

# sébastien bertrand

Lian Zhang

*The Rabbit Who Hunts Tigers*

3 March 2023 – 15 April 2023

Opening reception: Thursday, March 2, 6–8.30pm

Press Release



Lian Zhang, Tropical Sun, 2022, Oil on canvas, 80 × 60 cm / 31 × 23 in..

Sébastien Bertrand is pleased to present the first solo show of the artist Lian Zhang (1984, Hangzhou) at the gallery.

Set within a rich historical tradition, Zhang creates powerful, emotional landscapes that transport the viewer to another time and place. Her nostalgic, illusory scenes incorporate autobiographical fragments alongside references to Eastern and Western mythology, folklore, art, history, and popular culture. Each composition dwells on contradictions that blend past and future, good and evil, myth and reality, tragedy and comedy, and hints at multifaceted narratives that strain in many different directions at once. Her works draw from Surrealism, Symbolism, Taoist philosophy, and her personal experience living in London as an immigrant.

Executed with a vivid color palette and filled with the energy of both stasis and motion, her paintings embody a fluidity between objects and figures. Zhang aspires to achieve a form of soft power via delicate, flowing, water-like brushstrokes that interlace disparate elements across the surface of the canvas.

*“I always imagine that my hands become water; they travel freely when moving here to there in a painting.”* – Lian Zhang

Water – formless, shapeless, and adaptable – is an important component of Zhang’s work and a great source of inspiration. In that regard, she refers to Bruce Lee’s metaphor about water, quoted in Yin Yin’s album *The Rabbit that Hunts Tigers*, which gives its title to the exhibition.

While many of Zhang’s previous paintings were about exploring the experience of living abroad, this new body of works is about returning to an estranged homeland and confronting one’s deepest fear by ripping off the old wounds. They are based on the idea that life is impermanent, but one should never stop battling with inner demons and fight for a better future. The exhibition features ten paintings, three of which are large-scale atmospheric, dreamlike scenes. The other seven are uncanny portraits of female hybrid characters defying the viewer with their intense gaze.

The large work *Tiger’s Den* challenges the conventional storyline of predators and preys and reminds us that those presented as the perfect embodiment of strength and evil are, first and foremost, animals. Indeed, the demons we are afraid to face are always inside us. We are also reminded of this through *All of Our Waves are Water* that depicts a tidal viewing ceremony of the Qian Tang River, which the artist could witness from her balcony.

*“My studio was on the 24th floor, I saw so many tiny humans standing on the shore the whole afternoon just to see the waves which pulled by the gravitation of the moon goddess.”* – Lian Zhang

This piece takes this event further, to when everything gets out of control and the moon goddess stands on the water and fights her way out by cutting waves with her warping swords to kill the beast that blocks her way.

*The Invasion*, semi-autobiographical in a surrealist way, depicts a time when both the inner life and outer world are floating, leading to a plot that repeatedly happens in a distorted, dreamlike labyrinth inspired by reality.

Her ongoing series of female portraits explores Asian female identity, while highlighting and undermining some of the ways in which Asian women are stereotyped and objectified. *Ambush* is based on Anna May Wong, the first Chinese American actress to gain international recognition, but is yet mostly remembered for her stereotypical supporting roles as “Dragon Lady”. *Huntress*, *Bystander*, *Tropical Sun* and *The Silent One* are inspired by vintage posters in which the main protagonists were objects of male gaze. By giving these models a peculiar twist, Zhang makes them gaze back at the viewer with their monster eyes and unconventional expressions. *Cry of a Friend* and *The Archer* explore the symbol of rebellion and satisfy our thirst for freedom.

*I said empty your mind*

*Be formless*

*Shapeless*

*Like water*

*Have you put water into a cup?*

*It becomes the cup*

*You put water into a bottle, it becomes the bottle*

*You put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot*

*Now water can flow or it can crash*

*Be water, my friend*

-Bruce Lee, quoted by Yin Yin, in “One Inch Punch” – *The Rabbit That Hunts Tigers*, 2019. In his famous interview from 1965, Lee used water as a metaphor for kung fu.

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Sébastien Bertrand a le plaisir de présenter la première exposition personnelle de l'artiste Lian Zhang (1984, Hangzhou) à la galerie.

