

YINGQIU ZHAO



Yingqiu Zhao, Reproduced: (Artist) in Detaching and in Unifying

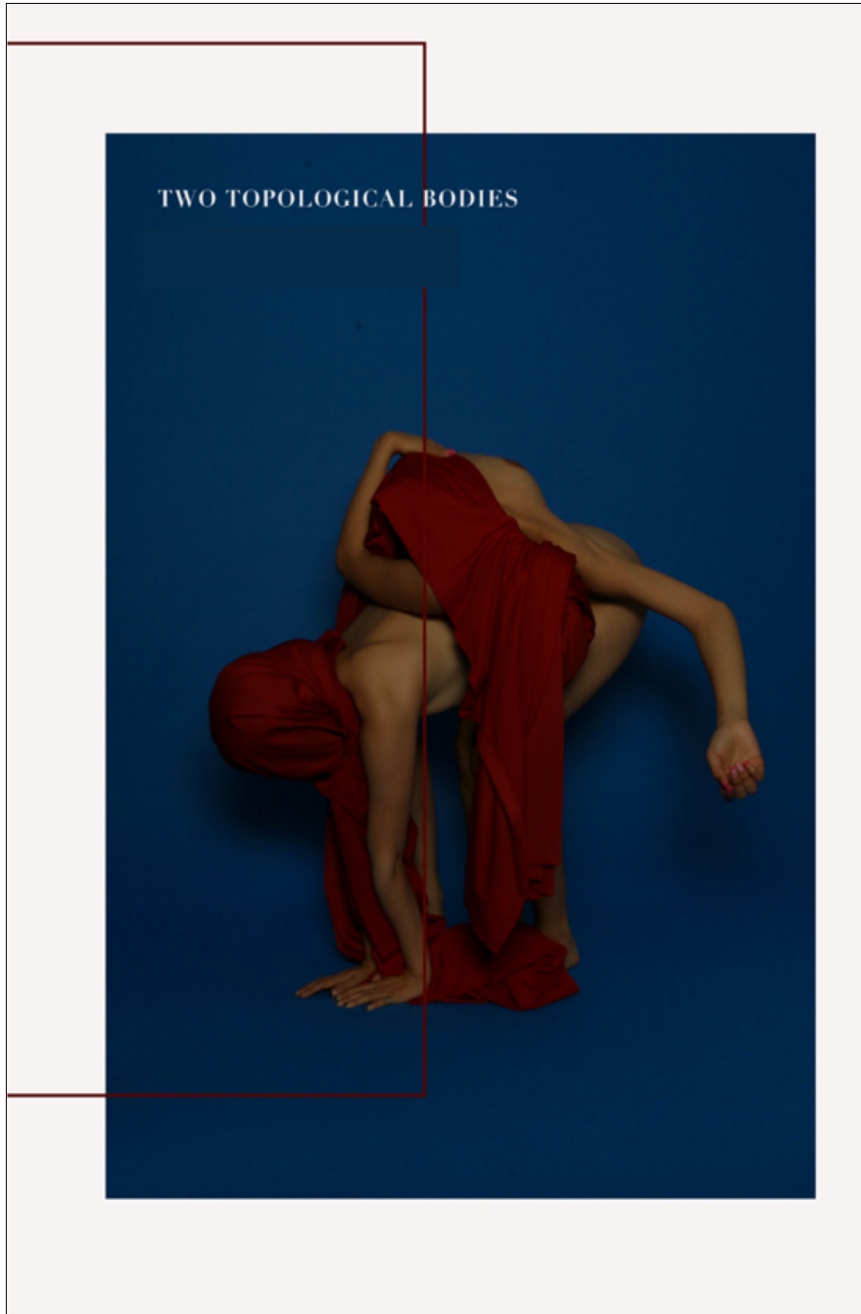
Walking me out of her studio, located on the third floor of the Audain Art Centre, Ophelia Zhao ran into her colleague and friend David Ezra Wang, who hugged her and said, “I am happy for you, Leyla Rose. I feel like you’re back.”

Wang’s words might be confusing to people who do not know Zhao, as she is fond of creating and separating herself into different personalities. From our conversations, I have learned of five different personas: Yingqiu, the child of two “cynical Chinese intellectuals,” Ophelia the Artist (now deceased), Leyla Rose the Artist (c. 2019), Ophelia the Art Critic, and, finally, Катюша (Katyusha), a 1920s-era communist activist. To explore such complex identities, while avoiding potential confusion, I will use her family name “Zhao” to address her, although “Ophelia” still functions as her name in everyday life.

