



IMAGE COURTESY OF SHUANG LI AND PERES PROJECTS

Rising artist Shuang Li tells *Tatler* why her favourite band's music reminds her of home, and how she crafted an art career from being a fan girl *By Aaina Bhargava*

Beyoncé has the Beyhive, Taylor Swift fans are Swifties, Bieber had his Beliebers, Rihanna fans are in her Navy and BTS has their Army. American punk rock band My Chemical Romance (MCR) has Shuang Li, who built an art career out of her overwhelming love for the band. She's a fan to the extent that one of her performance art pieces, *Lord of the Flies* (2022), involves 20 performers dressed as her teenage self, in a schoolgirl-inspired look: My Chemical Romance T-shirts layered over full-sleeved tees, nestled under black blazers paired with red tartan miniskirts and finished with chunky black platform loafers. She created a hive of clones that resembled an “army” of My Chemical Romance fans.

“It’s the only kind of army that should exist,” Li says of fan groups. “It’s how we relate to one another.” It’s a connection that Li found when she discovered the American band’s music and subsequent community of fans which led her to make work about fandom.

The band was particularly popular in the 2000s and 2010s, when Li was growing up in her hometown Wuyishan in southeastern China’s Fujian province. During that time, it wasn’t easy to access western music; and while surplus CDs were shipped to China as waste, holes would be punched in them as

they passed through customs to make sure they were categorised as “trash”. Despite the holes, the CDs still worked, and instead of ending up in landfills, they made their way to various suburbs in the rapidly developing country, including Li’s hometown.

When she got her hands on one of these discarded discs, Li felt an instant connection. “You didn’t really need to understand the lyrics,” Li says, explaining that the songs’ angst resonated whether or not you spoke English—but she started picking it up naturally; the band’s music “was my introduction to the language”.

MCR was formed in 2001 in suburban New Jersey by four 20-somethings on the day after the events of September 11. Naturally triggered by the attacks and

upheaval, their music was inspired by and conveyed existential dread—a feeling familiar to many teenagers, including Li; the lyrics from the song *The End*, “When I grow up I want to be nothing at all”, particularly resonated with her. A lot of the band’s music also expressed frustration at being trapped in a suburban lifestyle and finding a way out—yet another sentiment that resonated with Li. She found a community of MCR fans amid a budding subculture in China, that developed through online fan forums and creating fan art. “I encountered people encouraging each other to create fan art, and I felt encouraged to write about the music and about our lives,” she says.

Li takes her fan art to the next level with *I’m Not*, her first solo museum exhibition in the US, on view at the Swiss Institute, New York, in which the artist explores the ideas of connection, belonging, home and language through the lens of fandom. “There aren’t many artists tackling the idea of fandom and what it means, and breaking down the hierarchies between fan art and art,” says the exhibition’s curator Alison Coplan.

Creating uncharted but topical content has given Li an edge in the contemporary art world, and is certainly what earned her the solo exhibit at the Swiss Institute, which will move to the Aspen Museum of Art this autumn. She participated in this year’s Whitney Biennial 2024, *Even Better Than the Real Thing*, curated

IMAGES WILL JINCOFF (L); COURTESY OF SHUANG LI AND PERES PROJECTS (DÉJÀ VU, I’M NOT OKAY, DETAIL OF I’M NOT OKAY, MY HEART IS A BROKEN RECORD)



Previous spread: Still from Li’s *Lord of the Flies* (2022). **This page, clockwise from top:** Installation view of *I’m Not Okay* (2024); detail of *I’m Not Okay*; installation view of *My Heart is a Broken Record* (2023). **Opposite page, from left:** Artist Shuang Li; *Déjà Vu* (2022) installed in Leopoldplatz (2024)

by Chrissie Iles and Meg Onli, with Min Sun Jeon and Beatriz Cifuentes; and is also showing in a group exhibition at Karma International gallery in Zurich until mid-September. This November, the artist will open an exhibition at Prada Rongzhai in Shanghai, a renovated mansion built in 1918. The upcoming show will continue to ruminate on Li’s interest in fandom, and marks the artist’s homecoming in a momentous way, as her first solo exhibition in her home country.

Li intellectualises the ideas of home, language and belonging, and, by creating an environment that evokes nostalgia, also channels those themes through feeling, particularly in the show’s centrepiece, *I’m Not Okay* (2024). A screen, obscured by bleachers covered in multicoloured panels of translucent resin, plays a music video based on MCR’s 2004 hit single *It’s Not*

Okay (I Promise). MCR’s original video is set in a typical American high school, and acutely captures teenage angst and school memories. For Li’s rendition, she rewrote the lyrics in Mandarin and hired an acapella group in Beijing to sing them. The film depicts the troupe, identically dressed, and is conducted by a young girl who recites Li’s version of the song.

