

# KETTY ZHANG

CURATED BY: LISA EDWARDS, UFV Intern

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ART  
ON  
DEMAND 5.2

# KETTY ZHANG: Gen 1.5

"I am from there, I am from here.  
I am not there and I am not here.  
I have two names, which meet and part.  
I have two languages, but I forget  
which is the language of my dreams."<sup>1</sup>

Millions of people have immigrated to Canada in the hopes of building a better future for themselves and for their families. Today, most Canadians can trace some branches of their ancestry to a foreign origin and many have a lived, personal connection to the experience of immigration. And while the physical act of immigration presents myriad challenges and hurdles, the social and psychological aspects of transitioning from the culture of one's origin to the "foreign" culture of Canada are perhaps even more difficult to overcome, and can be felt for years in the future. In this respect, immigration is a threshold that must be crossed again and again, as people work to find a balance between the heritage they bring with them, and adapting to the new cultural environment they step into.

For *Art on Demand 5.2*, emerging, Fraser Valley-based artist Ketty Zhang explores her own experience with cross-cultural identity and the challenges of being a "1.5 generation" immigrant: someone who settles in a new country when they are still a child or young adult. Zhang has chosen *Gen 1.5* as the title of her project for *The Reach* in part because it



references her own experience of moving to Vancouver from a small suburban city in China when she was a teenager. But by abbreviating the first word, Zhang also alludes to the bible verse Genesis 1.5, which describes the creation of the first day on earth. Zhang thus draws a connection between the revelatory newness of a divine creation and the overwhelming experience of arrival in a completely strange and new land.

Zhang's *Gen 1.5* project is comprised of performance and ritual that is documented as intimate self-portraits, in which she explores diaspora and millennial cultural identity in two related bodies of work: *(True) Colours* and *Therapy*. In both bodies of work, Zhang uses art as a healing process and as a way to work through the difficult experiences she encountered as a young immigrant, as well as a way to preserve her traditional Chinese heritage.

*(True) Colours* consists of 49 small photographs that depict the artist performing a symbolic act in response to a cultural identity crisis she experienced shortly after immigrating to Canada. The photographs are framed nearly identically, cropped close to show only the artist's head and bare shoulders. In each successive image, her face undergoes a transformation as it is gradually covered with layers of dark ink poured over her head, then as this ink is (partially) wiped away. Zhang's use of dark, obscuring ink suggests the application of layers—artificial skins or masks that are donned in an attempt to portray versions of ourselves as genuine. The ink that pours down her face also mimics falling tears, suggestive of the emotional struggle of the artist. In the end, even when the ink is wiped away in the final photograph, it leaves behind a stain or residue, representing a permanent change of the self that has occurred.

The related series *Therapy* consists of six digital prints and an installation. Here the artist specifically explores traditional healing rituals by demonstrating the Chinese method of "cupping," a process by which cups are heated and placed on the body to produce suction in order to stimulate the flow of blood and "qi." Zhang expands on this traditional practice by first writing down a negative experience, words, or thoughts on a piece of paper, then burning them inside the cups to heat them. In the photos that document her experience, we see evidence of a modern young woman drawing on an ages-old tradition to help her navigate her experience as a newcomer to Canada. In the companion installation of glass cups, only small snatches of the burnt texts are visible—ashy remnants of self-doubt burned up in the process of that transformation. Zhang's performative act is an attempt to create an immediate relationship to the viewer through a journey of self-discovery, reconciliation of the self, and the act of letting go.

Zhang's work prompts us to consider where we come from and how the experience of existing between cultures affects not only our individual identity, but also our understanding of others. Her work draws attention to universal human connection, in order to emphasize our similarities rather than our differences so that we may better connect with our fellow human beings.

- Emerge Curator, Lisa Edwards

<sup>1</sup> Mahmoud Darwish, "Counterpoint: Homage to Edward Said," translated by Julie Stoker. *Le Monde Diplomatique*, January 2005.

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## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY



Originally from China but currently based in Surrey, Ketty Haolin Zhang is an emerging artist who works in installation, printed matter, and photography to explore her interest in diaspora and millennial identity. Zhang recently graduated from the University of British Columbia with a double-major in Visual Art and Art History.



THE REACH GALLERY MUSEUM — 32388 Veterans way, Abbotsford, BC  
[thereach.ca/emerge](http://thereach.ca/emerge)

Front Cover and Inside Image: *Therapy (details)*, 2019, digital prints on paper, 13 x 19 in. each.  
Back Cover: *True (Colours)*, 2017, digital print on paper, 4 x 6 in. All images courtesy of the artist.

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