Lian Zhang crée des paysages puissants et pleins d'émotion qui transportent le spectateur vers un autre temps et un autre lieu. Ses scènes nostalgiques et illusives incorporent des fragments autobiographiques, mais aussi des références à la mythologie, au folklore, à l'art, à l'histoire et à la culture populaire de l'Orient et de l'Occident. Chaque composition repose sur des contradictions qui mêlent passé et avenir, bien et mal, mythe et réalité, tragédie et comédie, et renvoie à des récits aux multiples facettes qui se déploient dans plusieurs directions. Ses œuvres s'inspirent tant du Surréalisme, du Symbolisme et de la philosophie Taoïste que de son expérience personnelle en tant qu'immigrée à Londres.

Exécutées dans une palette de couleurs vives et remplies d'une énergie issue aussi bien de l'inertie que du mouvement, ses peintures dégagent une fluidité entre objets et figures. Zhang aspire à atteindre une forme de force douce grâce à des coups de pinceau délicats, fluides, semblables à l'eau, qui entrelacent des éléments disparates sur la surface de la toile.

« *J'imagine toujours que mes mains deviennent de l'eau ; elles voyagent librement lorsqu'elles se déplacent d'un endroit à un autre dans une peinture* ». – Lian Zhang

L'eau – sans forme, souple et adaptable – est une composante importante de l'œuvre de Lian Zhang et une grande source d'inspiration. A cet égard, elle fait référence à la célèbre métaphore de Bruce Lee sur l'eau, citée dans l'album de Yin Yin, *The Rabbit that Hunts Tigers*, qui donne son titre à l'exposition.

Alors qu'un grand nombre des peintures de Zhang abordent l'expérience de migrant, ce nouveau corpus d'œuvres explore le retour dans une patrie aliénée et la confrontation avec sa peur la plus profonde en rouvrant les vieilles blessures. Ces derniers travaux reposent sur l'idée que la vie est fugace, et que la lutte pour un avenir meilleur est un combat de chaque instant. L'exposition présente dix tableaux, dont trois sont des scènes atmosphériques et oniriques de grande taille. Les sept autres sont des portraits étranges de personnages féminins hybrides qui défient le spectateur de leur regard intense.

La grande œuvre *Tiger's Den* remet en question le scénario conventionnel du prédateur et de sa proie, et nous rappelle que ceux qui sont présentés comme la parfaite incarnation de la puissance et du mal sont avant tout des animaux. En effet, nos démons intérieurs sont essentiellement des constructions issues de récits collectifs. Cela nous est également suggéré dans l'œuvre *All of Our Waves Are Water* qui représente une cérémonie d'observation des marées de la rivière Qian Tang, à laquelle l'artiste pouvait assister depuis son balcon.

« *Mon studio était au 24ème étage, j'ai vu tant de petits humains debout sur la rive pendant tout l'après-midi juste pour voir les vagues tirées par la gravitation de la déesse de la lune* ». – Lian Zhang

Cette pièce pousse l'événement encore plus loin, jusqu'au moment où tout devient incontrôlable et où la déesse de la lune se tient sur l'eau et se bat pour sortir en coupant les vagues avec ses épées afin de tuer la bête qui lui barre la route.

*The Invasion*, peinture semi-autobiographique, dépeint de manière surréaliste une période où la vie intérieure et le monde extérieur sont en suspension, donnant lieu à une intrigue qui se répète dans un labyrinthe déformé et onirique inspiré de la réalité.

Sa série de portraits de femmes explore l'identité féminine asiatique, tout en soulignant et en dénonçant la manière dont les femmes asiatiques sont souvent stéréotypées et objectivées. *Ambush* s'inspire d'Anna May Wong, la première actrice sino-américaine à obtenir une reconnaissance internationale, mais dont on se souvient principalement pour ses seconds rôles de « *Dragon Lady* ». *Huntress*, *Bystander*, *Tropical Sun* et *The Silent One* s'inspirent d'affiches vintage sur lesquelles les protagonistes étaient des objets du désir masculin. Avec leurs yeux monstrueux et leurs expressions non conventionnelles, ces modèles à l'attitude particulière soutiennent le regard du spectateur. *Cry of a Friend* et *The Archer* sont quant à eux un symbole de rébellion et une ode à la soif de liberté.

