



ZHANG XU ZHAN

Where Paper Becomes Flesh

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Portrait of ZHANG XU ZHAN with the set of *Animal Story* (2019-). Unless otherwise stated, all photos by Daphne Chu for *ArtAsiaPacific*.



Musicians and other figures line the shelves of Zhang Xu's studio. A 2019 calendar is on the wall alongside Zhang Xu's reference images.

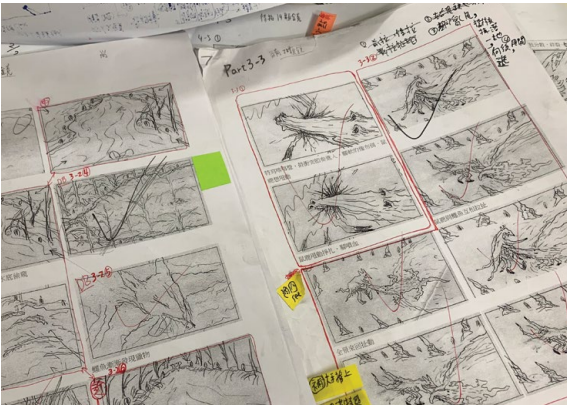
The journey to Zhang Xu Zhan's studio is like a retreat from the urban jungle of skyscrapers, motorbikes, and non-stop traffic in Taipei City. One passes through the outskirts of Xinzhuang's Siwei Market, an area of western New Taipei City populated by hardware shops, *kám-á-tiám* mom-and-pop shops, a few factories, several colorful murals, and a junior high school. Then one crosses in front of the Zhaode Temple, dedicated to Matsu, the goddess of the sea and patron deity of fishermen and sailors—a reminder of the early 18th-century migration and settlement in this area along the Dahan River. As I arrive at the unassuming apartment building that houses Zhang Xu's studio, he greets me and lifts up a mesh curtain along with a heavy black one as I leave my shoes outside.

Once the doors close, I am immediately immersed in a dark forest of miniature trees, 50 to 70 centimeters in height, set on a wooden platform that dwarfs me, with a small pathway leading into the workspace. An animator who works predominantly with paper, Zhang Xu employs drawing, stop-motion animation, and installations in works that revolve around strange and haunting imagery, inspired by observations, memories, life experiences, and mythology. As my eyes adjust to the darkness of his studio, I slowly find my way through the black forest, emerging from the set for the ongoing *Animal Story* series (2019–). One of these works, *Animal Story - AT5* (2020), a seven-minute video and installation, was featured in the Yokohama Triennale 2020. The video titles are abbreviations from the Aarne-Thompson system for classifying

folktales based on motifs—and *AT5* was inspired by the artist's research project on the tale of the Mouse Deer and the Crocodile during his 2019 residency in Yogyakarta.

On one side of the forest, there is a large expanse of water, with glistening waves made of iridescent, shredded cellophane filler. The mouse deer has just landed on a crocodile, his step alight as if in a dancer's pose, while another pair of crocodiles look toward the shore, their mouths agape. In the tale, the mouse deer outsmarts the crocodiles in a series of encounters, eventually crossing the river by leaping onto their backs as they inadvertently form a bridge to the other side. As Zhang Xu reconfigures the mouse deer, setting the character in action, just a glimpse of a human is revealed, in costume, under its creature skin.

In the *Animal Story* series, Zhang Xu employs elements of *yizhen* (art formation), combining *yi* (performance and craft) and *zhen* (structured arrangements), a term for traditional Taiwanese folk performance and dance that accompanies religious processions and often features performers or puppets in costumes enacting fables or folklore. For the new work, he is fusing elements of *yizhen* with tales featuring animal figures crossing rivers, a storyline found in various countries. An artist book on *yizhen* is also in the works as he plans to research a number of these troupes during a trip to the Xigang Qingan Temple, in Tainan, in late May during a pilgrimage held every three years in close to 100 villages and townships. By interweaving narratives, traditions, and imagery along with sounds



The storyboard for *Animal Story*.



Animal Story - AT5, 2020, still from single-channel animated video installation: 7 min 7 sec. Courtesy the artist and Project Fulfill Art Space, Taipei.

and instruments such as Indonesian gamelan and Taiwanese drums, Zhang Xu forges a universe that is at times both familiar and also distinctive in its own coherence and symbolic weight.

