

# SARAH SZE

VICTORIA MIRO VENICE

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'The paintings, the video, the sculptures – all of the work – is about being captured in a continual state of transition.'

SARAH SZE

Sarah Sze's most recent immersive environments explore how images are constructed and memories are formed. In a new moving-image installation, entitled *Sleepers*, 2024, Sze transforms the gallery with an array of ever-changing projections suspended throughout the space that coalesce as both *memento mori* and *memento vivere* – a reminder that life is transient, and also that life must be lived. Expanding upon these notions, Sze's latest series of paintings are shown in surroundings that bring the specific *mise-en-scène* of her New York studio to a nearby Venetian apartment, evoking a sense that the artist has just stepped away from her place of work, and offering an unparalleled and intimate encounter with the processes that brought the works into being.

In the gallery, two planar arrangements fill the space and appear to intersect; planes entirely comprised of, and at the same time fragmented by, a collection of moving images displayed on hand-torn paper screens. These images are like portals through which we glimpse moments of existence, from the humble to the sublime, the local to the universal. The convergence of the two planes – their vanishing point – is not a fixed horizon but instead is another threshold: a window onto a body of water, a canal in Venice, itself a place of vanishing and discovery. Creating a sense of infinite possibilities, so that, in the process of looking, the eye passes through one space that opens promptly onto another, is exemplary of Sze's practice. She continuously reminds us that an image is not only a picture but that it is also a view.

Essential to Sze's approach to moving image is that the digital – the video image itself – is a material to sculpt experience and choreograph the act of looking. Most frequently we think in binary terms of the analogue and the digital, yet Sze points to the fact that everything we receive as visual information is material that can be shaped, formed and manipulated like any other. The constellation of moving images within her new installation bears an organic temporality in the sense that each image grows and deteriorates within its own fleeting lifespan. As with a poetic or choral refrain, at times the entire composition comes together in instants of total cohesion – a deep intake of breath, a catharsis of sorts. This cohesion, too, falls apart to enable each of the screens to come to life once again, in yet another form.

Of significance is how this orchestration of imagery is generative over time, and how, as the work develops, something remains lost: it accumulates, it disintegrates, and while we anticipate the flickering arrival of every next image, we somehow mourn the one that evaded our grasp. Interested in shattering the singularity of an image, and in dismantling any hierarchy of visual material, fundamentally Sze questions the nature of looking. She explores the effects of how images emerge, and how, through their emergence, through their murmur and their echoes, they create within us an emotional and psychical shift.

The projections invite the viewer to navigate the work visually, forming a personal narrative by travelling from one moving image to the next. This wayfinding is fluid and emancipatory, as though the visual journey is itself the destination. As with Chris Marker's *La Jetée*, 1962, a film comprised entirely of photographic stills and a frequent point of reference for Sze, meaning lies in the juxtaposition of images, in the space and rhythm between them, and in the installation the viewer is given complete freedom to create their own intuitive and intellectual edit. A deeper line of enquiry in much of Sze's recent work is how do we combine images, forging new neural pathways to form memories, and how do these memories dissolve, how do they recreate themselves? Many of our formational life experiences are now mediated via an exchange of images, and at its most philosophical core, Sze's work asks how this affects what it means to be alive, to be human.

In the salon rooms of an apartment opposite the gallery, Sze creates a total environment with a series of paintings presented within a simulation of the space in which they were made. Previously, Sze has devised installations which evoke the sense that a site is live, that an activity has just taken place, or perhaps is just about to happen. As the domestic rooms of a Venetian apartment reveal themselves to be an artist's place of work, the act of making is aligned with the act of looking. Paintings on view (and some whose presence is understood *in absentia*) are displayed within a simulacrum of Sze's New York studio, the earliest context in which the paintings exist. Frisson occurs, as Sze remarks, 'when the viewer recognizes they are bridging a gap in time between the studio and the exhibition'. This *mise-en-scène*, an environmental artwork titled *The Lost Paintings*, is an archive of the paintings at the point of creation as well as a framing device for the works on view, and accurately reflects the specific gestures that engendered the paintings' existence. *The Lost Paintings* is in itself an image: an image, reproduced as a wall covering, of Sze's formative painterly marks made in the studio – a moment captured in time, a conversation between the artist and the work. *The Lost Paintings* also holds paintings – it is after all their primary context

– and offers the paintings as portals that open to other possibilities for discovery. In Sze's work, one medium frequently intimates another: a painting is not only a painting, but also a photograph, a print, a drawing, a digital reference, an active site and a position from which to perceive the world and ourselves.

With this series of paintings, Sze's enquiry is one of orientation: how does one locate oneself in a painting, and how can a painting's effect be one of disorientation? Compositionally complex, the works incorporate both art historical approaches and digital techniques. Considerations of perspective are crucial as Sze frequently employs devices that use two-dimensional space to create three, combining both Eastern isometric and Western single-point methodologies. Landscape, or the symbolic representation of landscape, is prevalent in these new works, as in *Meridian*, *Night Vision*, and *Lost Hour* (all 2024). Drawing on the tradition of spatial depth in Chinese painting, in which flat planes are used to establish a sense of foreground and background, Sze refreshes and updates this approach with an interest in landscape, not for what it depicts, but how it behaves: its entropy, decay, growth and evolution. For Sze, 'it is about capturing a moment in time when it is in transformation'.

The theoretical investigations of early Modern painterly movements such as Pointillism and Impressionism were grounded in aspects of human perception, in that the mind is always working to assemble images, whether points of colour, points of light or fragments of form – a foundational understanding that, as with all of Sze's oeuvre, the whole is ultimately greater than the sum of its individual parts. Sze is interested in the idea that elements in painting can be used to locate oneself and that these elements can subversively be made to thwart this drive to locate: as exemplified in *Unravel* and *Shimmer* (both 2024), they weave, become lost and re-emerge, shift between near and far distance, and become intertwined.

At all times, we are made profoundly aware that these are paintings, yet the strategy of disorientation empowers the viewer to piece them together and take them apart. Sze's paintings are something one looks *throughout* rather than looks *at*. As with Sze's video work, her paintings embody a certain fragility, always slipping into and out of full view – not unlike the attempt to find the precise language to describe them.

A sense of discovery has informed all of Sze's oeuvre, and the experience of Venice as a place, its unique invitation to wander, is echoed within the exhibition. All of her newest works incorporate imagery – even if layered and hidden – that the artist has captured or created in the city. Sze consistently rewards the act of looking; in her work, entire worlds unfold, one portal to the next, time and again. ● ERIN MANN