

# Shen Xin

Born 1990, lives and works in Minneapolis and Amsterdam

**Focusing on interpersonal complexity and political narratives, Shen's films encourage reflection and aim to dismantle dominant power structures.**

Shen Xin lives and works in Minneapolis and Amsterdam. Through films and video installations, as well as performative events, their practice examines and fabricates techniques and effects of how emotion, judgment, and ethics circulate through individual and collective subjects. Their recent solo presentations include

*To Siate* at Madeln Gallery, Shanghai (2019); *Methods of Inhabiting* at K11 Shanghai (2018); *Sliced Units* at the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art, Manchester (2018); *half-sung, half spoken* at the Serpentine Pavilion, London (2017); and *At Home* at Surplus Space, Wuhan (2016). Recent group exhibitions include *New Metallurgists* at

the Julia Stoschek Collection, Düsseldorf (2018); *Songs for Sabotage* at the New Museum Triennial, New York (2018); and *The New Normal* at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2017). Shen was awarded the BALTIC Artists' Award in 2017, and they are currently an artist-in-residence at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam.

**You were born in Chengdu and did your university studies in Singapore and London. Now you work in Amsterdam and Minneapolis. How have these cities influenced your practice?**

In Chengdu, like most people, I had to go through the teaching-to-the-test education system, which was very tough on me. I resisted this top-down mode of education and the expectations placed on me. Within this conflict, I learned how to give, accept, care, and love. It's like when you believe that you are not right for something but you experience efforts to break in; you find things to cherish like friends, community, and beliefs. In secondary school they screened movies on the Sino-Japanese War of the 1930s and 1940s. I would get very angry afterwards because most of the movies were about violence against women. Especially after my move to London, that sense of anger motivated me to reflect on the formation of collectivist sentiment and the nationalisation of the female body.

Before going to Singapore, I wanted to become an interpreter, but instead I decided to study painting. I felt that Singapore was a bubble that completely isolated me as an individual, but it was there that I experienced the differences embedded in appearances and recognition. There's something uncontrollable in how one is perceived by others. I experienced more direct discrimination based on my ethnicity and nationality in Singapore

than I did in Europe. But in London I encountered a simplicity of judgement that was image driven, which made me want to examine imagery, or deconstruct the complexity of systems of looking. The intense experience of otherness in London drove me less towards painting and more towards video and performativity. It was through video that I started thinking through ideas relating to family, personal narrative, and identity.



I was in Amsterdam for Rijksakademie, which was a focused and reflective time when I could quietly interrogate where commitment to discourses come from and observe limitations and the fact of complicity. I only recently moved to Minneapolis, for my family, and my time there has been focused on listening to Indigenous communities and Southeast Asian emigration and immigration stories. But being in the United States so far has much less to do with cities—Minneapolis—St Paul is relatively quiet compared to other cities I've lived in. A place like Minnesota encourages experiencing and learning with and from the land, and I spend a lot of time along the rivers and lakes and in the forests.

#### Why have you gradually moved away from Asia?

The first move from Asia was for Slade in London. At that time, I had a romantic idea about learning more deeply what abstract painting can be and do. But following that first move, it hasn't necessarily been a deliberate move 'away'. I was living in Gwangju for three months for the Rijksakademie and Asia Culture Center residency, which led to Amsterdam for two more years. Various circumstances brought my family to Minneapolis, and we will be there for a number of years, but this is not permanent either. My partner was living in Cambodia for almost half her life and still works around Southeast Asia often, so we will continue to be there annually, and perhaps much more in the future. My experiences in Southeast Asia, especially during the making of *Warm Spell* in Thailand, and my travels elsewhere made me feel as if my identity facilitates meaningful relations with others that are not only identity-based alliances. What I mean is that being a Chinese national in Southeast Asia is not easy; discrimination needs to be addressed in order to forge spaces for sincerity. I guess it is that way most places, but I feel it is productive in that region.

#### Your father, Shen Daohong, is a famous artist, and your 2014 work *Counting Blessings* relates to his work. But you didn't consider becoming an artist before you moved to Singapore. What made you change your mind?

I think it was my survival instincts. My father's representational painting language was impressive but it was not enough for me. I wanted to have a tool for interpreting the complex meanings in imagery, time, and space. It was important that I could assert detachment from the absoluteness and the boundaries of image and language, and it seemed that being an artist would allow this.

#### How would you summarise your practice?

I insist that my work is created through me rather than by me. Relationships are the most important aspect—between me and all the beings and elements that create a work, and between the work and the world. I often use moving image and performance. These two elements—the relationality and the rootedness in time and space—are very important for me.

