raid and The Met's exhibition into sharp relief. Clearly the same ethical, legal and conceptual rules that apply to cultural and intellectual property do not apply to cultural appropriation. Whereas Western consumption of Eastern cultural property is celebrated, the reverse is quite literally policed and regulated against. What these two seemingly disparate points of reference make evident is the power imbalances inherent in the ways we conceive of cultural output and consumption. Here,

and elsewhere, the authority to both culturally borrow and control is more or less one-sided. Or to put it as Zhang does, “the parameters of cultural exchange are never on an equal playing field.”<sup>3</sup>

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Exhibited within the domestic space of the historic Bradley Museum, Zhang’s works take on new meaning and speak to how throughout history certain household items have functioned as proxies for gender divisions and Western views of “orientalism.” Brought into dialogue with fans, dishes, jewellery boxes and small containers from the Museums of Mississauga’s collection this iteration of *Aesthetic of Surfaces* asks that we look more deeply at the object, any object. Folded into each of these serialized artifacts and contemporary commodities is a comment on the many cursors of femininity and exoticism that are perpetuated by the most mundane of things. Ultimately, this exhibition moves past the object as is to an object’s reality as site of exchange, assumption and possible misunderstanding.

This investment in critically looking at objects extends to one of the most significant aspects of Zhang’s exhibition – wallpaper. Throughout the exhibition site-specific wallpaper installations function as much more than brightly coloured backdrops to Zhang’s photographic series. Turning to wallpaper as a device of criticality or as a metaphor reaches far back into history. “Wallpaper cropped up constantly in 19th-century literature as a symbol of deceit...it becomes clear that describing a wallpaper pattern is a surprisingly efficient literary device: It can signal how in- or out-of-place a character feels in a room, or convey a character’s awareness of social class.”<sup>4</sup> Visual artists, including General Idea and An Te Liu, have similarly used wallpaper to challenge socio-political conditions and sites of contention. So too does Zhang seem to use wallpaper as a way to acknowledge how markers of class, gender and culture manifest in domestic décor and how domestic décor can be leveraged as a tool for contemplating overly simplified identifiers.

The many concerns that Zhang is addressing are folded into the title of the work. *Aesthetic of Surfaces* points to objects featuring Chinese florals and brocades being aestheticized to the point of having their histories sidelined. Zhang’s concerns equally apply to the ways in which certain objects are presented within exhibitions and institutions, noting that “the didactics for East Asian collections seem to always focus on the donors/collectors rather than the makers of the objects (who are often unnamed/unavailable). If the history of the style/era/process of making is mentioned, it is often secondary and there is a gap between where/how the object was made, and how it ended up in a collector/donor’s possession.” The title of Zhang’s project therefore acts as a provocation to see past beautifully resolved facades to the deeper contexts, histories and memories that materialize beyond the surface.

*Aesthetic of Surfaces* leads us to questions of intention, exchange and who has the power culturally borrow from whom. As visually striking as Zhang's works are, they are also laden with paradox and contradiction. Even though the objects in Zhang's images lack language, she knows how to make them speak.

--- Noa Bronstein

1. *China: Through the Looking Glass*. Accessed June 20, 2018 from <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2015/china-through-the-looking-glass>
2. Rachael D'Amore, "Police seize thousands of suspected counterfeit goods after raids at Pacific Mall," CTV News. Accessed June 27, 2018 from <https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/police-seize-thousands-of-suspected-counterfeit-goods-after-raids-at-pacific-mall-1.3991123>
3. Email correspondence with the artist
4. Jude Stewart, "A History of Wallpaper's Deception." *The Atlantic*. Accessed June 20, 2018 from <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/04/the-deception-of-wallpaper/476295>

### Conversation with Shellie Zhang

**Noa Bronstein: The Met's 2015 exhibition *China: Through the Looking Glass* has proven to be an important backdrop to this project. What is it about this particular exhibit that interests you and what nuances related to cultural exchange does it make explicit?**

Shellie Zhang: *Through the Looking Glass* was the exhibition that first got me thinking how Chinese motifs circulate on an international scale in the contemporary world. The exhibition was a collaboration between the Costume Institute and the Department of Asian Art at the Museum back in 2015. Looking at how Chinese aesthetics and design influenced Western fashion, *Through the Looking Glass* paired high fashion creations alongside paintings, porcelain, and textiles from the Asian Art Collection. Numerous film influences from cinema and popular culture were also incorporated. The exhibition resulted in record attendance for the museum.

