

Personal mythologies
La Trobe Art Institute
14 July to 16 October 2022

Artists: Tiyan Baker, Jenna Lee, Cindy Lien, NC Qin, Renee So, Jia Sung, Louise Zhang

Guest curator: Sophia Cai

The heart is a heavy burden
Sophia Cai

Personal mythologies is an exhibition that explores the creative potential of storytelling, imagination and fantasy in artistic practice. Bringing together seven multidisciplinary artists working across painting, sculpture, glass, photography, ceramics and textiles, it considers the various ways these artists have reimaged their relationship to specific places, histories and cultures to form new narratives. This is a diasporic and transcultural exhibition, investigating what it means to relate to the broader Asian continent from afar. It is a project that considers complex notions of personal identity, how we forge and maintain connections, and what new meanings can arise from these encounters.

The genesis of *Personal mythologies* was an invitation by La Trobe Art Institute to curate a contemporary art exhibition that would sit alongside *In our time: four decades of art from China and beyond – the Geoff Raby Collection*, held at Bendigo Art Gallery.¹ From 20 August until the close of *Personal mythologies*, the two exhibitions will act as counterpoints to each other. While *In our time* offers a broad sampling of contemporary Chinese artistic practice in the last four decades, my interest in curating *Personal mythologies* is, as the title suggests, more personal. It has been spurred in large part by my academic background in Chinese contemporary art, but also by my own complex relationship to this history as a first-generation migrant. Knowing that the artworks often favoured by Western institutions are ones ‘that appear political, fashionable, subversive, psychopathic, mixed in with a little of China’s traditional art, and sprinkled with a pinch of post-modernism,’² I wanted to consider an alternative way of curating Chinese art. I wanted to ask, can one curate an exhibition that doesn’t further mythologise ideas of nationhood or exoticise the self, but rather foregrounds lived experience as the main artistic methodology (knowing that this is a slippery, ever-changing, process)?

This curatorial praxis informed the choice of artists I wanted to work with as I sought out artists who contend with questions of cultural meaning and legacies. A common theme in *Personal mythologies* is the presence of narrative and the power of art to hold allegorical meaning and significance, as shown in the works of Cindy Lien and Renee So. Cindy Lien’s practice is largely inspired by her daily life in the harbour town of Keelung, Taiwan. Lien finds and gathers materials and objects from her everyday surroundings, which are then sewn into fantastical textile dreamscapes. While the works are humble in scale, their glittering sequinned and beaded surfaces dazzle and invite multiple interpretations of meaning. Renee So’s enigmatic ceramic sculptures similarly evoke multiple narratives. So reworks figures and objects from art history, tracing visual forms derived from decorative arts practices across both the so-called ‘East’ and ‘West’ to form new interpretations. In this way, her works challenge our assumptions about ‘classical’ forms, and how cultural legacies (i.e. what art forms are deemed ‘high art’) are transmitted through the hallowed halls of history.

Through artworks that draw on iconography and symbolism from classical Chinese mythology, Jia Sung and Louise Zhang similarly explore confluences of the past and present. Both artists have been commissioned to create new work for *Personal mythologies*. Sung’s tapestries and painted works on linen are rich in textual and cultural references, drawing inspiration from stories that frequently include spirits and elements of animism. For this exhibition, Sung has made a new work based on the Chinese word for witch or shaman and its pictograph – 巫 (wū) – that depicts two people dancing around a pillar. While the figures were historically female, in Sung’s work they are shown as shapeshifting fox spirits engaged in a rainmaking ritual. Iconography is also at the heart of Louise Zhang’s works, which are informed by her experience as a ‘third-culture kid’, existing in a place of in-betweenness.³ While a surface reading of Zhang’s works might focus on their eye-catching colour palette, her works invite a deeper reading in their considered use of motifs drawn from Chinese mythology and culture. For this new series of paintings, Zhang draws inspiration from Loong, the oldest surviving imperial dragon in the world. Loong currently lives at the Golden Dragon Museum in Bendigo, on the other side of Rosalind Park from La Trobe Art Institute. The dragon is a loaded cultural symbol in Chinese mythology, simultaneously representing strength, power and authority. In Zhang’s works, the dragon also acts as a symbol of healing for the Chinese community in Bendigo, as its initial appearance coincides with the introduction of the White Australia Policy of 1901.⁴ Combining the dragon with other visual symbols such as the lotus and ginkgo tree, Zhang’s paintings evoke feelings of hope in times of turmoil.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, the works of Tiyan Baker and Jenna Lee show us that cultural storytelling contains multitudes of experiences; it is neither singular nor static. Baker’s sculptures and prints follow her ongoing research into the significance of crocodiles in ancestral storytelling in Southeast Asia. For *Personal mythologies*, Baker has created a family of three textile crocodile effigies embellished with beads and text, which also feature in a series of black and white photographic portraits with the artist, captured using a night-vision hunting camera. The colonial view of crocodiles as a predatory threat is implied through the use of this camera technology, creating a sense of unease and distance between the viewer and the subject. For Baker, the crocodile occupies an imaginative space of both cultural and personal significance, offering her a way to connect to her Bidjäl heritage as well as her hometown of Darwin. Connection is also central to Jenna Lee’s works, which are based on the history of the Australian pearling industry as a means to reflect her own Japanese, Chinese and Aboriginal family histories. The interwoven cultural histories are further exemplified through the materiality of the work, which includes a range of pigments and papers sourced from multiple origins. The blending of various materials, including Chinese rice paper, ochre, origami paper and pages from books and legislation (such as the Immigration Restriction Act 1901), paints a vivid portrait of Lee’s connection to family and Country/countries of origin.

