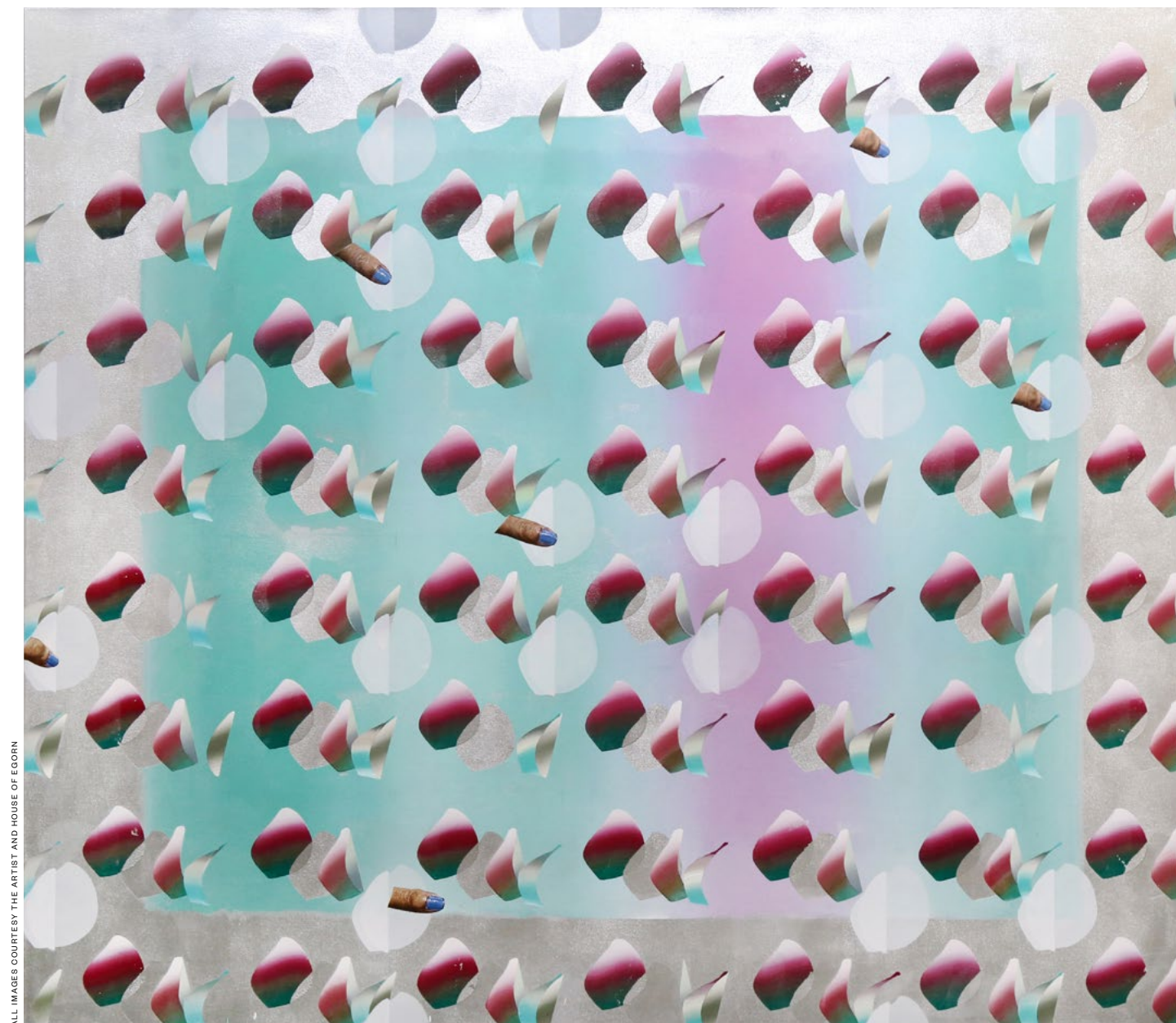


VIVIEN ZHANG

Though she lived in China, Kenya and Thailand before moving to London eight years ago to study at the Slade, *Vivien Zhang*'s work is less about transnationality and more about the subtle harmonies and dissonances between surfaces: Roman architecture, a shape designed by a Czech mathematician, aluminium foil. *Charlotte Jansen* visited her during her residency at the British School at Rome.