Their objective was to counter Said's argument in *Orientalism* that Western depictions of the East were patronizing and an essentialist way of viewing the cultures there. In the exhibition's extensive catalogue, curator Andrew Bolton states that the show aims to present orientalism as "a two-way street." These considerations stem into questions of homage, celebration, appropriation, exotification, objectification, trade and wealth. There are many positives and negatives associated with this show. Because this project was done on such a large scale, I often look back to this show to see if it was successful in its endeavour and if orientalism in general could ever be framed in a positive light.

**NB: Context is important and certainly within the context of this project you are being very careful about how you are approaching specifics.**

SZ: Cultural appropriation of Chinese motifs has always been complex for me due to how it functions in the world in comparison to the appropriation of other cultures. For example, Chinese cultural appropriation is often fuelled by the notion of the exotic other. This has issues with erasure and objectification but doesn't carry with it the same degree of violence, at least in my experience, in the current climate as say the appropriation of Black, Indigenous or Muslim cultures. Chinese communities have also self-exotified themselves as a means of survival (eg: Chinatowns, Anna May Wong) - a strategy that most other marginalized ethnic groups avoid. There are overlaps but I want to be clear in my critique/reflection that the conversation on cultural appropriation isn't the same for various bodies and to try to be aware of the space I inhabit. As well, in this work, I am speaking from the perspective of someone who has had these motifs and designs politicized for me. For some folks, such as say the Chinese shop keep in Chinatown who sells fans to tourists, these objects and designs function very differently. Appropriation is often very much an experience of the diaspora. Sometimes I find that people from motherland countries don't see issues with how their culture is consumed by the West and that's no surprise. When you have been shamed by mainstream culture for your difference and then see the mainstream culture adopt and profit from the very things you were mocked for, the experience is very different.

**NB: On the topic of context, you are drawing some interesting and perhaps unexpected parallels between The Met's exhibit and raids on counterfeit goods. Why did this latest major raid on Pacific Mall give you pause?**

SZ: What seems to me kind of unique about the latest large raid is that this was prompted after the U.S. Office of the Trade Representative named the mall as among the world's most notorious sources of imitation and counterfeit goods.

The import and creation of chinoiserie goods back in the 19th and 18th centuries, the power dynamics of this situation favour those with wealth and power. Raids such as this are founded on claims of intellectual property but if counterfeit goods harm large corporations and designers, what can be said about cultural appropriation? This is somewhat of a cultural value vs. capital value distinction I suppose. I can't speak to this fully, but from what I have seen, those selling counterfeit goods aren't necessarily rolling in wealth from being in the industry. I've been to the Silk Market listed in the report as one of the number one places for counterfeit goods in the world. It's kind of hilarious, there's a plaque which mentions a lawsuit where luxury brands sued the mall and how they no longer sell fake goods, yet they continue to sell fake goods (less luxury and more streetwear now as fashion changes). Almost ironically, these luxury brands that have sued

the mall are some of the ones I have seen in the in the Met exhibition.

**NB: What you make clear about these two examples, The Met's exhibit and raids on Pacific Mall, are the power dynamics inherent in the ways we conceive of cultural production and consumption. You are also very much interested in the power dynamics within museums.**

SZ: During my residency at the AGO this past year, I had a conversation with a Curator of European Art on which peoples' art is at the ROM and viewed as antiquities, and which peoples' art is at the AGO and viewed as fine art. I suppose one of the things I am hoping to get across in this series is the fact that in museums these objects and patterns are not neutral. I fear that they are being aestheticized to the point of being separate from this history. Because these objects are so beautiful and have been considered beautiful for so long, often they are only seen as just that - the aesthetic of surfaces. For example, the didactics for East Asian collections seem to always focus on the donors/collectors rather than the makers of the objects (who are often unnamed/unavailable). If the history of the style/era/process of making is mentioned, it is often secondary and there is a gap between where/how the object was made, and how it ended up in a collector/donor's possession. You also often hear of how great the collector is for having an eye for these objects and having the personal mission to collect them. Statements such as "A Passion for Asia" and "Taking inspiration from the history of the East" are phrases I often hear. This also contributes to the generalization of East Asian cultures. Abby Rockefeller, had a Chinese room in her mansion and books have been written about her and this room. It's almost as if creativity is solely being attributed to those who take inspiration from China rather than those who create it (full circle to Met show).

