

Faculty Spotlight: Jasmine Zhang's Lotus Pond Dream



Jasmine Zhang, *Shine 4 U*, performed on October 11th, 2024 | Photograph courtesy of Climate Control SF

**By
Yunfei Hua**

"There are always many layers to be found in [Jasmine] Zhang's work; one could say her actions are just a pebble dropping in the pond, creating a ripple effect. She observes how viewers react to her work, to see how they project themselves onto the performance. 'Everyone sees their self-projection,' Zhang says, 'but I want to see who they really are through the projection.'"



Artist and CCA Faculty member, Jasmine Zhang (Adjunct I, First Year Core Studios Program) held her solo show, *I dream about finding a lotus pond*, at Climate Control, located in the Mission district of San Francisco. The show itself took the form of a month-long open studio; in the gallery, Zhang worked and talked with visitors, and held a series of performances throughout. *Shine for U* was the show's penultimate performance, an interactive and collaborative piece lasting from sunset on October 10th to sunrise on October 11th.

Zhang declared that the show and her performances were, together, aimed to exchange thoughts and “good energy” on Buddhism. However, what stood out to me most were the underlying themes of kindness and curiosity. During this tiring night shift, it felt like Zhang was returning to her inner-child; one who plays whimsical jokes on people, waiting to see their reactions.



View of the ribbon cutting ceremony marking the show's opening on September 7th, 2024
Photograph courtesy of Climate Control SF

Seated behind the large glass doors of the gallery, she turned a warm, welcoming light on for every passerby. As people walked by, some waved and smiled back at her, looking for a description or sign for the gallery space. Someone even hurried past without looking up at first, only to pass by again in the same direction several minutes later. It was amazing to realize that a stranger had circled an entire block, just to see this scene again, out of curiosity. There are always many layers to be found in Zhang's work; one could say her actions are just a pebble dropping in the pond, creating a ripple effect. She

observes how viewers react to her work, to see how they project themselves onto the performance. “Everyone sees their self-projection,” Zhang says, “but I want to see who they really are *through* the projection.”

The final performance—which took place on October 13th—was full of layers, too. It bore the same title of the show, *I dream of finding a lotus pond*, and was performed by Zhang alongside her friends and artistic collaborators. The performance started with a healing journey led by Daniel Castro, a shaman working under Core Shamanism, and was accompanied by drum beats and a cocoa drink. Viewers sat on the floor, rowing an imaginary paddle with their eyes closed. I sailed off confidently, as the shaman promised it would be a safe journey, and he would guide us through. Hearing the drum, I envisioned myself in a canoe on the edge of a waterfall. I didn't stop or fall—instead, I sailed on an invisible waterway and arrived at a peaceful pond in the forest. I wondered if perhaps this was the lotus pond Zhang had been dreaming about.

Returning to the back room of the gallery, the first performer, Harley Healy, carefully placed her limbs into a large, adult-sized tank filled with water, being careful not to hurt two fish that swam inside. As Healy slowly stuffed herself in, water dripped from her fingers holding tightly to the edge, and the fish shuttled through the remaining space. Healy scooped water with diving goggles, trying to catch the fish gently, but they escaped every time. The fish didn't appear disturbed, swimming peacefully, and floating through the water. Zhang had sat aside, watching



I dream of a lotus pond, performed on October 13th, 2024
Photograph courtesy of Climate Control SF



Additional view of *I dream of a lotus pond* performance
Photograph courtesy of Climate Control SF

the process, when she suddenly started to read *Dear Navigator*, an epistolary novel by Hu Fang, about an astronaut who writes to a “navigator” during his 500 days of isolated training. As Zhang read the protagonist’s musings on gravity and the blurred senses, Healy held her breath underwater, fully immersing herself in the tank.

The combination of Zhang’s voice and Healy’s body movements seemed to distract the audience from each other, yet felt responsive to our energy. At one point, Healy seemed to give up on catching the fish. She supported her whole body with one arm, becoming a sad, regretful pillar, floating in the tank, giving herself to the water and fish. Every time she got out of the water, its gravity came back to her, almost crushing her. Her action of catching fish turned into a desperate attempt to return to water, but rejected by her own lungs. “Dear Navigator, what I want to say is, if I didn’t have your guidance and protection, I’d probably be eternally, apathetically repeating the same injury against the innocent.” Zhang’s voice was clear and resounding, re-counting the protagonist’s trust in a reliable guide without image, just like the shaman at the beginning. The loose connections between layers of action fascinated me.

