



Zhang Ruyi: Speaking Softly

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2022.12.23 – 2023.4.9

Location:

New Gallery, West Gallery

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UCCA presents “Zhang Ruyi: Speaking Softly,” the artist’s largest institutional solo exhibition to date. The show brings together more than 20 new artworks commissioned by the museum, comprehensively presenting several creative threads from the past decade of the artist’s practice, as well introducing her recent explorations of transparent materials

Beijing, CHINA — From December 23, 2022 to April 9, 2023, UCCA presents “Zhang Ruyi: Speaking Softly.” As Zhang Ruyi’s (b. 1985, Shanghai) largest institutional solo exhibition to date, the show features more than 20 new works commissioned by the museum. These pieces offer a systematic overview of how the artist has adopted cacti, concrete, grids, and other elements as symbols through which to explore the relationships between people and society, people and architecture, and the natural and industrial worlds. “Speaking Softly” also offers the first focused presentation of Zhang’s use of glass, plastic films, and other standardized, transparent materials, reflecting on transparency’s myriad connotations. “Zhang Ruyi: Speaking Softly” is curated by UCCA Curator Neil Zhang.

Over the past decade, Zhang Ruyi has used her precise grasp of sculptural materials and keen perception of everyday life to create art evoking alienated, post-modern urban landscapes, across which a personal lexicon of symbols repeatedly appears. In these scenes, everyday objects are stripped of their functionality, distorted in shape, or combined with industrial materials. These juxtapositions attract attention through their unusual visual appeal, while also inviting viewers to contemplate the metaphors, conflicts, and linkages contained within. The exhibition title “Speaking Softly” describes an ongoing current in the artist’s practice: from cement sculptures to the rubble of demolished buildings, thorns to silk, falling water drops to trickling dust, each resonates in a state of near silence, whispering of the city. Like the thorns and cactus spines that dot her works, everything waits in unassuming silence, yet possesses a piercing sharpness that cannot be ignored.

Cacti form one of the central motifs in Zhang Ruyi’s practice. The artist grew interested in these plants after serendipitously finding a cactus left by a previous tenant in a dilapidated apartment she rented shortly after graduating from university. Inspired by the plant’s tenacity, she uses its imagery as a way to build spaces and as a symbol for the relationship between individuals and their social reality, mining the rich



contrasts between cacti's spiky exteriors and soft interiors. Often, she makes sculptural casts of cacti using concrete, the most industrial of materials. Shifted from an organic, biological body to an inorganic, industrial substance, the cacti become metaphors for estrangement from nature. Works such as the "Matte Substance" series (2019), *Swaying Posture* (2022), and *Ghost of Metamorphic Creature* (2022) bring to mind various contradictions and questions within modernity: how humanity has altered both organisms and artificial objects; who has the right to speak of power and control; and the conflict between urban and personal space. In other works where cacti are combined with industrial detritus, their status as an organic material is further challenged, transforming them into a kind of sculptural hybrid, a "Modern Fossil" which can be seen in the series of the same name (2021-2022) and other pieces including *Submerged Landscape - 2* (2022). These works demonstrate how the artist has constantly experimented with the shapes, dimensions, materials, and settings through which she depicts cacti, as well as how her reflections on these plants have extended beyond the milieu of daily life into a broader social context. The cactus becomes a means to touch upon the opposition between individual freedom and spatial discipline, the power dynamics hidden in processes of material transformation, and the sometimes indistinct boundary between the artificial and the natural.

The exhibition's two-dimensional works, including the "Decoration" (2022) and the "Folding the Distant" series (2022), further illustrate Zhang Ruyi's speculation on space and materiality. The most striking feature of these works is their use of grids built out of repeated lines, inspired by the artist's experience learning printmaking as an undergraduate. In earlier works, Zhang drew cacti on graph paper, the strictness of the grids only emphasizing the irregularity of the plants' geometry. She would eventually free the cacti from these matrixes and transform them into the aforementioned sculptures; the grids have also moved into the real world, taking the form of tightly arranged tiles. Zhang's repeated use of grids as a foundational element across many of her works is not only the rational study of a purely geometric form, but also a kind of understated footnote, buried in the background—as they regulate and restrain compositions, the grids remind viewers of the countless hidden rules that maintain order in everyday life.

