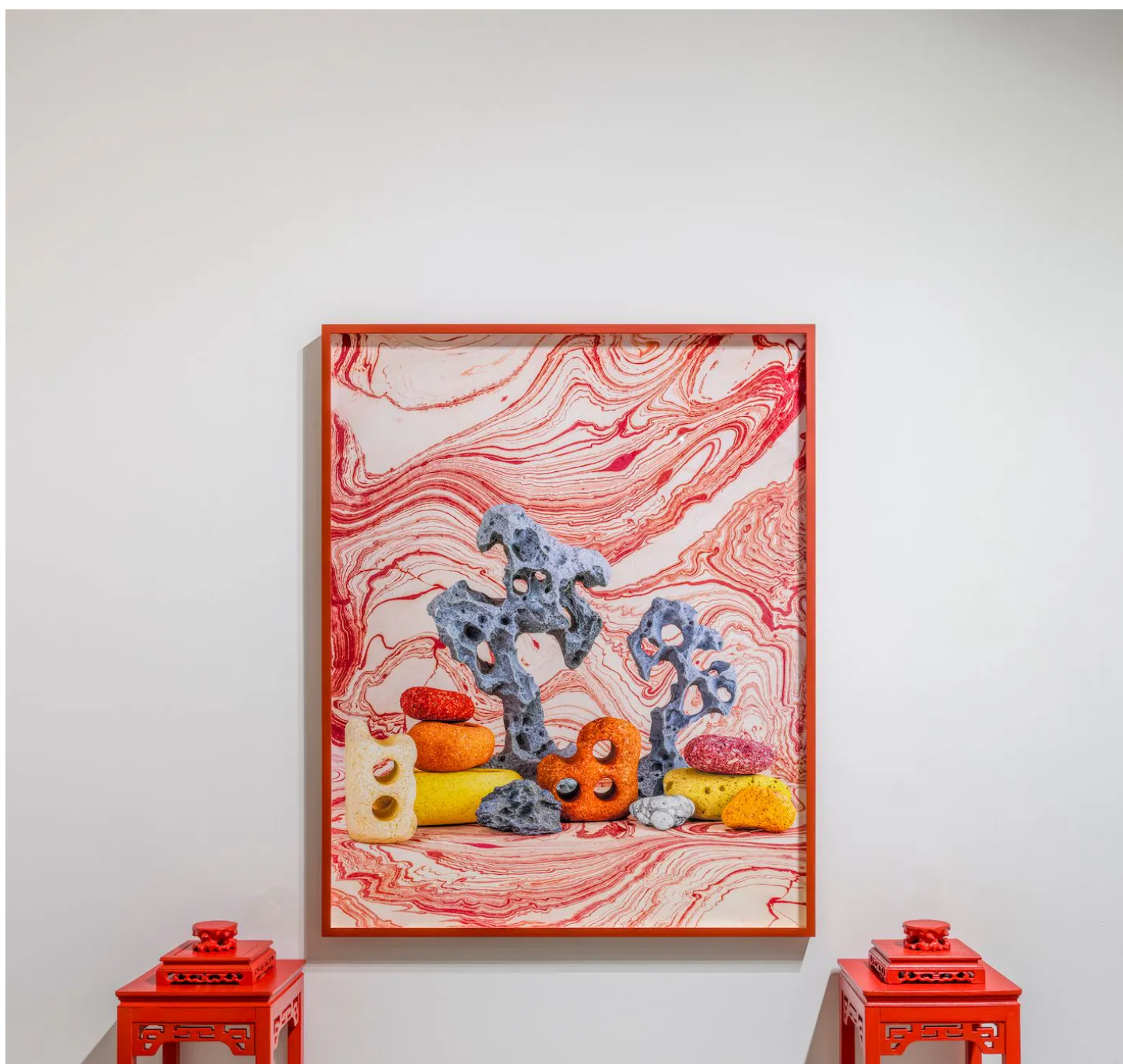


“Elemental” — Shellie Zhang by Sherry Chunqing Liu

REVIEW 6 Nov 2023

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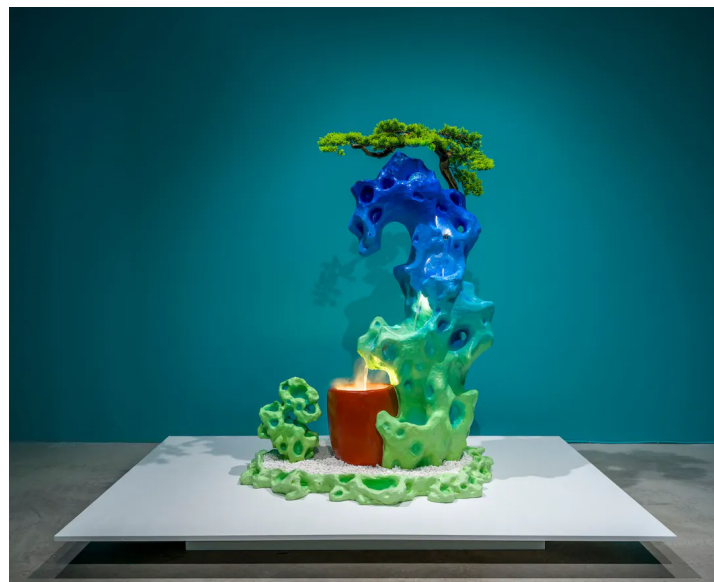




Shellie Zhang, *Earth Elemental*, 2023, PHOTO: DARREN RIGO

Red marble patterns stretch energetically behind a collection of bricks and Chinese scholar's rocks. Aqua ripple patterns complement the hot-pink coral and light-orange conch with pearls scattered in the foreground. These vibrant visuals from Shellie Zhang's photography and installation series *Elemental* (2023) generate unique encounters with household items that are meticulously recontextualized in dreamlike, nature-inspired settings, inviting us to reflect on the personal, cultural, and aesthetic meanings within the mundane objects in our living environments.

Thematically inspired by Chinese Wuxing, the depiction of natural elements alongside mass-produced merchandise evokes questions around the "authenticity" of these objects. Are the fruits edible? Are the rock-bricks found or made? And is the pink coral actually made of wax or plastic? The dynamic ambiguity characterizes a kind of visual language of diaspora's desire to be connected to ancestral culture in domestic spaces. Similar to our desire for natural elements at home during the COVID-19 lockdowns, practices such as feng shui and displays of culturally meaningful objects reveal a diasporic yearning for distant homelands.



Shellie Zhang, *Gazing at a Waterfall*, 2023, PHOTO: DARREN RIGO

Toward the back of the gallery hangs “*Can we live here forever?*” “我们可以一直活在这里吗?” (2023), a bamboo curtain painted with a mountainscape in saturated hues. The curtain is placed to the right of a room with turquoise walls, where *Gazing at a Waterfall* (2023) is installed as a set of mountainous water fountains. The tranquil sound of the waterfall fades into the background, while a smell