

SENJIE ZHU

2022 MFA PHOTOGRAPHY
THESIS EXHIBITION



DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES

MAY 6-20, 2022

2022 MFA PHOTOGRAPHY THESIS EXHIBITION

The *2022 MFA Photography Thesis Exhibition* features the thesis works of the MFA candidates in Columbia College Chicago's Photography Department. This exhibition presents photographs, installation, and video works that are representative of the culmination of research and practice these emerging artists have maintained throughout their time in the program.

Participating photographers:

Jes Farnum

Sylvie Harris

Katharine Norton

Emilie Plunkett

Ziru Tang

Fengzhao Xu

Senjie Zhu

The *2022 Photography MFA Thesis Exhibition* is presented in conjunction with the Department of Exhibitions, Performance and Student Spaces (DEPS), and the Photography Department.

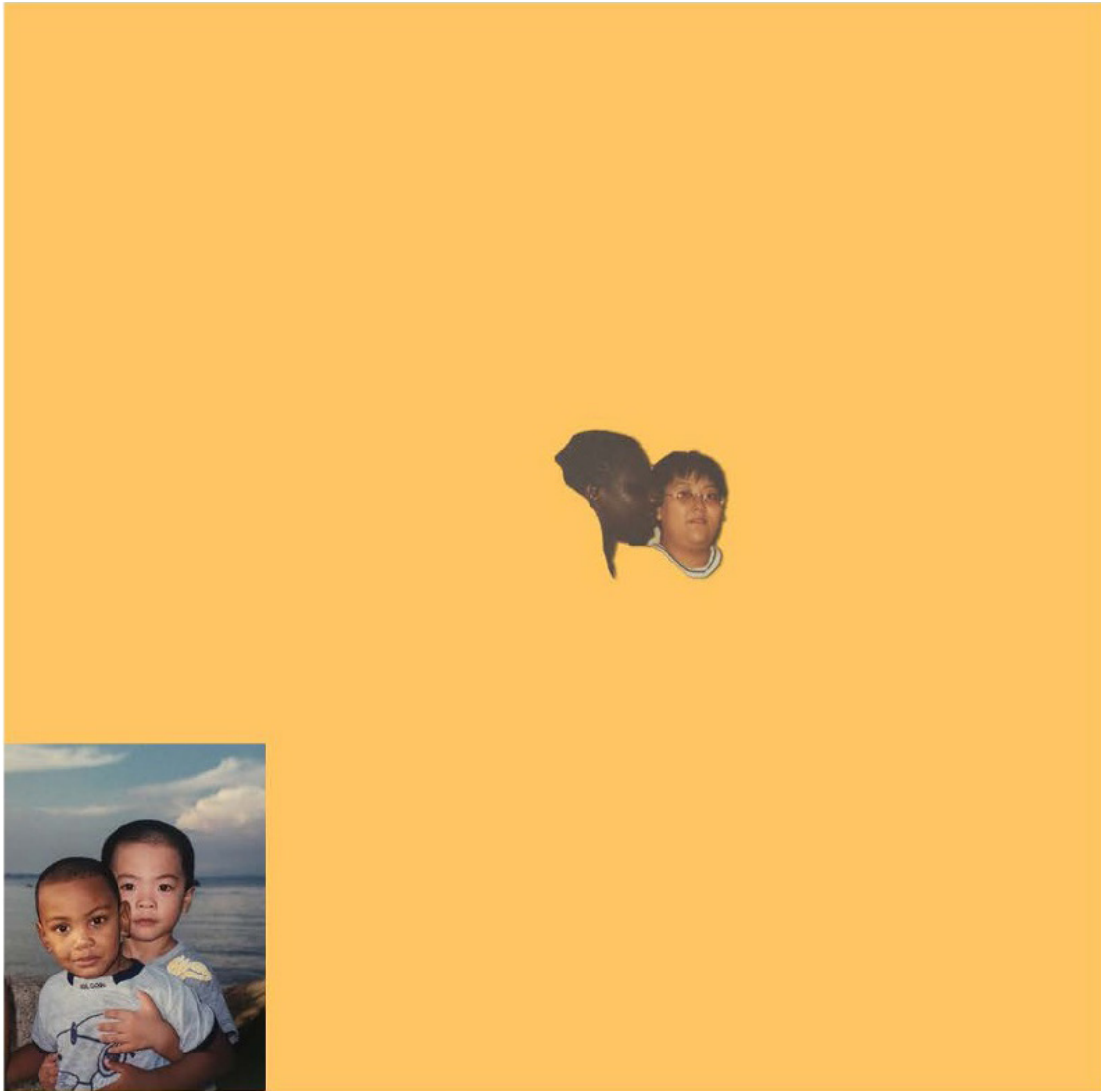
SENJIE ZHU

My cognition of family was hazy. I was left with my widowed grandmother (father's mother). My mother used to visit me once every few months, and my father was almost absent. When he did come home, all I could recall was him asking for money from my grandma like a child, so we had no chance to talk.

When I was 10, by chance, I found an old photo album of my family, I was immediately transfixed when I saw those old photographs of my parents. Browsing those photos and wandering the stories behind them had become my own therapy to be closer to my parents. Later on influenced by French artist Sophie Calle, I started to combine images and text from my own family archive. Since then I found a trusted relationship with photography—from simply enjoying looking at photographs to navigate the story behind them.

