

# ArtReview Asia



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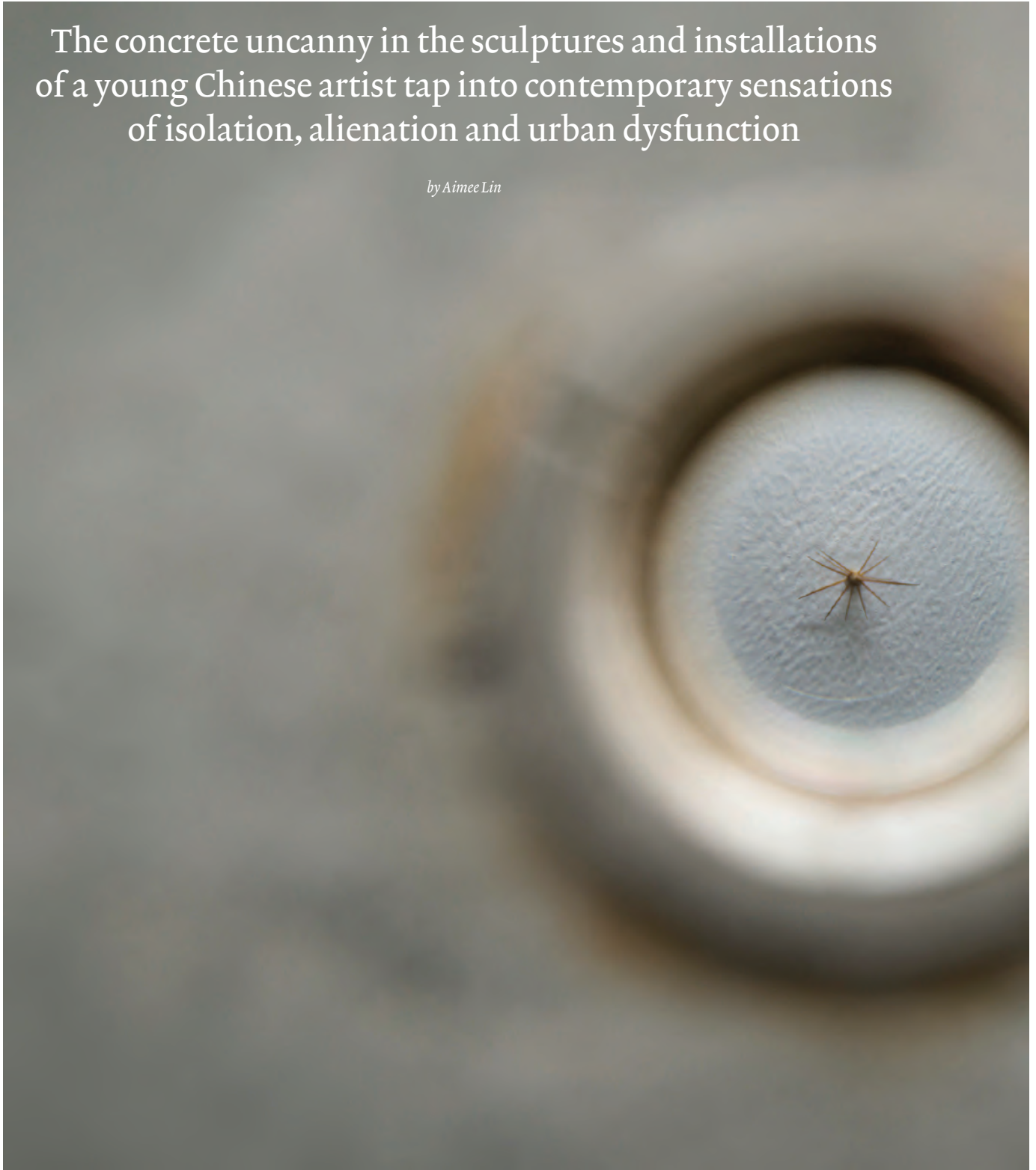
**Essential  
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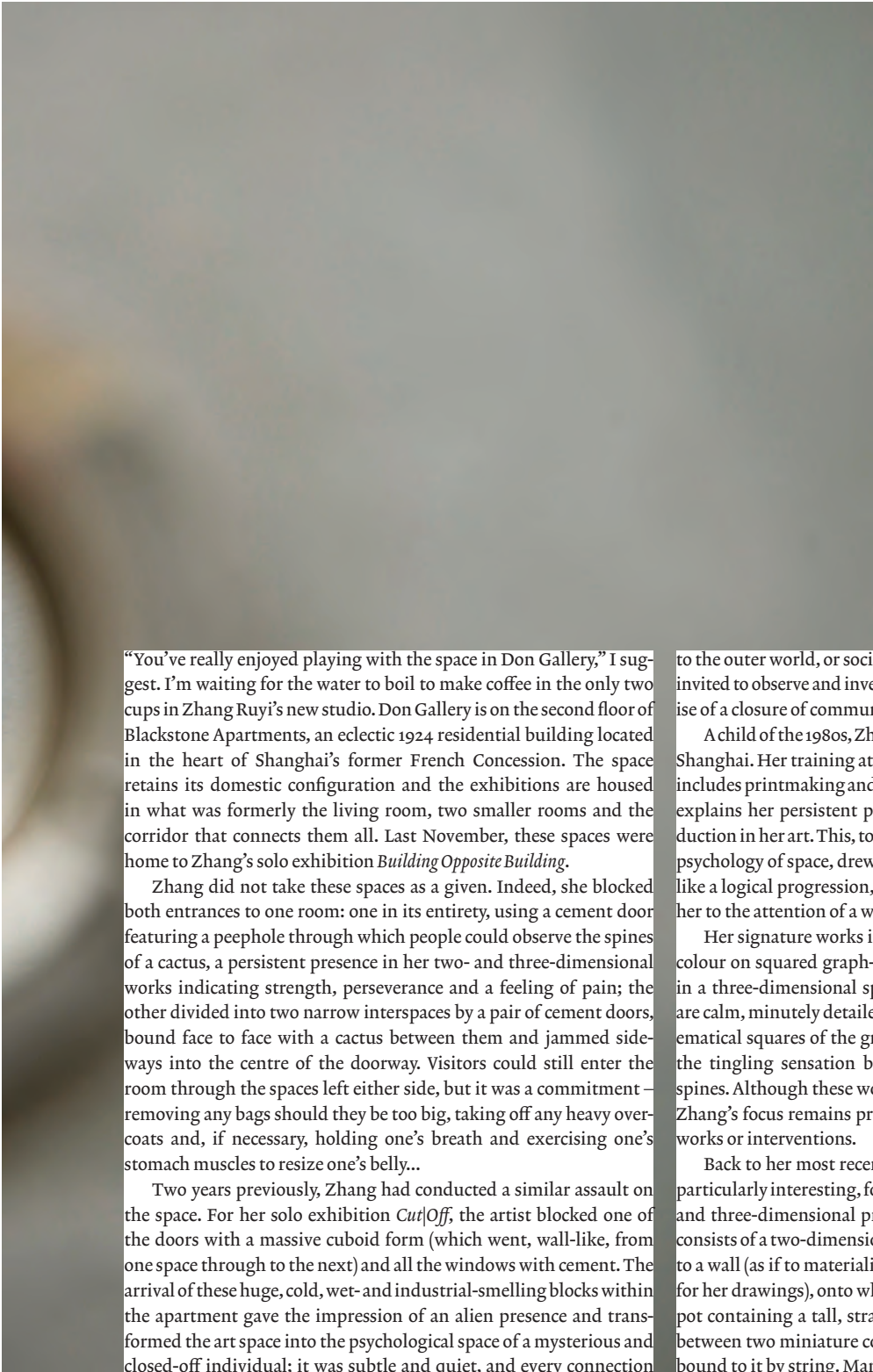
**Ho Tzu Nyen**

