

Often taking video as a point of departure, and produced using a distinct technique that combines sound, image and text from different sources, Jiajia Zhang's work is concerned with the ways in which people make sense of the world today, in the age of social media. Alongside footage she has shot herself or which has been taken from her private archive, Zhang's films incorporate content found online: audio fragments, essays and texts, videos and images from TikTok, YouTube and Instagram. The artist is interested in what happens between those who create and those who receive – which is to say, between the performer/influencer/artist and their audience. She is interested in that which holds our attention and creates affect. She is interested in what happens when content capturing something private, delicate and personal is shared online to an audience of many. She is interested in how this shifts our notions of shared public space and of that which we deem private.

Sometimes a theme emerges through her video collages – the family, for instance, in *Untitled (After Love)* (2021). This work, in which material from Zhang's own family archive plays an important role, looks at the hopes, expectations and dreams family members have for each other and themselves.

In other works, a piece of text or a line of theoretical inquiry forms the point of departure. The latter is the case in *Beautiful Mistakes (after LB)* (2022), in which lectures by the late cultural theorist Lauren Berlant provide a narrative that accompanies a series of images filmed mostly in front of and inside stores.

In *Between the Acts* (2022), clips from different sources, each with a specific and completely different affective intensity, follow each other. Here, the viewer is taken on a journey that I can only describe



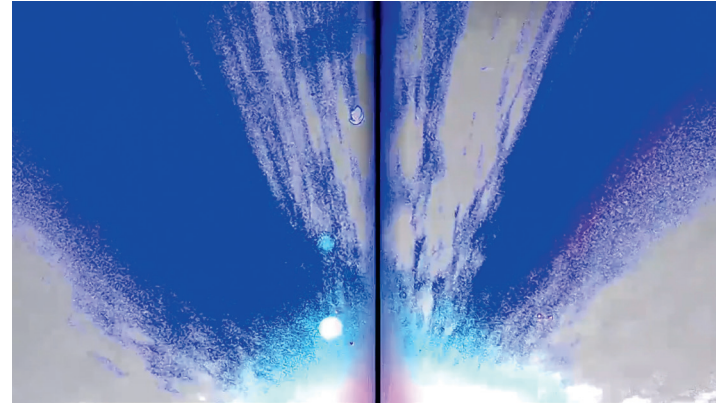
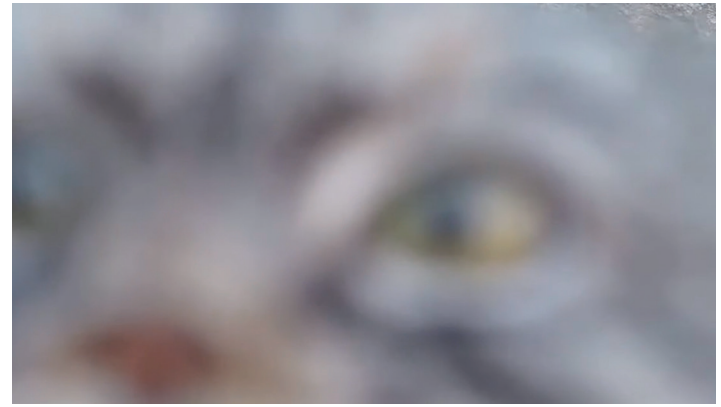
Jiajia Zhang, *Untitled (After Love)*, 2021
HD video, 16:9, 16'26", color, sound

Jiajia Zhang You Left Something Behind
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Jiajia Zhang, *Beautiful Mistakes (after LB)*, 2022
HD video, 16:9, 08'58", color, sound

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Jiajia Zhang, *Between the Acts*, 2022
HD video, 16:9, 38'33", color, sound

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as an emotional roller-coaster – a real ride, with an addictive quality. Footage filmed by vloggers, with their bodycams and selfie-stick cameras, is followed by news clips; profound statements about the world and our contemporary condition are paired with computer-generated images; a scene from a 1970s German costume drama is followed by a car ride through a storm and accompanied by the voice of a child telling her parent how to behave humbly, making use of a most poetic and abstract analogy. This stream of content defies cultural categories, mixing high and low, near and far, tender and catastrophic.

Zhang's newest film, *Social Gifts* (2023), was created while the artist was on a residency in Milan. It consists of footage the artist shot on a handheld camera while walking through the streets of Milan and Rome with her partner, Jiří Makovec, and her daughter, Fibi Lou Zhang, who was born in September last year. Included in the footage are images of the crowds around attractions like the Duomo in Milan and the Fontana di Trevi in Rome, but the attractions themselves are cropped out of the images. Instead, we see mostly zoomed-in shots of bodies. The camera focuses on the textures of jackets, the torsos of teenagers clasping each other in complicated knots, the patterns of shoes, and the flow of the fabric of a skirt in movement. The camera directs our gaze to mundane infrastructure too: a close-up of water gushing in a fountain, the grid of a shaft surrounded by traffic control bollards. We see a woman posing for a picture. Parts of her body are obscured – her head, for example, is at times blocked out by a bystander – but the camera focuses on her hands, which are busy one moment directing a camera outside the frame, and then held to the body as she assumes a pose for a picture. Christmas lights, up close, come



Jiajia Zhang, *Social Gifts*, 2023
HD video, 16:9, 13'08", color, sound

Jiajia Zhang You Left Something Behind
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in and out of focus. The camera points to the pavement as green, blue and purple light washes over it, saturating the frames momentarily. All of this appears stage-like, as if directed by a chorus of invisible spotlights.

