



**MFA | SOCIAL**

**DOCUMENTARY**

**FILM**



**Graduate Programs**

# Documentary film has changed dramatically

over the years, evolving into a fully realized art form. Growing audiences watch nonfiction in theaters, on TV and online to see fresh global stories, and be inspired by the lives of change-makers, artists and everyday people. These stories delve into our history, inspire action and let us discover distant regions and our neighborhoods with a fresh eye. But, as evolutions in technology make it easier to create films, more content competes for the opportunity to be seen. So it becomes vital to have the talent to produce a film that stands out. Those with true fluency in the form—and a network of like-minded artists and mentors—have a crucial advantage.

SVA's MFA Social Documentary Film program fosters filmmakers who are technologically and artistically assured. Students make many films throughout the program; each allows them the freedom to experiment and hone their craft with support, guidance and critique. They are introduced to the industry through an unparalleled faculty of active, award-winning filmmakers, as well as through internships, guest speakers, film festivals, screenings and other events.

Located in the heart of New York City, "SocDoc" is part of the most active documentary film community in the world. Students work directly with accomplished filmmakers—who are faculty, mentors and collaborators—

giving students the benefit of their expertise. The department also works to foster a direct line to the production professionals who will be their best network after graduation.

SocDoc alumni have made an impressive impact. Alumni films have received more than a million dollars in production funding from Sundance Institute, ITVS, JustFilms/Ford Foundation, Jerome Foundation, CAAM, IDFA Bertha Fund, Chicken & Egg Pictures, Tribeca Film Institute, Frameline and others. They have won an Emmy and the Student Academy Award, and received multiple nominations. Alumni have been broadcast on TV, garnered industry support via international film markets, received theatrical release in the U.S. and around the globe, received countless views online and played top-tier festivals including Berlin, Sundance, IDFA, SXSW, Hot Docs, Busan and Tribeca.

Now in our 12th year, MFA SocDoc is proud to inspire and support the next generation of documentary filmmakers. A filmmaker's work is essential, now more than ever. In a time of political upheaval and a global pandemic, our films tell vital stories. No matter the topic or style—personal, political, comic or revolutionary—documentary increases our awareness of the world, and ourselves. At SVA, we are committed to realizing that potential, and we welcome the opportunity to add you to our community of storytellers.

—Maro Chermayeff, chair



# About the Program

SVA's MFA program in Social Documentary Film provides a solid foundation in the fundamentals of nonfiction filmmaking, as well as an immersion into the critical and analytical process necessary to conceptualize and develop significant, socially relevant film. It represents the convergence of the art of filmmaking, journalistic research and social activism.

Our program is open to qualified students from varying backgrounds—prior filmmaking experience is encouraged but not required. Ultimately, we are looking for passionate, insightful individuals who know how to tell a great story, and are eager to learn how best to share these stories through documentary.

Working with documentary filmmakers as teachers and mentors in a collaborative environment will not only teach students how to tell a story, it will guide them toward a lifelong career in filmmaking.

The first year's core curriculum is devoted to exploring the past, present and future of documentary film craft, while mastering the

tools and techniques needed to tell compelling stories. Each student will complete five to seven documentary shorts, in addition to other class assignments.

During the second year, students focus on their thesis films, and courses are designed to support them in their production. Students will direct their own films, shot primarily in the summer between first and second year, and serve as a key production crew member on at least one other thesis project. These thesis projects must be reviewed and approved by the thesis committee and the department chair in order for the student to be eligible for degree conferral.

Degree candidates must successfully complete 60 credits, including all required courses, with a cumulative grade point average of at least 3.0. A residency of two academic years is required.

OPPOSITE, TOP: From left, 2017 graduates Brian Inocencio, cinematographer; Notapoon Boonprakob, director; and Chesli Bullard, director. BOTTOM: Jessie Adler (MFA 2018) films with the Sioux community in South Dakota for her thesis, *The Boxers of Brule* (Tribeca Film Festival).









