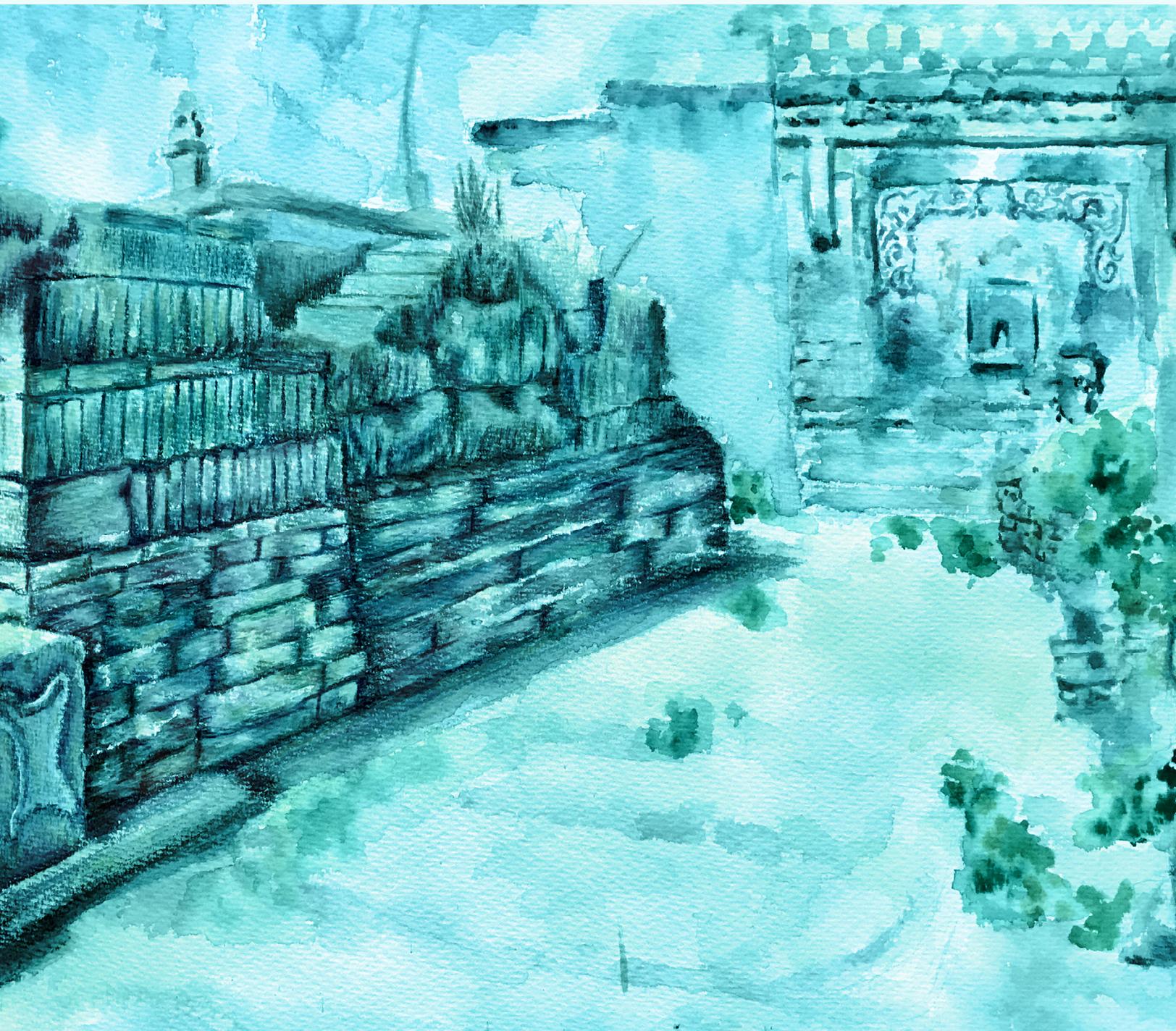


Amy F. Zheng: Memory and Motherhood

by Meghan Smith

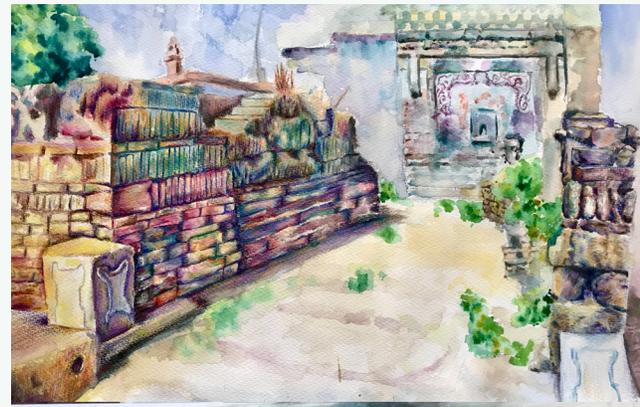


When Amy F. Zheng quit her accounting job in 2017 to focus on art, she was overwhelmed by how many of her childhood memories waited eagerly under the surface, ready to be unearthed by a creative practice.