The footage is accompanied by Gertrude Stein's 1936 text "What Are Master-Pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them," read by Martin Burr, a Swiss actor, whose recording of the text Zhang found online. Imposed onto the images are sentences taken from scientific texts, marketing papers and how-to guides on the business model of influencers. Through this collaging, Zhang links the stage that is public city life in Italy, and the particular performativity of this setting, to the flattened-out, commercial performance space of the internet, for which the influencer has become the emblematic figure. By superimposing the opening sentence "What are influencers and why are there so many of them" when the title of Stein's essay is read, Zhang connects the rarified space of avant-garde artmaking, where value is based on scarcity, to the cultural space of the internet, where profits come with mass quantity and scale of reach. One is drawn to ask: What is a masterpiece? Are they so rare because they are so hard to pin down? And, more specifically, linking the three streams of which the video consists: Is the influencer a masterpiece? Are the bodies that we see moving in and out of shot, when Zhang's camera is trained on the streets of Milan and Rome, masterpieces? Or are they influencers? There are so many of them, and they look for the most part uniform, de-individualized. Yet in the light in which they are captured, in the poses they strike, as their puffy jackets reflect the cold winter light and the colorful Christmas ornaments, in the pattern they become, they look beautiful, meaningful, purposeful.

I keep thinking "beautiful" when I'm looking at Zhang's work – not only this video but others as well – but even as I write this I almost want to apologize. Clearly, Zhang's work functions as a profound comment on our contemporary conditions, the "hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism,"¹ as Sianne Ngai has described them. That is to say, my use of the term "beautiful" is not meant in any denigratory sense. For the avant-garde, this would have been the case: calling a work of art "beautiful" meant, for Gertrude Stein, declaring it dead.² This had to do with the anti-intellectual, feminine connotation it had accrued. In 1975, Susan Sontag wrote: "Christianity set beauty adrift – as an alienated, arbitrary, superficial enchantment. And beauty has continued to lose prestige. For close to two centuries it has become a convention to attribute beauty to only one of the two sexes: the sex which, however Fair, is always Second. Associating beauty with women had put beauty even further on the defensive, morally."³ A term that once denoted the aim of art had become a concept for the masses, and the "weak" part of the masses in particular. It found itself attached to sunsets rather than high-art theories. Nevertheless, beauty still

1 Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012), 3.

2 Susan Sontag, "An Argument about Beauty," *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 209.

3 Susan Sontag, "A Woman's Beauty: Put-Down or Power Source," in *Occasions for Writing*, ed. Robert DiYanni and Pat C. Hoy II (Boston: Wadsworth, 2008), 245.

“reminds us of nature as such [...] and thereby stimulates and deepens our sense of the sheer spread and fullness of reality, inanimate as well as pulsing, that surrounds us.”⁴

I’d like to argue for a resurrection of the term in response to a profoundly contemporary aesthetic experience that Zhang manages to capture, often while also prioritizing and speaking about female experience. In contrast to art’s Modernist vocation, its “mission of producing perceptual shocks,” (which goes in tandem with Gertrude Stein’s anti-beauty stance), the minor beauty of the everyday, which is Zhang’s, belongs to a string of “weaker aesthetic categories [...], testifying in their very proliferation to how ‘in a world of total design and Internet-plentitude,’ aesthetic experience, while less rarified, also becomes less intense.”⁵ Zhang’s is an everyday kind of beauty, but nevertheless, it *is* beautiful, in that it relates, just like a sunset, to something larger that is out there, something inevitable, moving, pulsating.

Moreover, it taps into something that Kant identified as a property of the beautiful when he wrote that the beautiful is no thing as such, but the sharing of pleasure in relation to the world. Beauty, then, has to do with others – with sharing and partaking. It’s an affective currency. However, though we use it as a blanket term, beauty is reflected, like all aesthetic judgements, in “its relationship to the material of the work and the language of its form,”⁶ which is to say it is anchored in a specific, material sense in

4 Sontag, “An Argument about Beauty,” 213.

5 Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 21.

6 Adorno, as cited in Shierry Weber NicholSEN, *Exact Imagination, Late Work on Adorno’s Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997), 18.

the work. The question then becomes: Why is Zhang’s work beautiful? What makes me call it that?

It has to do with the attention Zhang pays to composition, color, and surface textures. Bodies and objects appear staged, bathed in colorful light. Images blend in and out – rhythmically, purposefully. There is a level of care in her editing, in the cropping of her images, in the organization of her sequences and the staging of what she films. I love watching these bodies, these textures, these shiny surfaces. There is an allure that sucks you in. It’s seductive. The beauty of her work is a beauty attuned to screens and to the specific ways we look and deal with images today. Beauty is theatrical, it wants to be looked at and admired, and Zhang’s films, especially her latest, ask for precisely this.