"Speaking Softly" also features two new large-scale sculptural installations, *The Desert Is Not Sad, Nor Is It Deserted* (2022) and *Water Stain* (2022), which highlight the artist's recent use of mass-produced transparent materials. In *The Desert Is Not Sad, Nor Is It Deserted*, the artist evokes the recognizable form of a plastic greenhouse—a gridded metal skeleton and an exterior of transparent plastic film.



Able to transform unstable external conditions into a controllable system, greenhouses illustrate how humanity often challenges and then simulates nature. However, the placement of this greenhouse alongside pristine white tiles in the exhibition hall complicates matters, removing its original function and turning it into unadulterated spectacle. In *Water Stain*, Zhang Ruyi constructs an enclosed space, once again using transparent plastic film. A steam generator is inside, causing water to constantly condense and slide off the plastic film. The tiles that are also inside the space appear blurry and indistinct in the mist. The plastic film becomes an ambiguous boundary, implying conflict and connection between the outside world and the space's interior. In these pieces, the transparent physical structures may be seen through, but not penetrated—on the one hand, the plastic film represents transparency, openness, and freedom; yet on the other hand, it forms an obstruction, a means of control. Transparent materials may seem invisible, inclusive, and open, but they always maintain a kind of restraint and absolutist isolation. In Zhang's hands, they become another metaphor for describing the complexity of contemporary social relations.

Support and Sponsorship

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About the Artist

Zhang Ruyi's (b. 1985, Shanghai, lives and works in Shanghai) work has been shown at major exhibitions and institutions including "Manifesto of Fragility," the 16th Lyon Biennale (2022); He Art Museum (Shunde, Guangdong province, 2022); Tai Kwun (Hong Kong, 2022); Power Station of Art (Shanghai, 2021); TANK Shanghai (2021); UCCA Dune (Beidaihe, 2020); K11 Art Foundation (Hong Kong, 2019); Rockbund Art Museum (Shanghai, 2018); and more. Her solo exhibitions include "Modern Fossil" (SSSSTART, Shanghai, 2022); "Consciousness of Location" (Don Gallery, Shanghai, 2019); "Bonsai" (François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles, 2019); and "Building Opposite Building" (Don Gallery, Shanghai, 2016); among others.

Public Programs

During the exhibition period of "Zhang Ruyi: Speaking Softly," UCCA's Public Practice



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department will present a conversation on the artist's creative themes as well as a guided walk through a botanical garden, deepening audiences' understanding of Zhang's artworks through both speculative analysis and firsthand experience.

About UCCA

UCCA Center for Contemporary Art is China's leading contemporary art institution. Committed to bringing the best in art to a wider audience, UCCA shares a wide range of exhibitions, public programs, and research initiatives to a public of more than one million visitors each year across three locations. UCCA Beijing sits at the heart of the 798 Art District, occupying 10,000 square meters of factory chambers built in 1957 and regenerated in 2019 by OMA. UCCA Dune, designed by Open Architecture, lies beneath the sand in the seaside enclave of Aranya in Beidaihe. UCCA Edge, designed by New York-based architecture firm SO – IL, opened in Shanghai in May 2021. Formally accredited as a museum by the Beijing Cultural Bureau in 2018, UCCA also operates non-profit foundations, licensed by the Beijing Bureau of Civil Affairs and the Hong Kong government. UCCA's commercial ventures include the retail platform UCCA Store, the children's education initiative UCCA Kids, and collaborations and projects under the rubric UCCA Lab. Opened in 2007 and revived by a committed group of Chinese and international patrons in 2017, UCCA works to bring China into global dialogue through contemporary art.

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