

Vestiges of Transnational Belonging: Marking the Millennial Diasporic Identity in Ketty Zhang's Works

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At fourteen years old, artist Ketty Zhang left the small city of Chaoyang, China, boarding a plane destined for Vancouver, British Columbia—with only a few days' notice. "I had no idea," Zhang remarks, recalling her parents' secretive decision to send her to a Canadian school. Chaoyang City—not to be confused with the district of the same name—is a small, rural city compared to Vancouver, and the transition "was a huge culture shock," says Zhang. Her first years at UBC were somewhat nebulous, and Zhang admits in retrospect that she did not expect to major in visual arts. It was not until her solo trip to Japan in the summer of 2014 that she recognized her "calling in the visual arts," she says. Since then, her artistic practice has come to focus on social issues such as cultural hybridity, millennial identity, and media culture.

Ketty Zhang's creative process places materials and medium at the forefront, which serve as "a starting point for ideas." For example, her work *The Alphabet* (2017) utilizes eighty-three CD envelopes that she acquired through a Vancouver website called *Bunz*, where transactions take the form of trading second-hand items. Zhang uses a range of everyday objects in her projects, including newspaper, makeup, lubricant, glass cups, and pages from children's books. "I like the physicality of objects," says Zhang, "especially everyday objects that are familiar but which

may provoke and unsettle."

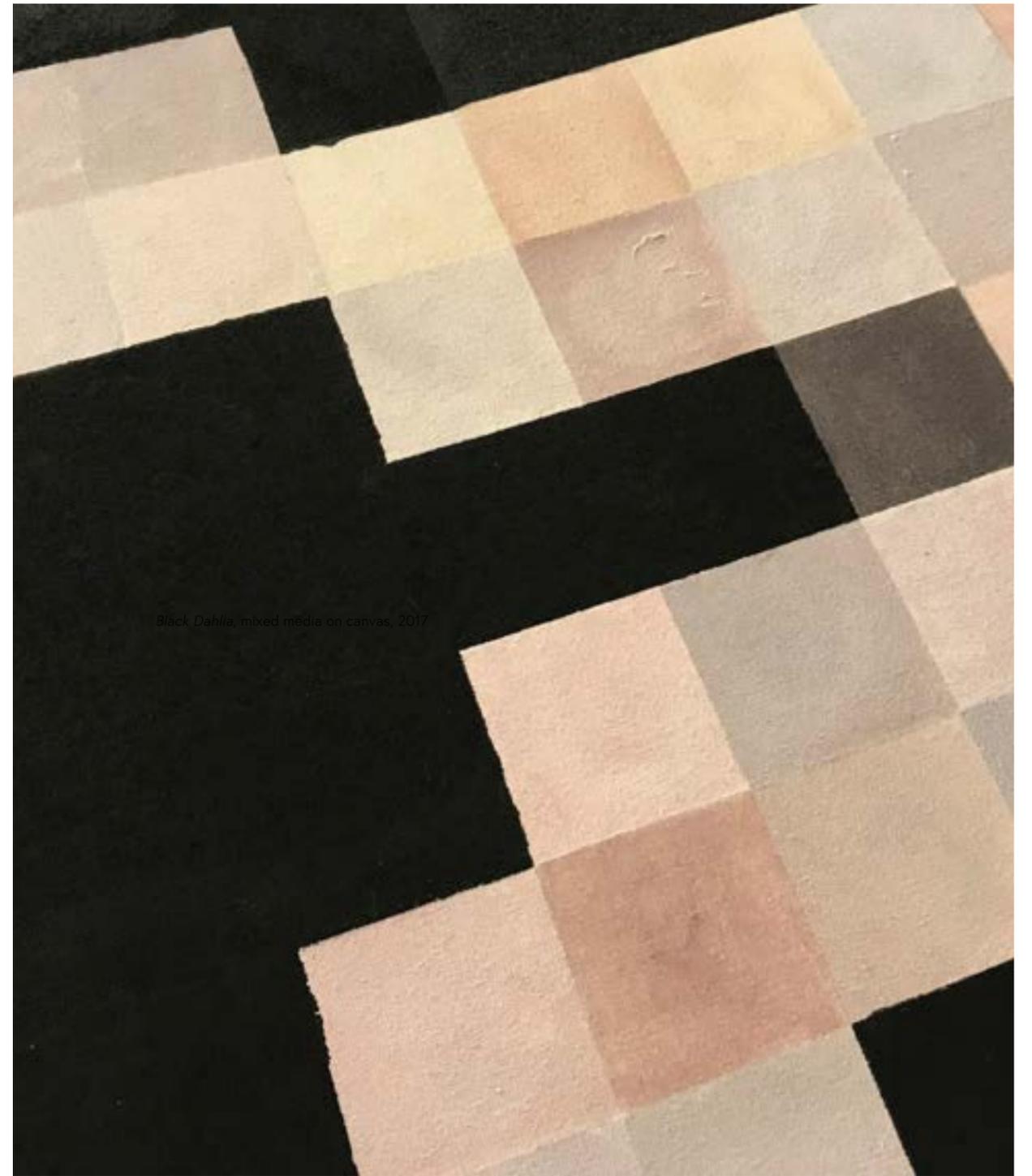
Indeed, it is precisely this uncanny, unsettling sensation that one feels when observing her art. Ketty Zhang's *Black Dahlia* (2017) is one of those works. The five-foot-tall diptych is painted almost entirely black, save for the pixelated outline of a human body spanning across the two parallel canvases. The heavily concealed figure against a black background recalls an experience so familiar in this day and age. It is the formation of pixels composing the vague outline of a Facebook profile photo when clicked on, slowly coming into focus as the image loads. The painting is a representation of the mutilated body of Elizabeth Short, nicknamed and commonly referred to by the media as the "Black Dahlia." Zhang says that *Black Dahlia* "is intentionally opaque and blurred" in an act of concealment. She uses makeup and lubricant to paint a mosaic which obscures the viewer's voyeuristic gaze, but the figure's concealment also invites fascination and curiosity.