# A Filmmaker Follows True Calling to Success

From the time he was a small child, Bao Nguyen worked in his family's fabric store every weekend and all through summer vacations. His mother and father were refugees from Vietnam, who arrived in the United States in 1979. They opened their small business in a suburb near Washington, D.C., and worked hard to feed their young family. To keep Bao busy, they taught him to run the cash register. His parents wrote invoices for orders on small slips of paper, which they would hand to customers to bring to Bao, who would ring them up. When the store was empty, he would flip the stack of invoices over and spend hours sketching on them. ►





“When I ran out of paper, I would draw on air,” he recalls. “I think that’s how I developed my sense of visual storytelling.”

Like many first-generation Americans, Bao felt pressured by his family to excel in school—and to jettison any dreams of a career in the arts. He dutifully entered New York University as a political science major with the intention of going on to law school. Unable to squelch his creative desire, he added film classes to his schedule as electives and kept taking them after graduation, as his childhood practice of drawing on air evolved into a passion for cinema.

“I even worked as a photographer after graduation,” he says. “It kept my creative instinct sharp.”

The tipping point came in 2008, on the morning he was scheduled to take the LSAT. “I sat in my car, thinking ‘Is this what I want to do?’” The answer was no. He drove away without taking the exam. Instead, he took a job working on Barack Obama’s first presidential campaign. When a subsequent position in the Obama White House didn’t materialize, he took a risk, and signed up for a new MFA program at the School of Visual Arts in Social Documentary Film.

“It seemed like the perfect way to combine my love for politics and activism with my love of cinema,” he says.

Two years later, his thesis film, *Julian*, the story of a young actor who joins the Marines and is killed in Afghanistan, premiered at the Palm Springs Film Festival and tied for Best Student Documentary Short. It also won Special Jury Prize at Doc NYC, the largest documentary film festival in the U.S.

Since earning his MFA, Bao has directed more than a dozen documentaries, often working with friends he made during his time at SVA. In 2015, he directed *Live From New York!*, a chronicle of *Saturday Night Live*, which premiered on the opening night of the Tribeca Film Festival. Most recently, his documentary *Be Water*, about martial arts master and movie star Bruce Lee, debuted at



Sundance 2020, and then was broadcast on ESPN’s award-winning series *30 for 30* in June 2020. The film resonates deeply with his own life’s trajectory. “When I was growing up, I didn’t see many stories about people who looked like me,” he says. “I think it’s important to start the mythology and to champion those stories.”

A still from *Be Water*, about martial arts and film star Bruce Lee



# Curriculum

Graduates must complete 60 credits, including all required courses and the thesis project. A matriculation of two academic years is required.

## First Year

FALL	CREDITS
Cinematography and Sound I	3
Directing I	3
Editing I	3
Editing Lab II	0
Camera and Sound Lab I	0
Process and Style I	0
Producing I	3
Visionary Journalism I	3

SPRING	CREDITS
Cinematography and Sound II	3
Directing II	3
Editing II	3
Editing Lab II	0
Camera and Sound Lab II	0
Process and Style II	0
Producing II	3
Thesis: The Pitch	0
Visionary Journalism II	3

OPPOSITE: Rohan Rao (MFA 2020) films in the White Desert in India for his thesis

# Second Year

FALL	CREDITS
Process and Style III	0
Thesis: Directing	6
Thesis: Editing	3
Thesis: Producing	3
Visiting Artists: Documentary Masters	3

SPRING	CREDITS
Process and Style IV	0
Thesis: Directing Lab	6
Thesis: Editing Lab	6
Thesis: Review and Presentation	3



# Course Offerings

All course descriptions can be found online at [sva.edu/mfasocdoc/curriculum](http://sva.edu/mfasocdoc/curriculum).

## CINEMATOGRAPHY AND SOUND I & II

Success in the film industry requires fluency in the cinematic language and an immersion in the world of production techniques. Beginning with the use of image and sound as the tools of storytelling, these courses focus on gaining a comprehensive grasp of the technical and creative demands of documentary filmmaking. Through class and lab sessions, a range of equipment—cameras, tripods, lighting instruments, audio recorders and microphones—will be explored. Students will then focus on a broad spectrum of nonfiction techniques, including how to use camera angles, sound and lighting to convey meaning and further their narrative. Finally, on-camera interviewing skills—the essence of much of the documentary experience—will receive a thorough examination.

