

BASEMENT VISIONS

by Jeff Crosby

In a mirrored chamber in a basement under Saint Mark's Place, scenes of Shanghai play across five different screens, accompanied by a disconnected soundtrack of voices and songs. Scattered across the floor are small wooden stools topped with saddles from the e-scooters and motorcycles that constantly zip through the city's streets. This is the central installation in *Domestic News*, Jiajia Zhang's new solo exhibition at Swiss Institute.

The scenes onscreen, selected from an ongoing film project by Jiří Makovec, construct a panorama of Shanghai through a series of closeups and cross-sections. We see giant billboards and animated light displays dancing across skyscrapers, live river crabs being stuffed into a steamer, couples posing for wedding photos by the riverside, the dashboards of cars navigating the traffic, and a drone hovering in a shopping mall. The soundtrack, scripted by Aurelia Guo, reads like found footage, consisting of little glimpses of urban life, mass media narratives, and overheard conversations.



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Free and open to the public



Jiajia Zhang, *Self-portrait with mirrors*, 2016/2026. Courtesy of the artist.

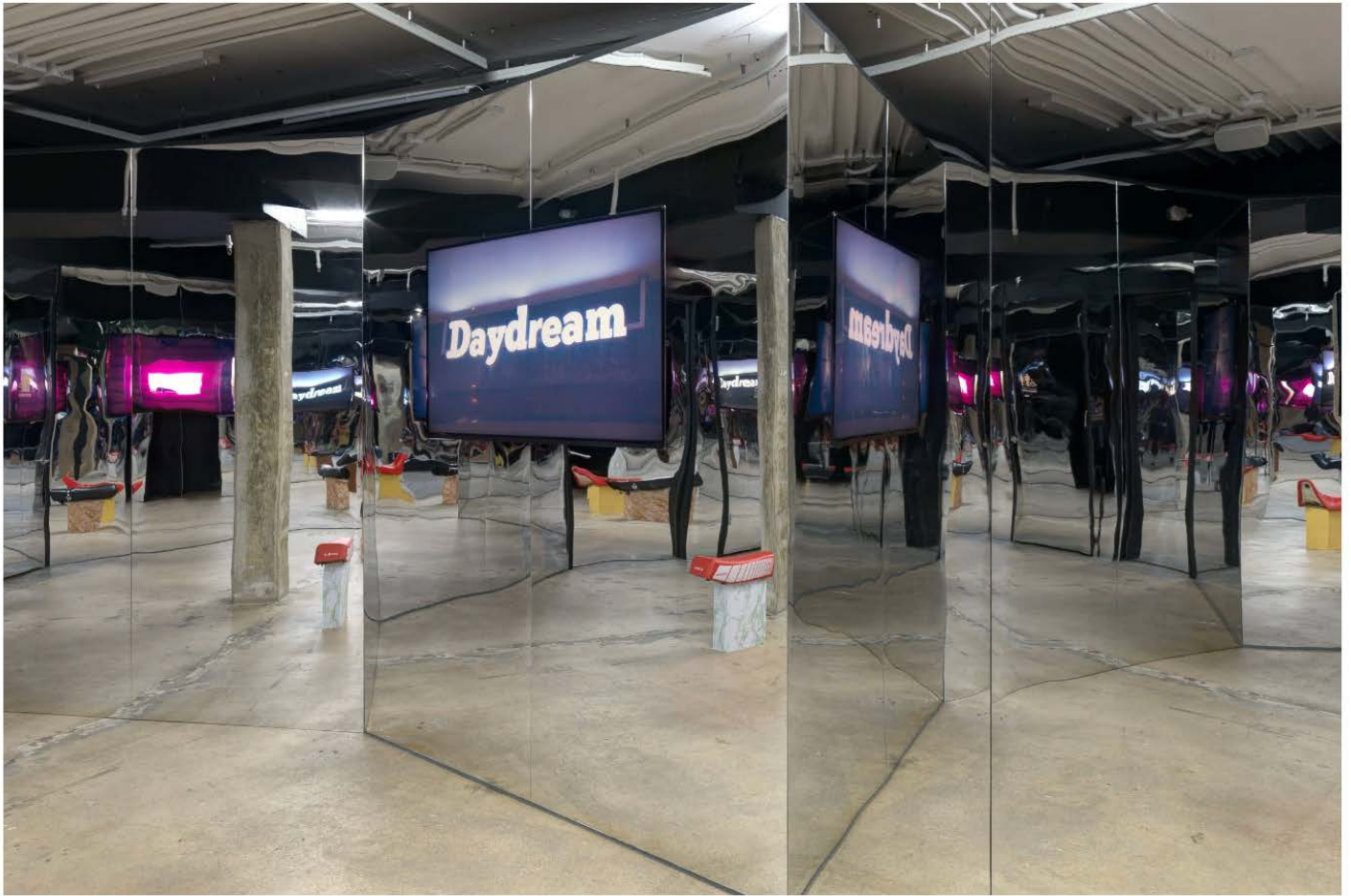
These sights and sounds are not woven together into a neat cinematic package with a clear narrative direction. With the ring of screens and the disjointed soundtrack alternating between Mandarin and English, it is more like dipping our head into a city's media feed.

This is a common thread in Zhang's practice: "the flood of images surrounds us and no one can simply jump into it. I don't always have complete control over it. I feel like a lot of works are me trying to weave found images into my personal narrative, to find something in this generic flood that is still personal enough."



Installation view of *Domestic News*. Courtesy of the Swiss Institute. Photo by Dan Bradica.

In an installation composed mainly of text from others, the artist's own personal notes are subtle, but present, with details such as the classic springtime anthem "Gong Xi," along with the flower arrangements intermittently appearing on a billboard in the stairwell, alluding to the memoirs of the artist's grandmother who lived through the Second Sino-Japanese War. Also in evidence is the artist's background in architecture and ongoing inquiries into public and private space.



Installation view of *Domestic News*. Courtesy of the Swiss Institute. Photo by Dan Bradica.

The curator describes this exhibition as “placing two imperial cities in dialogue.” This is not, however, the typical jeremiad about a rapidly rising China and American empire in decline. We do see the gleaming new skyscrapers, but we also see more intimate scenes, like an old couple lounging around a park in their pajamas. What it does provide is an opportunity for New Yorkers to ponder the seasons of change in their own city, as they sit on motorcycle seats in a basement beneath the punk rockers and brunch lines of Saint Marks Place.



Installation view of *Domestic News*. Courtesy of the Swiss Institute. Photo by Dan Bradica.

***Jiajia Zhang: Domestic News* at Swiss Institute, New York. Curated by Alison Coplan, on view through Apr 29— Jul 5, 2026**

Jeff Crosby

Jeff Crosby is a translator and curator focused on contemporary art from China. He served as Deputy Director of Contemporary Gallery Kunming from 2018 to 2024. He currently lives and works in New York, where he writes the newsletter [Art in Translation](#).