Zhao has “a dialectic obsession with Marxist theories.” She told me that a fellow *UJAH* editor, James Albers, once said that Zhao’s artist profile could be titled “The Artist in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility,” referencing the well-known essay by Walter Benjamin, to demonstrate Zhao’s fascination with the Frankfurt School. One would expect such love for theories would inevitably influence an artist’s practice. However, Zhao aspires to limit the impact of theory on her practice. Mostly working with photography and performance, Zhao’s artist personas begin projects without any theoretical or conceptual ideas. Instead, the personas think through the process of making art: going into the studio with artist partners and starting to work right away, with no clear objectives. As Zhao explains this to me, however, although she does not know what she wants the work to be, she knows what she does not want. For instance, in *Two Topological Bodies* (2019), she knew that she did not want

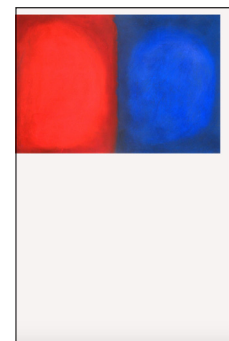
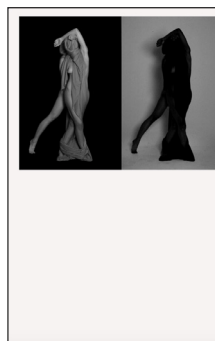
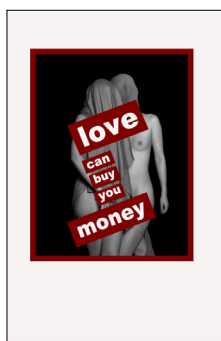
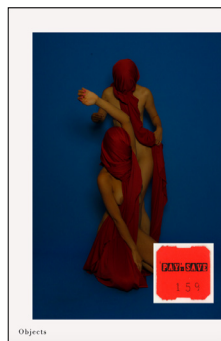
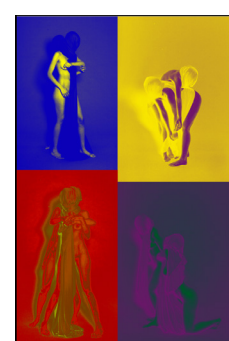
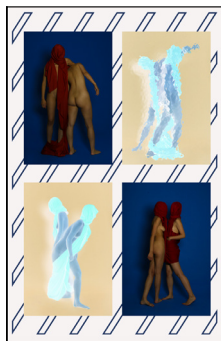
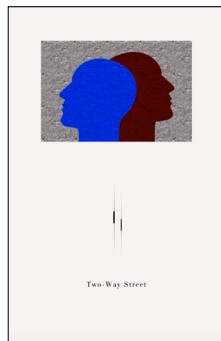
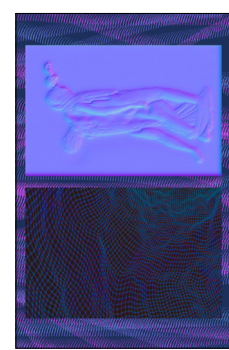
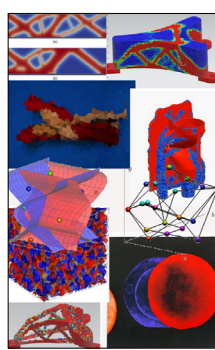
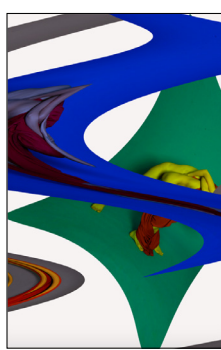
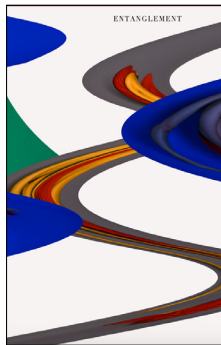
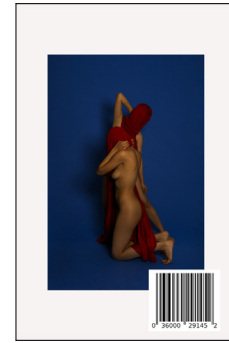
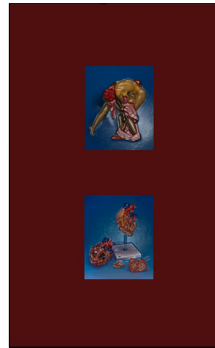
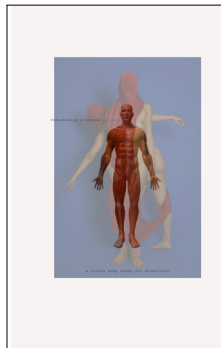
the photographs to be sexual or reminiscent of Greek and Roman sculpture. Zhao’s working habit of not starting with objectives reveals her careful approach to theory. This distance to theory relates to why Zhao consciously names her different personas and roles: her artist personas only consider the artworks, not the interpretations. This idea might appear odd at first, but everyone has different sides and roles; Zhao simply labels all of them, in order to protect the purity and independence of each persona.

