

# Offerings to both Past and Future

## Still life photographs by Shellie Zhang

### Introduction by Lorraine Chuen

It is a familiar vignette for many first- and second-generation Chinese immigrants: a plate of sliced fruit, constructed with kindness and care. Perhaps the plate is shared with siblings, or hand-delivered by a father to a teenager's bedroom. Perhaps it contains apples, carefully peeled and cut, or cubes of melon that melt in your mouth like candy. Perhaps it's not a plate at all; instead, oranges, numerous and whole, offered to the grave of a family member.

This quiet way of giving is captured in Shellie Zhang's newest series of photographs, *Offerings to both Past and Future*. The images display real and artificial fruit, majestically elevated and arranged as offerings one might see in a temple or shrine. Fruit are displayed against a range of backdrops, from stately marble to wallpapers reminiscent of the comforts of home. In *Still Life with Citrus*, a lush collection of peeled oranges, grapefruit, and limes are delicately stacked in a porcelain family heirloom Zhang brought back to Toronto on her last trip to Beijing. In *Still Life with Berries*, lychees, cherries, and grapes spill out of a bowl like jewels.

Zhang is a multidisciplinary artist based in Toronto exploring themes of identity, diaspora, and femininity. Much of Zhang's practice draws on meticulous historical research: her recent series, *Accent*, explored xenophobic media portrayals of MSG and Chinese food dating back to the 1960s, beliefs that persist in the white popular imagination to this day. Archives are telling of the world we live in, and Zhang demonstrates how they can be a powerful medium for informing present-day lived experiences of othering and oppression.

*Offerings to both Past and Future* marks a departure from this research-based approach. These images grasp at the personal and sentimental, examining the labour, intergenerational knowledge, and care passed on in the offering and exchange of fruit in Chinese communities. In speaking about this series, Zhang recalls a conversation with a long-standing member of the Chinese-Canadian community in Toronto. The writer had shared memories of growing up in Toronto's Chinatown and eating fresh lychee during their short season, savouring them slowly one by one—a taste made possible and cultivated by a growing Chinese immigrant population and their local markets.

For many diasporic people of colour, food is tied to migration and can be deeply personal and complex. It can be a site of racism, shame, and trauma, a site for politicization, as well as a site for remembrance, family histories, and notions of home. In the case of fruit for Chinese communities, it can be a way to demonstrate affection, to celebrate, and to honour the dead. Zhang depicts these multitudes in ways that are both poignant and visually delightful in *Offerings to both Past and Future*.

*Offerings to both Past and Future* is part of a larger body of work around fruit and vegetables that is currently in development by Shellie Zhang.

Lorraine Chuen is a Cantonese-Canadian writer and designer based out of Toronto. She explores themes around technology and the Internet, food, diasporic identities, and family in her writing. Her work has appeared in GUTS, Ricepaper Magazine, the Globe and Mail, Shameless Magazine, and LooseLeaf Magazine.

Images:

Page 37: Shellie Zhang, *Still Life with Bitter Melon*, from the series *Offerings to both Past and Future*, 2018–2019, ongoing, chromogenic print 45.75 x 61 CM.

Page 38: Shellie Zhang, *Still Life with Lychee and Pomegranate*, from the series *Offerings to both Past and Future*, 2018–2019, ongoing, chromogenic print 45.75 x 61 CM.

Page 39: Shellie Zhang, *Still Life with Lychee*, from the series *Offerings to both Past and Future*, 2018–2019, ongoing, chromogenic print 45.75 x 61 CM.

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Page 45: Shellie Zhang, *Still Life with Peach*, from the series *Offerings to both Past and Future*, 2018–2019, ongoing, chromogenic print 45.75 x 61 CM.

































