

Hidden Within Matter: Zhou Xiaohu & Zhang Yibei

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UCCA Clay presents “Hidden Within Matter: Zhou Xiaohu & Zhang Yibei” from April 3 to June 21, 2026, bringing together brand-new UCCA-commissioned pieces alongside other recent work from both artists. Through installation, sculpture, animation, and other media, Zhou and Zhang explore the latent agency within material itself. Taking “the object” as its point of departure, the exhibition examines the operative role of materials across history, perception, and everyday life, and considers how it continually reconfigures the boundaries between nature and technology, the artificial and the ecological.

Exhibition Period:

2026.4.3 - 2026.6.21

Location:

Gallery 1 and Gallery 2

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YIXING, China—From April 3 to June 21, 2026, UCCA Clay presents “Hidden Within Matter: Zhou Xiaohu & Zhang Yibei.” The exhibition features a series of newly commissioned works and other recent creations from the two artists, foregrounding the agency inherent to matter through multimedia practices such as installation, sculpture, animation, and archival studies. Inviting the audience to move beyond a traditional human-centric viewpoint, the exhibition posits “things” as narrators capable of expressing and conveying information. It reconsiders how objects participate in shaping our cognition, history, and daily lives through their material presence, while continuously blurring and reconfiguring the boundaries between the natural and the urban, the artificial and the ecological. This exhibition is curated by Yao Mengxi.

The title “Hidden Within Matter” unfolds along two intertwined dimensions. On one hand, matter itself contains information—inscriptions sedimented over the processes of formation, circulation, and persistent existence, rather than bestowed by human language. These traces serve not only as witnesses to history, but also as active agents in its making. On the other hand, matter is intrinsically capable of expressing and creating; rather than inert vessels awaiting interpretation, materials continuously interact with the world through their inherent properties, subtly permeating, interweaving with, and reshaping the boundaries often taken for granted. Through distinct artistic trajectories, Zhou Xiaohu (b. 1960, Changzhou) and Zhang Yibei (b. 1992, Daqing) each respond to these propositions, prompting viewers to re-examine both past and present from the perspective of “things,” and to attend to the active role material takes within social, economic, and ecological

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contexts.

In Gallery 1, Zhou Xiaohu presents “Anchor of Asia | Shipwrecked Porcelain and Ballast Stones.” The project unfolds along the historical trajectory of “ceramics–trade–finance–culture,” transforming the gallery into a maritime trading theater structured around porcelain. Here, the material participation in the global system of governance, economy, and culture over time becomes perceptible through tangible textures of specific objects. These textures, in return, archive parts of history that are otherwise forgotten.

Following his 2024 solo exhibition “Permaculture,” Zhou continues this exploration into materiality with a more concentrated focus on ceramics as a medium. Drawing on the fragments of porcelain from the Nanhai I shipwreck and ballast stones from Macao as points of departure, Zhou imaginatively reconstructs the material networks embedded within ceramic trade through a number of newly commissioned works. For example, *A Piece of Sea - Shipwrecked Porcelain* (2026) recreates the excavation of Chinese porcelain from a historical shipwreck, opening an entry point into the global history of ceramic exchange. *The Hidden History of Ceramics* (2026) imaginatively traces out the misinterpretations and anecdotes generated around ceramics over the course of their global circulation. Meanwhile, *Ceramic Geography: Hidden History* (2026), a dual-channel clay animation, gestures toward those histories that, though materially real, remain only partially accessible. From the vantage point of “ceramic geography,” pottery emerges as an active participant in history, beyond the role of a passive commodity in transit. Through animation, sculptural installation, and other forms, clay expresses itself through Zhou’s artistic practice with a renewed material perspective—one that reconsiders the hidden histories of maritime trade while continuing to generate new meanings within a contemporary cultural framework.

Moving on to Gallery 2, Zhang Yibei presents “Murmurs of Water and Warblings of Birds.” In this project, she turns her attention to the present moment through the lens of “phenology” (the study of cycles in nature), examining the entanglement and co-existence of nature and the artificial, life and technology, material and perception. The UCCA-commissioned *Murmurs of Water and Warblings of Birds* (2026) takes a cell phone tower disguised as a tree as its central element. Incorporating cast aluminum, marble and found objects into its spatial structure, the work constructs a perceptual field that audiences are free to ramble. Research into phenology brought the artist profound revelations—just as seasonality and climate shape the cycles of flowers blooming and animal migration, the multi-layered

networks connecting the environment and living things similarly condition how the world is perceived.

Although the work's title evokes a natural soundscape of waterflows and birdsongs, it is actually silent. This deliberate quietness, along with the marble-carved seeds and internal organs, serve to activate the viewer's own sensory awareness, directing their attention toward the invisible network of phenology formed by otherwise imperceptible circulations of matter and exchanges of information—including mobile coverage, wind, seeds, and the coordinated workings of internal organs. Visitors are invited to wander through the installation as if they themselves were sensing devices: if we remain open to all signals, what might we hear? Referencing the framework proposed by Donna Haraway, we may see ourselves as part of a knotted-together network of “sympoiesis” (making-with). In a state of quiet observation, we can reflect on how the artificial intertwines with the natural, how technology becomes internalized as part of life, and how matter quietly records stories of coexistence between humans and the natural world. Also featured is *Recipes for Breathing* (2024), a seashell form fitted with hinges and clasps, which enters into dialogue with Zhou Xiaohu's investigations into maritime remnants, together extending the narrative dimensions of material.

