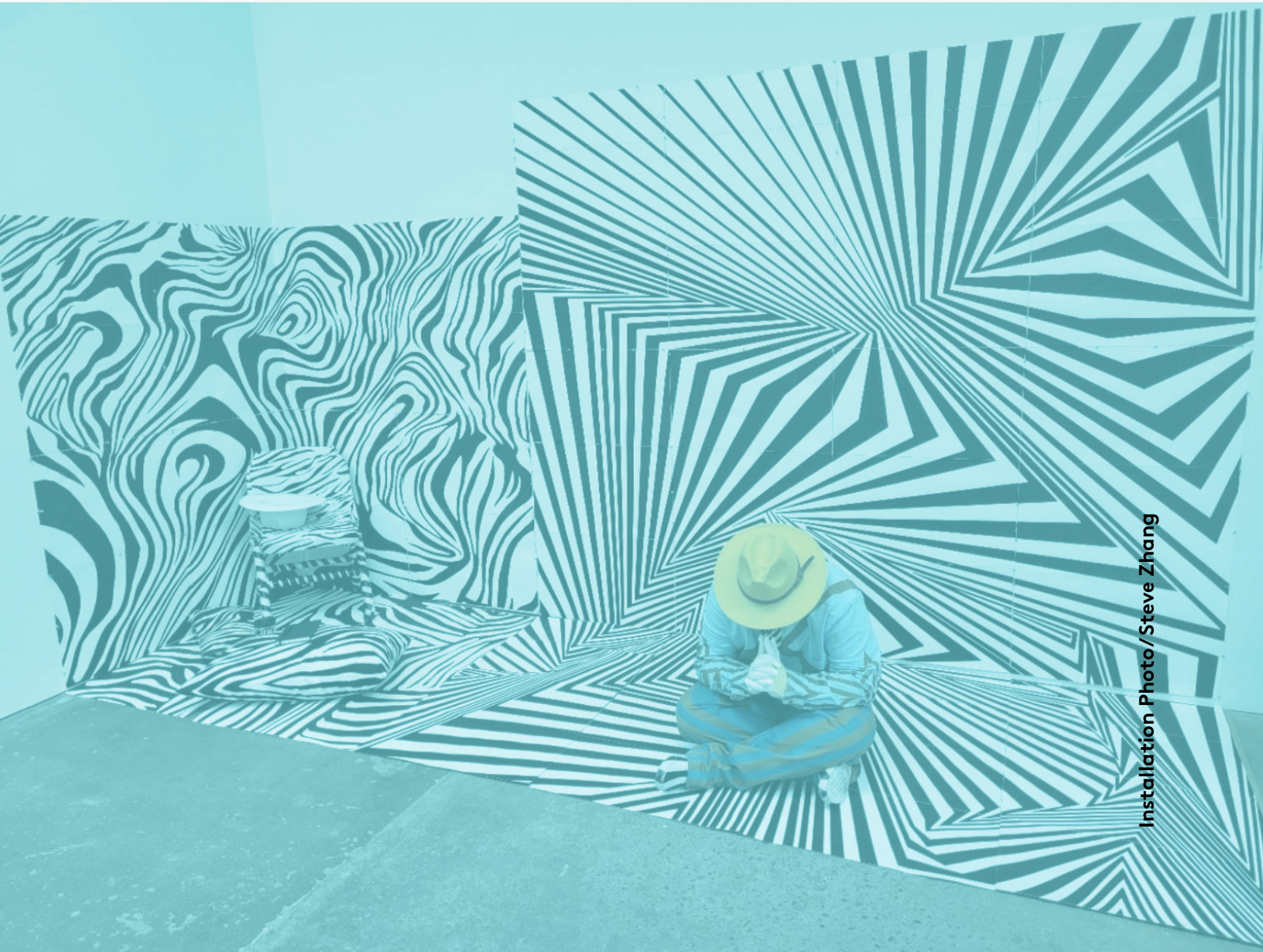


Conversations with Three Artists: *Steve Zhang, Yiming Si, Zhen Cao*

by Yue Liu



Installation Photo / Steve Zhang

Steve Zhang was born in Beijing, China. He studied printmaking at Cleveland Institute of Art, and continued with the medium in the MFA program at CCA. His passion, perseverance, and commitment to his printmaking have contributed to him as a good printer and allowed him a way to better communicate. From his traditional relief prints to his art works, there is a movement and freshness that makes his working interesting and creative.