## Zhang Ruyi

The concrete uncanny in the sculptures and installations of a young Chinese artist tap into contemporary sensations of isolation, alienation and urban dysfunction

*by Aimee Lin*





“You’ve really enjoyed playing with the space in Don Gallery,” I suggest. I’m waiting for the water to boil to make coffee in the only two cups in Zhang Ruyi’s new studio. Don Gallery is on the second floor of Blackstone Apartments, an eclectic 1924 residential building located in the heart of Shanghai’s former French Concession. The space retains its domestic configuration and the exhibitions are housed in what was formerly the living room, two smaller rooms and the corridor that connects them all. Last November, these spaces were home to Zhang’s solo exhibition *Building Opposite Building*.

Zhang did not take these spaces as a given. Indeed, she blocked both entrances to one room: one in its entirety, using a cement door featuring a peephole through which people could observe the spines of a cactus, a persistent presence in her two- and three-dimensional works indicating strength, perseverance and a feeling of pain; the other divided into two narrow interspaces by a pair of cement doors, bound face to face with a cactus between them and jammed sideways into the centre of the doorway. Visitors could still enter the room through the spaces left either side, but it was a commitment – removing any bags should they be too big, taking off any heavy overcoats and, if necessary, holding one’s breath and exercising one’s stomach muscles to resize one’s belly...

