

Echo He

Capturing the Traces of Everyday Life



Zhe Zhu, *Aerial View*, 2014, archival pigment print on paper, 76 x 61 cm. © 2016 Zhe Zhu. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.

Zhe Zhu and Zhangbolong Liu are two young artists who strive to present traces through their photographic works by exposing the subtle web of tracks following life's trail through time. Although these scenes are completely devoid of people, they are filled with a number of different marks and signs that point to certain occurrences. The artists' photographs become empty stages, abandoned by its actors, yet the remaining set and stage props suggest intriguing narratives. Here, the story can only be unraveled through clues provided by the objects that have either remained or disappeared from view.

Zhe Zhu's *Vanitas* series captures the remnants of everyday life. He meticulously gathers consumed objects, and references within his photography traditional arrangements found in vanitas still life paintings. Vanitas was a school of still life painting that flourished in the Netherlands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Within these refined still life paintings, objects that symbolized life and joy, such as fruit and flowers, were placed together with objects that symbolized deterioration and death, such as bones, hourglasses, clocks, etc., to remind the viewer that happiness and sorrow are both equally ephemeral. Zhe Zhu adopts a cool-headed

Zhe Zhu, *Floating*, 2013, archival pigment print on paper, 61 x 76 cm. © 2016 Zhe Zhu. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.



approach to his work, creating his photographs with both great precision and a manner of experimentation. He chooses residual materials from everyday life and then arranges them according to the composition of classical seventeenth century vanitas paintings. He uses a large-format film camera or a medium-format digital camera to record his images, which makes the photographs resemble oil paintings in their composition and quality of light.

Zhe Zhu, *Fast Food*, 2013, archival pigment print on paper, 61 x 76 cm. © 2016 Zhe Zhou. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.



Zhe Zhu, *Trick*, 2013, archival pigment print of paper, 61 x 76 cm. © 2016 Zhe Zhou. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.



While working on this particular series, Zhe Zhu's grandfather passed away, causing the artist to contemplate the meaning of death, as well as develop a more personal understanding for the symbolism of vanitas. Zhe Zhu uses his own everyday objects to replace the elements within the traditional Dutch still lifes, including dried flowers, household utensils, dust, napkins, and bones. By capturing the process of decay and disappearance within these everyday objects, the artist lays bare his very own "trail of bread crumbs." The final photographs become modest

monuments for our current age of consumerism and material surplus in the attempt to grasp the fleeting moments created by fragmentary images of light and shadow, although this attempt seems almost futile.

Zhangbolong Liu's *Traces* series, in contrast, attempts to record things that have already disappeared, or, to put it in the artist's own words, to capture the "presence of absence."¹ In *Library-2, New York*, an illustration has been torn out of a Van Gogh picture album, leaving nothing behind but



Left: Zhangbolong Liu, *Library—2*, 2013, archival pigment print on paper, 27.9 x 35.6 cm. © 2016 Zhangbolong Liu. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.

Right: Zhangbolong Liu, *Classroom—3*, New York, 2013, archival pigment print on paper, 27.9 x 35.6 cm. © 2016 Zhangbolong Liu. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.



Left: Zhangbolong Liu, *Bedroom—3*, New York, 2013, archival pigment print on paper, 27.9 x 35.6 cm. © 2016 Zhangbolong Liu. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.

Zhangbolong Liu, *Restroom—3*, New York, 2013, archival pigment print on paper, 27.9 x 35.6 cm. © 2016 Zhangbolong Liu. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.

the following written caption: “Plate Fifteen. Landscape with Olive Trees (October 1889 Saint-Rémy). Collection John Hay Whitney, New York. 28 1/2 x 35 1.2 inch.” Despite the Information Age that we live in, people are in need of only the bare minimum amount of data in order to fully trace back to the origins of this landscape painting. However, the disappeared landscape is much more thought provoking than the landscape itself. It raises a number of questions, such as, why did the illustration disappear? Did someone take it? Why was it removed? The soft traces of white that remain on these yellowed pages are similar to Hiroshi Shugimoto’s photographs of empty theatres, which were shot with exposure times that lasted the entire duration of a movie, leaving behind a screen of vast whiteness as a photographic record.

With images of a classroom blackboard wiped clean of its writings, a completely empty exhibition cabinet within the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the remaining white wall of a studio after a canvas had been removed from it, lingering pinholes on bathroom wallpaper, Zhangbolong Liu’s works create a kind of pending atmosphere, filled with foreboding and suspense. (image 9) The artist explains that he hopes to evoke people’s perception of time: “The traces of things are etched by time, with the flow of time. Finally, the original thing will thoroughly disappear; all we can find is the trace it left behind.”² It goes without saying, however, that vanished objects cannot be recorded, and within this seemingly paradoxical context, the object that has been “grasped” by means of photography actually no longer exists. Change is the universe’s most constant state of being, and the objects we discuss only exist, in fact, within our own perceptions. With regards to this meaning, the state of disappearance that Zhangbolong Liu aims to document is more realistic than the disappeared objects themselves. The traces that he captures remind us that no matter how intense the emotion, how precious the materials, or how profound the story may be, all of this merely exists within the moment. This means that regardless of how much we may try to preserve these things they will inevitably fade away with the passing of time.

Right: Zhangbolong Liu, *Met—3*, New York, 2013, archival pigment print on paper, 27.9 x 35.6 cm. © 2016 Zhangbolong Liu. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.



This brings to mind a particular anecdote by Agnes Martin. When Martin’s dealer, Mark Glimcher, brought his two daughters to visit Martin, the eighty-seven-year-old artist was still creating her highly minimalist paintings. Her canvases remained almost entirely blank with only the

softest of pencil contours visible on the surface. When the girls asked her curiously what she was painting, Martin casually took out a few roses from a vase at her side, and asked “Are they beautiful?” The little girls nodded. Martin hid the flowers behind her back and asked again: “Are they still beautiful?” The girls nodded once more. Martin smiled a faint smile, stretched out the other hand and slowly swished the air above the empty vase. “I’m painting this.”³

Zhe Zhu and Zhangbolong Liu’s duo exhibition *Zhe Zhu and Zhangbolong Liu: Vanitas/Traces* was held in New York from April 24 to June 28, 2015. Zhe Zhu’s *Vanitas* series focuses on different moods and trajectories concealed within the remnants of everyday life. Zhangbolong Liu’s *Traces* series follows the intricate network of clues captured within frozen stage scenes. The exhibition was organized in collaboration between Fou Gallery and the restaurant, CARMA Asian Tapas in Manhattan’s West Village.

Zhe Zhu and Zhangbolong Liu, *Vanitas/Traces*, installation view, CARMA. Photo: Jiayi Yang. © 2016 Zhe Zhu and Zhangbolong Liu. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn and CARMA, New York.



This exhibition continues my experiments to curate in alternative spaces. I founded Fou Gallery with the mission to offer a flexible, small and dynamic alternative space. Located in an ordinary apartment building in Brooklyn, Fou Gallery differs from the traditional

white cube gallery space by offering art exhibitions and events in a home-like environment. Here, people can appreciate art and exchange ideas with curiosity and happiness. I believe that art should be accessible and understandable by ordinary people instead of a certain group of cultural elites. Curating an exhibition in a restaurant allowed me to further explore the possibility to merge unique artistic experiences with everyday life.

Translated by Cila Brosius.

Notes

1. Zhangbolong Liu, “Traces,” *Chinese Photography* (April 2014), 54–57.
2. Ibid.
3. Kelly Crow, “Keeping Pace,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 25, 2011.