#### Considering how your practice has developed, how did *Provocation of the Nightingale* come about?

*Counting Blessings* is the first work that is related to *Provocation of the Nightingale*. It looks at how Tibetan ethnic groups are depicted in my father's portraits, including the exaggeration of their physicality. At the time, I was very aware, and wary, of using abstract, conceptual, or macro approaches to discuss the relationship between China and Tibet, since I place great value on personal narrative. And so it was through my relationship with my father that *Counting Blessings* addressed a political situation that has been overly conceptualised. The relationship between my father and me in a way extends to the relationship between a country and a geographical region, which includes their interdependent economic systems. While placing oneself within this system, the conclusion I reached is that I am, as we all are, an accomplice in the capitalistic structure. I wanted to find a way to avoid the conclusive nature of always being complicit, and I thought that it could be done by fictionalising events and subjects. This led to *Strongholds*, *Forerunners*, *Provocation of the Nightingale*, and *half-sung, half-spoken* in 2016 and 2017. These four works are based on my longer-term research on the assimilation of Buddhism in different regions.

#### You mentioned that you see art as an expression with possibilities beyond the boundaries of language. In *half-sung, half spoken* and *Provocation of the Nightingale*, you don't use Chinese. How do you see the function of language in your work?

Three or four of my works are in Chinese, but I am very careful when it comes to using Chinese, and English, because they are pervasive and I'd like language to be embraced in a more bodily way. I feel sensitive towards written language because it has the potential to become a measurement that defines civilisation and superiority. Language is a medium that should be able to be felt with different

senses. If it only exists for the purpose of being written down and it has never been tested or experienced by other senses, it could very well become an abstract ideology. Sometimes language is completely submerged into a bodily experience, especially when we don't know that language. I often work with multiple languages in one work, and for me this pronounces language's tactile quality and allows it to be touched and felt, as if it were a piece of cloth. If there are bulges or parts that are uncomfortable, these will be experienced too. In this way language can be a tool to provoke emotions like resistance, or to activate conflictive nodes and unease. It also expresses complexity and limitations.

**What is the main concept in *Provocation of the Nightingale*? What led you to the idea of filming a conversation between a couple for the first screen?**

Before starting production, I was interested in understanding how fictionalising a personal narrative can empower research, and how embodied experiences can be combined with research around various belief systems, the intersectionality of these systems with sociopolitical structures, and their accompanying desires and emotions. The first screen presents a dialogue between a migrant Buddhist teacher and a manager in a commercial genetic testing company in South Korea. They are immersed in systems of belief that offer benefits to adherents, but it is often forgotten that they are not isolated systems; they are not immune to the sociopolitical. It's like opening Pandora's box. And, importantly, they are lovers, and each holds doubts over the other's practice. In the conversation, they provoke



and question conflicting opinions about each other's work while at the same time expressing their love. Through their admiration, empathy, and understanding, the friction between two different belief systems is experienced. For example, the discussion reveals the differences in the nature of their work, but they connect over past trauma. There is a line in the script that is crucial for me: 'Power is good when it is not abused.' This is a very simple point. Fiction can inherit this good power; it resists the reproduction of oppression.

I feel that the characters on the first screen have so many different identities that it wouldn't be possible for them to have a conversation in real life.

These two people are brought together by love. When the work was shown in South Korea, the response was that it was unrealistic, as if the characters and relationships were not based in South Korean society. Indeed, the work was built upon the condition of speaking through fiction, and essentially the story is used as a tool to examine power as reflected by the self, put in relation to the work. The benefit of an individual embracing traits of multiple identities and languages is that they cannot be easily defined by the viewer. In this incomprehensible situation, identity is suspended in mid-air. When one observes decisions, moralities, or identities that are not grounded in the expected and the known, another space emerges that is meditative and that amplifies reflection on oneself and one's relationships. It forces the self to look, which can be an uncomfortable experience.

**My understanding of suspension is as a separation from everyday experience. How does your work relate to your life?**

I don't see suspension as a separation, but as being related to the time and space of the 'un'—something unknown, unjudgeable, unidentifiable. For example, we can feel a sense of the unknown in partners, friends, and strangers. This space or this feeling is something we cannot control. We need a lot of wisdom to adjust relationships if we honour the fact of the unknown. This is how my creative practice comes about. Fear and anxiety of the unknown on a personal level relate to collective levels, to national and extranational levels.