The texts that accompany Zhang’s images, however, complicate their visual composition. Both texts excerpted in *Social Gifts* center on the question of what makes a successful piece of art (Stein’s essay talks about the “masterpiece,” while the writing on social media discusses the “influencer”), and for both, success has to do with identity, though their perspectives collide. Stein argues that for an artefact to become a masterpiece, its maker needs to leave their identity behind, whereas the influencer’s currency is their “authentic self.” Rather than interfering with these two versions of “the peculiar interrelation between product and person,”⁷ Zhang pairs them with her saturated close-up images of public spaces. She adds the missing link – the infrastructure, the stage, the audience, the masses – reminding us that neither

7 Isabelle Graw, “How Much Person is in the Product,” *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 128 (December 2022): 60.

masterpieces, nor influencers, can come out of nowhere. They are both embedded in specific contexts that allow for their creation and reception. These contexts, the private space of creation – the most basic condition of which was famously identified by Virginia Woolf as “A Room of One’s Own”⁸ – and the public space of reception, are the larger stages on which Zhang’s work appears.

Jiajia Zhang You Left Something Behind
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The question of how this “Room of One’s Own” relates to public spaces of cultural production, such as the internet and the museum, lies at the heart of *You Left Something Behind*, the exhibition Zhang has created and the artworks she has selected for the Kunstmuseum St.Gallen.

The downstairs exhibition space of the Kunstmuseum St.Gallen, where Zhang’s exhibition is located, was built in 1983 by the architect Marcel Ferrier, when the museum building was still home to two museums: the city’s natural history museum and its art museum. In the 19th century, art was shown on the upstairs floors while the underground space displayed a natural science collection: minerals, fossils, stuffed animals. Ferrier’s architecture turned the museum’s souterrain into a “cave-like” space, as the architect himself was to describe it. With its exposed concrete walls and prominent ramp, one could easily imagine this “cave” as an underpass, a parking garage, a shopping arcade or some other kind of public infrastructure connecting and blurring distinctions between the inside

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*
(Richmond, Surrey: Alma Classics, 2019,
first published in 1929).

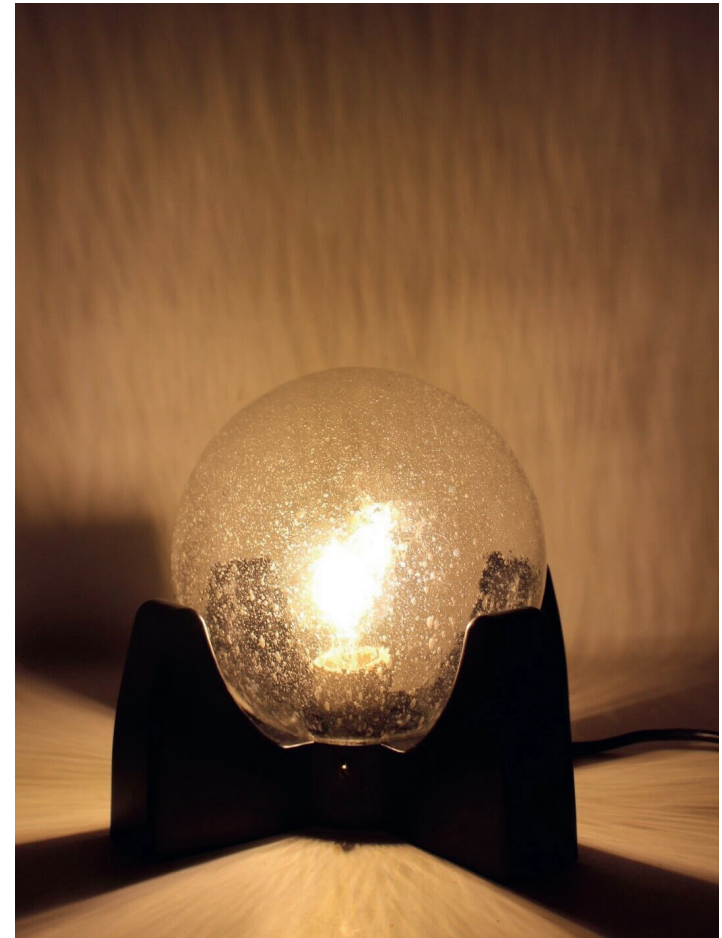
and outside. It looks massive, functional, brute and durable. For her exhibition, Zhang has furnished this space with artworks that relate to both public infrastructure and private homes. Next to her own artworks, pieces from the collection are exhibited. The works of furniture-turned-sculpture by Michael E. Smith suggest a domestic, if run-down, setting, as does the warm light emitted from the homely lamps that Zhang has installed. Other artworks by Zhang, and other works from the museum’s collection that she has selected, highlight tensions between inside and outside rather than firmly falling into either category themselves. David Bürkler’s *Schachtelkörper* combines two materialities that we associate with different spaces. A typical cardboard box is extended by a box of the exact same dimensions but in a different material: sheet steel. Here, an object that we know from the domestic realm – one is reminded of the similar cardboard boxes in which online purchases are conveniently delivered to our homes – is combined with a material that we associate with public infrastructure and high durability. Rita McBride’s sculpture *Awnings* references the canopies seen above entrances to establishments like boutiques or restaurants. Next to these objects, which, rendered abstract, are turned into post-minimalist sculptures, a similarly deadpan painting by Andreas Schulze shows an abstracted, bulbous window frame and through it a completely grey and flattened view.

