

Courtesy of the Artist.

# DIGITAL DEEP DIVING

**Vivien Zhang is not frightened by the future, incorporating the evolutions of technology into her art**

*By Pairat Temphairojana*

**With the emergence of technology and an increasing role for artificial intelligence (AI), many feel they're at risk of becoming less human due to the rise of machines working on auto. But for Vivien Zhang, a Chinese-born award-winning artist, it's an exciting and intriguing time.**

"We're essentially the first generation of kids that grew up with access to the digital, access to computers, access to these data gadgets and I personally feel their effect on us," Zhang says, standing inside her private studio in London filled with brushes, duct tape and canvases.

"Big companies have invented new modes of looking at space and digital surfaces for us. We scroll through the webpage and the user interface; that way of looking at images affects how we process other things in daily life."

Since her debut in 2014, Zhang has done 11 solo and duo exhibitions across 12 countries – and at 26 was named on the Forbes 30-under-30 Asia list for her artwork. Zhang's work is abstract, futuristic and uses colourful repetition as an underlying device.

"I was in Siena [Italy] putting together a solo show at the Monteverdi gallery, curated by Sarah McCrory, and woke up to find I was a list-maker for 2017! Receiving this astonishing news on the Tuscan hills was quite the start of a day." Zhang shares that the list brought attention in the first years of her career for which she's still grateful.

Zhang's art colleagues and patrons call her the "collector of motifs" for a reason – a good portion of her studio's vast walls are heavily taped with references she uses as a recurring theme in her artwork.

Her work features different objects ranging from hand gestures (*Velvet Murmurs*, 2016) to peaches taken out of their diverse contexts and mashed together inside the canvas.

For instance, her painting *Contra Prunus* (2017) was inspired by 8-bit computer cursors that were originally designed by Susan Kare for Apple. The work is also infused with peaches that pay homage to a 15th-century

Venetian painter, Carlo Crivelli. Crivelli used fruits as a secondary signature in his work and Zhang was particularly drawn to Crivelli's fruits as she reflected on how personal identity is changing against today's explosive growth of AI technology.

Zhang's latest solo exhibition, *Codescape*, was held in September last year in Beijing and was her biggest yet with 19 paintings displayed at a 2,500-square metre space. The show was specifically made to reflect on how humans have been affected by the digital age and what it means to be a digital native today.

"Most of the 19 paintings were created in the space of nine months – that was the most intense period in my career so far. I became a hermit in my studio," she recalls, and laughs during her break from a meditative painting session preparing for Art Basel in Hong Kong in late March.

A continuation of her work in Beijing, the six new paintings that were on display at Art Basel included glimpses of NASA images of sand dunes taken on Mars to mundane price tags seen in China's ubiquitous stationery stores. Zhang first noticed the tags on her annual trip back to Beijing. It reminded her of windows commonly found in Chinese gardens. Reimagined in Zhang's paintings, here they are like landscapes akin to a Nintendo game where Mario jumps to earn coins during his quest to save his princess.

During recent research on NASA's expedition to Mars, the artist also revisited her fascination with an elusive shape known as *gomboc*, an invention from Hungarian mathematician Gábor Domokos, with whom she had the chance to become friends.

The peculiar shape became her interest for the past four years because of its unique qualities on stability and instability – a property that scientists hope would unlock the evolution of our planet and beyond. The discovery of the shape made her think more about her own life experience and how to balance stability or instability in work.

When not painting, Zhang prefers to take time in her research for her recurring motifs, sometimes even years






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until it takes on new forms.

“Usually I put a motif aside for a while and try to make a connection with my existing research – why am I intuitively drawn to this? Is there a deeper significance? We’re sort of bombarded by this abundance of visual stimulus all the time. It’s even more important for us to contemplate, to filter through and see what’s more important, what sticks,” she says, explaining that consistent in-depth research is crucial to ensure long-term success for any artist’s career.

Zhang says her interest in digital interfaces increased with AI’s popularity as it has made her more aware of her human flaws. “It’s important to tell my viewer that I’ve actually made this with my hand. My painting, because it sort of has this digital, mechanical feel, I think it’s ever more important to emphasize that it’s crafted.” She points to a deliberate smudge she has made in her work.

Asked if there will be a future for artists with the emergence of AI, she believes even if machines are more intelligent than humans and can replicate Van Gogh paintings, they can’t on their own create with new intentions.

“There’s still such a disparity because we’re able to give ourselves a task and explain why we paint in this way.” The artist compares AI to an answering machine that can take input but is not able to generate the same human results.



Long March Space (Beijing).

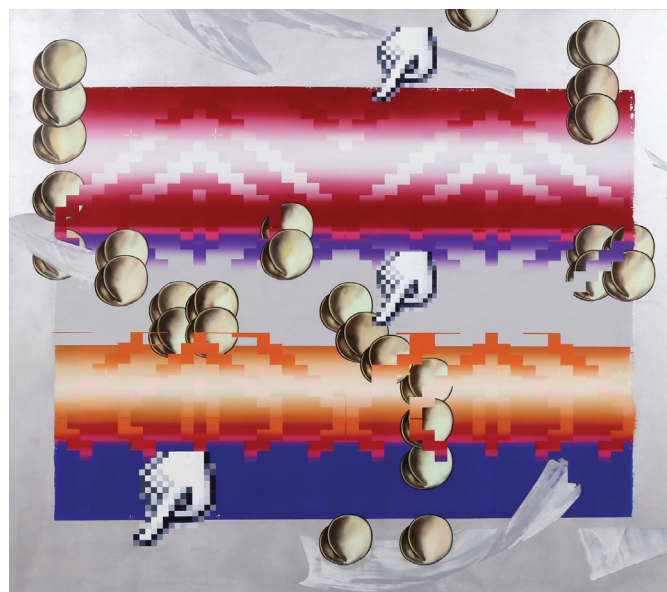
“But if an algorithm, a machine formula, can create an equally beautiful, interesting or weird work of art, I think the ‘artist genius’ would be at risk and that question will be very interesting in the future.”

A digital nomad, her work is influenced by time spent overseas, including in Thailand. She spent four years in Bangkok before pursuing an art degree in London.

“My formative years were spent in Bangkok and studying in an international school. We were taught to be very open-minded, to look at other cultures and to really reflect on them. That has come through in my work as well,” Zhang says with a warm smile. “Thailand’s such a hub right now with all these art activities, like the Bangkok Biennale which I saw last December. That was brilliant!”

She offers advice to artists looking to make an impact in this digital age; to travel and expose yourself to as many things as you possibly can. Although Zhang admits the journey to pursuing a creative career as an artist in the West will be smoother, where “one is not plagued by having to justify this identity by making art and only making art and living off that”.

“It’s just important to get a degree and study in a big city – one that’s at the centre of art, culture and activities in the region. Exposure is so critical, you want to be surrounded by the buzz as early as possible, as much as possible.”



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