**The relationship between the four screens transforms research and field observation into a sensual subject, which I think is very interesting. How does the structure of the work in the space inform a viewing of it?**



*Provocation of the Nightingale* is a four-channel video installation; all four scenes were shot in the same theatre but are approached very differently. Maybe there is a kind of sensuality in experiencing formal research material arranged counterintuitively. There are elements of performativity within each channel and within the material itself, whether a screen within a screen, or animation as a device that infers bodily presence and interaction. Each channel is choreographed to take up its own time and space.

**You have a very thorough speculative viewpoint and approach to field research. How did you develop your interests and skills in investigating institutions, authority, and language?**

It is very personal and relates to being resistant while I was growing up, for many reasons, which later became a reflection on resistance itself. It's a continuous process of struggle and understanding. The nature of the Chinese family—the intergenerational nature of any family—makes it a complicated place to discuss defining self, identity, and nation. Ever since I was young, I've been interested in Taoist philosophy and the works of Zhuangzi. When I was studying in Singapore I started writing essays to reflect on these ideas. *Commerce des esprits*, a new work,

is inspired by French sinologists' analysis of Zhuangzi's philosophy based on deconstruction. This kind of reflection might not coincide with today's political reality, since it comes from a desire for anarchism. It's extremely logical and demands the elimination of ego. A body that embraces egolessness can be used to form the foundation of a harmonious society. This could be something I continue to explore in my practice in the future.

# TAO HUI

生於一九九〇年，現

生活及工作於明尼阿波利斯和阿姆斯特丹

## 沈莘的影片作品

促使人們思考與解構，  
佔支配地位的權力結構。  
複雜性與政治敘事，  
聚焦人際關係的

沈莘在明尼阿波利斯和阿姆斯特丹生活和工作。他從事影片、錄像裝置與行為展演等創作，藉此探索情感、價值判斷和道德倫理如何在個體與群體間流通，並建構其技巧和剖析其影響。他近期的個展包括：「使飽和」（上海沒頂畫廊，二〇一九）、「居住的方法」（上海chi K11美術館，二〇一八）、「切片裝置」（曼徹斯特華人當代藝術中心，二〇一八）、「半說半唱」（倫敦蛇形美術館，二〇一七）、「在家」（武漢剩餘空間，二〇一六）。他近期參與的群展包括：「新冶金者」（杜塞爾多夫Julia Stoschek Collection，2018）、「破壞之歌」（紐約新當代藝術博物館三年展，二〇一八）及「例外狀態」（北京尤倫斯當代藝術中心，二〇一七）等。沈莘於二〇一七年獲頒「BALTIC藝術家獎」，現為荷蘭阿姆斯特丹皇家藝術學院的駐留藝術家。

你在成都出生，到新加坡讀大學，然後去了倫敦，現在阿姆斯特丹跟明尼阿波利斯工作。到目前為止，你出生和工作所在的城市對你的實踐和創作有甚麼影響呢？

在成都經歷了多數人都得經歷的應

試教育，對我而言是非常艱難的。因為我成長的過程中一直很抵觸應試教育，很抵觸各種外來的期待。在這種抵觸中，同時也學到怎麼樣去給予和接受，關心和愛。當你堅信自己是不適合的，卻還在經歷磨合，尋找一些值得珍惜的東西，朋友、群體、信仰等。比如說中學會放抗日電影，那時候年紀輕，看了也會很憤怒，因為很多都是關於針對家庭中不同女性的暴力行為。而那種憤怒感會在以後的過程中，特別是到了倫敦後，讓我反思集體主義情緒的形成，以及女性身體的國家化。

去新加坡前是想做同聲傳譯，但最終去了國外學習繪畫。感覺那是一個把個體包裹在內的泡沫。但也是在那裏，讓我慢慢更深刻地意識到表象和認知上的區別，別人的眼光是無法控制的。在新加坡受到更直接的種族歧視或者國別歧視，比在歐洲多。但到倫敦以

後，我感受到被人以圖像式的簡單化判斷來看待，於是就想在這個圖像裏去剖析，或者瓦解一些觀看系統上的複雜性，這才開始做影像。倫敦強烈的他者性可能是觸發我不再傾向繪畫，而投入影像和表演的原因。我開始通過影像來思考和家庭、個人生活以及身分有關的問題。

去阿姆斯特丹是因為荷蘭皇家藝術視覺學院的駐留項目。這是一個精力集中和反省式的時段，在其中我安靜地分析和探索之前投入某些話題的動力和來源，也在觀察其中存在的局限和「共犯性」現實。最近移居去了明尼阿波利斯是為了我的家人，而我在那裏目前主要是學習聆聽美國原住民群體和東南亞移民的經歷和故事。在美國的生



