

Kunsthalle Wien
Museumsquartier

EN

Guan Xiao
TEENAGER
8.10.2025–11.1.2026

Originally trained as a filmmaker, Guan Xiao produces works and exhibitions that trigger an impulse to tell stories about what we see. Employing an array of elements – some meticulously hand-crafted, others mass-produced – she references a broad range of cultural material. Objects and images are defamiliarised to create ambiguous, semi-fictional environments. Her first solo exhibition in Austria presents an entirely new body of sculpture and painting. It takes what the artist describes as the ‘ambiguous life stage’ of the teenager as a reference for works that embody the currents, conflicts and absurdities of a society impacted by the values of capitalism and liberalism.

‘Teenager’ describes a state of being: unresolved, simple yet direct, ever-changing, naive, silly, fleeting yet intense, uncompromising, reckless, riddled with doubt yet blindly trusting. It carries the raw wildness of the body and the spiritual, ceaseless quest for life’s meaning. This, too, is how I see Asia: suspended between devotion to restraint and the alchemy of identity – romanticism woven into realism.

– Guan Xiao

Questions of progress and civilisation or tradition and spirituality are central to Guan Xiao’s practice. Here they are addressed via fundamental subjects such as food, clothing and shelter. The ‘teenager’ is used as a metaphor for a society that the artist describes as conflicted by a legacy of philosophical and social values that are ‘in direct opposition’ to the economic system of capitalism. In her interview for the exhibition catalogue Guan Xiao explains:

China’s imperial history and Confucianism praise restraint and suppress individuality. Yet subcultures, independent cultures throughout history emphasise individuality [...]. This contradiction is fundamentally between the philosophical systems of Asia and the economic system of capitalism – a conflict between two modes of thought [...]. You might say capitalism is about ‘construction’, while Asian philosophy is about ‘deconstruction.’

Nine sculptures in the exhibition employ the natural form of tree roots which have been cast in brass and painted in a range of colours. The works belong to an ongoing series that Guan Xiao began in 2018. They refer to the Chinese custom of displaying polished tree roots in domestic settings. The practice of root carving dates back to the Warring States Period (474–221 BC). Guan Xiao has described such objects as functioning like a ‘readymade’, which she adopts for their contradictory associations:

Tree roots in Chinese culture carry traditional associations but as objects they’ve become a cliché. They’re used as decoration and have become a status symbol in living rooms [...]. From a conservative perspective [the tree root] is a symbol of wealth, while others might trace its aesthetic value back further to a more historical, naturalist worldview.

Guan Xiao employs these organic forms together with precision-engineered motorcycle parts. This treatment creates an equivalence between two apparently antithetical objects; one natural, the other industrially-manufactured; one unique, the other mass-produced.

Each work is given a title and a short inscription that can be read like a fragment of narrative that serves to underscore its anthropomorphic aspects. Several of the texts describe attributes associated with animals or mythical creatures, for instance

‘wings’ for *Flyingnest*; ‘hoof-footed’ for *Trotflute*; ‘serpentine’ for *Glitea* and ‘dragon’ for *Jeanake*. Other works are given human characteristics, such as the ‘dancer’ *Lazuloid*, the warrior-like *Cyclemony* or the athletic *Vibragrass*. Their collective presence in the exhibition and as an ongoing, ever-expanding series in the artist’s practice bears associations to character construction in contemporary gaming cultures such as *Pokémon* where species proliferate in large numbers:

My sculptures have always embraced both abstract and figurative possibilities and these are guided by the character of the tree roots themselves: the natural form. One part remains abstract, conceptual and related to the specific object, while the figurative possibilities can result in certain characters and the suggestion of narrative within the work [...] Sculpture becomes a game between the artist and an audience, playing with perceptions. The works are puzzles to decipher [...] The sculptures can be seen as characters with actions, or just normal daily movements.