While many of the works in *Personal mythologies* celebrate the roles that storytelling and fantasy play in creating connections to diasporic cultural expression, it would be remiss not to also acknowledge that connections to culture and the past can form a heavy burden. NC Qin’s glass armour series is a visual testament to the weight of this expectation in a contemporary context. By making armour and helmets – usually substantial metal items worn for bodily protection – in a fragile and translucent material such as glass, Qin is making ‘ineffective’ armour. She intends to make a full body of armour piece by piece, and, as this body of work continues to grow, the juxtaposition between frailty, vulnerability and protection takes on further implications. As more pieces are completed, this suit of armour will render the wearer immobile. We might then view this body of work as a metaphor for the weight of cultural expectations – particularly felt by migrant children – and the challenge of navigating the legacies of the past alongside the individual’s needs and expectations.

Sometimes when I think about my own ‘Chinese-ness’, I similarly contend with these doubts and feelings. Making art in a diasporic context is itself an act of world building, generating new meaning and narratives by piecing together disparate elements. Presenting this art in a public realm and, more specifically, within the settler-colonial context of Australia, further imposes particular readings and interpretations. Having this exhibition sit alongside the exhibition of La Trobe University’s Geoff Raby Collection across View Street further complicates this question of cultural ‘authenticity.’ I wouldn’t call *Personal mythologies* a Chinese art exhibition, even if the impetus was to turn inward and consider the definition of Chinese art exhibitions. Instead, it’s an exhibition that brings together the diverse artistic practices of my peers, each of us contending with these complex questions and feelings in our own individual ways: creating new narratives and showing audiences new stories in the process.

Sophia Cai born Dalian, China, 1989, lives in Melbourne (Wurundjeri Woiworung and Boonwurrung Country)

Sophia Cai 蔡農昕 is a curator and arts writer. She currently teaches as a sessional lecturer in Critical and Theoretical Studies at the Victorian College of Arts, the University of Melbourne. Cai is particularly interested in Asian art histories, the intersections between contemporary art and craft, and feminist curatorial methodologies and community-building as forms of political resistance. *Personal mythologies* is her first major exhibition in a regional centre, and continues her interest in unpacking questions of ‘Asian-ness’ by bringing a diasporic, feminist, lived experience to art institutional contexts to complicate ideas of cultural authenticity.

1. The Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art comprises 174 objects collected by the Australian economist and diplomat Dr Geoff Raby AO and donated to La Trobe University in 2019. The collection features work made predominantly by contemporary Chinese artists post-1979.
2. Zhu Qi, ‘Do Westerners really understand Chinese avant-garde art?’, in John Clark (ed.), *Chinese art at the end of the millennium*, New Art Media Limited, Hong Kong, 2000.
3. Louise Zhang, artist statement for *Personal mythologies*, 2022.

4. ‘Two large dragons and one small dragon participated in the Federation celebrations held in Melbourne in May 1901. It appears that one of the large dragons was Loong and the other large dragon may be the one now held at the See Yup temple in South Melbourne. There is slight doubt as to the date the present Loong was made and imported from China as there were a number of dragons in use in Bendigo and Melbourne at the time’, Heritage Council Victoria, *Statement of significance: Loong, Chinese Dragon, Melbourne*, extracted from Victorian Heritage Database.