In “re-contextualising the music”, as Li puts it, she projects her own experience of growing up in a small town and “reflects herself in the band”—a hallmark quality of fan psychology. “The premise of fandom is the absence of an idol—you see yourself in them to some degree,” says Li. “But it’s also an illusion, because you might think they’re accessible but they’re really not.”

In *Heart is a Broken Record* (2023), Li captures another aspect of the fan experience: the anticipation

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— SHUANG LI



of watching your idols live and collectively expressing love for them. The installation is a heart-shaped fountain with a screen in the middle that plays found footage of the crowds and fans at MCR concerts. She cuts the footage just before the band takes the stage, capturing the pinnacle of excitement.

The work was inspired by Li never seeing the band play live until their 2022 reunion concert. “I cried so much,” the artist says. “So I wanted to compose a concert that would never start. You can only hear the fans screaming, and it really takes me back there,” she says of the build-up and anticipation.

The experience of seeing the band perform live is in stark contrast to watching them on a screen, which is how audiences see all of Li’s works—and what we’ve become accustomed to in terms of consuming



information and content today. “Her work generally thinks through our relationship to screens and the internet; how identities and interests are formed and mediated through them,” says Coplan, noting that many of Li’s works involve an element of obscuring or hiding; take the bleachers in *I’m Not*, for example, or another section of the same installation, which showcases Li’s old handwritten fan letters to MCR immortalised in resin, like some kind of abstract mosaics.

Given our current cultural climate, where social media has taken fandom to new heights, Li’s work is more relevant than ever. “I’ll definitely always be a crazy fan, but now in terms of the relationship, the general media landscape has changed so much. I think before, being a ‘fan’ had negative connotations,” the artist says, referring to the “crazy stalker fan stories” she heard growing up. “Now there are more positive associations,” she says, citing examples of BTS’s Army disrupting a Donald Trump political rally. “It’s a good time to study this shift within entertainment and fan culture.”

The staging and curation of the exhibition mirror Li’s relationship to her home, alluding to the association between finding belonging at home, away from it, and in fandom. One of her video works, *Déjà Vu* (2022), is embedded in a structure titled *Leopoldplatz* (2024) that resembles architectural models and the unfinished residential buildings that were common around mainland China when she was growing up. The country’s rapid development and urbanisation resulted in many half-built, deserted projects—whose remains are the result of a crashed market, projecting an abstracted vision of a future that never materialised.

Déjà Vu features footage of the 2022 *Lord of the Flies* Shanghai performance, which happened on the opening night of the exhibition; Li wasn’t able to attend, as travel restrictions kept her in Europe during the pandemic, and unable to return home. The “clone army”

Institute exhibition. They serve as relics of both the performance and Li’s teen years, reflecting her absence and desire to be present.

Crossing borders and Li’s relationship with her home have been a fixture in her work, and is especially pronounced through the performative aspect of her practice, often through subverting cultural tropes she observed and experienced while studying in New York. In 2015, she hung a sign board around her neck which read “Marry me for Chinese citizenship”, a tongue-in-cheek take on green-card marriages. Her performance proved how ingrained people’s biases are; most people didn’t properly register what they were reading and assumed she was asking them to marry her so she could get US citizenship.

Li’s work and current show capture the ironic dualities intrinsic in being attracted to something—in Li’s case,

A still from *Heart is a Broken Record* (2023).
Opposite page, from left: Li performing her 2015 *Will You Marry Me for Chinese Citizenship* piece; Li’s *For What You Did to Me*, and *What I’ll Do to You* (2023)



who participated in the live performance were given personalised scripts and handwritten letters to deliver to her close friends who attended the opening, while the performers wore glasses that captured the reactions. These reactions were interspersed with footage taken by a GoPro camera worn by a duck in an animal rescue centre in Geneva, where Li spent most of the pandemic. Indecipherable subtitles imposed on the film describe a town where people start jumbling words, losing the concept of grammar, and eventually the ability to speak, demonstrating both a fragility and fluidity inherent in languages when borders are crossed.

In a separate set of sculptural works, shoes worn by the performers in *Lord of the Flies*, similar to those Li wore growing up, are wrapped in and sculpted from papier mâché and interspersed throughout the Swiss

for example, My Chemical Romance—that’s far away when you’re home, and yearning for home when you’re far away from it, and how that dislocation contributes to shaping your identity. The pandemic not only transformed her relationship to home, but also to her art. “Before [Covid], I thought of art like an accessory or hobby almost. But now I need to make work to process what I went through, otherwise I wouldn’t know how to deal. This is why the idea of home has become centred in my work, and why MCR’s language—both the lyrical and visual—have really influenced my work.”

No matter where Li travels or how her definition of “belonging” might change, My Chemical Romance follows, remaining a constant fixture in the artist’s memories; after all, she says, “for me it’s the sound of home”.