I started to collect my grandmother's archives after her funeral which held in Africa at the end of 2017. The fragile atmosphere of the family had forced me and my grandmother to find solace in each other. I remember once when we were on the way home, a drizzling afternoon, grandma said to me, "A man wanted to date me, but I don't want to see him, I know my grandson is my lover." According to the project *Tracing Yu Xiaomei*, which reconnected my grandma's path with family photo archives, and analyzed cross-cultural phenomena in the Chinese context around the 1990s and after, during the process of China's reforming and opening up. My work continues exploring a photographer's relationship with family members from the series *Guillaume*. I am fascinated by family stories that are not able to avoid the complexities of personal emotions, times, generations, cultures, genders, races, and educational levels that overlap each other layer by layer.

Zhu Senjie is a photo-based artist currently living in Shanghai and Chicago, born in 1996. His practice is driven by family history, social memory, and global issues. He received a BFA from East China Normal University in 2018. Senjie dissects his memories through archival images to try to understand who he is and his connection to the world. His works plays with the shift of personal memories and social identities. Recently, his series *Guillaume* was nominated for the Banshan Photography Award. Senjie Zhu was born and raised in Shanghai, a city colonized by more than 5 different countries during WWII. It was one of the first cities in China that was opened up to the Western world since the Cultural Revolution. Zhu's aunt married an African in 1992 and gave birth to two mixed-race kids in Shanghai, which was very rare at that time in China. They remember people staring at them when they played together. The cultural fusion phenomenon of my hometown is what motivates Zhu to make photographs focused on the different role-played family identities. At age ten by chance Zhu found an old photo album of his family, and was immediately transfixed.