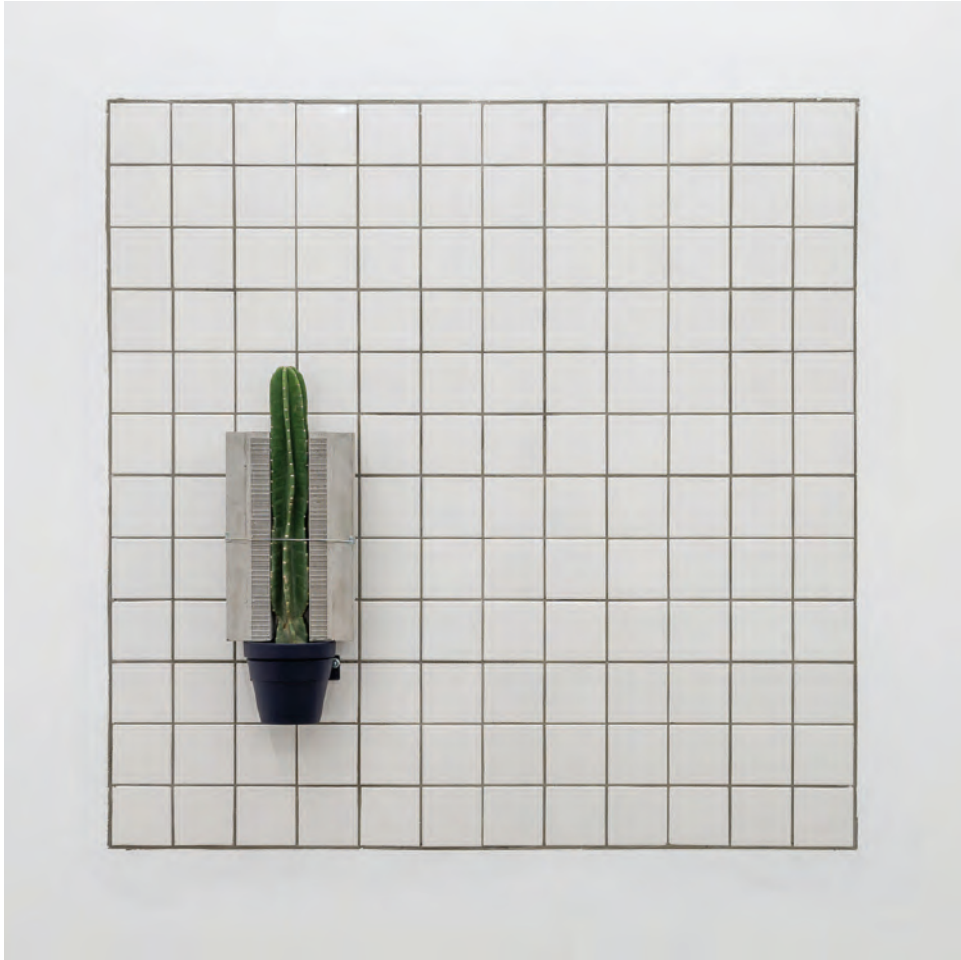
Two years previously, Zhang had conducted a similar assault on the space. For her solo exhibition *Cut|Off*, the artist blocked one of the doors with a massive cuboid form (which went, wall-like, from one space through to the next) and all the windows with cement. The arrival of these huge, cold, wet- and industrial-smelling blocks within the apartment gave the impression of an alien presence and transformed the art space into the psychological space of a mysterious and closed-off individual; it was subtle and quiet, and every connection

to the outer world, or society at large, appeared severed. Visitors were invited to observe and investigate the reality of this world on the premise of a closure of communications.

A child of the 1980s, Zhang Ruyi was born and bred, and is based, in Shanghai. Her training at the Fine Art School of Shanghai University includes printmaking and plastic art using synthetic materials, which explains her persistent passion for organised, process-based reproduction in her art. This, together with her interest in representing the psychology of space, drew her to sculpture. Yet for all that this seems like a logical progression, it was Zhang’s drawings that first brought her to the attention of a wider art audience.