Zhang read half of the novel, then started to sing a random melody. On the wall that wasn’t lit by the dim light of the projector, another performer, Yiliu Teng (MFA Fine Arts / MA Visual and Critical Studies 2024) had been placing tape, drawing quietly on it since the moment Zhang had started reading. At a certain point, Zhang changed the projected content using the front camera of an iPad to

capture Healy’s image. She started to cover the camera with pieces of tape that Teng handed to her, layer after a layer. The timing was mysterious and confusing; Healy hadn’t succeeded in catching fish, nor had Zhang finished reading the novel. The image on the wall became dimmer and paler as the layers increased, their figures becoming increasingly unrecognizable, until pure blankness. Healy’s goggles were left in the tank, and fish kissed them as they had kissed the performer’s body before. Teng left the room without being noticed by anyone, right as Zhang and Healy began to “fence” with walkie-talkies.



Additional view of *I dream of a lotus pond* performance
Photograph courtesy of Climate Control SF

When they got too close to each other, a shrill, resounding noise would force them apart, mimicking an invisible magnetic force. At this point, Zhang was still singing, and Healy had started making fart-like noises using the pit of her elbow. A constant noise of something scratching was coming from both from the walkie-talkies and the hallway, as well as a crescendo of traffic noise coming in from the street. The noise got stronger and added layers to itself. As an audience member, it felt like we had now become like the fish, trapped in a large tank, tortured by noise. Finally, Zhang and Healy left the room, followed by viewers.

During the performance, audiences could move freely and even relocate themselves to another room. Yet, a large proportion of the audience, including myself, stuck near Zhang, considering her as the core of the performance. In truth, she was not, instead just one of many layers. When the rest of the audience finally

stepped out of the backroom, following Zhang and Healy, the hall of the gallery was already buzzing and chaotic. Musician Silas Morrow was improvising with various metal ready-mades, scratching copper bells on a stainless steel grater while sampling from a Buddhist prayer player. Another musician, Connor Tomaka, was controlling the audio system of the entire room, but somehow found an opportunity to cut his jeans into pieces. He connected a microphone to his scissors, capturing the soft noise of cutting fabric.

By the wall of another side of the room, Teng was climbing on a ladder, seemingly finding it hard to decide whether to put either Buddha's head or a plastic piggy bank on the shelf above her. She chose to put the Buddha's head there, returned to the floor to appreciate it from a distance, then shook her head, and stepped on the ladder again to replace it. During this moment of meditation and replacement, she shook the piggy bank to the rhythm of the music.

The audience became more relaxed, walking around to place themselves. Some of them went to the entrance to put their shoes on, so that they could see more from a distance, as Zhang had required audience members to remove their shoes before entering. A man appeared from the back room, wearing Healy's goggles, and walking towards the entrance for his shoes. He seemed to be a rogue audience member, but when he turned back with two long threads of shoes tied to each other by shoe laces, holding a saxophone in his hands with a pomegranate in the horn, people realized he was another performer, Edan Mor. He came and went several times, changing shoes from the threads every time. Finally, he fell down in the middle of the room while wearing a pair of roller skates.

Throughout the performance, there were many symbols from Zhang's Buddhist background, but most of them were both subtle and secular. For example, when Zhang stopped singing and lit a fire on a gas cartridge stove, she used the kind typically found in the cheapest and most unrefined settings in China, often seen in a shabby little restaurant on a greasy plastic tablecloth. But when the stove began heating sunflower oil on the white floor of the gallery, frying Chinese prickly ash seeds, the oil fumes rose in a beam of near divine sunlight around Jasmine Zhang's focusing face, just like a *lama* meditating among incense.

At the end of the performance Zhang used a digital thermometer to test each audience's temperature, then the oil's. Everyone laughed. As performers gradually finished their work and assembled around Jasmine Zhang, the audience started to applaud and congratulate her. I stepped out to ask the gallerist, "where is the shaman?" I had wanted to thank him for protecting our journey. The gallerist responded, "he has two kids. He had to leave early, back to reality."

Yunfei Hua (MA Visual & Critical Studies 2025) is a writer and researcher currently based in San Francisco, who is interested in subcultural communities and their cultural productions. She is currently working on her thesis about fan culture around a highly political-related video game. Before stepping into the writing realm, she was a sculptor and socially engaged artist.

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