## DIRECTING I & II

The potency of any documentary relies on the instincts of the director, whose acuity of mind and eye must be able to translate intellectual content into an aesthetic experience. These courses will address topics that include how to most effectively tell a story, how to conduct meaningful and informative interviews and how to navigate the relationship between subject and filmmaker. With an emphasis on originality as it applies to the documentary, students will explore new media and a variety of directing styles, tones and techniques. Included will be an extensive study of documentary film history and theory, which will examine a wide range of texts and films and look at such genres as realism, formalism, cinema vérité, essay, feminism and postmodernism. Class assignments will emphasize the interview technique, with exercises involving interviews within the class itself as well as with family and friends, and those of the “man on the street” variety with anonymous pedestrians.

## EDITING I & II

If viewing a film is understood to be an interpretive process, then the orchestration of image and sound, and the rate at which information is disseminated, is critical to the endeavor. The editor transforms footage from observation to an engrossing experience. These courses examine the critical role that editing plays in nonfiction programs, and look at how the editing room is often the arena where the structure and narrative arc are created. Classic and contemporary documentaries will be screened to provide students with a fundamental understanding of editing styles, aesthetics and techniques. Topics will cover a wide range of subjects—from continuity of motion to montage, jump cut, music usage and program structure. Finally, these courses will explore voice-over narration, sound design, music and other postproduction techniques to further the story and deepen the experience.

## EDITING, CAMERA AND SOUND LABS I & II

Students in the first year attend two lab sessions. One covers camera and sound, and one covers editing, but both labs deal with the technical specifics of how to use the equipment. The labs provide students with a hands-on opportunity to get comfortable using cameras, microphones and editing software, especially Avid, as storytelling tools.

## PROCESS AND STYLE I, II, III & IV

Independent voices from the field will share their professional experiences and offer diverse perspectives in documentary film. Primarily in this course, documentary filmmakers will screen their new films and discuss their careers. Additional lecturers will discuss a range of specialized topics, including new technologies and new platforms; film festivals and distribution; the relationship between subject and filmmaker; the pitch; job opportunities; and professional advancement. These courses are required in both years of the program.

## PRODUCING I & II

Multifunctional and multidimensional in approach, the role of a documentary film producer is to initiate, coordinate, supervise and control all matters in the realization of a film project, such as fundraising and hiring key personnel. Beginning in the first semester, students will receive a full grounding in what they need

to know to proceed with their first assigned projects. All key aspects of documentary production will be covered in these courses, from pitch, grant writing, budget preparation, production setup, accounting, scheduling, crew management and postproduction workflow. Students will learn how to analyze a project and apply this analysis in cost and project management, from preproduction rights to editing and film distribution. In addition, they will learn how to implement production arrangements singular to the field of documentaries. How to read, understand and negotiate contracts with vendors, crew members and distributors will also be included.



### THESIS: THE PITCH

Getting an idea off the ground and maintaining the momentum is often one of the most difficult facets of a production, even for accomplished filmmakers. Yet without the proverbial green light, even the best plans atrophy by the wayside. Using their own project ideas, students will articulate their vision clearly and concisely and deliver this pitch to a panel of film industry professionals and faculty. Students will answer questions and address comments posed by the panel. The course objectives are to build confidence in the presentation of concepts and master a professional pitch, in addition to securing a well-conceived topic for their graduate thesis film.

### THESIS: DIRECTING

This course will guide students through the process of bringing their thesis ideas and script to fruition. Of central focus will be the aesthetic and overall style considerations for thesis films. Emphasis will also be placed on the student-director's communication with the producer, cinematographer, sound recordist and other personnel who will assist on the project and help to make each student's thesis vision a reality.

### VISIONARY JOURNALISM I & II

The field of social documentary film is as much about journalism as it is about filmmaking; therefore, it is paramount that the journalistic process be comprehensively examined. From finding and researching a story to writing a treatment and a shooting script, learning and adhering to established journalistic ethics is of primary importance. This course will engender an understanding of the ethical standards inherent in print and broadcast journalism and nonfiction writing as they relate to social documentary. Working within these structures, we will approach how to successfully tell a story—from origin of concept to finished project.