IMAGE COURTESY ANTONIO PALMIERI AND THE BRITISH SCHOOL AT ROME



ALL IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HOUSE OF EGORN

How is this residency informing your work?

The reason I'm interested in Rome is this idea of layering, something that's quite obvious in my work. Rome is built on layers. Romans recycled marble from the fifth to the twelfth century. You can see, for example, churches that are built on the foundation of temples, like a palimpsest—manuscripts where you can see what's been erased. The most direct conversation my work has with Rome is that—I recycle my motifs and shapes, I claim and distort them, then put them out again in the work.

So you're interested in surfaces?

In my work there's a lot of play with space, depth and illusion, the oscillation of the gaze. A curator just sent me an article on iridescence and stereoscopic vision—having two images of the same thing that looks different from two different angles. That's something I'm very interested in, having a “viewing geometry”. I found a spray paint called Chameleon, which I've used in my work, and it changes colour depending on the angle you look at it from. I think it's super-toxic, though. It's used for cars!

That also contributes to the digital effect of your work, though it's done entirely by hand. How do you create this?

When were you born, may I ask?

1985.

I'm a 90s baby, and I think our generation—people born in the 80s and 90s—grew up with Microsoft Paint, Photoshop, Illustrator, and then Instagram came about, and so the way we read information and images is very much programmed by all these. The way these giants have developed their software and hard-

ware, such as with Apple's finger motion, almost dictates new ways of engagement with information and reading it. I think this is perhaps related to my experiences, because people always make remarks about reading from top to bottom, from left to right. I am Chinese but I left China when I was ten. Still, the passage of the eye is something I think about, how you scroll through a page, how the glance travels.

And going back to finger motions—it's also incredible working in Rome now and seeing the hand-gesture culture of Italians!



**“I THINK TO HIGHLIGHT THE DIGITAL
YOU NEED TO ALLOW MISTAKES TO SURVIVE
AND ENDURE IN THE ARTWORK”**

Previous pages, right
Digi-Cloves
2016
Oil and spray paint
on canvas
140 x 160 cm

This page
Paths Stamper 3
2016
Mixed media
on canvas
51 x 46 cm

Opposite page
≥
2016
Oil, acrylic and
ink on canvas
170 x 220 cm



Were you always interested in digital software?

I started working with Photoshop when I was at middle school in Kenya, editing pictures of people for yearbooks. That methodology of placing one image on top of another, dragging and enlarging, or lassoing and selecting a section, that’s coming out much more in my practice, and I’m also allowing it to. I’m more conscious now of the separate layers in my work, and giving my audience a clue that I am thinking about layers, gaps, margins, by making them more distinct.

How has that progressed to going back onto paper and using physical paint?

I think it’s the love—and also maybe the pain—of doing it yourself. I

could have done many of my works on a computer, but it would defeat the purpose of talking about the handmade and the digital. I think to highlight the digital you need to allow mistakes to survive and endure in the artwork: the touch of the hand and process of manual imitation is important. So what I have done in some of my works is to construct very organic ground layers and then have the top layer imitate the shape of the bottom layer—almost like the way you select, duplicate and drag layers in Photoshop.

Painting is where you can distort things—it’s a medium that traditionally creates fantasy, it’s where you can construct your own landscape, where the real and the fake can coexist or are blurred. So in

a way I’m carrying on that tradition. What I’m depicting can even be very slick, very industrial, such as my paintings of aluminium foil. So then having that perceivable hand gesture inside is an essential counterpoint.

Tell me about this fruit shape that pops up in several of your paintings?

It comes from a physical shape developed by two Czech mathematicians, initially hypothesized by a Russian mathematician, to describe an object that always returns to one stable point, not because of the weight distribution, but because of the shape of the object itself. It’s called a gömböc. I was thinking about stability and instability. The gömböc provides me with a way to approach these ideas critically.

I’ve used this shape quite a lot in my work. I want to explore what kind of authority artists have over an image or object they see, and how much they can use a particular object and permute it through their own work—and at what point does it just become a compositional element?

Repetition for me is not about being the same—what repetition does is it gives an anticipation of sameness. The bleeding of the paint or the imperfections in my paintings are reminders that no two things can ever be truly identical in the world.

House of Egorn presents a solo booth of new works by Vivien Zhang at MiArt 2017 in Milan, 31 March–2 April.