Untitled, 2022



Some Dreams Are Big, Some Are Small, 2020



They don't Know About You, Except Me, 2021



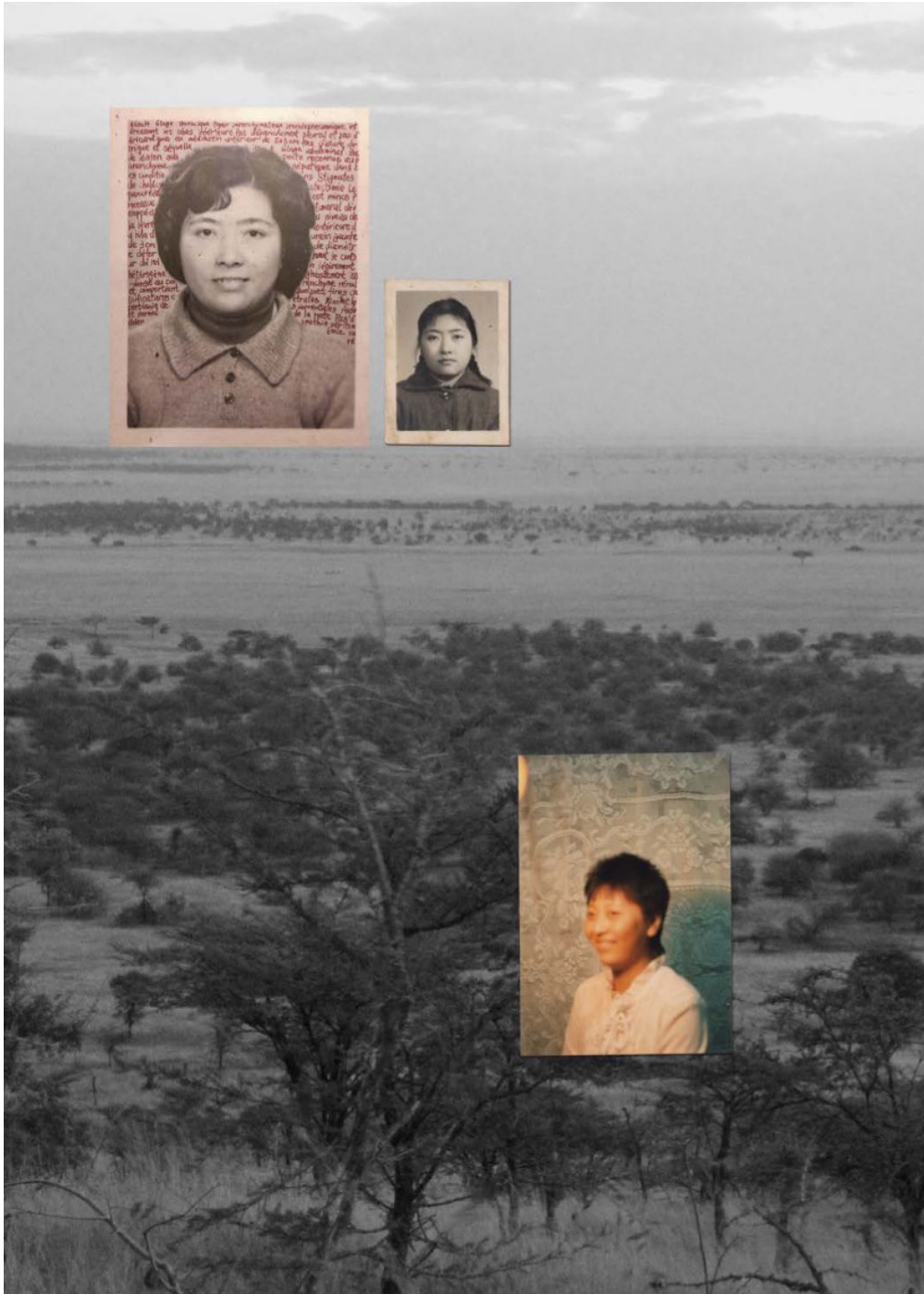
Shaving, 2022



Parallel Brother, 2021



Empty Passport, 2021



Untitled, 2022



As We Were Before, 2021

INTERVIEW WITH SENJIE ZHU

Conducted by Kaylee Fowler

Kaylee Fowler: You begin your body of work with the statement, “China’s Ministry of Justice publicly solicited opinions on permanent residence in China for foreigners.” Could you explain this more?

Senjie Zhu: It was around the end of February in 2020 that I accidentally saw that the Chinese Ministry of Justice had publicly released the regulations on permanent residence for foreigners and asked for public comments. The public was debating this topic. Chinese nationalist sentiment had become very intense, it was some sort of combination of the government relationship between U.S and China, the Hong Kong issue, or even Chinese government’s support for African countries in past few years. It’s an extremely complex context. I remember seeing some comments about how blacks were destroying the local living environment and market rules in Guangzhou, and even taking over the social benefits of the Chinese. I immediately thought of Guillaume, we hadn’t seen him in over 15 years. In my mind, I always thought of him as my family, my cousin, and never associated as black. It was also when I read these comments that I realized that race could potentially put us on opposite sides of the fence. I wasn’t sure about that feeling, but honestly, there was some uncertainty in my mind.