### THESIS: DIRECTING LAB

Bolstered by critiques of professional film directors and fellow classmates, students will gain additional insights and the technical resources to develop their thesis films. Directors' cuts of thesis films will be screened and analyzed, and students will have the opportunity to incorporate valuable suggestions into the final work.

### THESIS: EDITING

On average, in documentary films there is a ratio of 10 hours of footage shot for every minute in the final film. This course will address the challenge of managing the sheer bulk of media that will have been amassed for the thesis film. While shooting may continue throughout much of this period, students will be required to block out the basic sequence from what has already been filmed, and how the narrative together into a rough cut. The goal is to bring projects into readiness for fine-tuning and completing in the spring semester.

### THESIS: EDITING LAB

This course will encompass all of the finishing touches for the thesis film projects, including opening titles, closing credits, sound editing and mixing, visual effects, color correction and film scoring. A professional editor, under whose guidance students will strengthen their editorial acumen while completing their thesis films, will supervise the editing lab.

### THESIS: REVIEW AND PRESENTATION

During their final semester, students will present their thesis projects to a team of faculty advisors for review, advice and critique, and will introduce their documentaries to the film community at large.

### VISITING ARTISTS: DOCUMENTARY MASTERS

To help forge relationships between experts in documentary film and MFA SocDoc students, these seminars offer in-depth study and discussion of the craft of documentary storytelling. Seminar topics include creative producing and personal filmmaking, and vary each year based on student interest and changes in the field.

### THESIS: PRODUCING

Half of producing is getting the film made; the second half is getting the film seen. Filmmakers need to know how to reach their audience—and how to maximize in an ever-changing marketplace. In this course, students will build upon the previous Producing classes to strengthen their skills at conceiving and pitching ideas and executing those projects on budget. Using their thesis films as a model, students will also discuss the division of distribution rights; strategies for funding, distribution and advertising; and finding the most advantageous position in the market.



# Faculty

To learn more about the faculty members visit: [sva.edu/mfasocdoc/faculty](http://sva.edu/mfasocdoc/faculty).

**Maro Chermayeff**  
chair, MFA Social Documentary Film Department; director, *Atlanta's Missing and Murdered: The Lost Children*, *Half the Sky*; producer, *Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present*

**Julie Anderson**  
senior producer, *Vick, 30 for 30*, ESPN

**Axel Baumann**  
cinematographer, *Carrier*, *Pavarotti*

**Alan Berliner**  
filmmaker, *Nobody's Business*, *Letter to the Editor*

**Mira Chang**  
producer, *A Path Appears*

**Lori Cheadle**  
producer, *Matangi/Maya/M.I.A.*, *Captivated: The Trials of Pamela Smart*

**Peter Chelkowski**  
filmmaker, *Carnival Roots*

**Ann Collins**  
editor, *Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold*, *Swim Team*, *The Pharmacist*

**Deborah Dickson**  
filmmaker, *Lalee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*, *Ruth & Connie: Every Room in the House*

**Bob Eisenhardt**  
editor, *Free Solo*, *Everything Is Copy*

**Michael Epstein**  
filmmaker, *MAKERS: Once and for All*, *John & Yoko: Above Us Only Sky*

**Penelope Falk**  
editor, *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*, *Step*

**Micah Fink**  
filmmaker, *The Abominable Crime*, *Mann v. Ford*

**Leslie Asako Gladsjo**  
director, *Black America Since MLK: And Still I Rise*; producer, *Why We Hate*

**Richard Hankin**  
editor, *The Jinx*

**Judith Helfand**  
director, *Cooked: Survival by Zip Code*, *Blue Vinyl*

**Tom Hurwitz, ASC**  
cinematographer, *The Queen of Versailles*, *Nothing Left Unsaid: Gloria Vanderbilt & Anderson Cooper*