Short artists' biographies

Tiyan Baker born Darwin (Larrakia Country) 1989, lives in Newcastle, NSW (Awabakal and Worimi Country)

Tiyan Baker is a Malaysian Bidayuh/Anglo-Australian artist who makes video and installation art. She uses documentary techniques and digital processes to reveal bias, frailty and failure in established discourses. Baker's practice also engages with her Bidayuh heritage, piecing together language, landscape and story to celebrate Bidayuh knowledge and explore its radical potential to upend Western ideologies.

Jenna Lee born Canberra (Ngunnawal Country) 1992, lives in Melbourne (Wurundjeri Woiworung and Boonwurrung Country)

Jenna Lee is a Gulumerridjin (Larrakia), Wardaman and KarraJarri Saltwater woman with mixed Japanese, Chinese, Filipina and Anglo-Australian ancestry. Using art to explore and celebrate her many overlapping identities, Lee works across sculpture, installation, moving image and photography. With a practice focused on materiality and ancestral material culture, Lee works with notions of the archive, histories of colonial collecting and settler-colonial books and texts. Lee builds on a foundation of her father's teachings of culture and her mother's teachings of papercraft to create work in which she, her family and the broader mixed First Nations community, may see themselves represented.

Cindy Lien born Keelung, Taiwan, 1994; lives in Keelung

Cindy Lien 連芯妤 is a Taiwanese artist born in the north-eastern port city of Keelung. Using imagery drawn from dreams and memories, Lien creates distinctive scenes that draw on her personal experience and daily life. Across a range of materials, including fabric, thread, wools, glitter, beads and found craft materials, the artist intends to create feelings of warmth and safety. Through the practice of making each work, Lien re-examines what the memory of the past can look like in the present.

NC Qin born Sydney (Gadigal Country) 1992, lives in Sydney

NC Qin (Nancy Yu) explores the histories of ancient battle artefacts, prompting conversations about heritage and values. Appropriating the symbolism of glass and its associated qualities of fragility, risk and preciousness, Qin uses this medium to explore legacies of cultural heritage and question our heritage of traditional values. Qin's works allude to real and mythical heroes and weaponry within Chinese history, reinterpreting Chinese myths, such as the epic *Romance of the three kingdoms*, through a cultural perspective that has been shaped by both Eastern and Western influences.

Renee So born Hong Kong 1974, lives in London

Interested in the decorative arts of the East and West, Renee So works with yarn fibre and clay, creating enigmatic characters in her tapestries and ceramics that suggest myriad diverging lineages. Her multifaceted works evoke not just the 16th-century German stoneware jugs referenced in this exhibition, with their trademark Bellarmine bearded face, but also Greco-Roman sculptures, Assyrian friezes, prehistoric pottery and cartoon graphics.

Jia Sung born Minnesota 1992, lives in Brooklyn, NY

Jia Sung 宋佳瑜 is an artist and educator. Inspired by Chinese historical textiles and traditions of feminised labour, Sung's work combines tapestry, embroidery and beadwork with painting. Drawing on motifs from Chinese mythology and Buddhist iconography, Sung uses the familiar visual language of folklore to examine and subvert conventional archetypes of femininity, queerness, and otherness. Her approach pulls from that of the Chinese *zhiguai* tradition, the genre of 'strange tales', where the supernatural, the monstrous and the spiritual seep into the tidy confines of ordinary existence and the boundaries of our reality.

Louise Zhang born Sydney (Gadigal Country) 1991, lives in Sydney

Louise Zhang 张露茜 is a Chinese Australian multidisciplinary artist. Her paintings, sculptures and scroll-like banners incorporate demons, dismembered body parts and organs drawn from anatomy books overlaid with illustrations of flowers, bones, scholar's rocks (also known as *gongshi*) and auspicious imagery presented in sugary colours. Inspired by horror cinema, Chinese mythology and botany, Zhang deliberately contrasts the attractive with the repulsive to make sense of the fissures and contradictions that define her own sense of identity as a 'third culture kid'. By bringing together these seemingly disparate sources of artistic inspiration, Zhang documents her attempts at both constructing and deconstructing her own personal and cultural identity.