I think museums are also grappling with strategies of how to bring their collections into a contemporary light. A few years ago, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts mounted an exhibition of work by Claude Monet and titled it "Flirting with the Exotic." There is a large painting of his French wife in a kimono with a fan. The piece was titled "La Japonaise." A program called "Kimono Wednesday" was also released where visitors were invited to try on a kimono and take selfies with it (#KimonoWednesday). There was a huge backlash from groups including Decolonize Our Museums. In this case, the program was a misguided attempt to integrate Japanese culture because it encouraged engagement on an exclusively superficial level.

We are now also in an age where people are demanding their (sometimes sacred) objects back from museums. Nicholas Deleary is calling on the ROM to return a peace pipe that descended from the Anishinaabe Three Fires Confederacy so that the youth of their community can recirculate the pipe as the ceremonial item. The foundation

overseeing state museums in Berlin recently returned nine artifacts to Indigenous communities in Alaska after discovering they were stolen from burial grounds. There are also short-term acts of reparation such as the London Museum returning Ethiopian artifacts but only on loan. Chinese communities have also been working for decades to recover twelve zodiac heads that were once part of the Old Summer Palace and looted by British and French forces during the Second Opium War. Some of these ended up in the collections of designers such as Yves Saint Laurent and art auction houses such as Sotheby's.

**NB: Museum collections are certainly very complicated. Why did you choose to pair *Aesthetic of Surfaces* with artifacts from the Museums of Mississauga's collection?**

SZ: The fan belonging to Dora Sayers Caro from the Collection is estimated to be from 1928 – 1935. It's really fascinating to me knowing that she had a Chinese room and this fan was in it during this time. The Chinese Immigration Act went into effect in 1885. This transitioned to the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1923 and was in effect until 1943. Collecting things as opposed to welcoming people gives this colonialist perception that you can have ownership over a culture. I also see this parallel quite often at museums when I look at when things were donated/collected and what was happening politically. There is a desire to want our goods, our art, our culture, but not our people. Our experiences are not selective and in turn, museums cannot take the good without the bad.

I'm also interested in the exchange and attribution of wealth and what is regarded as authentic and inauthentic. In the hopes of addressing some of these themes, *Aesthetic of Surfaces* pairs photographs of kitschy objects found in Toronto's Chinatown alongside things found in the Museum's collection that have been preserved and protected because they provide some kind of cultural value.

**NB: Back to your comment about creativity being associated with the collector rather than the maker, is it fair to say that for this particular iteration of *Aesthetic of Surfaces* that you are interested in how we address lack of provenance for certain artifacts and redressing the perceived anonymity associated with the producers of specific goods?**

SZ: Yes, my interest in the missing gaps of how these goods are catalogued lies in the fact that the information given is often only part of the object's history. I ask museums to not only look at their collections as a nostalgic window into the past but as the complex stories and experiences they embody.

## Artist Bio:

Shellie Zhang (b. 1991, Beijing, China) is a multidisciplinary artist based in Tkaronto/Toronto, Canada. She has exhibited at venues including WORKJAM (Beijing), Scope Art Fair (Switzerland) and Public House of Art (Netherlands). She is a recipient of grants such as the RBC Museum Emerging Professional Grant, the Toronto Arts Council's Visual Projects grant, and the Canada Council's Project Grant to Visual Artists. Recent projects include a residency at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Creative Time Summit, and an ongoing year long peer mentorship program with Whippersnapper Gallery.

By uniting both past and present iconography with the techniques of mass communication, language and sign, Zhang's work deconstructs notions of tradition, gender, identity, the diaspora, and popular culture while calling attention to these subjects in the context and construction of a multicultural society. She is interested in exploring how integration, diversity and assimilation is implemented and negotiated, how this relates to lived experiences, and how culture is learned and relearned.

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