**Amitabh Joshi**  
director, *Tashi's Turbine*

**Ross Kauffman**  
filmmaker, *Born into Brothels*, *E-Team*, *Tigerland*

**Sabine Krayenbühl**  
editor, *My Architect*, *Letters from Baghdad*

**Beth Levison**  
producer, *Made in Boise*, *32 Pills: My Sister's Suicide*

**Mark Mandler**  
production sound, *Spielberg, Reconstruction: America After the Civil War*

**Kat Patterson**  
cinematographer, *12th & Delaware*

**Samuel D. Pollard**  
filmmaker, *4 Little Girls*, *When the Levees Broke*

**Thom Powers**  
programmer, Toronto International Film Festival; artistic director, DOC NYC

**Robert Richman**  
cinematographer, *The September Issue*; *Paradise Lost*

**Jerry Risius**  
cinematographer, *The Devil Came on Horseback*; *Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations*

**Amy Schewel**  
producer, archival researcher, *Soundbreaking*; *Stories from the Cutting Edge of Recorded Music*, *Atlanta's Missing and Murdered: The Lost Children*

**E. Donna Shepherd**  
editor, *Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present*

**Toby Shimin**  
editor, *Ernie & Joe*, *Buck*

**Karen K. H. Sim**  
editor, *Nothing Left Unsaid: Gloria Vanderbilt & Anderson Cooper*, *Who Killed Garrett Phillips?*

**Erik Spink**  
producer, *Tashi's Turbine*

**J.T. Takagi**  
sound recordist, *Strong Island*

# Notable Alumni

**Daniela Alatorre**  
producer, *Midnight Family* (Sundance 2019)

**Adam Banicki**  
executive producer, *Originals*, *The Wall Street Journal*

**Nottapon Boonprakob**  
director, *2015* (Thailand National Film Association Best Documentary Award 2019)

**Sasha Friedlander**  
director, *Grit* (Hot Docs, PBS's POV)

**Ja'Tovia Gary**  
director, *The Giverny Document* (Locarno Film Festival Award 2019)

**Yuqi Kang**  
director, *A Little Wisdom* (Busan International Film Festival)

**Alexa Karolinski**  
director, *Oma & Bella* (Berlin International Film Festival), *Unorthodox* (Netflix)

**Lindsay Lindenbaum**  
director, *Tomboy* (SXSW 2020)

**Bao Nguyen**  
director, *Be Like Water* (Sundance 2020, ESPN Films)

**David Osit**  
director, *Thank You for Playing* (PBS's POV, Emmy Award Winner 2017)

**Enes Ozdil**  
senior producer, TRT World (Turkey)

“ [SocDoc was] the only program where alumni and faculty were really creating the stories I wanted to create.”

—Jessie Adler, director, *The Boxers of Brule* (Tribeca Film Festival)



# Lecturers

Below is just a sample of guest lecturers who have spoken with our students.

**Robyn Hutt**  
truTV

**Michael Kantor**  
PBS's *American Masters*

**Simon Kilmurry**  
International Documentary Association

**Christine Le Goff**  
ZED (France)

**Sheila Nevins**  
MTV Documentary Films

**José Rodriguez**  
Tribeca Film Institute

**Molly Thompson**  
Apple

## FILMMAKERS

**Natalia Almada**  
*El General*

**Joe Berlinger**  
*Paradise Lost*

**Doug Block**  
*51 Birch Street*

**Steven Bogner**  
*American Factory*

**Marshall Curry**  
*If a Tree Falls*

**Abigail Disney**  
Fork Films

**Yance Ford**  
*Strong Island*

**Alex Gibney**  
*Taxi to the Dark Side*

**Julie Goldman**  
*Life, Animated*

**Lauren Greenfield**  
*The Queen of Versailles*

**Zachary Heinzerling**  
*Cutie and the Boxer*

**Kirsten Johnson**  
*Cameraperson*

**Ellen Kuras**  
cinematographer

**Susan Lacy**  
documentary filmmaker, HBO

**Ross McElwee**  
*Sherman's March*

**Muffie Meyer**  
*Grey Gardens*

**Brett Morgen**  
*Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck*

**D. A. Pennebaker & Chris Hegedus**  
*Dont Look Back*

**Yoruba Richen**  
*The New Black*

**Nanfu Wang**  
*One Child Nation*

**Frederick Wiseman**  
*Titicut Follies*

# Application Process

## APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS

For a full list of application requirements and detailed instructions, visit:

[sva.edu/grad/howtoapply](https://sva.edu/grad/howtoapply)