A common thread linking Zhang's works is the relationship between (social) media and privacy—particularly the privacy of victims of physical and psychological violence. *The Alphabet* is composed of eighty-three CD envelopes with the names of the victims of the recent Harvey Weinstein scandal. The alphabetical



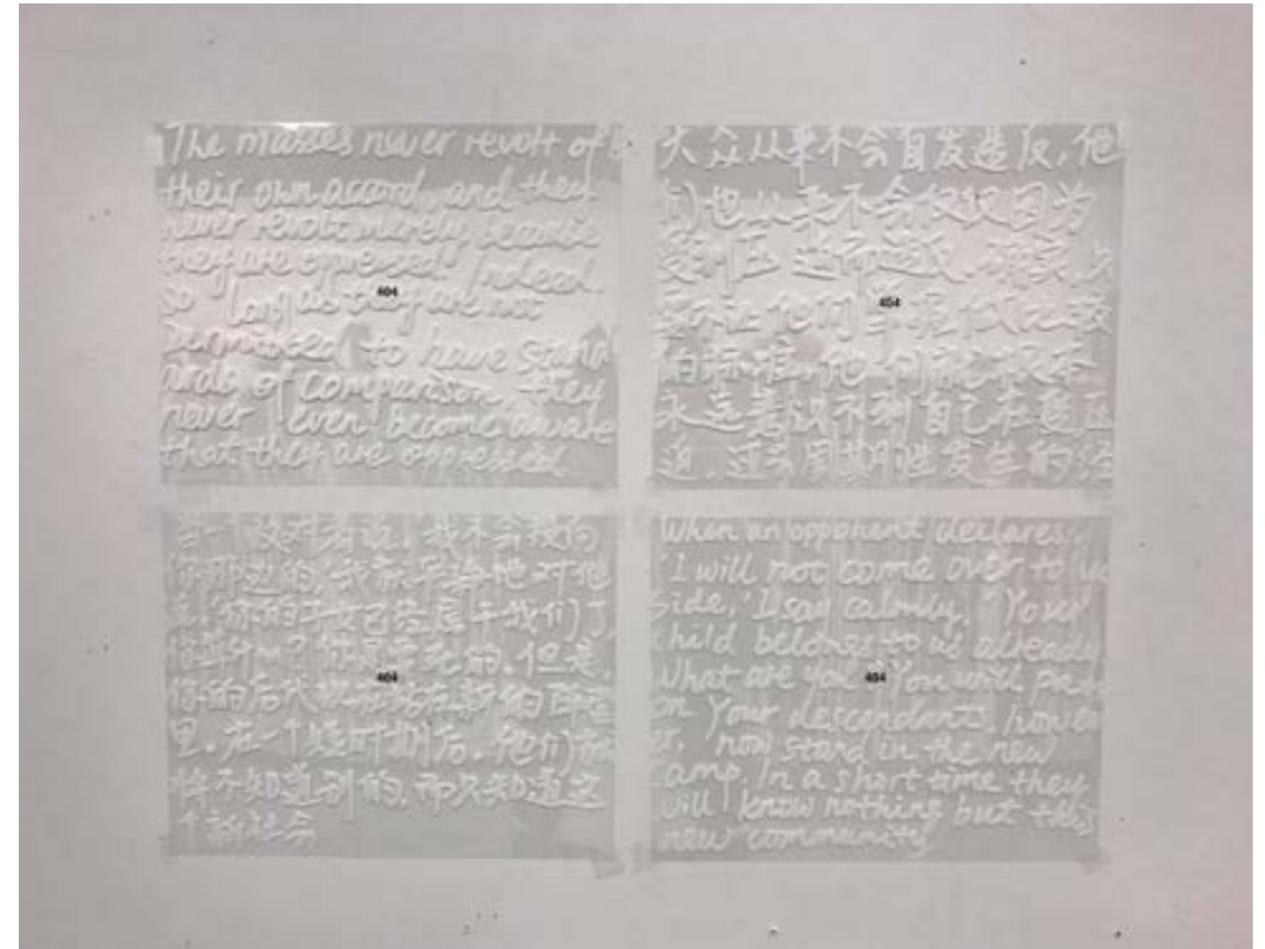
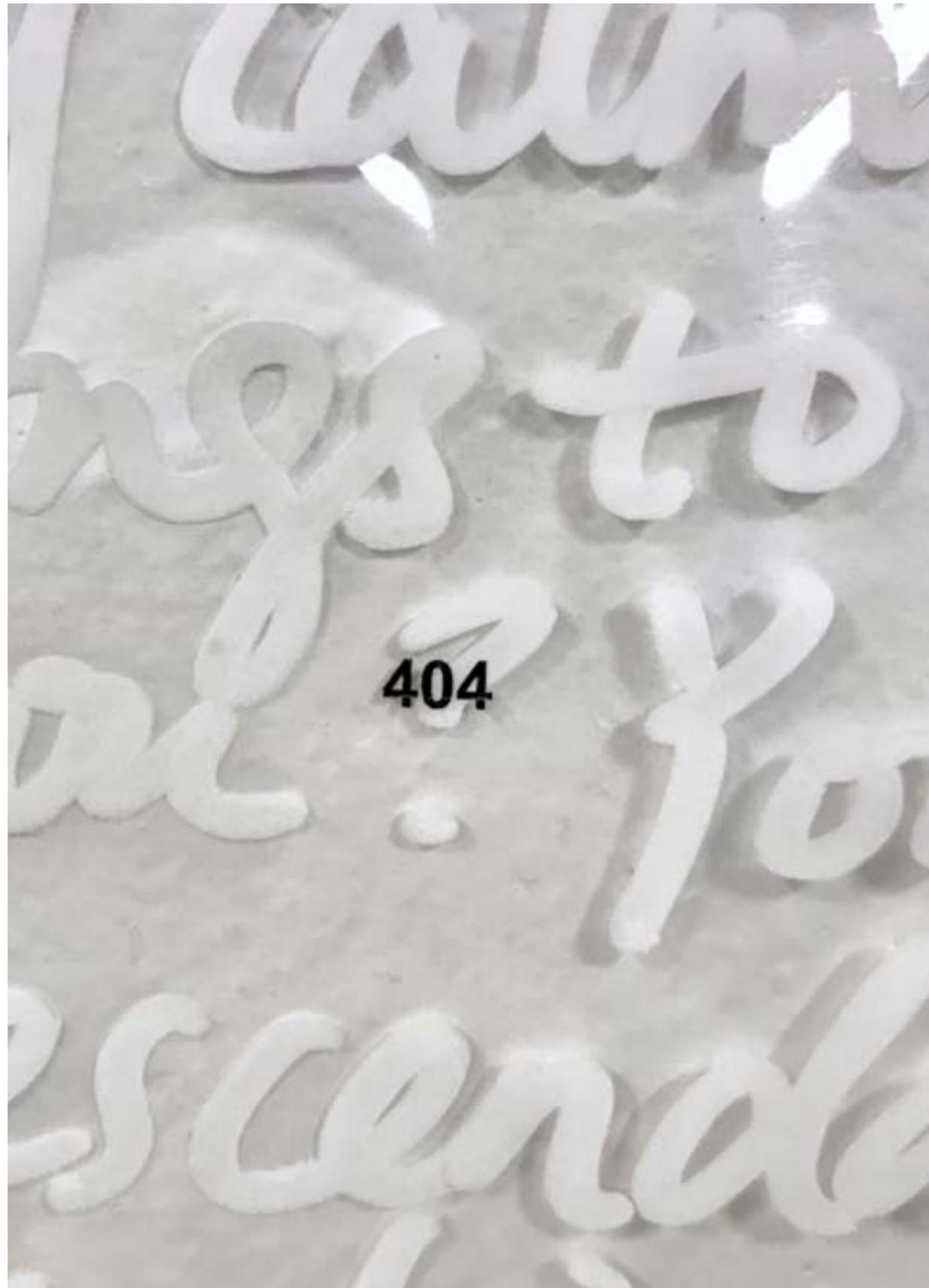


Black Dahlia, mixed media on canvas, 2017. Image provided by Zhang.