of incense graces the entire space. These sensory experiences highlight Zhang’s emphasis on the embodied nature of the exhibition. In a recent talk at Patel Brown gallery, Zhang described how *Can we live here forever* was inspired by her visit to Mount Lu (庐山) in China, where Zhang felt most connected to her motherland. Both installations emanate a melancholic nostalgia for a touching yet distant land, recalled through Zhang’s delicate exploration of cultural motifs and artistic techniques in traditional Chinese paintings and interior objects. Overall, “Elemental” presents Zhang’s poignant observations around the vitality and cultural significance of simulacrum of homelands in domestic spaces, threaded through vivid visual narratives of her personal diasporic experience.

"Elemental" ran from 14 September to 4 November 2023 at Patel Brown, Toronto.

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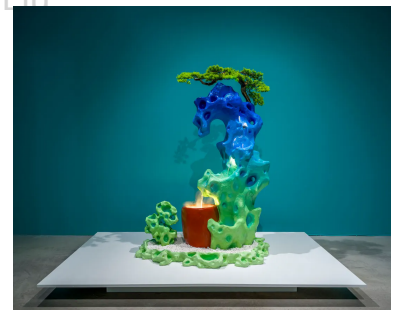
About contributors

SHERRY CHUNQING LIU 刘纯青 (b. Xiamen, China) is a curator, writer, designer, and artist based in Toronto and Vancouver, Canada. She holds an HBA in Architecture and a MVS in Curatorial Studies from the University of Toronto. Her work and curatorial projects have been exhibited at the Art Museum at University of Toronto, Jackman Humanities Institute, and the University of Toronto Exam Centre among others. She is the recipient of the 2022 Reesa Greenberg Curatorial Studies Award and a 2021–2023 University of Toronto Fellowship, as well as a participant in the 2022 Art Museum Curatorial Residency. Her practice is broadly inspired by community engagement and diasporic experience with consideration to site-specificity and social issues. Her work has been published and featured in *C Magazine*, *U of T News*, *The Varsity*, *Daniels Faculty*, *Demo Magazine*, *The Strand*, and more. sherryliu.ca

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