- Online Application and \$80 Application Fee: [sva.edu/apply](https://sva.edu/apply)

## DEADLINES

For information on application deadlines, visit: [sva.edu/grad/timeline](https://sva.edu/grad/timeline)

## IMPORTANT LINKS

- FAQ: [sva.edu/grad/faq](https://sva.edu/grad/faq)
- International students: [sva.edu/grad/intl](https://sva.edu/grad/intl)
- Tuition and fees: [sva.edu/tuition](https://sva.edu/tuition)
- Visit SVA: [sva.edu/grad/visit](https://sva.edu/grad/visit)

## FILM INDUSTRY

**Nancy Abraham & Sara Rodriguez**  
HBO Documentary

**Tamara Gould**  
ITVS

**Judith Helfand**  
Chicken & Egg Pictures

**Beth Hoppe**  
ABC News



# Contact Us

We encourage applicants to visit our department. Contact us directly to schedule a department tour or sign up to attend an Information Session. For more information and to register, go to: [sva.edu/grad/visit](http://sva.edu/grad/visit).

If you have any questions about the application process, contact Graduate Admissions at 212.592.2107 or email: [gradadmissions@sva.edu](mailto:gradadmissions@sva.edu).

**Maro Chermayeff**, chair

**Rose Vincelli Gustine**, director of operations

**Timothy Doyle**, assistant to the chair

**Kristian Gonzales**, senior systems administrator

**Joseph Eisenstein**, video production manager

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**Department site:** [mfasocdoc.sva.edu](http://mfasocdoc.sva.edu)

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 To be in close proximity to

and receive feedback from so many accomplished faculty members really helps you find your voice as a filmmaker.”

—Amitabh Joshi, MFA 2013

## ACCREDITATION

The School of Visual Arts has been authorized by the New York State Board of Regents ([www.highered.nysed.gov](http://www.highered.nysed.gov)) to confer the degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts on graduates of programs in Advertising; Animation; Cartooning; Computer Art, Computer Animation and Visual Effects; Design; Film; Fine Arts; Illustration; Interior Design; Photography and Video; Visual and Critical Studies; and to confer the degree of Master of Arts on graduates of programs in Art Education; Critical Theory and the Arts; Curatorial Practice; Design Research, Writing and Criticism; and to confer the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching on graduates of the program in Art Education; and to confer the degree of Master of Fine Arts on graduates of programs in Art Practice; Art Writing; Computer Arts; Design; Design for Social Innovation; Fine Arts; Illustration as Visual Essay; Interaction Design; Photography, Video and Related Media; Products of Design; Social Documentary Film; Visual Narrative; and to confer the degree of Master of Professional Studies on graduates of programs in Art Therapy; Branding; Digital Photography; Directing; Fashion Photography.

The School of Visual Arts is accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education ([msche.org](http://msche.org)), 3624 Market Street, Suite 2 West, Philadelphia, PA 19104, 267.284.5000. The Commission on Higher Education is an institutional accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

The School of Visual Arts is an accredited institutional member of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design ([nasad.arts-accredit.org](http://nasad.arts-accredit.org)).

The Interior Design program leading to the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Interior Design is accredited by the Council for Interior Design Accreditation ([accredit-id.org](http://accredit-id.org)), 206 Grandville Avenue, Suite 350, Grand Rapids, MI 49503-4014.

The School of Visual Arts' Department of Art Education is currently pursuing accreditation of its educator preparation programs by the Association for Advancing Quality in Educator Preparation (AAQEP).

Pursuant to Section 52.21 of the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education, the educator preparation program offered by the School of Visual Arts is considered to be continuously accredited for purposes of meeting the New York State requirement that all such programs maintain continuous accreditation. The School of Visual Arts' Master of Arts in Teaching in Art Education program was previously accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP).

The Master of Professional Studies in Art Therapy degree program is approved by the American Art Therapy Association, Inc., and as such meets the education standards of the art therapy profession.

## CREDITS

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COVER: Zoey Zhang (MFA 2020) filming *City Symphony* as part of an assignment. Photo by Weixin Zhuang (MFA 2020).

# School of Visual Arts

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