



*Beijing wa wa*, 2007  
oil on canvas

La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art.  
Donated by Dr Geoff Raby AO through the Australian  
Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019. © Zhang Hui.  
Photo: Jia De

Born in 1969, Zhang Hui grew up during a comics and cartoon boom in China, which is reflected in her series *Beijing girls* and her painting *Beijing wa wa* (2007), in which a young girl in a trench coat and smart lace-up shoes stands alone against a grey background. Zhang Hui often paints young girls as caricatures, with large heads, long eyelashes, thin brows, exaggerated heart-shaped lips and rosy cheeks. Their youth is emphasised by short bob haircuts that curl at the edges. *Wa wa* in the title may be translated as 'baby', 'small child' or 'doll', which further infantilises the girl depicted.

Her chic, trendy outfit is rendered realistically in oil on canvas, in a style reminiscent of fashion magazines and photoshoots, but there is a vulnerability and vacuity emphasised by the empty space around the body. The girl is shrouded in glamour, but her expression is morose. The backdrop is flat and her shadow dissolves behind her into a grey, amorphous mass. At exactly a metre square, the smaller scale of the canvas diminishes the figure further. The criss-cross bandage on the girl's forehead suggests harm has been inflicted and her closed eyes, enlarged head, and coat sleeves so long they obscure her hands, create a sense of passivity. Zhang Hui exaggerates the features of hyperbolised femininity she found in depictions of Chinese women, evoking the monochrome melancholy prevalent in a culture of commodification.

Soo-Min Shim, 2022