



Ran Zhou in studio, February 2018.  
Photographed by Arsebel Gancena.

# Ran Zhou: History in the Present Tense

Raina Cameron

Ran Zhou is currently pursuing a double honours degree in visual art and art history at UBC. Zhou has developed and refined her practice through her experiences of both Eastern and Western culture, by addressing themes such as globalization, national restriction, and tradition. *The Map Series* is a multi-piece art project that includes various mediums relating to Chinese social issues, city memoirs, and self-identification within cultural gaps. It is the work selected to be of primary focus in this interview, as the exploration of personal, political, and historical issues and experiences have been addressed and challenged by Zhou in many creative and compelling ways. *The Map Series* is currently a three-part series, including *The Hidden City*, a set of three charcoal drawings, *Beijing Tourist Map*, an installation piece, and *The Diary of Destroying a Map*, an installation including a performance. Zhou's work combines the past and the present of China's geography and urban development through a personal point of view. Zhou's artwork aims to break the confines of comfort and to express cultural anxieties in order to lead its way back to self-recognition. Zhou has been unable to explore many of these topics previously due to political sensitivity in China, and UBC has offered an environment of creative pursuit for her art. Zhou has said herself that "recognizing where I came from is just the first step for me to get a clear understanding of where I am going."

## Can you talk about how you ended up in Vancouver, studying at UBC?

I was born in Yantai, Shandong province in China, a second-tier city. Then I moved to Beijing to an international high school alone when I was fifteen. It was the first time that I made decisions on my own. To be honest, I was not happy in my hometown. I just couldn't fit into the system. Eventually, I applied for university in

Canada. UBC was my first choice—it promotes cultural diversity. I think it was destined.

## What led you to expression through artwork?

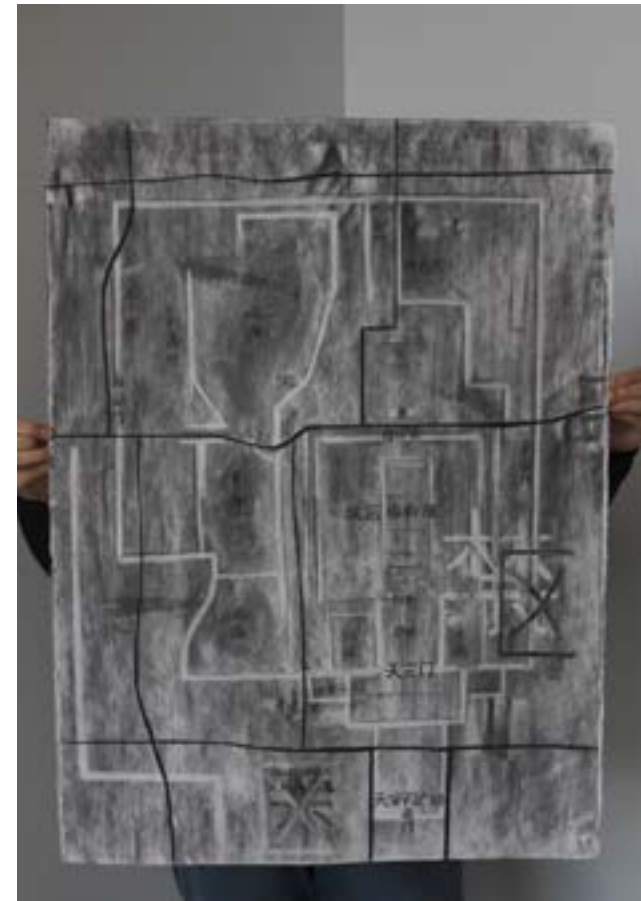
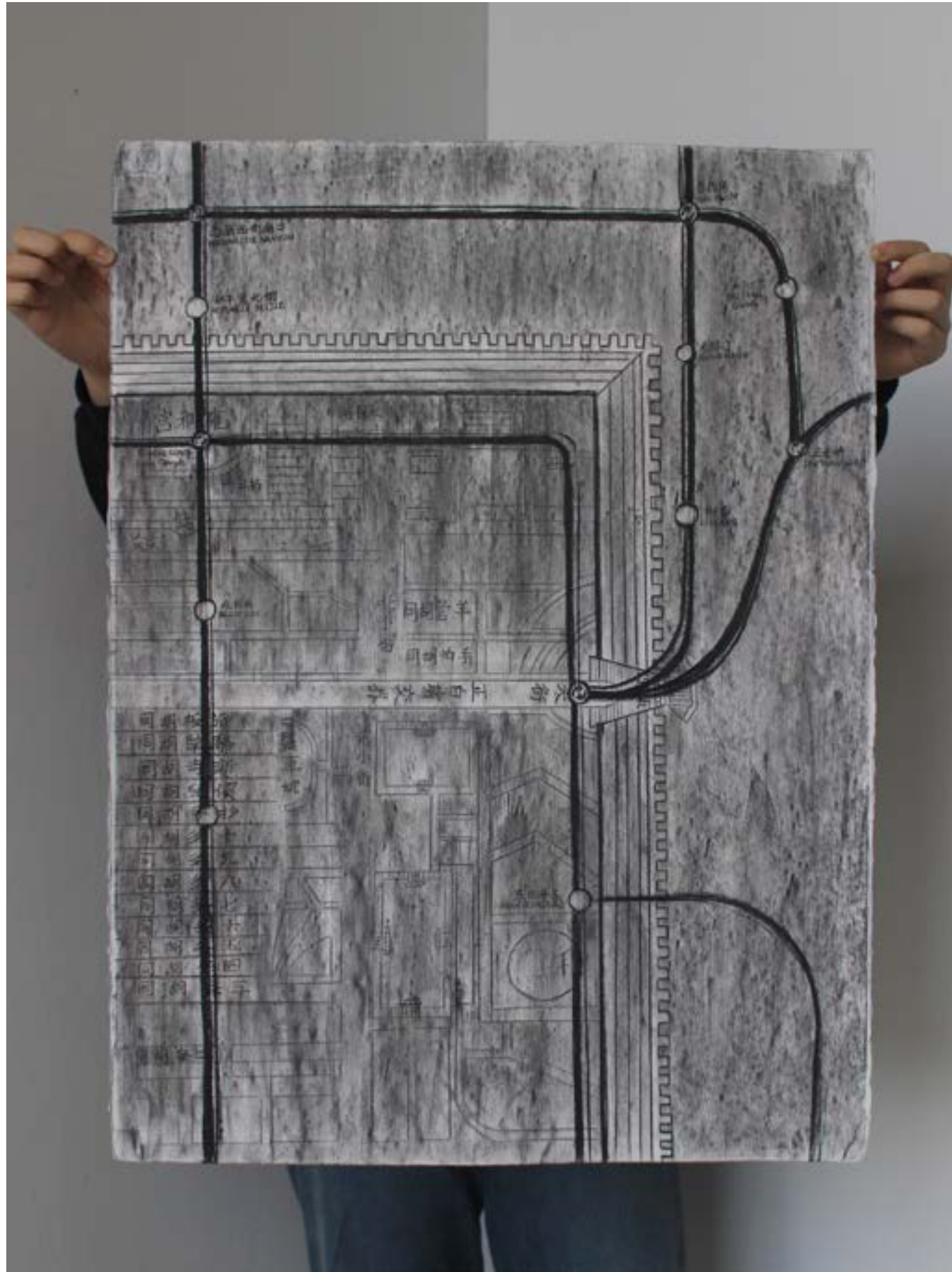
I value every chance to create things, [and to] express my inner thoughts. I used to be a Chinese online writer but it didn't last long ... I found that I had already emptied myself. Writing takes inner energy. So I decided to take a break from writing and turned my eyes to art, another battlefield of creating things. Visual art is different in that it allows the space of multidimensional feeling and more possibilities to express. Also, visual arts courses have pushed me to explore the relationship between concept and ways of expression. Thinking about concept requires me to research, to see, to think.

