

The Real and Surreal in Ji Zhou's Photography

by ELIA ZHANG 张琰宇



Twining Florets. CREDIT: Ji Zhou

The language of photography is in between the real and the illusory. A photograph, claiming to have the ability to represent nature, is an interpretation of what there is, made by the photographer. This principle of photography as an art form thus implies a broader conundrum in epistemology that, while we often think we know a certain thing which image we carve out of its environment, we can never know what the thing is in wild nature by itself.

For Ji Zhou, rather than widening the dichotomy between human knowledge and boundless nature, he is most interested in what he calls a “symbiotic” relationship between the two. The camera, being a machine built off of scientific knowledge, is on the one hand a symbol of the human power to observe, categorize, and eventually manipulate nature the moment when it takes wildlife as its subject. The camera is also, I think, at the same time observed by what seems to be its prey: when we look at a flower or a blade of grass and take a photo of it, the plant is also looking into us. The wildlife which has its presence preserved in the artificial image is also looking into the lives of those who shoot it with an internal eye, the eye that is a part of the greater power of nature, and which is always looking at those who attempt to solve its mystery.

In the series “Metempsychosis,” Ji Zhou made photos of various plants scattering over a white lightened background. These interconnecting branches, the petals popping out in random positions, and thin fibers around the green and gray leaves, amount to a pattern that would remind one of Jackson Pollock’s action paintings. Ji Zhou admitted that this series was inspired by Pollock’s practice in the late 20th century, which expressed the sense of chaos in the aftermath of WWII. Taking plants as his subject matter, Ji Zhou’s work highlights the additional layer of chaos, that of time’s disorderliness. Some plants are growing new sprouts, some flowers are in full bloom, and some barks are withering in dark yellow and brown. They gather into one single image to narrate nature’s comprehensive lifespan in multiple dimensions. Temporality becomes no longer linear but circular here in this photo.



Metempsychosis 2022-1. CREDIT: Ji Zhou

A photograph aims at preserving moments in the seemingly unordered life, Susan Sontag wrote, and all photographs testify to time's relentless melt. This photo as itself being a slice of time, taken in an instant, is at the same time preserving the complete cycle of life. One can in some ways be overwhelmed by the disordered array of time, while also be in awe of the sense of vitality that is the motivation behind the plants' blooming and withering. Indeed, the Metempsychosis series has another name—vitality in action. The philosopher Anne

Conway, who is often labeled as a “vitalist,” said that there is no such thing as death: death is not an annihilation, but a change from one species and degree of life to another. Hence Ji Zhou’s photography as a collage of various herbal life in different seasons becomes a chorus of nature’s vitality forever on the move.

The idea of vitality is central to Ji Zhou’s artistic practice. He was first inspired by the form of patterns. The origin of these patterns can be traced back to the architecture of ancient Greece. Constituted by herbal and floral elements, the patterns are often associated with spiritual and religious significance. While the architectures themselves perish through time, these patterns survive and become parts of new and evolving sculptures, artworks, and printed documents, and they are associated with new layers of meanings every time they are carved down. Through the vicissitudes of history, the meaning of the pattern shifts constantly within its

respectful context, yet the pattern itself remains. And the very fact that these images can be seen and still be seen by us today is a testimony of vitality.



Marble pilaster capital
1st half of 1st century A.D.
CREDIT: Metropolitan Museum of Art

Precisely, these patterns retain their life through the multiple layers of interpretations that are kept being added on during the transcriptions and re-transcriptions of them. Today it is still common to see these patterns of herbal and floral elements carved on buildings and

printed in the margin of book pages as decorations. Those testimonies of civilizational progress have subsumed into our cultural unconsciousness, and hence become the ultimate form of an image that guides us on what we perceive to be beautiful.

Ji Zhou's photography is his attempt to move these marginalized elements of our cultural artifacts to the center of interpretation. It is also, as he said, "to make [his] own version of these patterns" with meanings attached under his specific historical circumstance. By engaging with this seemingly oblivious aspect of our cultural symbols, Ji Zhou expects to see further studies on these patterns and their transformations.



Plant Portrait - Tillandsia 03. CREDIT: Ji Zhou



Plant Portrait - Tillandsia 01. CREDIT: Ji Zhou

Ji Zhou expressed no interest in answering the question of which specific cultural heritage these patterns he created were tracing. “It is not about any specific context that comes to be known to us,” he said, “it’s about the transcultural manner that all patterns can be preserved through time.” Symbolic meanings have been attached to certain herbs in Buddhist classics, and spiritual significance is associated with plant motifs in Islamic art. Ji Zhou notes that for contemporary artists like him, the sense of a strong cultural heritage becomes blurry as we enter the era of receiving lots of information from all over the world every day. Rather than regarding oneself as the heir of one single cultural tradition, artists today are constantly thinking about the new, global sense of identity and an interconnecting and all-encompassing cultural landscape that, rather than classifying—which inevitably results in isolating—bridges ideas and creativities across geography.



Twining Florets. CREDIT: Ji Zhou

The work “Twining Florets” is one of Ji Zhou’s newest creations brought to New York this summer. In this work, the floral patterns he used to photograph are enveloped within an acrylic box whose front side is under a yellow fluorescent cover. “This is a work inspired by the pandemic,” he said, “the way I look at these plants has changed fundamentally in the last two years.” The pandemic has revealed to him the obliviousness of truth: everything is constantly filtered, and our life is as fragile as those flowers living in a glass box. A box is a veil, a mask. It gives us a protective disguise while actually holding us captive within the illusion it creates. He chose fluorescent yellow as the color of the filter to express the sense that, in our illusions, things are often portrayed to be better than how they really are. “Life is so fragile” he realized, just like these particularly delicate and thin fibers and branches that are circulating each other in a manner as if it is ripping through an invisible water surface.

After the pandemic, all of our experiences seem no longer reliable, and this filter may also be interpreted, I think, in the way that history has to be cast under a different eye, and we have to reexamine, unlearn as well as relearn, to keep our life going.

On the light box, the yellow filter is only attached to the front side of the acrylic. Transparency is left on the four peripheral sides, through which a viewer can still see the floral patterns in their original color. This design demonstrates that often truth can only be seen from indirect sources and side details that are not telling but suggesting. Though Ji Zhou was inspired by the instance of the pandemic, the oblivion of truth is not something that is in particular to the case of the pandemic—our lives have always been encircled within the realm of assumptions, the customs that we are used to, the limitations of our knowledge, among many other factors. The pandemic is only an opportunity to reveal many internal contradictions that have long been

concealed in our life. In this light box, it shows that it is especially when you want to confront something, you have to see it through a filter, while traces of the real might be left on the sides. This ambivalence of what the true image is, goes back to the philosophy behind the genre of photography, that in its equivocal expression of what is real and what is illusory, it becomes an art form that tells something fundamentally true about life.

*** Ji Zhou's solo exhibition *Symbiosis* is on view at Eli Klein Gallery in New York until August 27th, 2022.**