

GUANGZHOU Pearl, River, Futures

An interview with Xiaoshi Vivian Vivian Qin
by HG Masters

How have events of the last couple years impacted your practice?

I realized the pandemic really changed my priorities. I started asking myself what really matters to me. I wanted to create a new Chinese character that replaces third-person pronouns, and that doesn't differentiate between things, humans, animals, or genders. I went very commercial with it. I had received a nomination for a Net-a-Porter female artist award, to support the Shanghai Yiwen Foundation, so I put my character on an artist's edition tote bag. The design features 也也 [Yě yě], which means "both" or "also." I chose this character because it's inside the male and female characters, but it also suggests agreeing or finding a community of likeminded people. So it has a connection to mirroring and togetherness.

Because it was 11/11 (Single's Day), this actor Hu Bing (胡兵) was selling the bag live on Taobao. He introduced it but he said "Try Yě yě—it should be 'Ta' like other pronouns, so the whole concept got lost. But he just kept saying, 'This is a beautiful bag, I love it so much.'" Then it sold out. He was our generation's super-hot childhood star, so it was magical to see him holding my bag, even if no one cared about the new character I invented.

What else were you up to in Shanghai?

I also contributed to Cao Dan and Hans Ulrich Obrist's publication *do it China 2021* at West Bund. I led a debate workshop on the topic, "Should artists try to prevent the end of the world?" The people there were from very different backgrounds. We talked about what art is and if there were no humans left whether art would still matter. One participant worked for the biggest organic food company in China. She really fought for the idea that we should try to stop ourselves from destroying humanity.

In 2014, I had started the series in New York with former debate-team members from the Bronx High School of Science, on the question of whether there would be contemporary art in the year 2020. The answer was "no." The negative side won. But that was only because the affirmative side went over time. I do believe that predicting the future can make you shape the future—but I didn't know the year 2020 was going to be like that!

I'm interested to know: What do you do if the end of the world is here? Do you still make art, and, if so, what kind of art do you make? I'm fascinated by the ability of ceramics to hold information for a very long time. So if it's really the end, what do you leave behind? If you see old ceramic artifacts taken from the graves you can read the inscriptions—it's like gossip that lasts thousands of years.



Did you see any good exhibitions in the last year?

I've been a loner for the past year, hiding out in the mountains and on islands in the river. I was trying to stay distant from the art world. That's also why I went to Jingdezhen. But you know what happened? Every artist went to Jingdezhen. So I'm wondering, where I should run to next?

While I was using the facilities at the Pottery Workshop (樂天陶社), one of the things I made was a ceramic pillow box (枕箱), like the Cizhou ware that was popular in Hebei many centuries ago.

What have you been working on back in Guangzhou?

In Guangzhou, I also found a pillow box. But instead of an object, it's a hill. I've been looking at maps and going to places with interesting names. I went to Dragon Cave Island (龍穴島, or Lankit Island), where people believe the treasure of the pirates of the Red Flag Gang, who were led by Madame Cheng-I (Shi Yang 石陽), is still hidden. The cave was also where the South Sea Dragon King lived. The Qing-dynasty legend says there are specific nights when the moon doesn't appear in the sky and the sea is lit by fire. It becomes a sea market where the sirens of the South China Sea sell the pearls made of their tears. Now the island is a container port and ship-building facility, Wenchong Yard. I started hiding my

artworks, which refer to specific folklore, near historical sites along the river, like treasure.

For the show "Synecdoche, Landscape" (9/29–11/25) at N3 Contemporary Art in Beijing, I created a series of treasure maps, *Twenty Four Album Leaves* (2021), which are digitally printed decals on translucent porcelain, with images and calligraphy related to the local history and the legends of the places where I hid my artworks. I consider this whole geographical place along the river like a border between worlds. This idea of connecting different times is also in my sculpture *Mirage* (2021), which has mother-of-pearl-like digital images printed onto thin ceramic pieces (an ancient material) held together by nails. In all these works, I want to show how if we remove the element of time, then we see that these places and contemporary imageries are overlaid, or "photo-shopped," by old legends.

How have you been thinking about, or imagining, the future?

I love doomsday preparations. For the new show at UCCA Dune, "The Rearview Landscape, or a Trip of Ownership" (12/4–6/12/22), I made *Landscapegotchi* (2021), which is a Tamagotchi for an invisible giant. Instead of interacting with your cute pet you interact with landscapes, which have different energy levels. The giant starts with one transparent flower, which they give to the landscape and then the landscape gives items back. All the items are related to the idea of doomsday but you don't know what they are—the messages are in a coded language that is not immediately clear to us. To produce these items the landscapes will need energy to work, otherwise they die.

In the past year, I have been thinking about how, if you are marginalized, you experience catastrophe, or disaster, first. You're like the goddess Cassandra—you can see the future but nobody ever believes you because of your marginalized position. So I want to make works that recognize that your voice matters, even if we cannot change things that are coming.



Opposite page: XIAOSHI VIVIAN VIVIAN QIN, *Landscapegotchi*, 2021, installation with six-minute single-channel video, LCD monitor, resin, and aircraft-grade aluminum, 234 × 80 × 45 cm. Courtesy UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing.

This page, top: Installation view of XIAOSHI VIVIAN VIVIAN QIN's *Mirage*, 2021, digital print on stoneware, 200 cm in diameter, at "Synecdoche, Landscape," N3 Contemporary Art, Beijing, 2021. Courtesy the artist and N3 Contemporary Art.

This page, bottom: Installation view of XIAOSHI VIVIAN VIVIAN QIN's *Twenty Four Album Leaves*, 2021, decal on ceramics, 27 × 23 cm each, at "Synecdoche, Landscape," N3 Contemporary Art, Beijing, 2021. Courtesy the artist and N3 Contemporary Art.