Zhang Xu is currently preparing a new, eight-to-ten-minute video and installation for Deutsche Bank's Artists of the Year 2021 exhibition at the Palais Populaire in Berlin in September. The pandemic has not halted his production and he is working steadily to meet its deadline. However, as with much of the activities in 2020, the artist was not able to travel to Yokohama, nor the group exhibition "UN-TACT" at the Asia Culture Center in Gwangju, South Korea. We chatted about a few residencies that he is interested in, and lamented at the time it might take before things return to normal. Zhang Xu mentioned that some sources estimate it will be at least seven years to achieve global herd immunity, exclaiming, "I'll be 40 by then!"

Next to the set, hand-sized figures resembling fox, deer, hare, rats, and frogs, line the nearby shelves on the wall, several of them armed with drums and xylophones, drumsticks and mallet in hand. I could not help asking if they had names, and Zhang Xu laughs and belts out a few. There is lady Shu-Shu, who is often mistaken for "Uncle" A-Bao ("bao" as in "treasure"); Wu-Hu, the Witch-Wizard Fox; Wa-Ming, Frog Croak; and Zhan-Ge, Brother Zhan, a skinny figure with a large beer-belly artfully concealed behind his drum set—a character based on an acquaintance.

Zhang Xu explained to me the construction process for the figures, beginning with wire frames for their skeletal structures so the characters can bend their limbs and move. He then mixes newspaper with paste to create a pulp for the outer layers of the character. Newspaper has a history in the Taoist paper art

tradition of *zhizha*, giving fleshly forms to deities and mythological creatures, and Zhang Xu carefully selects the material for both its texture and information, using newspapers in German, Indonesian, or Chinese. Once he has shaped the figures he embellishes them with glazed paper (a paper often used in *zhizha* for gold and silver mountains but comes in a variety of colors), crepe paper for tassels, and mirror paper for decoration, before adding beady plastic eyes. Layering paper on paper gives his characters an air of antiquity, as if they have witnessed thousands of years.