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Michael E. Smith, *Untitled*, 2018
Two reclining chairs, each 58 × 81 × 85 cm,
Installation dimensions variable
Kunstmuseum St.Gallen, acquired in 2018
Photo: Philipp Hänger © Kunsthalle Basel,
Installation view, 2018

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Jiajia Zhang, *Study for Milestone/Regression*
(*ma, da, ah, oh, no*), 2023
Lamp, chain with pendant , installation
dimensions variable



David Bürkler, *Schachtelkörper*, 1996
Sheet steel with gray car paint, brown corrugated
cardboard, 90 × 100 × 75 cm
Kunstmuseum St.Gallen, donation from Galerie
Adrian Bleisch, 2017
Photo: Adrian Bleisch, 2017 © Kunstmuseum St.Gallen



Rita McBride, *Awnings*, 2000
Metal construction, tarpaulin, 2 parts, 91 × 34 × 40 cm
and 121 × 41 × 32 cm
Kunstmuseum St.Gallen, loan from private collection



Andreas Schulze, *Ohne Titel (Fenster London 21)*, 2014
 Acrylic on nettle, 60 × 60 × 4,5 cm
 Kunstmuseum St.Gallen. Acquired by Kunstverein
 St.Gallen with funds from the legacy of Marguerite
 Louise Hadorn, Münchenstein, in memory of
 Dr. Ulrich Diem-Bernet, 2015
 Photo: Sebastian Stadler ©Kunstmuseum St.Gallen, 2015

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Two new wall sculptures by Zhang are on display, each evoking the space between inside and outside in a similar way as the works from the collection. There is a closed shutter, lit from behind and encased in a Perspex frame. A curious schedule is printed on top of the glass, akin to opening hours you might find listed on the closed façade of a shop, although the intervals seem warped – they extend far into the night and are separated irregularly, with strange gaps.

07:00 – 08:30
 10:10 – 11:25
 13:40 – 14:15
 16:30 – 17:50
 19:05 – 21:00
 22:50 – 00:30
 01:15 – 02:25
 04:05 – 05:15

Really, this schedule comes from Zhang’s notebook and registers the waking/feeding times of the artist’s baby when she was only a few weeks old, just as the artist was starting to work on the show. The times in between are the hours left in which the artist could work on the exhibition, rest or have a moment to herself. This Room of the Artist’s Own then has a peculiar schedule. Its listing directly links creation to social reproduction and the infrastructures that allow for artmaking.

Zhang’s other wall sculpture encases a found pane of yellow safety glass. Behind the glass, onto which a yellow Safe Crash foil has been glued, a mirror is installed. Safe Crash foils protect the glass casings in which fire extinguishers are stored in private and public spaces. Next to the Safe Crash logo, the artist has added the line “You Left Something Behind.” This expression is used in

online shopping, to alert a customer that an item has been placed in the “shopping basket” but has not yet actually been purchased. This is also the line from which the show takes its title. It suggests care: somebody is following up on you. However, it also betrays the darker reality of online space: all of our behaviors are being meticulously tracked and registered. Really, this care is the work of an algorithm designed to encourage us to buy more.

The act of leaving something behind is also evoked by a different work from the collection: Sylvie Fleury’s *Elite Shopping Bags*. The work consists of eight shopping bags, filled with purchases, placed on the floor next to each other. The bags carry the branding of stores such as Chanel, H&M and Elite. They look as if they have just been dropped on the floor by the artist, moments after she has returned home, having closed the door behind her. Fleury’s Pop Art acknowledges the female shopping experience. Just like many works by Zhang, it raises questions regarding the forms of identity and stereotypes made available to women through popular culture and consumption.

On the left-hand side of the ramp that leads into the space, a metal trough filled with coins has been placed. Visitors are encouraged to throw money into this abstracted version of a wishing well, which emits an eerie sound whenever a coin hits its bottom. It references the kind of places the people in Zhang’s video are drawn to, where collective rituals are performed – often, as in this instance, by leaving something behind.

On the right-hand side of the ramp, a series of five lamps has been installed, their heads pointing toward an empty wall. They are the kind of industrial lamps used to light large screens stretched over empty walls



Sylvie Fleury, *Elite Shopping Bags*, 1997

Objects, shopping bags with various contents,
dimensions variable

Kunstmuseum St.Gallen. Loan from private collection

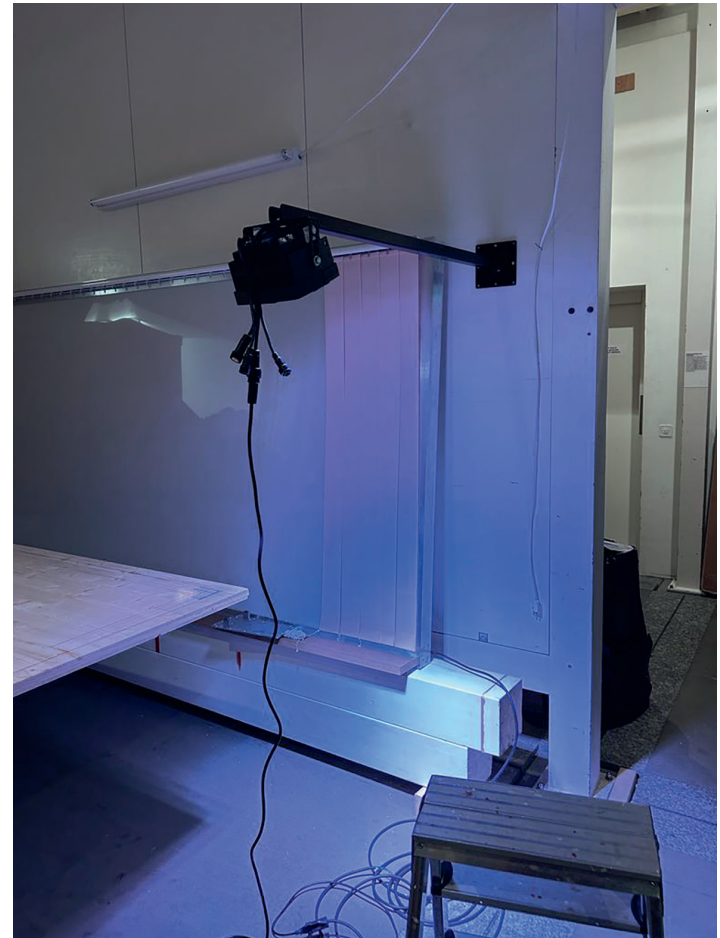
Photo: Stefan Rohner © Kunstmuseum St.Gallen, 2008