活和城市關係不大，明尼阿波利斯——聖保羅跟我之前居住的城市比較起來都安靜許多。像明尼蘇達州這樣的地方，會促使人們通過自身和土地的關係去學習和經歷，我也會花很多時間處身於河邊，湖邊和森林中。

### 你為甚麼逐漸遠離亞洲呢？

我第一次搬離亞洲是為了去倫敦的斯萊德學院。在那個年紀，我對深入學習抽象繪畫有一些幻想。但在那一次離開亞洲之後，沒有再刻意地「遠離」。

我曾在光州韓國居住過三個月，是因為荷蘭皇家藝術視覺學院和亞洲文化中心的駐留項目，也由此才延伸了我之後在阿姆斯特丹的兩年生活。由於很多原因，我的家人移居到了明尼阿波利斯，我們會在這裏居住幾年，但這也不是永久的。我的伴侶曾在柬埔寨居住了很長時間，現在也時常在東南亞工作，所以我們每年都會去，未來在東南亞的時間也會增多。對我而言，特別是在泰國創作《溫暖期》和在其他地方旅遊的經歷，讓我感到通過自我的身分和他人建立有意義的關係，但這些關係的形成不只是基於身分認同。我想說的是身為一個擁

時間，現在也時常在東南亞工作，所以我們每年都會去，未來在東南亞的時間也會增多。對我而言，特別是在泰國創

作《溫暖期》和在其他地方旅遊的經歷，

我堅持我的作品是通過我被創造的，而不是被我創造。關係性是最主要的，包括我和其他生靈與元素的關係，以及作品和世界的關係。我常用的媒介

你父親沈道鴻是很著名的藝術家，你在二〇一四年做了個作品《細數祝福》，跟你父親畫有關。而你到新加坡之前似乎都沒有要當藝術家。我很想問，你為甚麼會想要成為一個藝術家？

我覺得是一種求生慾。我父親寫實的繪畫語言很有影響力，但對我而言是不夠的。我非常想有一個工具可以去理解圖像、時間和空間的複雜意義。還有一個很重要的功能，便是能夠脫離語言、圖像的邊界和絕對性，而成為藝術家似乎可以實現這點。

如果用一句話來概括你藝術創作的話，你會說甚麼？

我堅持我的作品是通過我被創造的，而不是被我創造。關係性是最主要的，包括我和其他生靈與元素的關係，

### 如果從你的創作脈絡來說，《夜鶯的挑釁》是怎麼一步一步創作出來的？

你說你把藝術看作一種超越語言的表達和可能性，在《半說半唱》和《夜鶯的挑釁》，都刻意回避使用中文。你怎樣看待語言在作品中的作用？



是流動影像和表演。這兩點對我來說很重要，一個界定了關係性，另一個界定在時間和空間中扎根的體驗。

第一個有關聯的作品是《細數祝福》。這個作品是去看父親的肖像畫對藏族的描繪，包括誇大他們的肌肉和形態等。同時我非常關心或者說比較戒備擴大或者抽象化、概念化地去談論中國和西藏的關係，因為我很看重個人敘事。所以，是通過我父親和我的關係，《細數祝福》得以講述一個已經被概念化的政治事件。我和父親的關係，也引申出一個國家和地域之間的關係，包括它們之間的經濟是怎樣流動、互相依靠。當個體把自己放到這個系統裏面，得到的一個結論是，在這個資本主義的系統中，我也是共犯，或者我們都是共犯。之後，我很找到方法去避開以「共犯性」為總結的結局，我想或許可以把事件和研究對象虛構化，所

其實我有三、四個作品都是中文的。我會慎重使用的是英文和中文，因為它們很容易被自然化，而我想使語言體驗變的更身體化。我對書寫語言的警覺，是因為能看到它會可能變成定義文明和優越感的重要尺規。語言這個媒介應該是可以用感官去感受的。如果只是因書寫而存在，並沒有經過感官的檢驗，或者體會，它很可能變成一種抽象的概念。有時候語言會被完全帶入到身體的體驗中，特別是當我們並不熟悉這種語言的時候。而我也經常在一個作品中使用多種語言，對我而言，這樣做有如把語言當作一塊布那樣有質感的東西，你可以摸到它、感受到它。如果有凸起的部分，不舒服的地方，你會有所體會。語言由此得以成為一種工具，去