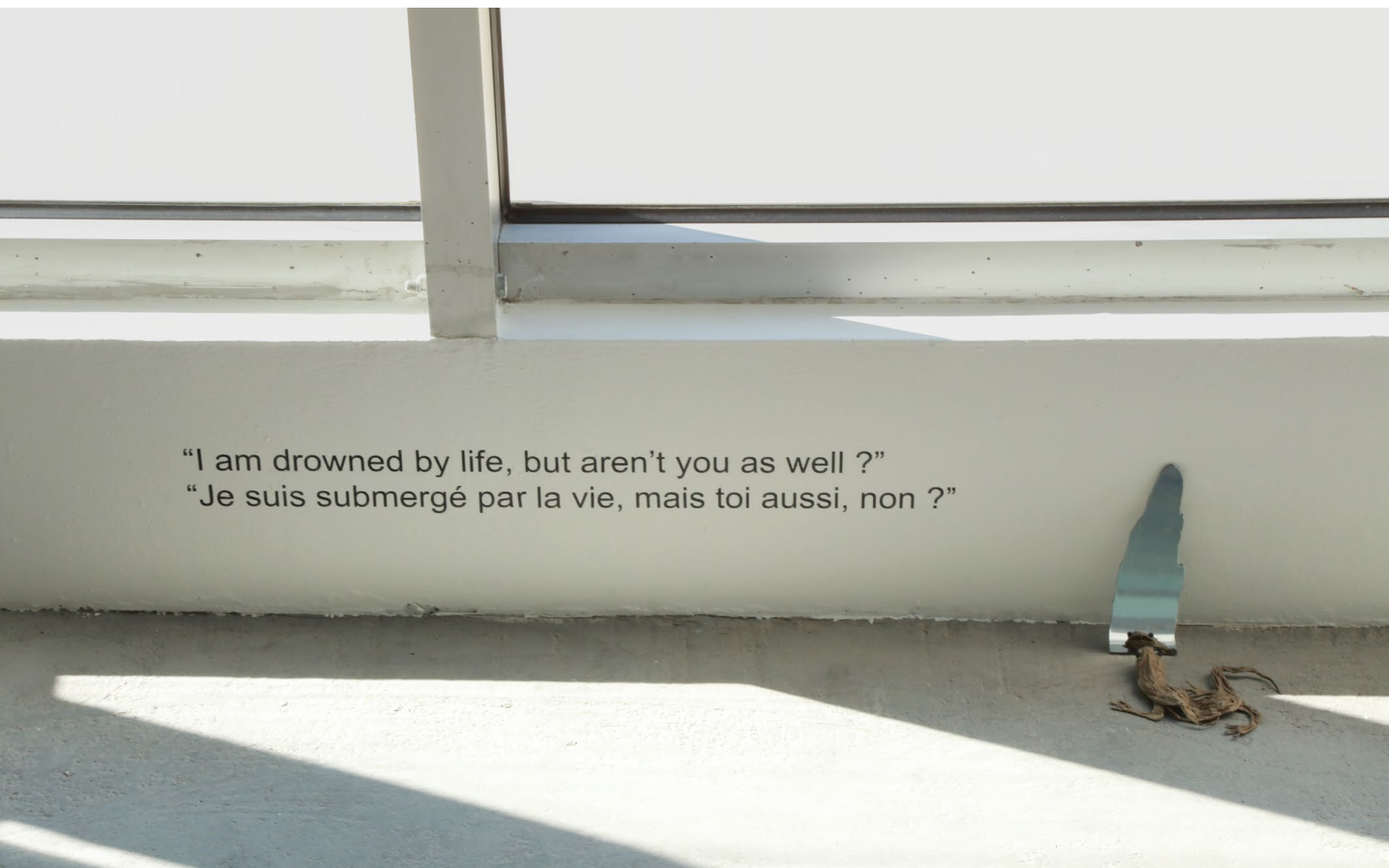
For an artist working with folk tales and lore, paper is an apt material. Zhang Xu himself is the fourth generation in the family that runs the century-old Hsin Hsin Joss Paper Store in Xinzhuang, which creates handmade joss paper offerings in *zhizha*, burned and offered in hopes that deceased loved ones are sufficiently provided for in the afterlife. The offerings take on the form of luxury mansions, domestic necessities, high-end goods, or servants. However he grew up during a time of decline in the family business, as joss paper items are increasingly mass-produced, while environmental concerns and evolving religious beliefs have also impacted the trade.

Fittingly, then, he has been working on an ambitious stop-motion animation series titled *Hsin Hsin Joss Paper Store Series* (2013-), a paper home office with many rooms. In *Hsin Hsin Joss Paper Store Series Room 004 - Si So Mi* (2017-18), the latest in the series, a dance unfolds with the German folk song "Ach wie ist's möglich dann (How can I leave thee)" by composer Friedrich Wilhelm Kückken, which was introduced to Taiwan along with Western instrumental bands and whose first three notes, "Si-So-Mi," are synonymous with funeral bands. During the video,

paper-craft rat figures wearing festive items used for birthday celebrations revel in a macabre dance in the forest, holding ribbons in their hands that are in fact entrails pulled out from their own bodies. Other paper rats, squashed flat, stare at their reflections in mirrors

Mirrors are a key feature in his works. The mirror paper Zhang Xu pasted onto joss-paper mansions as a child made an impression on him. Now he uses mirrors for different purposes: they serve as a site for internal dialogue in the sculptural *Mirror* series (2017–19); or to contain different characters imitating the protagonist in *Animal Story*; and as an extension of worlds within worlds in *Si So Mi*, where they create an ambiguous zone between the living and the dead often found in folk beliefs and rituals. We talk more about transitions and transformation, and how his work has brought a renewed interest to the family business. There is a great weight of responsibility that comes with the institution of traditional culture—one with strict codes that must be adhered to. But for Zhang Xu, as an artist, he finds it much more intriguing to combine life experiences, tales, and mythology to create universes that are ambiguous, or in his own words, placed in the *zhongjian*, the “intermediate” or in-between realms where weighty subjects can be bright and joyful and grief can be festive and celebratory.

It is dark as I leave the studio, the quiet neighborhood transformed with the hum of the market and the mystery of the night, glistening with energy and a buzz reminiscent of Zhang Xu’s cosmos of tales.



Installation view of *Mirror*, 2019, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable, at the 15th Lyon Biennale of Contemporary Art, 2019–20. Courtesy the artist.