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Jiajia Zhang, Study for *Cast* (*She You She I We She They You I We*), 2023
Metal, coins, loudspeakers, 485 × 100 × 20 cm

Jiajia Zhang You Left Something Behind



Jiajia Zhang, Study for *Chore* (*1-5: care, compassion, courage, communication, commitment*), 2023
6 pieces, programmed lamps, metal, installation
dimensions variable

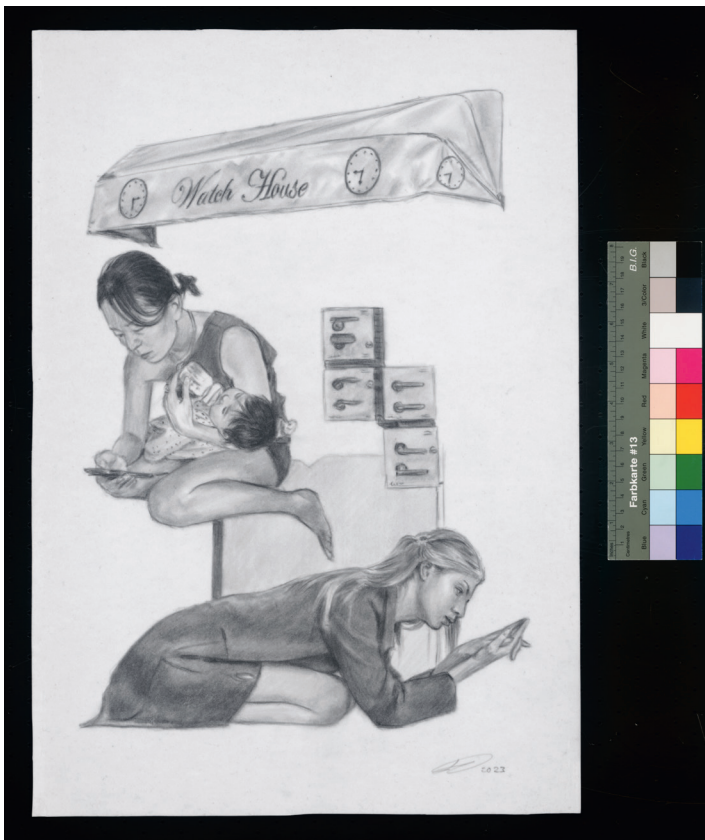
and construction sites, onto which larger-than-life advertisements are placed. Here in the exhibition space, however, these industrial lamps emit a warm, weak light, just like the other lamps in the space. During opening hours, they switch on and off to a particular rhythm, timed to reflect the duration of different chores structuring the life of a caretaker of a newborn baby, such as changing diapers, rocking the baby to sleep, and breastfeeding. Here, too, time follows the structure of a daily rhythm that has nothing to do with the setting – an exhibition space – or its operations. These lamps are out of place and out of time. Yet they reflect the rhythm in which the exhibition was created and they allude to another important theme of the show, that of motherhood and the family. An etching by Picasso selected by Zhang from the collection of the Kunstmuseum also connects to this topic. *Mère et enfants* shows a mother with two children, the three arranged as a peaceful huddle, each absorbed in their own activity, writing or playing.

A new series of drawings by Zhang are dispersed throughout the space and take as their points of departure images drawn from various sources, including fashion advertisements and Instagram. Some images were shot on the streets of Milan; some portray the artist herself. Often bringing together two or three such images, the drawings depict mostly domestic moments of caretaking, introspection and selfcare: applying make-up, feeding a newborn, a pattern of braided hair in the making, stuffed animals, girls looking at their phones or at themselves in the mirror. It's an intimate world that is on display: the labor of reproduction and beauty, punctuated by screens.

