

The British School of Beijing (BSB) Shunyi

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Rationale:

The works included in my exhibition explore life and mortality, which seems especially significant during COVID-19. Our lives have changed drastically, in a short period of time. During lockdown, my family urged me to appreciate the people around us. Our daily preoccupation with material goods, prompted me to focus on the transience of life and mortality. I started exploring allegorical 17th century Dutch Vanitas paintings, they communicate the certainty of death and the fact that material goods were mere distractions from our everyday lives. Using still life objects, I wanted to communicate my experience and document the isolation of this global trauma. Developing my personal aesthetic through primary reference photos, compositional arrangements and carefully selected objects, my *Vanitas* works reflect the current context. To incorporate a personal style, I contrasted realistic painted imagery with achromatic linear motifs inspired by Cynthia Greig. I found this combination of styles ambiguous. On one hand, I wanted to contrast the sterile, mundane environment of lockdown, whilst simultaneously appreciating the colourful world around us. Furthermore, since we put emotional attachments on material goods, often connecting them to a memory or person, I considered the importance of worldly materials. What happens when these emotions are stripped away, when the objects are reduced to lines on a page?

The viewer enters a low-lit room with individual artworks spotlighted, to separate and isolate each artwork from one another, just as people were socially distanced. The room generates a solemn and melancholic atmosphere, which relates to the mood of Covid-19. Central to my exhibition is a still-life installation, *Vanitas*. Viewers are encouraged to bring in their own objects, that they found most significant during lockdown. I positioned it two metres from the other artworks to conform to social distancing regulations, allowing the viewer to safely navigate around the work. These were arranged with my own selection of objects, that formed the focus for my other pieces.

On the right side of the exhibition, I focused on *Vanitas* artworks. The trilogy of works titled ***Restriction***, ***Recrudescence*** and ***Reminisce***, depict different stages of my quarantine experience. ***Restriction*** was created under lockdown, when I found myself confined to the objects found around the house. Although mundane, I incorporated symbolism to allude to my experiences. ***Recrudescence*** is a mournful piece, reflecting life during the pandemic, commemorating lives lost. ***Reminisce*** is a recollection of our lives before the pandemic when life seemed more carefree. To develop coherence, I created two photography pieces, titled ***Still Life***, which explore my personal role, as an artist, in reflecting this pandemic. A part of our identity is represented through objects, which is where our personal attachments and emotions are formed. These pieces illustrate my experience exploring the objects' symbolism in relation to COVID-19 and *Vanitas* paintings. Limited to materials at hand, I chose to develop my interest in digital photography and film to communicate with the viewer. I aim to create symmetry and balance in the space, to allude to the disciplined lifestyle of quarantine. This creates cohesion within the collection and allows the viewer to explore in any direction they please.

On the left, I reflected the confusion of lockdown through jigsaw puzzles. Puzzle pieces contribute towards building something or feeling complete, these puzzles are incomplete to hint at the sense of unease. The pieces are fixed and regular, which reiterates the systematic and robotic nature of life in lockdown. The mixed-media sculpture, ***Evanescent Ballads***, alludes to the personal importance of music, but also communicates the tragic number of deaths- each puzzle piece representing a statistic from COVID-19. The large-scale drawing, ***Reconstruction***, illustrates the experience of examining a person's life. It is hung diagonally to provide symmetry and balance with ***Recrudescence***.

In the exhibition, I want to prompt the audience to consider our attachments to material goods and the inevitability of mortality. We often develop a fear of death, for ourselves and those around us. However, I want to remind viewers that it is a natural process of life and we should appreciate what we have in our given time. My exhibition becomes a time capsule for this period, a modern-day *Vanitas* that explores our current cultural context.

Vanitas 2021

Installation 150cm x 50cm x 150cm

'Vanitas' is Latin for "vanity", connoting that material possessions do not preclude us from our inevitable death. Initially, only the still-life objects from *Recrudescent* are found. Viewers are encouraged to insert objects, significant to them during the lockdown, allowing them to contribute to this visual documentation of the global experience. However, simultaneously, viewers should consider the futility of material goods and the importance of living a virtuous and meaningful life instead.

Recrudescent 2020

Mixed media installation, projection on medical screen 180cm x 200cm

This time lapse film was taken over 48 hours, with over 2000 images. Taking inspiration from Sam Taylor Wood's videos, I created a mixed-media projection on a painted medical screen, that reminds the viewer of the trepidation of the hospital. The clock alludes to the passing of time, the candle reflects the end of life, but also a sense of hope. It communicates my experience during the pandemic, with glasses and books to reference school, which was significantly affected during lockdown.

Restriction 2020

Acrylic on canvas 60cm x 120cm

This diptych was created under the limited boundaries of lockdown. It is physically fragmented to create separation. Inspired by traditional Vanitas paintings, mundane objects found at home were used to symbolise mortality and confinement. Fruits and flowers rot over time, which signifies the transience of wealth and beauty. These worldly pleasures are confined by the borders of the photo frame, with single flower petals isolated on the side, just as we were remote from the outside world.

Reminisce 2020

Acrylic on canvas 60cm x 120cm

This piece further delves into the transience of youth and beauty, inspired by Pieter Claesz's use of symbolism and musical instruments, and Audrey Flack's luminous paintings. It suggests how the pandemic has interfered with the enjoyment of these worldly pleasures. In the 17th century, the objects chosen were typically exclusive to the richest members of Dutch society. They were also fragile, to connote the delicate nature of life. The objects I chose were personally significant and reflect my own experience.

Evanescent Ballads 2020

Mixed media – broken violin, puzzle pieces, acrylic paint and modroc 18cm x 20cm x 50cm

This sculpture is made from recycled, broken objects to represent lost lives. In China, there were 4,636 deaths from COVID-19. I used exactly 464 puzzle pieces in this sculpture, each puzzle piece represents approximately 10 people. Violins connote sadness, tranquillity, and the ephemeral nature of life. The violin is fragmented and decayed, suggesting that the attentive care once lavished on music would eventually turn to neglect. It reflects on our fading memories of the lost lives over time.

Reconstruction 2019

Graphite and ink on paper 100cm x 150cm

This large-scale drawing was executed monochromatically, with a large black ink stain, to create a melancholic mood. The self-portrait, from the back signifies looking back into the past, and illustrates the process of building a picture with individual puzzle pieces. Connected to ***Evanescent Ballads***, it commemorates the lives lost by reflecting missing pieces. Furthermore, jigsaw puzzles often leave us overwhelmed and confused, which represents the resilience required during lockdown.

Still Life I 2020

Digital photography 52cm x 52cm

This piece illustrates my experience as an artist, to reflect on the objects that shape our lives, during the pandemic. It records the process of analysing the symbolism of each object, examining its role in representing life and mortality. Inspired by Cynthia Greig I chose to conceal and reveal the image, using *Adobe Photoshop*. Fruit rots, candles burn and music fades, eventually turning into futile remains, the erased parts of the image, demonstrating that worldly pleasures are temporary.

Still Life II 2021

Digital photography 52cm x 52cm

This photography piece was inspired by Cynthia Greig, who transforms mundane objects into simple line drawings. It shifts the viewer's perception between the familiar and strange, just as the drastic changes we experienced during the pandemic. The violin, wine glasses, flowers, clock, are internally connected with similar references to fragility - things that are easily broken. These fragile worldly possessions connote the delicate nature of life and time, the things we easily take for granted.