Black Dahlia, mixed media on canvas, 2017

Black Dahlia detail, mixed media on canvas, 2017. Image provided by Zhang.



404, ink on acetate, 2017. Image provided by Zhang.

Left: 404 detail, ink on acetate, 2017. Image provided by Zhang.





Heal the Divide, glass, newspaper clippings, 2017. Images provided by Zhang.

arrangement of victims' names imparts a sense of intimacy associated with addressing someone by their first name. "Some celebrity names are famous and identifiable, and some are unheard of. They could be names of people you know personally," she comments. Zhang's *The Alphabet* undermines the notion that sexual abuse and harassment occurs merely in the sphere of celebrity culture. The CD envelopes are sealed, and "when they are sealed, you can't access the contents of the envelope without breaking the seal and leaving a mark," says Zhang. Does the element of concealment and privacy in her works "stir up attention and curiosity, or does it protect the victim?" she asks. "Does it do both?"

Our conversation takes an ironic twist when we discuss her piece *404* (2017). *404* consists of four clear sheets of acetate which bear the numbers "404" printed in the centre of each one. Zhang covers each sheet with English and Chinese text, written in white ink. The text is sourced from George Orwell's *1984* and a November 1933 speech by Adolf Hitler. One such quote reads, "The masses never revolt of their own accord, and they never revolt merely because they are oppressed. Indeed, so long as they are not permitted to have standards of comparison, they never even become aware that they are oppressed." Zhang's *404* alludes to the act of censorship and state oppression, which acquires an eerie resonance when Zhang mentions that her website cannot be accessed in China due to the Great Firewall (GFW). The purpose of the GFW is to control the Internet within China, leaving access only to content that complies with strict governmental policies. It is achieved through blocking specific websites, keyword filtering, and monitoring the activity of Internet users.

In her piece *Heal the Divide* (2017), Ketty Zhang explores the ancient practice of cupping therapy: a traditional method of healing illnesses, which is often considered a pseudoscience in Western medicine. Zhang's *Heal the Divide* helps to "release the pain" caused by American president Donald Trump's recent travel ban, more formally known as Executive Order 13769, titled *Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States*. "As an immigrant, I was pretty hurt," Zhang says. For this piece, Zhang burned newspaper clippings placed into glass cups whose openings were held against her own skin. The gradual disappearance of the marks left on Zhang's body evidences the healing process.

Ketty Zhang's work *(True) Colors* (2017), first exhibited at the Surrey Art Gallery's *Canada 150* exhibition, is a testament to her transcultural experience of moving to Canada. *(True) Colors* was a performance piece documented across the course of three hundred consecutively shot photographs. It features the artist facing the camera with her eyes closed and her body painted white. Black ink drips onto her face, slowly accumulating throughout the performance's duration. During the last eight shots, Zhang wipes her face clean of the paint. Zhang says that when she arrived in Canada she "tried to create a new identity and blend in," which

she echoes in her performance. The white paint covers her own skin like a mask, while the black ink indelibly leaves its marks. When she attempts to re-expose her own skin by wiping these layers away, Zhang says that she "can't get rid of [the] marks." Thus, the viewer becomes privy to the lamination of Zhang's multifaceted and transcultural identity. *(True) Colors* masterfully traces the complexities of cultural identity and as Zhang says, the uncertainties of "not fully knowing who you are entirely."

"I don't want my art to be a luxury item," Zhang says, reiterating the powerful effect of her visual language that is rooted in the mundane. She consistently looks to artists involved in activism, citing Ai Weiwei and the Guerilla Girls among her many influences. Zhang is presently examining the "commonalities and differences between Vancouver and Beijing," namely the cultural effects of rapid urban development in China. Zhang mentions Peter Hessler's book *Oracle Bones: A Journey Between China's Past and Present*, a galvanizing text she has recently read which tells a story about modern China's growing links to the Western world post-Cultural Revolution. Currently, Ketty Zhang holds a curatorial assistant position at I: Project Space in Beijing, and is planning to pursue further studies in exhibition design, and artist residencies in the near future.

Alexandra Trim's interview with Ketty Zhang took place on January 26, 2018.