*Je t'ai dit de vider ton esprit  
Sois sans forme  
Fluide  
Comme de l'eau*

*As-tu mis de l'eau dans une tasse ?  
Elle devient la tasse.  
Tu mets de l'eau dans une bouteille, elle devient la bouteille.  
Tu la mets dans une théière, elle devient la théière.  
L'eau peut couler ou s'écraser  
Sois de l'eau, mon ami.*

-Bruce Lee, cité par Yin Yin, dans "One Inch Punch" – *The Rabbit that Hunts Tigers*, 2019. Dans sa célèbre interview de 1965, Lee parle de l'eau comme métaphore du kung-fu.

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Saturday by appointment

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## About the works

### *Tiger's Den:*

In *Tiger's Den*, Zhang challenges the conventional storyline stating that tigers are powerful and evil predators while rabbits, meek and quiet, are destined to be prey. She portrays an humanlike rabbit wearing a Chinese warrior suit, looking at her audience fearlessly, about to enter an unknown realm bare-handed. Is she going to fight? Sacrifice herself for something bigger? Set the giant tiger free? A huge tiger eye is almost bursting through the elegant gate as if the prison can no longer hold it. In the foreground, a tiger with ghost-like green eyes is testing the depth of the water, while the lucky turtle might be surprised by a sudden attack. But while presented as the perfect embodiment of strength and evil, in a quick nod to Blake's poem *The Tyger*, we must remember that tigers are first and foremost animals. This is hinted at by the mother and its cub, hiding in the background behind the flame-like grass, vulnerably burning bright. The inner demon always comes from inside of us.

### *The Invasion:*

*The Invasion* depicts a time when the inner life and outer world are floating, ultimately leading to nightmares that repeat in circles. This piece is semi-autobiographical in a surrealist way and a subtle comment on the larger world. The haunting black creature, representing an unknown dark force, awaits for the right moment to attack. The woman hiding behind the pillar isn't entirely innocent, as she set her home in the creature's habitat. A grey cloud in the shape of a broken face is drowsily witnessing this stalemate, too weak to intervene. The same plot thus happens repeatedly in a distorted, dreamlike labyrinth, inspired by reality.

### *All of our waves are water:*

*"For nearly six months I had a studio in a balcony with a view of the Qian Tang River where the world's largest tidal bore visited multiple times in August. The beast makes loud noises like an airplane, the marching waves form a curvy white line on the river, dividing it into a Tai-chi like field, one side in stillness, and one side in motion. My studio was on the 24th floor, I saw so many tiny humans standing on the shore the whole afternoon just to see the waves which pulled by the gravitation of the moon goddess. Each year the tidal washes away some people, but it never stops more gathering on the shore the next year."* – Lian Zhang

This piece takes this event further, to when everything gets out of control and the moon goddess stands on the water and fights her way out by cutting waves with her warping swords to kill the beast that blocks her way. A human face in the mirror indicates that the demons we are afraid of are always inside us.

*Ambush:*

*Ambush* is inspired by Anna May Wong, the first Chinese American actress to gain international recognition. She is mainly remembered for her stereotypical supporting roles as “*Dragon Lady*”, whilst her documentary films were much less known, even when there were few female directors at the time. The painting ironically exaggerates that stereotype by portraying her as an alien-like, cunning huntress waiting patiently for her prey.

*Huntress, Bystander, Tropical Sun, The Silent one:*

These four female portraits are inspired by vintage posters in which the main protagonist was an object of the male gaze. By giving these models a peculiar twist, Zhang makes them gaze back at the viewers with their monster eyes and unconventional expressions. This group of characters seem suddenly aware that they are mere characters in a play and, beginning to question their identity, eventually decide to quit acting.

*Cry of a Friend* and *The Archer:*

*Cry of a friend* is inspired by pictures of women cutting their hair during a protest subsequent to Iranian Mahsa Mamini’s death. Similarly, *The Archer* responds to the national protest against abuses related to the harsh Covid-19 methods in China.