This is why Zhao killed Ophelia the Artist. “Ophelia has to die,” Zhao told me, because the character, Ophelia, from *Hamlet*, is destined to die. Ophelia now lives as a critic, alongside Leyla Rose the Artist. The dissociation of art critic and artist prevents her “artist persona [from] residing in that entrapment of theory.” Leyla Rose creates the work, and Ophelia critiques and interprets the work. She consciously draws the boundary between her identities and believes that the different roles of these personas would liberate her and provide more freedom for herself and especially for her audience: “I can leave my word agency for my critic persona and I can use the name to critique my work. That makes Ophelia the Critic talking about the works of Leyla Rose. That makes me feel way better.” Such restriction of the artist’s authority is also revealed in her everyday life. She does not explain or talk about her own works during critique in her classes, with special permission from her professors. Because of such consciousness of denaturalizing her authority over her artworks, Zhao only relates her works with theory using the identity as a critic, to interpret the meanings of these works. The works are always open to interpretation. Ophelia the Critic is only critiquing as an outsider to Leyla Rose’s projects. Ophelia is no different from any other audience.



Two Topological Bodies, 2019.

ARTIST PROFILES



Ophelia the Artist died on a very cold day in November 2019, after performing *My Pain is Your Song* at UBC: “I had a harmonica attached to my mouth. I was almost naked. Because it was so cold, my rapid breathing was captured and transformed into a melody. That was my ceremony for the death of Ophelia. After that point, I felt it was the call for the death of Ophelia. Since then, I started to use the name Leyla Rose.” She did not design this work as the death of Ophelia, but performing this piece, Zhao found a perfect moment to end Ophelia’s duty as an artist. At the same moment, Zhao liberated Ophelia to exist only as a critic, to talk about art and even to theorize art. The death of Ophelia the Artist marked the birth of Leyla Rose as Zhao’s artist persona. The name “Leyla Rose” came from a beautiful story that sounds almost made up: “My friends and I went to Queen Elizabeth Park to have a picnic and saw this random stranger playing the saxophone, so we started to dance with him because it was such a beautiful sound. Then he told us, ‘You guys should check out my daughter, Leyla Rose, who’s on YouTube.’ I later searched online and there was no Leyla Rose, and I decided I am going to take over now.” Zhao decided to give this name a new life—while adding that, when she feels the time is right, Leyla Rose will eventually die as well.

Although Zhao believes that visual representations always come before theories, her art frequently presents scientific theories. When I asked about this contradiction, Zhao explained that it is neither Ophelia nor Leyla Rose who use those scientific theories; she has a third-person persona, a quantum physicist, who introduces science to the artworks. Different from the personas mentioned before, this one is not a part of Zhao, since Zhao does not have a background in science; the quantum physicist is the “other,” who can bring something different and exciting to Ophelia’s art. He adds new dimensions and brings a new scientific perspective to the work. In *Two Topological Bodies*, Ophelia the Artist works with this quantum physicist, and they explore the relationship between quantum physics and love. Zhao suggests that science creates a sense of excitement and detachment for her. As she writes in a recent text-based project, discussing her relationship with quantum physics, “I am very fascinated—after all

this fascination being an extreme detachment from my own conscious mind: something that is supposed to be so estranged to me suddenly sounded so familiar—the plethora of incorrect, misled, insoluble, contingent ... all coexist and materially entangled with one another.” Here, the fascination of science parallels Zhao’s creation of different personas: she enjoys the detachment from her own conscious mind.

Throughout our conversation, Zhao presented such detachment. She did not tell me how theories affect her works, but told me how to eliminate the impact of theories; she did not tell me the relationship between her works and scientific theories, but told me that scientific language offers a sense of excitement; she did not tell me how she adeptly switches personas, but told me why having personas is important to her. She sees herself from an external perspective and labels different roles and personalities with names. Such perspective allows her to analyze herself, yet also creates a distance to her different personas. There are no easy ways to access Zhao’s personalities. Perhaps only through the artworks can one get a peek inside the complex world of Zhao. ■

WRITTEN BY

Yige Wu



“Not enough Chinese to speak for Chinese, not enough Western to speak for Western; not aggressive enough to start a revolution, not rational enough to have a conversation. Not Marxist enough to criticize, not capitalist enough to purchase; not objective enough to be an object, not significant enough to be a sign ...”

—Yingqiu Zhao