Her signature works in this genre are drawn in pencil and watercolour on squared graph-paper and often take a cactus (represented in a three-dimensional space) as their subject. The works on paper are calm, minutely detailed and vivid; between the small, cold, mathematical squares of the grid and the pencil lines you can almost feel the tingling sensation brought about by contact with the cactus spines. Although these works are warmly received by the art market, Zhang’s focus remains primarily on three-dimensional, space-based works or interventions.

Back to her most recent exhibition: there was one work that was particularly interesting, for the way in which it linked the artist’s two- and three-dimensional practice. Titled *Potted Plants* (2016), the work consists of a two-dimensional plane constructed of ceramic tiles fixed to a wall (as if to materialise the squared paper that serves as the base for her drawings), onto which, on the lefthand side, is bolted a plastic pot containing a tall, straight cactus. The plant is then sandwiched between two miniature concrete models of a residential towerblock, bound to it by string. Many works in this show, for example *Slow Still*



*above* *Potted Plants*, 2016, plant, soil, flower pot, iron, ceramic tiles and concrete, 20×15×57 cm  
*preceding pages* *Peep* (detail), 2016, concrete, iron, peephole, light and electric wire, 210×80×5 cm



*Spacing*, 2016, plant, iron and concrete, 211×76×5 cm



*Cleaning*, 2016, concrete, fishtank, fish (common pleco) and ceramic tiles, 70 × 36 × 39 cm

and *Pillar* (both 2016), use the same pattern to place or bind two or multiple miniature cement models of a building or of an architectural or interior detail together, face to face. In this way Zhang builds up a conversation between the equal component parts of each work, but any real possibility for communication is questioned – because in each example, the front side (or the outward face) of all the components is covered.

Another standout work from the show is *Cleaning* (2016). Here, Zhang puts the cement miniature building parts in a fishtank (lit by a fluorescent tube and the natural light within the space), together with some common pleco, a tropical fish that likes to eat the algae that grows on the sculpture. Thus, the work has produced, on the one hand, a self-contained ecosystem and, on the other, a stage for a long-lasting, nonstop performance. The sculpture, if the term can be used to refer to this work as a whole, is not only the stage for the performance but also a performer within it.

In understanding Zhang's art, the two Chinese characters that make up the word *zhuāng xiū* can be seen as a key. It means to install, construct, decorate and/or repair. Zhang belongs to what is called the post-80s generation (generally born during the first half of the 1980s), who have witnessed China's rapid economic development since their childhood, and for whom the experience and imaginary of construction, relocation, demolition, renovation and decoration have become a daily experience of their lives and formed an important part of their visual and mental memories. It is these collective memories and social meanings, particularly of interior construction using materials such as electronic plugs and sockets, ceramic tiles and prefabricated doors, that have become an important vocabulary in Zhang's art. Cement, sometimes used by Zhang as a construction material (particularly in *Cut(Off)*), is also a material for sculpture, reproducing ordinary buildings in miniature, or lifesize parts of buildings and everyday objects:

doors, sockets, a bath soap (introducing the existence of the human body and adding a sense of intimacy). In the woods surrounding the Cass Sculpture Foundation, in West Sussex, England, Zhang's *Pause* (2016) introduces the artist's reflection on the circumstances of modern life and its environment by installing cement plug-sockets in the trees and on the ground at Goodwood's New Barn Hill.

Zhang Ruyi is one of those artists who refuses simply to quote feminist discourse in their work. However, the repeated presence of certain items in her works, such as the cactus and its prickly spines, the closed (instead of open) or dysfunctional doors, the blocked entries or windows, the sometimes half-used Safeguard bath soap, is revealing, metaphorically, of the artist's individual feelings or sensations in the context of society: pain, strength, repression, frustration at a lack of communication, expensiveness, a sense of hyperconsumerism. These feelings of course are part of human nature as a whole, but the sensitive and enduring character of her works suggests that the way that Zhang perceives and expresses them is distinctly feminine.

And while these types of features could already be found in Zhang's early works, in her recent practice, the expression of a unique individual has turned towards a description of a universal status. When I try to understand Zhang's persistent interest in human feelings and their expression in physical space, I find, via the list of artists from which she takes inspiration – among them Doris Salcedo, Rachel Whiteread, Rebecca Horn and Ann Hamilton – a context that consists of female artists who have been exploring the similar fields through material and space-based works. When compared to these older artists, Zhang's methodology includes reproduction, repetition and an interest in the fabrication process, in which human participation is naturally hidden or diffuse. For that reason, a sense of the uncanny caused by the compression of the individual and the built world is finally revealed. ara



*Pause* (detail), 2016, concrete, dimensions variable

all images Courtesy the artist and Don Gallery, Shanghai