While Zhang made the collages on which the drawings are based, the drawings themselves were executed by others – by artists who make a living drawing tourists

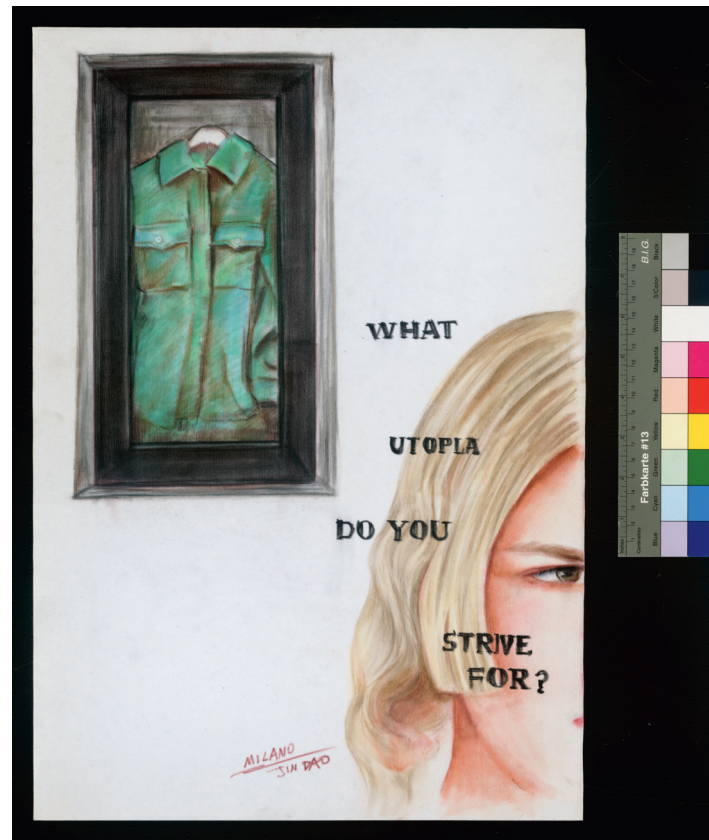


Pablo Picasso, *Mère et enfants*, 1953
 Etching, 25,9 × 30,8 cm
 Kunstmuseum St.Gallen. Deposit of the Gottfried
 Keller-Stiftung Bundesamt für Kultur, Bern
 Donation from Georges Bloch, 1973
 Photo: Sebastian Stadler © Kunstmuseum St.Gallen, 2021



Jiajia Zhang, *Watch House*, 2023
Pencil on paper, 35 × 50 cm

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Jiajia Zhang, *What Utopia Do You Strive For?*, 2023
Pencil on paper, 35 × 50 cm

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around the Duomo in Milan. By having these artists sign the works, Zhang provides additional information about the labor that went into their production, one aspect of a broader array of necessary elements and conditions – such as networks of people, infrastructure, money and time.

The lamps, the closed shutter, the images of women at home, looking at screens, removed from where other people gather. There is also a sense of isolation here: a feeling of “just” looking rather than partaking, of living not in but next to the action, of running on a different track, in parallel. It’s the isolation of the Time Zone of Motherhood, in which days and nights melt into each other and structures dissolve as reality becomes hyper-focused on taking care of a newborn. Rachel Cusk, in 2001, called it “the housewife slurry of everything that is both too late and too early, of madness and morning television. The days lie ahead empty of landmarks, like a prairie, like an untraversable plain.”⁹ Today, in 2023, morning television has been replaced by screens and their intermittently scrolled social media feeds, which are often one’s only points of contact with the world outside. Zhang’s works provide access to private spaces and daily rituals. They show how porous these spaces have become and how difficult it is to draw a line between the idea of a secluded “Room of One’s Own” and our spaces of online interaction – with their audiences that are always “there”, though each member may be elsewhere alone. Can we ever leave them behind? What are these private versions of ourselves that we share online? And, finally: what is at stake when the lines between public and private are so radically redrawn, as work and leisure and caretaking and performance collapse?

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Rachel Cusk, *A Life’s Work: On Becoming a Mother* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), 15.



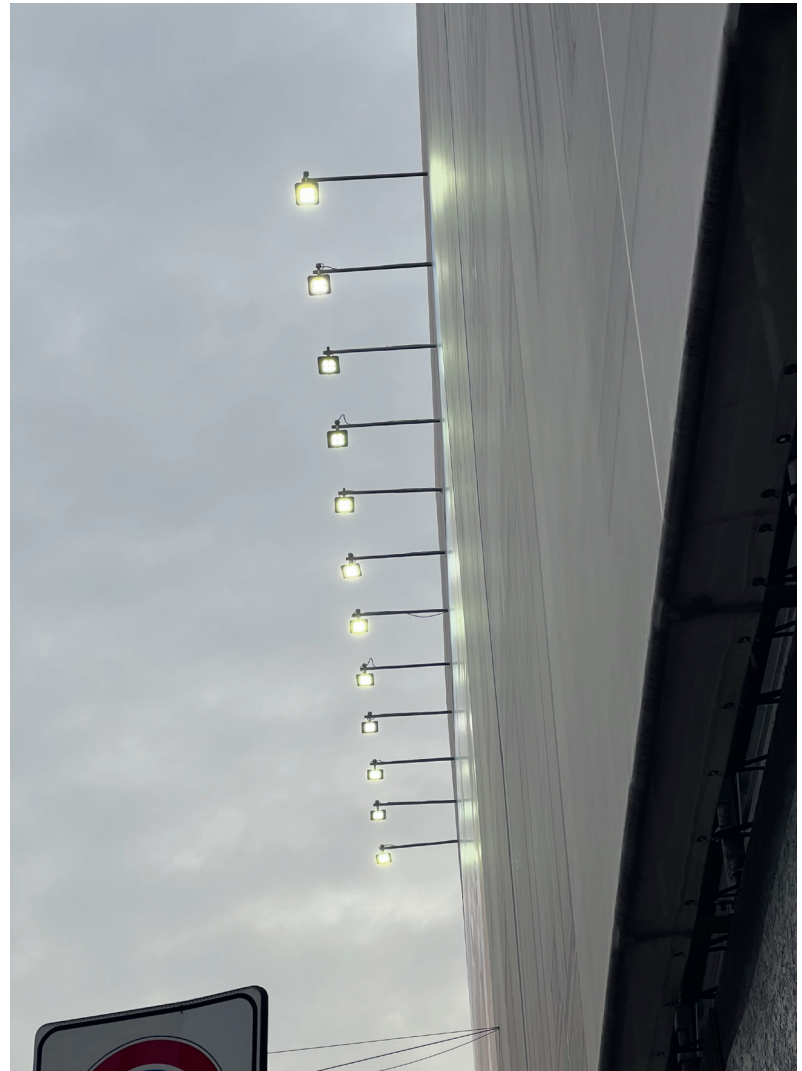
Ayse Erkmen, *Ring*, 2005, detail
Chain of 260 silver rings, 440 cm
Kunstmuseum St.Gallen. Acquired by Kunstverein
St.Gallen, 2005