List of works in the exhibition

Dimensions are given as height preceding width (followed, where applicable) by depth

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| <p>Tiyan Baker</p> <p>1. <i>Invocation to be visited by a crocodile I</i>, 2022
fabric, hair, resin, teeth, beads, thread, mixed media
14 x 14 x 86 cm</p> <p>2. <i>Invocation to be visited by a crocodile III</i>, 2022
fabric, reflective ribbon, floats, fishing line, glass beads, thread, mixed media
26 x 33 x 288 cm
Courtesy of the artist</p> <p>Renee So</p> <p>3. <i>Venus of Valdivia II</i>, 2020
glazed ceramic, oak tray frame
66.5 x 58 x 5.5 cm</p> <p>4. <i>Woman III</i>, 2018
stoneware
46 x 22 x 23 cm</p> <p>5. <i>Woman IV</i>, 2018
stoneware
45 x 23 x 20 cm</p> <p>6. <i>Bellarmino XVI</i>, 2016
stoneware
49 x 23 x 19 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery</p> <p>Cindy Lien 連芯妤</p> <p>7. <i>夢 / Dream</i>, 2021
thread, fabric, plastic sequins
19 x 16 cm</p> <p>8. <i>苦艾酒與墜落隕石 / Absinthe and falling stars</i>, 2021
thread, fabric, plastic sequins
43 x 33 cm</p> <p>9. <i>跳舞星星與月亮 / Dancing stars and the moon</i>, 2021
thread, fabric, plastic sequins
92 x 92 cm</p> <p>10. <i>山獸神 / Forest spirit</i>, 2021
thread, fabric, plastic sequins
96 x 82 cm</p> <p>11. <i>星星洞窟 / Night cave</i>, 2021
thread, fabric, plastic sequins
29 x 19 cm
Courtesy of the artist</p> <p>NC Qin</p> <p>12. <i>Intent (Halberd)</i>, 2020
cast glass (Blackwoods lead crystal), marble, brass
24 x 75 x 15.5 cm</p> <p>13. <i>Glass armour</i>, 2020 (development ongoing)
cast glass (Blackwoods lead crystal), marble, brass
49 x 75 x 34 cm</p> <p>14. <i>Head case I</i>, 2018
cast glass (Blackwoods lead crystal – Sapphire), marble, brass
31.5 x 30 x 30 cm</p> | <p>15. <i>Head case II</i>, 2018
cast glass (Blackwoods lead crystal – Grey Blue), marble, brass
35 x 30 x 30 cm</p> <p>16. <i>Head case III</i>, 2018
cast glass (Blackwoods lead crystal – Calypso Gold), marble, brass
33 x 30 x 30 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Art Atrium</p> <p>17. Jia Sung 宋佳瑜
<i>寶娥冤 / Apocalypse hymn</i>, 2021
gouache, synthetic polymer paint, embroidery thread, grommets, and glass beads on linen
41 x 152 cm
Courtesy of the artist</p> <p>Louise Zhang 张露茜</p> <p>18. <i>Scholar mound (lattice) study</i>, 2019
foam clay, polyurethane, wood, flatpack pearls</p> <p>19. <i>Memory and healing (The ginko outlasts)</i>, 2022
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
91 x 122 cm</p> <p>20. <i>Murnong (yam daisy) and Guanyu</i>, 2022
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
61 x 46 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Arterial Gallery</p> <p>Tiyan Baker</p> <p>21. <i>Invocation to be visited by a crocodile II</i>, 2022
fabric, pearl, resin teeth, fishing hooks, coins, beads, thread, fabric, mixed media
23 x 28 x 193 cm</p> <p>22. <i>Invocation to be visited by a crocodile IV–VIII</i>, 2022
pigment prints
5 prints, each 34 x 60 cm
Courtesy of the artist</p> <p>23. Jia Sung 宋佳瑜
<i>宵夜 / Late supper</i>, 2022
plain-weave tapestry, wool, cotton
93 x 185 cm
Courtesy of the artist</p> <p>Jenna Lee</p> <p>24. <i>Painting with papers of many origins</i>, 2021
various pigments (including China red pigment, garramal-wa [Gulumerridjin white ochre], bijeji-ba [Gulumerridjin yellow</p> |
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ochre], smoked oyster, iridescent medium pigment, pearl white pigment, pearlescent white [coarse] and synthetic polymer paint on paper (including inkjet print of altered pages of Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 on Awagami washi, found papers, Chinese rice paper, origami papers, mother of pearl shell backing cards, kaishi [tea ceremony paper], torinoko, lace uzumaki, awagami unryushi, awagami ginwashi, awagami tea paper, pages from the book 'Aboriginal words and place names' by AW Reed [1982]) on wooden panels and Australian south sea pearl oyster *Pinctada maxima*
10 panels, each 25 x 25 cm, pearl: 15 x 15 cm

25. *Labour of love*, 2021
synthetic polymer paint on reclaimed wooden stools with garramal-wa (Gulumerridjin white ochre) and Chinese knotting cord
installation dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery

26. **Jia Sung** 宋佳瑜
Witch pillar, 2022
gouache, synthetic polymer paint, embroidery thread and grommets on linen
60 x 30 cm
Courtesy of the artist