As fragments of shipwrecked ceramics enter into quiet resonance with cell phone towers camouflaged as trees, a dual narrative of matter unfolds within the exhibition space. These materials are at once sediments of history and traces of the present—tracing the trajectories of civilizational exchange while simultaneously weaving networks of coexistence between life and technology. Through the respective practices of Zhou Xiaohu and Zhang Yibei, “Hidden Within Matter” offers a profound examination of the manifold agency of material across temporalities and conditions—between past and present, nature and technology, life and environment. In doing so, the exhibition expands the possibilities of matter as a narrative agent, prompting a deeper reflection on materiality, perception, and the “sympoietic” orders of existence.

#### About the Artists

##### Zhou Xiaohu

Zhou Xiaohu (b. 1960, Changzhou; lives and works in Beijing) graduated from the Sichuan

Fine Arts Institute and is regarded as a pioneering figure in Chinese contemporary art. Since 1998, Zhou has incorporated computer-assisted techniques into his practice, experimenting with stop-motion animation and video installation. His work moves freely across disciplines, encompassing animation, video installation, sculpture, painting, and performance-based projects. Zhou's practice is informed by anthropological inquiry and observations of possible ways of living. He focuses on hybrid forms of theater and mixed-media art, employing generalized readymades and "automatic writing" as methodological strategies to expand the boundaries of artistic expression.

### **Zhang Yibei**

Zhang Yibei (b. 1992, Daqing; lives and works in Beijing) graduated with a Master's degree in Sculpture from the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London and a Bachelor's degree in Sculpture from University of the Arts London (UAL). Her practice starts with a proposition rethinking the relationship between artist, material, and ideation.

Select recent exhibitions include: "Yibei Zhang: Please No Helmet" (Longlati, Shanghai, 2024); "A Vase in Everything" (BANK/MABSOCIETY, Shanghai, 2021). She has presented in group exhibitions including: "Echoes Among Us: Jing'an International Sculpture Project 2024" (Jingan District, Shanghai, 2024); "BODILY REACTION: VITALIZING THE BARE LIFE" (Taikang Space, Beijing, 2023); and "The Disconnect Generation" (Song Art Museum, Beijing, 2022). Zhang has been honored with the UCCA Young Associates' Choice Award 2024 and the 2019 Tomorrow Sculpture Awards, in addition to being shortlisted at the 2021 Huayu Youth Award 2021. She is also the recipient of Longlati Foundation's Artist-in-Residence Program from 2022-23.

### **Support and Sponsorship**

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### **Public Programs**

UCCA will curate a series of dynamic public programs throughout the exhibition period of "Hidden Within Matter." On the opening day, the exhibition curator will join the two participating artists for a special guided tour, offering visitors an intimate look at the works

and an in-depth introduction to the exhibition's narrative and its interwoven lines of inquiry. During the run of the exhibition, UCCA will also invite scholars from related fields to participate in a Conversation with audiences. The discussion will consider the trade histories connected through ceramics, as well as media methodologies, while further extending to questions of historical narrative, material circulation, and visual construction explored in Zhou Xiaohu's "Anchor of Asia."

In parallel, a Workshop developed in response to Zhang Yibei's *Murmurs of Water and Warblings of Birds* will take the museum as its point of departure and invite participants to observe the surrounding environment and ecology. This aims to encourage participants to reconsider their relationship to place and to renew awareness of everyday detail and lived experience through walking, listening, and sensing. For the latest updates on our events, please visit the official UCCA website and our social media platforms, including WeChat.

#### **About UCCA**

UCCA Center for Contemporary Art is a leading institution of contemporary art that serves as a vital bridge connecting Chinese art with the global art scene. Guided by the mission of "bringing the best in art to a wider audience," UCCA operates a constellation of three distinct museums, each with unique architectural styles and exhibition programs, offering audiences a rich array of exhibitions, public programs, and educational activities. Since its founding in Beijing in 2007, UCCA has welcomed more than ten million visitors to over 200 exhibitions that systematically explore the key historical narratives of Chinese contemporary art in tandem with best-in-class exhibitions of leading international artists.

#### **About UCCA Clay**

UCCA Clay is a museum situated at the intersection of ceramics and contemporary art. Located in Yixing, Jiangsu province—China's "City of Ceramics"—it anchors the city's reimagined Creative and Cultural Ceramic Avenue district. Designed by Kengo Kuma and Associates, the 2,400-square-meter building is the Japanese architect's first built work to employ clay as a primary material. Featuring a remarkable façade made of hand-fired terracotta tiles, the building showcases Yixing's renowned purple clay ("zisha") that began to be used in pottery during the Song Dynasty. UCCA Clay's program takes inspiration from the region's unique cultural heritage, drawing together Yixing's thousand-year ceramic history with UCCA's global artistic vision. The museum's exhibitions center contemporary work in the medium of ceramics by Chinese and international artists, while also offering

further context and facilitating exchange and dialogue with the wider world. Opened in 2024,  
it is the first contemporary art institution in Yixing.

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