“Art is my agency to connect to the past,” Zheng explained to me as she began pulling paintings out from a rack in her studio. She is deeply attached to her experiences growing up in Beijing and feels called to explore her family’s history across time and culture. Painting offers her the freedom to not only interpret her own experiences, but connect them to those of her mother, and her mother’s mother.

One small work, *Where do I come from* 我是谁/*Childhood Memories*, depicts the entrance to her adoptive grandparent’s house. Zheng lived with them here in Jinyuan, Shanxi Province, from the age of three months to three years old. “I always dream back to this place”, she said, but isn’t sure why it holds so much psychological weight compared to Beijing, where she lived most of her life. Leaning into this ambiguous feeling, she painted the scene as it appears in her mind today.

With no ink outlines or clean borders, Zheng’s watercolor forms blend into a dreamscape. Certain details come into focus, like rainbow bricks in the wall on the left, while others recede into an airy wash. Her positive associations with the space have quite literally colored her perception of it. Zheng paints foliage in bright emerald, sunlit stone in happy yellow, and shadows in vivid blues and magentas. It reads just like a memory – impressionistic and imperfect, capturing the essence of how it felt to stand there, bare toes wiggling in the dirt.



(1) Amy F. Zheng, *Where do I come from* 我是谁/*Childhood Memories*, 2021, watercolor and colored pencil on watercolor paper, 15 x 25 inches
(2) Amy F. Zheng, *Mom with Kids* series, 2021, oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches each



(1), (2) Amy F. Zheng, Mom with Kids series, 2021, oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches each

This imaginative quality is apparent in other works as well, even when the subject matter is serious. In her Mom with Kids series, Zheng focuses on the complicated yet intimate bonds between mother and child. The series of four progresses chronologically from left to right. First, Zheng paints the biological grandmother she never knew: her mother was raised from infancy by foster parents in another village, who Zheng would come to see as her adoptive grandparents.

Zheng imagines her lost grandmother pregnant and alone, strong on the outside but terrified on the inside. Her face is an invention, an amalgam that Zheng designed based on actresses in old Chinese movies. The portrait brings up complicated emotions for Zheng, who has not shown it to her mother for fear it will be too painful.

The second painting in the series has a similarly somber tone. Zheng paints her mother as a child, sad and serious beyond her age, with her adoptive grandmother. They stand together in stiff positions and monochrome clothing. Zheng recounts stories her mother told of growing up too fast, working hard from the early age of four or five to help take care of the household. The third painting shows her mother as a stoic adult with a smiling toddler in tow (Zheng herself). Zheng appears healthy, jolly even, her little body in motion with one foot stretched behind her.

Finally, in the busiest and most inventive work of them all, Zheng paints herself playing with her young son. She is pregnant and smiling with scenes of her new life behind her: the Golden Gate Bridge, a graduation cap and gown, international currency symbols. Though the bottom left corner is hazy and unresolved, the scene of her with her son is clear and animated. He holds her hands and leans forward,



Amy F. Zheng, Mom with Kids series, 2021, oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches each

goofing off as only kids do, fully trusting his mom won't let go.

And so the Mom with Kids series comes full circle, drawing a line from one pregnancy to another across three generations. The relevance of this generational storytelling can be found in how Zheng paints each child. Each one becomes more playful, more free, more expressive, as time progresses and their lives become more privileged. Zheng didn't plan their poses this way; they came out organically as she translated each mother/child relationship into paint. Art helped Zheng see the bigger picture of how deeply her mother and grandmother struggled to ensure she could achieve the life she has now.

"Before I had kids, I never really thought about my mother's trauma," Zheng explained with a hint of regret. Now, however, she understands how personal hardship can radiate outward, impacting not only those around you but the next generations to come. The responsibility she feels to her ancestors, expressed through art, is equally a responsibility to her children. Far from seeing this as a burden, Zheng considers it the "invisible power" driving her work.

Meghan Smith (she/her) is currently pursuing a dual MA in Curatorial Practice/Visual & Critical Studies at CCA with interests in postcolonial theory, critical race, and the contemporary art market.

Amy F. Zheng was born in Beijing, China, and is currently in the San Francisco Bay Area. She is a second year MFA candidate at California College of the Arts working in painting, drawing, experimental animation, installation, weaving, and fabric arts.