Yue: I see you've been working hard on your exhibition pieces. Tired? You look tired.

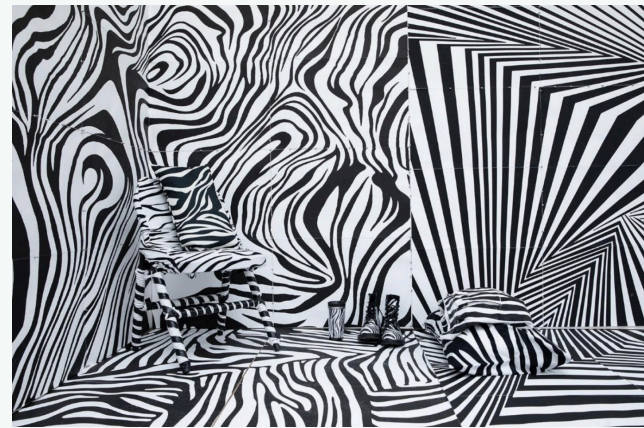
Steve: Yes, we all have deadlines, but I don't care. I'm tired right now, and I'm only going to be even more tired after I finish this, but I have a feeling that I'm not going to take a break right away. I'm still working because I love it. But maybe I'm going to want a stiff drink alone.

Yue: Cheers! Tell me about your work. You're making a zebra pattern scenes which visually distorts space, especially when I look at it from a distance. This is beyond the traditional concept of printmaking, isn't it?

Steve: I wanted to try something new, so I am working with the concept of installation prints. Printmaking is based on the concept of printing. In our daily life, we regularly encounter printed pieces, like packaging, clothes, glass, and documents. I love the way printmaking can be used in many materials, and they can be installed in so many ways. The visual effect can be enhanced by adding materials, patterns and colors to the print.

Yue: How do you pick and choose new ideas that come out of your creative process?

Steve: I try my best to make my works as good as possible within the time limit, budget, and within the techniques that I can master. In undergrad, I



Installation Photo/Steve Zhang

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was sometimes too ambitious, so I would divide work into stages, and I'd get new ideas from each phase.

Yue: How can you tell when a work is successful?

Steve: I think showing one's art is to seek relevance. Some people may love it and have similar experiences. Some people might not. But ultimately I must follow my own ideas. That doesn't mean that I don't listen to critiques. The fact that a work can be hotly debated proves the necessity of its existence.

Yue: I feel your answers are sincere and direct, introspective. As you appear in the installation on your own, I sense the theme of loneliness and isolation.

Steve: It's undeniable that art can't be free from loneliness. A lot of the time artists are observing the noisy environment. The moment when I get away from the busy atmosphere is the beginning of artistic creation.

Yue: As you know my major is architecture, and I especially have this feeling. It's interesting that we have different majors, but our attitudes about this are so similar. I'm curious about how you see your art in the world. Does it take on an educational component? Are you interested in guiding people, a government, or a country?

Steve: I think art itself can arouse people's emotions. It can be used to fill a spiritual need and humanistic care of human beings. However, art will not solve the problems of humanity. Certainly people can be inspired by art, but I don't have the illusion that viewers will stay in that state—self-examination is a painful process.

The fact is that for most people, art is a form of entertainment, so I express my feelings and circumstances without being deliberately educational. Let the people who appreciate art enjoy themselves.



Photograph, "What's The Meaning of Life?" Yiming Si

Yiming Si is a San Francisco-based art student originally from Beijing, China. His projects, Pinklemonade, unErased, and Lingering Vestige will be presented in book form. They are mainly about photography and poetry. Recently, he attempted to introduce performance more into his works as depictions of intimacy including my perspective of devotion of time in relations. The flexibility of photography, the instant way of producing images given by the cameras, helps him through his practices. Subtle emotions flow through his images, he creates non-linear narratives of his perception of intimacy and reconciliation between the sense of loss and existence.

Yue: I find that each of your photos tells an independent story. When they are put together in sequence, they weave a whole other narrative.

Yiming: I am a very image-oriented person. Taking pictures is a natural act for me. What I can say with images is different from the abstraction of words. It's challenging to capture a part of something that already exists and still leave room for imagination. Being able to create these small worlds and then inject a part of my soul into them is why I chose photography.

Yue: Are there particular photographers who inspire you?