有中國國籍的人，在東南亞生活並不容易，首先要跨越很多偏見，才能為真誠的交流創造空間。可能很多地方也是如此，但我覺得在東南亞這個過程是有創造力的。



激發比如帶有抵抗性的情感，或者帶動具有矛盾性的節點和不適感。同時語言也呈現出複雜性和局限性。

回到《夜鶯的挑釁》這個作品，主要的創作概念是甚麼？第一個熒幕是關於一對情侶的談話，為甚麼會有這個想法？

在創作之前我感興趣的是，虛構的個人敘事如何賦予研究話題所謂的力量。我關注個人體驗怎樣與有關各種信仰系統的研究結合起來，以及信仰系統和其他系統：政治系統、社會系統、欲望和情感表達等交叉的地方。第一個熒幕呈現的是南韓一個移民佛教老師和一個基因工程公司經理之間的對話，她們處身的是追隨擁護便會得到回報的信仰系統。然而，人們時常會被忘記這樣的信仰系統並非獨立存在，它們對社會政治環境並不具免疫性，這就像一個打開了的潘多拉盒子。重要的是，她們倆是一對戀人，同時對彼此的實踐抱有一些質疑。在這個對話中，她們質疑、激發彼此實踐中的一些矛盾點，也表達對對方的愛。通過她們的愛慕、同情、理解，去體會兩個不一樣的信仰系統中的摩擦。比如說，在對話中激化她們工作

着自我去觀看，所以可能會是一種不舒服的體驗。

我理解的懸置是在日常生活體驗之上的區隔。另一方面，你每一件作品它主要是如何跟你的日常生活關聯在一起？

對我而言，我不認為懸置和區隔有關，而更與時間空間中的「未能達到」有關。

關於，比如未知的、無法判斷的、無法識別的。比如說我們會在伴侶、朋友、陌生人的身上感受到一種未知，這種未知所處的空間是無法被控制的。若我們珍惜「未知」，我們需要很多智慧去調諧這些關係。其實創作是源於這樣的一個出發點，生活中個人對未知的害怕和焦慮，與集體、國家，和規則外的事件都有關聯。

《夜鶯的挑釁》是一個四頻道影像裝置，其中所有的場景都拍攝於同一個劇場，但用了不同的方式處理。也許感性是來自對嚴肅的研究材料予以反直覺式編排的體會。每個頻道的

性質之間的區別，但當談到過往創傷的時候，兩個人又進入了一個共情的語境。裏面有一句台詞我很看重：「當權力沒有被濫用的時候它是好的。」這也許是很簡單的一個概念，我覺得虛構也賦予這樣的好權力，能抵抗壓迫的再次出現。

你談到第一幕兩個角色，我感覺你創造的這些角色綜合了很多身分。但我覺得現實中這兩個身分的人在一起談話幾乎是不可能的一件事。

這兩個人是被愛帶到了一起。在南韓展出這個作品的時候，有一些人反饋說覺得好像不太寫實，似乎這樣的角色和關係在南韓社會現實中並不存在。確實，作品是建立在一個虛構的語境之上，而虛構的故事成為一種工具，去檢驗和作品產生關係的每個人的力量。其實身分和語言的多樣性在一個人身上同時存在，好處就是讓觀眾無法輕易地去下定義。這個無法定義的局面把身分懸置起來了。就相當於我們的判斷、道德體系、認知無法在已有的期待和已知中落地，它產生了自己的空間，這個空間有點類似於冥想的空間，它擴大了對自我及其所擁有的關係之反思。它逼

內容和使用的素材都具有表演性，無論是熒幕中正在播放的電視，或是用動畫指代身體的呈現和互動。我刻意為每個頻道編排出獨立的空間和時間予觀眾觀看。

我覺得你有很完整的思辨性和做田野考察的能力，你對體制、體系、權力、語言的興趣和挖掘的能力是從哪來的？

這有很個人的原因，也和抱着一種抵抗性長大很有關係，它在日後漸漸形成了對抵抗性的反思。這是一個不斷進行的爭鬥和理解過程。華人家庭，或者說任何家庭的跨代性，組成了一個非常複雜的場域去探討和定義自我、身分和國家。我從小最感興趣的一種思考方式是道家、莊子的文學。在新加坡讀大學的時候就開始寫一些論文，去反思道家、莊子的思想。新作品《精神流通》也是建立在法國漢學家運用解構哲學對莊子的解析所得到的啓發。這樣的反思也許不太符合現在的政治現實。它來自對無政府主義的渴望，它非常有邏輯性，嚴格要求去掉自我中心化。一個並不僅僅擁有自我的個體，是可以被利用來建立一個諧和社會的根基。這可能是我一直以來都會持續去研究的思想之一。