## How did you decide what content you wanted your artwork to relate to?

I started to think about what I have. I have [a] different cultural background, and I have experience from moving to another country. Different languages, different concepts of value, different modes of thinking. I was still not special among all of the Chinese students abroad, but I'm sure not everyone was able to think about the gap between the two cultures systematically. For me, the inconvenience and the hardship fitting into the new environment is just a kind of homesickness. Then I realized staying in a different country is the best opportunity for me to look back to my country and the culture/ideology that I grew up with.

## What has been your medium of choice?

I started with pencil, charcoal, acrylic, and oil paint to create. I enjoy drawing, but I found it limits me—my feelings cannot be



*The Hidden City*, charcoal drawing, *The Map* series, 2017. Photographed by Arselbel Gancena.



*Beijing Tourist Map* 北京旅游地图, fabric installation *The Map* series, 2017.  
Photographed by Arsel Gancena.



*The Loss*, detail of triptych, ink and marker on canvas, 2016.  
Photographed by Arsebel Gancena.

expressed through these normal mediums. But in Gu's class [Gu Xiong, Zhou's professor and boss], he encouraged us to draw with ink on rice paper. I enjoyed using ink to paint, but not on rice paper. The quality of rice paper requires precise control of the brushstroke and is so thin that you cannot make changes on your drawings. I was inspired; why don't I apply ink on canvas? I did some experimenting, and found it works well together. Ink is an Eastern material, but canvas is widely used in the West, and this kind of combination is just like myself. Then I developed my artistic expression to more three-dimensional ways, such as installation, combined with video, performance. Through motions and audio, viewers can hear it, maybe smell it, touch it, and walk around it. It has much more space to pass messages that are unspeakable or cannot be drawn.

**Can you talk about your work *The Map Series*, and how it began?**

It was based on my experience living in Beijing. At that time, I found that people didn't pay much attention to the protection of historical buildings. As many gorgeous, strange, modern buildings were built up, the old houses, courtyards, and walls became "useless," taken down without further consideration. With Beijing growing fast, the historical evidence that defines Beijing is rapidly disappearing. If all of this was gone, what else could be left? Many of my works are based on history and culture. Experimentation with materials also requires me to do research on certain topics, such as the history of Beijing's urban extension, the evolution of structure planning on certain areas, the pictures of the Cultural Revolution and the real history, behind the scenes, what happened and what it looks like in a textbook.

**Will you continue *The Map Series*?**

The three parts of *The Map Series* comes to an end temporarily. I don't want to over-read anything I'm not 100% sure about. The whole history of the development of a city is not simple to criticize, so I only say what I can feel based on what I got from my research. If something new comes in my mind, I'll definitely continue doing it. It could overturn my previous thoughts. Everything is totally expected and possible.

**What are some aspirations for your future work?**

Most of my work is based on rethinking the history and culture of a country. To explore the nature of culture, and the nature of the culture that I came from, is what I want to achieve in the end of everything. It includes defining my personal identity, which may exceed the national boundaries. I am not eager to criticize anything—anything real is rational; every existence is rational and reasonable. But what I criticize in my artworks does not have much personal emotion within it. There, criticism exists objectively. Revealing the misunderstandings of truth and problems is a necessary step for me to read my culture and I don't expect

everyone understand that. The next step after these social issues would be linking my personal existence into my work, the East, the West. Something more complicated and unspeakable may be shown in the work. But I'm still not quite sure about what exactly it is going to be.

Raina Cameron's interview with Ran Zhou took place on January 24, 2018.