

*Zearo: in dust time*

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Where do our eyes alight when we first encounter an image? We absorb art much like we engage with the world at large: in fragments, by piecing together information from myriad points of vision and assembling what we find to form composite mental narratives. The longer we spend contemplating an image, the more visual details we are able to collect, and so the fullness of an artwork reveals itself to us over time.

For the past two millennia, the dominant aesthetic medium of the Chinese diaspora has been the handscroll—an extended painting or calligraphic piece that enables the portrayal of an uninterrupted narrative. The act of observing a handscroll serves as a literal embodiment of the fragmented way in which we engage with our surroundings. It entails traversing both the temporal and spatial dimensions embedded within the narrative, as well as the tangible time and distance required to experience it in full. Only upon deliberate unfurling by an engaged and typically solitary viewer does the handscroll disclose itself, rendering the experience an unequivocally intentional one.

With the unfurling of a scroll comes the revelation of the narrative it encapsulates—yet it is seldom intended to be viewed as a single image, and only a single portion is visible at any given moment. For this reason, a set of scroll-weights is usually readily available to restrain the curling ends of the work, should a compelling segment elicit prolonged contemplation in the viewer. This deliberate structural design encourages the audience to actively participate in the unfolding spectacle, steering the viewer beyond the superficial to experience a transcendent level of meaning.

It is from this aesthetic tradition that Zearo's recent body of work—presented in his inaugural solo exhibition *in dust time*—evolves. In contrast to the deliberate unfurling required in order to engage with a handscroll, however, Zearo's intricate visual narratives are expanded onto walls and offered to us in their entirety. Grounded in a deeply autobiographical perspective shaped by his South-East Asian heritage and subsequent move to London, Zearo creates profoundly contemplative works that explore the nuanced dimensions of same-sex relationships and psychological spaces. Despite the expansive scale of many of his recent works, a palpable sense of intimacy pervades his practice.

By employing a distinctly queer lens, Zearo's practice challenges conventional norms associated with the male gaze, often by depicting male figures in various cognitive states. In works like *Lessons Through Dusk and Dawn* and *Noon Thoughts*, recurring male characters serve as poignant reflections, revealing complex psychological aspects of self-confrontation while tenderly capturing the lingering presence of past partners or friends who have left an indelible mark on the artist's life. Some are portrayed immersed in laughter, others in serene repose, many are simply caught in the act of existing. Through the subtle inclusion of objects and motifs imbued with symbolic meaning, the artist endeavours to illuminate a richer understanding of same-sex narratives.

In the upper left corner of *Noon Thoughts*, for example, the Chinese ligature 囍, traditionally associated with wedding ceremonies, is inscribed onto a wall, prompting reflection on marriage equality in the diaspora. In other works, interlocked gloves convey sexual undertones whilst emphasising the many ways in which fetishised objects embody the tenderness, affection, and care that exists between partners. This care is mirrored in Zearo's deliberate choice of material. Here, chalk pastels allude to the pixel, with each stroke transcending its individuality to collectively build a visual narrative that surpasses the mere sum of its parts. The fragility inherent in these materials, along with the meticulous care required to employ them, serve as a metaphor for the transient nature of the human experience.

If the “male gaze” as defined in Laura Mulvey’s seminal 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* objectifies women for the heterosexual male, and the “female gaze” seeks to subvert this objectification by repositioning women as active viewers rather than passive subjects, then both perspectives arguably remain rooted in the dynamics of social power inherent in the act of observation—the perceiver and the perceived. Whether entirely intentional or not, Zearo’s work departs from this notion by disrupting the power dynamics of the ‘gaze’ itself; it steers clear of Mulvey’s focus on looking and categorisation to make space for new, plural modes of interconnected existence—queer modes of existence—to envision a world free from binary notions of love and desire.

In the exhibition’s largest work, *Breeze of the August’s Feast*, Zearo depicts an imagined room reminiscent of the clandestine realms we traverse in our dreams, where multiple seemingly unrelated narratives unfold concurrently. Yet the artist goes beyond portraying logistical architectural structures, aiming instead to capture the inner emotional and psychological landscapes associated with a particular space. The delineated edges of the work, reminiscent of architectural blueprints, emphasise the painting’s surface as interior, capturing the convergence between external form and internal essence within the realm of lived experience. The room pulsates with life: a humorous figure clad in a banana costume stretches its arms out blindly; a cluster of featureless, ghostly entities diverge in various directions; a child delights in blowing bubbles into the air; a lone male figure sits cross-legged in deep contemplation. What unites these characters is not a shared awareness of one another, but the common thread of existence. Each figure, disparate in their pursuits, is collectively bound by the profound and universal act of being.

A flowing river traverses the room, subtly guiding our gaze, perhaps alluding to the inexorable and gradual march of time. At first glance, my vision is overwhelmed, frenetic even; I want to digest the work in a single visual gulp, comprehend it in its entirety, bounce off of its surface. But the nature of Zearo’s works, akin to the nature of handscrolls, prohibit immediate consumption. Instead, as our eyes dart from one information-rich area to the next and our vantage point begins to shift, we are invited to contemplate the significance behind intentionally void spaces, and to linger over details we initially overlooked. The observer transcends the role of mere spectator, becoming an active component in the compositional process by dictating the pace and progress of the work’s narrative. This deliberate visual pacing heightens the emotional impact of each work, inviting us to consider the act of looking as a contemplative experience in itself.

— Lisa Modiano, January 2024