Two works *PVC Highway* and *Midnight Pancake* are accompanied by short stories. The text for *PVC Highway* describes a motorcycle ride in a desolate, post-industrial landscape:

He would ride along the expressway, until the next town. Stop for a simple lunch, then ride back again. If he had a whole day, he would go to the mountain airport. The road was long, passing through several tunnels, past a small hydroelectric plant, climbing to the highest peak in the area. A flat-topped mountain, the air was always colder than in town. Only two flights a week, most of the time the place lay deserted. No people. No cars. An empty terminal. An empty hotel. Quiet, as if the village had been abandoned for years. The frying pan of the wind was always on. It swept through the parking lot, swaying the grass between the cracks in the stone slabs. It scoured the mountain top clean. Everything pale grey, as if every trace of colour had been blown away like dust.

The text ends with the question: ‘Do highways ever end? Or do they all, in some way, eventually join together?’ The story accompanying *Midnight Pancake* also describes a journey, although this one is made between restlessness and sleep, between consciousness and unconsciousness:

Slowly, she forgot whether she was waiting for sleep or for sound. Like drifting in a quiet, empty pool at one in the afternoon, neither asleep nor awake, only waiting.

The protagonist eventually falls asleep and then awakes at ‘the kitchen table’ to strawberries and ‘fresh pancakes, warm and steaming’ with ‘golden honey slowly dripping down their edges’. The two narratives, with their respective solitary male and female characters serve to underscore a relationship between the two sculptures which figure as counterparts in the exhibition.

Other works assume an architectural aspect. Two columns, one pink, the other blue, recall the form of modernist, monumental sculpture such as Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column* (first conceived in 1918) in their modular configuration. Covered in coloured, synthetic fur and decorated with string lights they playfully incorporate materials associated with domestic interiors and childrens' bedrooms. Unlike Brancusi's 'infinite' form, Guan Xiao's columns end with an oversized bunch of bananas, giving the sculpture the appearance of a giant paw. Respectively entitled *Raining* and *Snowing* the works are layered with artificial symbols of the natural world extending from the fruits of the earth to the cosmos, represented by LED moon and star shapes. The latter allude to China's manufacturing history and the conflict between tradition and modernity:

China used to be the world's largest producer of electronic components. You often see them in Asian flea markets. I use them to represent subcultures, as I associate them with the films of Wong Kar-Wai, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Jia Zhangke, or Bi Gan for example. These lights are always flickering in small towns, villages or in the slums. To me, they represent a sense of nostalgia, a pure and unpretentious romanticism. The moon and star are mythical symbols. They represent dreaminess. In the teenage bedroom they're a leftover from childhood: mythical symbols displaced from reality, escaping the pressure of reality.

The exhibition space is bisected by a large sculpture entitled *Torso*. This furry, A-Frame structure can be seen to recall a tent, cave, tunnel or shrine. It signifies shelter while denying entry, an open yet closed space with which the artist refers to modern domestic space, and specifically, the bedroom:

The bedroom is a shelter, a place that carries secrets and emotions. Not only for teenagers, but for all of us, it's a private space that can also serve as a spiritual home. My work has consistently explored the idea of a spiritual home – not as a utopian or collective ideal, but as something grounded in the individual.

Torso is animated by light that mimics 'flowing water'. Cast aluminium elements take the form of tubes that 'represent the body in its most basic form, but also a river'. Scaled-up cutlery, a moka pot and a series of enlarged eggs 'stand for food and eating'. Guan Xiao refers to China's transition from an agrarian to industrial economy, where foodstuffs are intensively produced as consumable goods.

These 'old eggs' are elements that have appeared in other works. The wrinkles on their surface are there to remind us that the egg was originally a living being. I chose a fork instead of a spoon because when it is enlarged it resembles a weapon. As an object it has a coldness about it and eating itself is also connected to killing. At the far end, in the 'moka pot', I placed sugar instead of salt, because I wanted it to represent desire. So the inside of the tunnel can also be understood as a long dining table and life as a closed loop of time.