Photo: Stefan Rohner © Kunstmuseum St.Gallen, 2008

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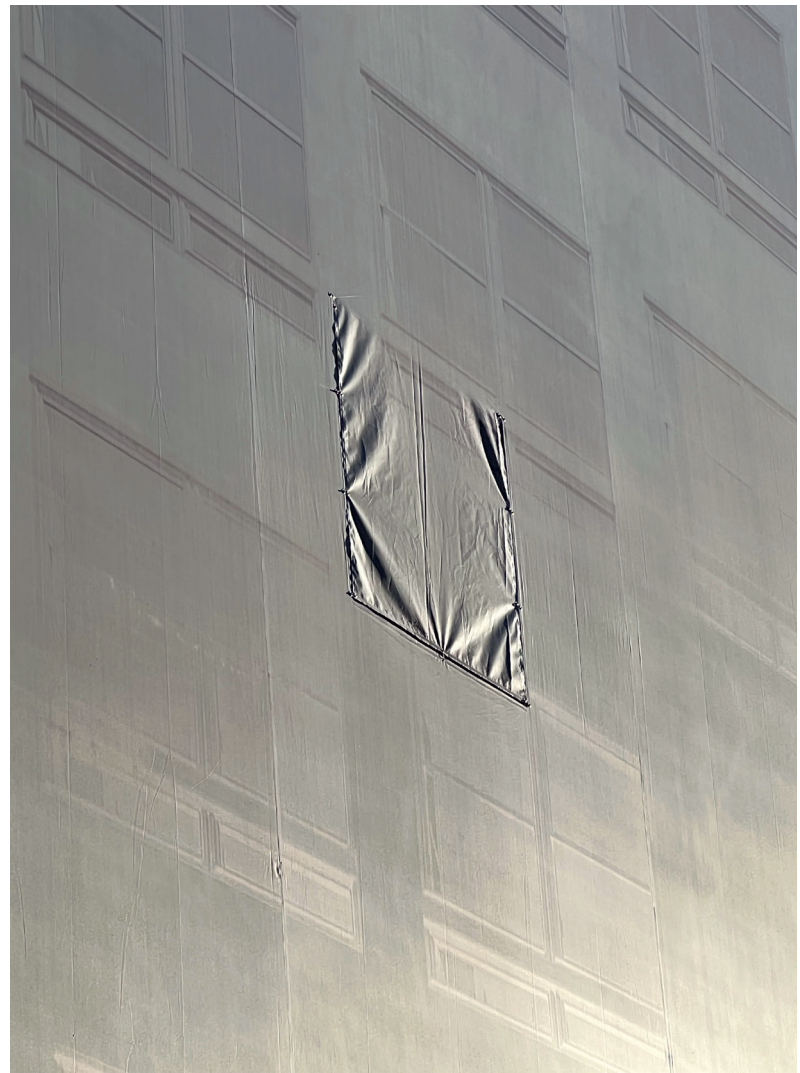