KF: You say this project made you think of your lost cousin Guillaume. How did this experience inspire your body of work?

SZ: Because of the epidemic, and those comments about black people, it made me concerned about Guillaume. I knew that his parents had died and I think it was also out of family responsibility, so I tried to contact him. I remembered he replied to me very briefly, like someone he had just met. Later, by sending some family archive images, we slowly started

to find shared memories. These photos were pieces of memories that formed a bridge to reconnect us. Simultaneously, I realized that our memories of the same photograph could be completely different, which sometimes made me feel lost. Until I saw him again at the end of 2020, Guillaume was no longer the same as the kid I remembered, making me feel like I had lost Guillaume who was still that child. The moment I saw him, which began to be symbolic for me: childhood formally became a memory. This experience made me think about what the function of family photographs really is. If the family album is a vehicle for fragments of memories, what does it carry and what does it convey? I have also retaken photographs for us, continuing to think about the relationship between new family photography and archival photographs, and how they deconstruct family identities. In the process, I was fascinated to explore the overlap between Larry Sultan’s *Picture from home* and Jeff Wall’s photography. I was interested in how the elements of reality, performance, and composition in family photographs would constitute another form of photography. How exactly can photography deconstruct family relationships?

INTERVIEW WITH SENJIE ZHU continued...

Conducted by Kaylee Fowler

KF: Your photography work is very personal to your life and your family history; what do you hope viewers will take away from your work, and how do you approach this level of intimacy in a project?

SZ: I believe that every personalized artwork has a part that is in conversation with a complex public context, in addition to the private part. Traditionally, society has assumed that intimacy proceeds from the nuclear family formed by heterosexual parents and their children. Intimacy involves practices of close association, familiarity and privileged knowledge, and strong positive emotional attachments. However, the idea of family has changed greatly over the course of the past few centuries as societies and cultures have adapted to modern social norms. Within sociological research, the boundaries of intimacy extend from the individual and family unit to the broader social unit, Richard Renaldi further extends these boundaries in his project *Touching Strangers*, which takes a sociological approach to the idea of family intimacy by posing strangers as if they were related. My own photographic project on the family explores the boundaries of family intimacy, which are magnified, reinforced, and defined by how we photograph each other's families. I question whether photographs of intact, happy families are always true. This project explores the idea that family can be chosen based on how we photograph people in relation to each other, even if these people are not a real family unit. Due to the increased individualism in the modern era, people make more self-conscious choices about intimate relationships. Intimate relationships in contemporary society are bound up in a complex environment of personal feelings, economics, culture, race, educational level, and many other factors. Modern subjects are more capable of making

choices and decisions in their core family roles, free from traditional conventions. The boundaries of intimate relationships are quite flexible in contemporary families. Sasha Roseneil suggests that the boundaries between "familial" and "non-familial" relationships are becoming increasingly blurred as the combinations of what people designate as "family" becomes more diverse. I hope my photography has touched on these complex issues and contexts.



THE DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES

The DEPS Artist Profile Series presented by Columbia College Chicago's Department of Exhibitions, Performance and Student Spaces (DEPS), is a virtual publication on select artists involved with the DEPS Galleries and the Columbia College Chicago community. Our goal with this series is to connect artist and viewer on a deeper level, and to highlight the amazing works and thoughts of our featured artists through interviews, artist biographies, and catalogs of work. Art has always been a way to connect with others, no matter where one may physically be. We hope by presenting the creativity and insights of the people involved in the DEPS Artist Profile Series that viewers may have one more way to stay in touch with, and support the arts community. The DEPS Artist Profile Series is managed by Fine Arts major and DEPS Exhibitions Assistants Kaylee Fowler and Sierra Delamarter. Graphic design is managed by DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Gray Beyer. This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.

Learn more at: colum.edu/deps

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