Five large paintings simulate windows on the walls of the exhibition space. These palette-shaped triptychs, each seemingly heavily daubed in paint, float ambiguously between painting and sculpture; autonomous elements or part of a compositional whole. Their titles draw associations with landscapes in diverse terrains and their abstract imagery is derived from photographs that have been transformed via a change of scale, a method deployed elsewhere in Guan Xiao's sculpture. Digital images of flowers or plants are magnified by 'zooming-in' on 'close-up photographs' pushing the camera 'to its maximum focal length'.

This becomes material for a process of abstraction whereby the three-dimensional subject is translated to a graphic composition before being built up as a textured image. Guan Xiao explains:

I use marker pens of various sizes to recreate the surface in black and white on paper – reducing it to basic geometric elements like squares, lines and circles. These sketches are then transferred as line drawings onto the panels before I begin developing textural layers using gesso and sculpting paste.

Biography

Guan Xiao (b. 1983, Chongqing, China) has held solo exhibitions at Bonner Kunstverein; Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis (both 2019); Kunsthalle Winterthur (2018); Jeu de Paume, Paris (2016); K11 Art Foundation, Shanghai and ICA, London (both 2016). Her work has also been exhibited at Start Museum, Shanghai (2024); Mudam Luxembourg (2023, 2021); Museum Ludwig, Cologne (2023); Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen (2022); the 34th Bienal de São Paulo; the 58th Belgrade Biennale (both 2021); Kunstmuseum St. Gallen; Sharjah Art Foundation (both 2020); Migros Museum, Zurich (2019); the 57th Venice Biennale; Julia Stoschek Collection, Berlin (both 2017); the 9th Berlin Biennale; ZKM, Karlsruhe (both 2016) and the 13th Biennale de Lyon (2015). Her public art commissions include Skulpturenpark Köln (2020) and High Line, New York (2017). She lives and works in Beijing.

Exhibition Publication

The exhibition is accompanied by the first monograph on Guan Xiao. Published in English and German it includes new essays by Chelsea Qianxi Liu, curator at UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing and Sarah Johanna Theurer, curator at Haus der Kunst, Munich alongside an extensive interview between the artist and Michelle Cotton, Artistic Director Kunsthalle Wien.

Public Programme

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| 7.10. | 18:00 | | Artist Talk: Guan Xiao in conversation with Sarah Johanna Theurer, Curator Haus der Kunst, Munich (EN) |
| 10.10. | 18:30 | | Film Screening and Q&A with Guan Xiao and Anna Marckwald (EN) |
| 16.10. | 18:00 | | Guided Tour (DE) |
| 6.11. | 18:00 | | Guided Tour (EN) |
| 11.11. | 18:00 | | Tour in Austrian Sign Language (ÖGS/DE) |
| 20.11. | 18:00 | | Curator's Tour with Anna Marckwald (DE) |
| 4.12. | 18:30 | | Workshop with Mirela Baciak, Director Salzburger Kunstverein (EN) |
| 8.1. | 18:00 | | Guided Tour (DE) |

Guided tours are offered in English, German, Einfache Sprache [Plain German] and Austrian Sign Language.

Full programme details for the exhibition are available online:



Limited Edition

Guan Xiao has created an editioned sculpture as part of Kunsthalle Wien's new series of artists' editions. *Soda* (2025) reproduces a motif that recurs in the artist's sculpture, an idealised, oversized apple. The work refers to the seemingly flawless consumer goods sold in supermarkets, where food is often disconnected from the actual conditions of its production.

Guan Xiao

Soda, 2025

Edition of 15 + 1 AP

20 x 18,5 x 18,3 cm

Brass, acrylic

Certificate of origin, numbered and signed

€ 1,000

Kunsthalle Wien's editions are available from the shop at Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier and Karlsplatz as well as online. Sales proceeds support Kunsthalle Wien's programme.

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DERSTANDARD



VÖSLAUER

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