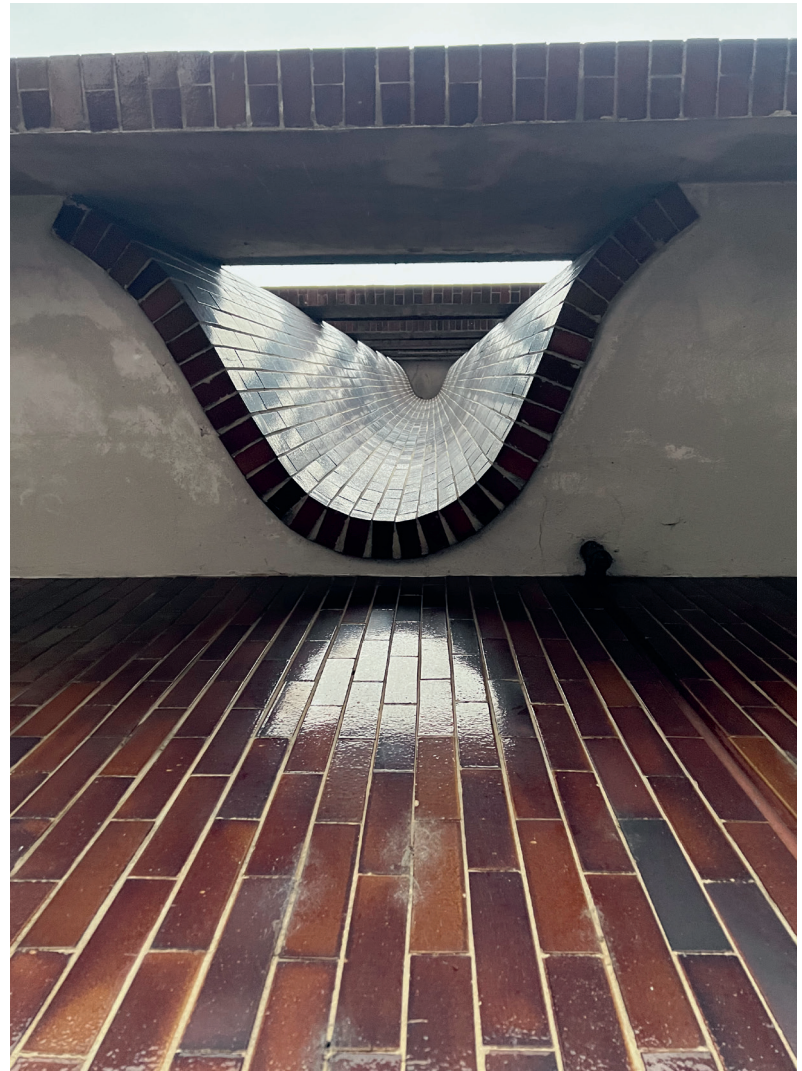






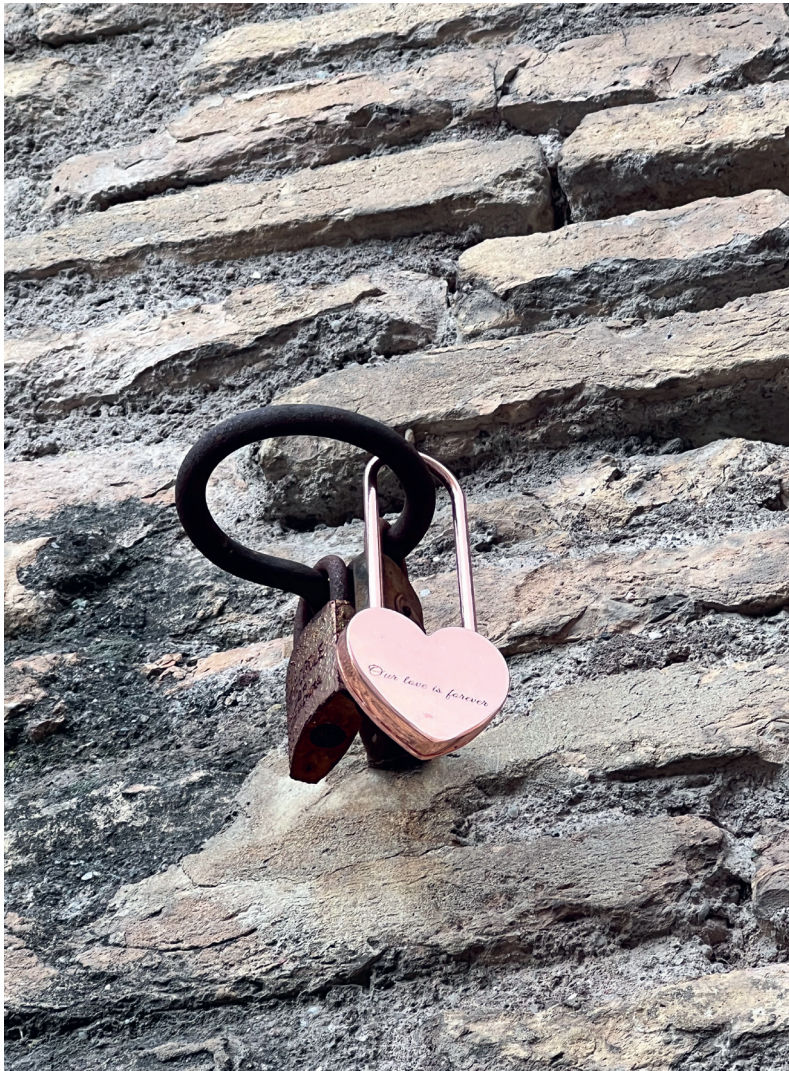


















I took these photographs during my residency at Istituto Svizzero Milan between November 2022 and March 2023, while working on *You Left Something Behind* – Jiajia Zhang, March 2023

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Jiajia Zhang

Jiajia Zhang studied architecture at ETH Zürich from 2001 to 2007 and photography at the International Center of Photography, NY, from 2007 to 2008. In 2020, she completed her Master of Fine Arts at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK). Her work has been part of various exhibitions, including at Helmhaus, Zürich (2022); FriArt, Fribourg (2022); Coalmine Gallery, Winterthur (2021); Haus Konstruktiv, Zürich (2021); Kunsthaus Glarus (2021); Fondation d'entreprise Pernod Ricard, Paris (2021); Haus Wien (2020); Kunsthalle Zürich (2020); Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen (2019). In 2022 she received the Swiss Art Award and the Shizuko Yoshikawa Advancement Award for Young Women Artists.

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