Yiming: In terms of contemporary photography, Alec Soth, Andreas Gursky, Stephen Shore, Gregory Halpern and many other people who are famous for their color work have influenced me a lot. I don't emulate their work, I use photography to sincerely capture my emotions, maybe some of the tenderness I experience, moments of calm.

Yue: What is sincerity in photography? A good view? Good color? A very good exposure? Which aspect comes first for you?

Sometimes too many ideas can affect my creativity, so sometimes focusing more on what I've already thought about may make me more efficient.

Yiming: Most of my work is content-driven, with some exploration of form. I look for forms that can help express the content, but the content must be the main thing. The concept may be more from the usual input, such as reading books, looking at other people's photos or works in other mediums.

Yue: I sense all that input when I look at your work. There are different styles to your photographs. How do you choose which new ideas to pursue?

Yiming: Sometimes ideas pop up, but it takes deeper thinking to see the core of those ideas. Sometimes too many ideas can affect my creativity, so sometimes focusing more on what I've already thought about may make me more efficient.

Yue: I'm curious to know if you feel it's more important to please yourself than the viewer?

Yiming: I think sincerity is the most important thing. If the work lacks sincerity, it is worthless, and if you can't convince yourself, how can you convince others? Form is important, but I think that if one's work is sincere enough and can justify itself, then it will resonate with viewers.

Yue: Do you have a strong desire to lead or call on the people of a country, society, or nation to re-think, examine, and evaluate themselves and make positive changes through your art?

Yiming: I think I can only do what I can do. Maybe at some point I'll use my reputation to do something more influential, but now I'm satisfied to be able to resonate with a small group of people. I feel that my work is not going to change much in the world. I pay more attention to the beauty that exists in the world and being able to bring some more beauty to those who can resonate with me is what makes it worth the effort.



Installation Photo / Zhen Cao

Zhen Cao was born in China and spent half of her life in the US. She now studies and works in San Francisco. She has been working in sculpture and exploring different materials for six years now. She is currently enrolled in the MFA program at CCA. Her recent work talks about femininity and vulnerability.

Yue: Tell me about your background and how it relates to your work.

Zhen: As an artist with both eastern and western backgrounds, I create my works revolving around the intensity of emotions and feelings. By imprinting my experience into my artwork, I want to create an opportunity for viewers to experience an aesthetic catharsis. I believe that shared emotions through art are the bridge that can help alleviate alienation and that by pulling people together, I can forge community with my art. Although my subjects can be intense, I pursue a gentler way by utilizing elements of Eastern culture. This showcases influences from my background but also shows how even the unfamiliar and the often-regarded “aliens” share similar emotions and experiences with their native counterparts.

Yue: One of your sculptures is a white fox made from wire. What does it represent? Is it yearning for true freedom?

Zhen: I like people to see the artwork independently. I don't want to define things subjectively, I need to let the work speak for itself. I don't have to give a definite answer to your guess, because that would lose the value and interest of art.

Yue: I love that insight. Where do you get most of your creative inspiration?

Zhen: I let each idea percolate for a while, and as time settles, some ideas will stand out more than others, which is an interesting process.

Yue: But in that case, time always gets in the way of your productivity, doesn't it?

Zhen: In fact, when it comes to creativity, sometimes time is the greatest helper and sometimes, as you might say, the greatest challenge, but that's the way I am. Many ideas don't work without time, and they don't turn into inspiration or motivation.

Yue: Do you feel that pleasing yourself with your work is more important in your creative process than pleasing the viewer?

Zhen: I will make works that are closer to me, but not overly descriptive, so that each audience can have their own interpretation. I don't think a work of art has to choose between pleasing itself and the audience. I think it can be balanced.

Yue: What do you think is the most important thing for young artists to pay attention to in the current art market environment?

Zhen: Learn to be alone. Keep your distance from the Internet and fast-food culture. There's so much art on the Internet, it's so easy to see, it's not right, it kills inspiration. As creators, we should learn from them, but we can't watch and appreciate them every day.

Yue: Yes, I agree. Being alone gives you space to think.

Yue Liu has joined the Master of Advanced Architectural Design program with a focus on Urban Works. Yue, who is from Daqing, China, received his Bachelor of Architecture degree from CCA in 2019, and returned to the school to augment his approach to spatial and formal design with strategies for understanding the systems and protocols of cultural life in cities.