

Zadie Xa: Long ago when tigers smoked

Shrine Painting 1: Hemlock, 2022

Shrine Painting 2: Western Yellowcedar, 2022

Shrine Painting 3: Western Redcedar, 2022

Hand-sewn and machine stitched linen, wooden dowse

The three hanging patchwork tapestries are made of simple linen material inspired by traditional Korean patchwork making. Sometimes used as domestic wrapping cloth, this technique gathers pieces of various leftover fabrics which are stitched together. Resonating with traditional quilting practices found in many communities all over the world, these textile works use colours connected to Korean spirituality.

Each tapestry is named after an indigenous tree found in British Columbia and Vancouver, where the artist is born: Hemlock, Western Yellow Cedar and Western Red Cedar. The textile artworks therefore function as trees and holding a connection with her native area. Hanged together, these works form a kind of a forest and they guide you through the exhibition space, creating channels and trails, which audiences are invited to walk through in search for the tiger.

Tricksters, Mountains Beasts and Servants to the Sacred, 2022

Oil on canvas

The oil painting shows three tigers situated in a tree on a mountain, shrouded in mist against the backdrop of a full moon. The orange, pipe smoking tiger in the foreground represents the ominous tiger and references the tiger puppet from The Box's collection, also on display in the exhibition. The three eyed white tiger is a symbol of the supernatural, while the darker tiger perched on a branch at the back of the painting is a direct allusion to the 2022 Chinese Zodiac Year of the black water tiger.

The two white rabbits in the foreground references a connection to folktales whereby tigers and rabbits are often featured together, the rabbit usually seen to outwit the tiger. The tiger is also a familiar animal within South East Asian imagery and folktales, often appearing as a motif in connection to Aristocracy and the upper class. The dynamic between the rabbit and tiger is also a reference to class systems within Asian folklores.

Tigers can no longer be found in Korea, however they still remain a prominent cultural symbol.

Black Water Tiger, 2022
Horangi, 2022
White Tiger Mountain Keeper, 2022

Machine and hand sewn linen and oil paint on mixed media

Xa created these puppets as a response to the 19th century Myanmar tiger puppet that the Box had as part of its own collection. It is the first time the artist has made puppets.

Each of the puppets' colourful bodies are made from linen, and the feet and heads are made from mixed media and oil paint. The colourful linen bodies replicate the same textile qualities as seen on the textile works, inspired by traditional Korean patchwork.

The three puppets are the same characters painted in 'Tricksters, Mountain Beasts and Servants to the Sacred'. The three tigers are called 'Black Water Tiger' (tiger with its tongue out) 'White Tiger Mountain Keeper' (three eyed white tiger) and 'Horangi' (green and yellow eyed tiger).

The puppets, through their medium and symbolism, create a dynamic and joyful dialogue among the elements of the exhibition. Within much of South East Asia, puppets play a significant role in storytelling and entertainment, with popularity of Marionette shows around the continent. In Myanmar a tiger (kyar) is a common sight in Yoke thé, or traditional Marionette shows. Appearing as a staple motif, the tiger is seen to be 'moody and cunning' in the shows. As well as for entertainment purposes, the puppet shows hold ritualistic significance within communities, it is believed that the puppet shows summon helpful spirits and dispel harmful ones, and are performed to ensure a successful harvest and other blessings.

In Korean folktales, tigers are often portrayed as a symbol of aristocracy or the upper class, they are also usually portrayed as a fool; outwitted by the rabbit and gentle natured, unlike the attributes that are usually associated with the ferocity of a tiger as a predator. 'Black Water Tiger' bears his teeth with lips curled up, this is a common depiction of the tiger, a signature characteristic of the tiger. In Korean art the ferocious roar of a tiger is never depicted; instead the tigers will be shown with either a stern expression, as seen on 'White Tiger Mountain Keeper', or as a grin as seen on 'Horangi'.