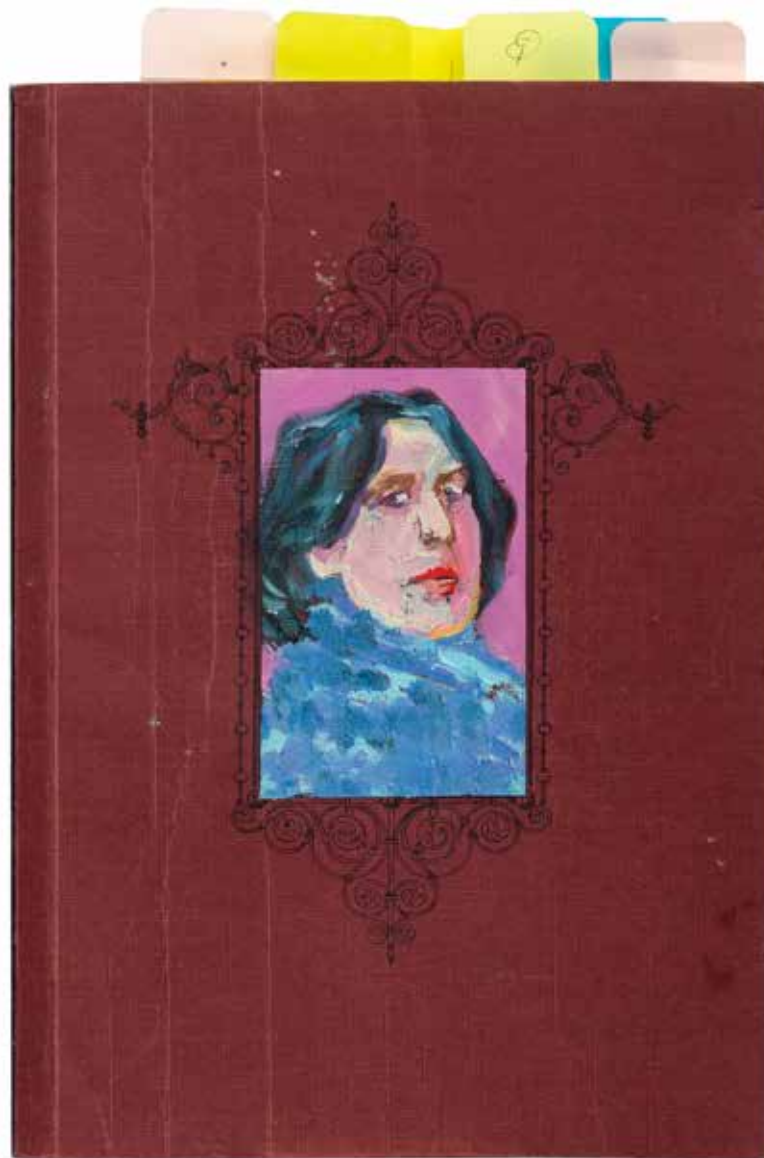


These texts are selected to showcase the working process of Xiaoguo Chen's "virtual residency".

The texts that follow are AI-generated scripts reimagining *The Picture of Dorian Gray* on present-day Seymour Place – the central London street where Mandy Zhang Art is based – alongside Xiaoguo Chen's personal daily life.

Having first fed the original text into AI, the aesthetics and themes of the novel were extracted, and then projected onto contemporary Seymour Place. Combining the artist's own experiences, from his memories of London to his everyday life in the studio, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was rewritten, staying close to the overarching themes and atmosphere of the original novel while reconstructing modern-day scenes in which the artist is seen wandering through the street and neighbourhood surrounding Seymour Place.

Combined with photographs submitted by businesses and residents of Seymour Place, the generated scripts bring the aura of the neighbourhood and fragments of the artist's life into view through the lens of Oscar Wilde's novel. The texts below are the selected generated chapters that formed part of the "virtual residency" the artist undertook to create the body of work for his solo exhibition *Behind Every Exquisite Thing*.



Chapter V

The Bright Things of Seymour Place

This chapter should take place during the day, at the edge between spring and summer, on one of those afternoons when London becomes almost persuasive. The air is bright but not oppressive; the street is warm enough to make walking feel like a form of agreement with the weather. Seymour Place should appear light, polished, and faintly vain, as though the whole street has dressed itself in order to be noticed. By this point, the artist has spent several days around Seymour Place. He has begun to develop an addiction to its bright and self-displaying things: flowers outside restaurants, chairs set out on the pavement, shop windows, parasols, painted doors, reflected car lacquer, and the small arrangements by which a street presents itself as a life worth desiring. He is especially susceptible to colour when it appears alive and temporary. Roses may be flowers one buys for oneself; tulips belong more naturally to the street. They arrive suddenly, shamelessly, and insist that the present moment is already enough.

The chapter begins with the artist walking slowly along Seymour Place without any urgent purpose. He may be carrying his phone, or nothing at all. He looks at shopfronts, at flowers placed outside cafés, at the colours people have chosen to wear, and at those who seem to know how to insert themselves elegantly into the street. He is not merely passing through. He is comparing things, silently and with a little private pleasure. One doorway has placed its flowers badly; another has understood the colour of its awning. A bunch of tulips is charming, but the wrapping is vulgar. A parasol is almost too much, and therefore perhaps exactly right. Taste is often most enjoyable when one has no need to announce it.

This small aesthetic vanity is important. The artist is pleased by the fact that he can tell the difference. Just as he notices whether a restaurant painting has been hung well, or whether flowers have been arranged with real instinct rather than money, he notices how the street composes itself. For him, these details are not decoration. They are the first signs of a picture.

Then he sees a woman outside a flower shop.

She is standing partly against the light, choosing flowers. Around her are several things too bright to remain secondary: a parasol, a bucket of tulips, perhaps the reflection of a convertible parked nearby, or the shine of a shop window catching the afternoon. The woman should not appear as an isolated figure. She belongs to the arrangement of things around her. The flowers, the parasol, the car, the glass and the light complete her. She has not simply entered the street; the street seems, for a moment, to have produced her.

This is what attracts the artist. Not beauty as a fixed quality, but beauty as a conspiracy between a person and their surroundings. The woman becomes visible through the objects near her. The tulips make her more vivid; the parasol makes the whole scene more theatrical; the reflected car lacquer gives the street a brief, liquid brightness. It is not a grand moment, but it is exactly the kind of fleeting arrangement that painting is always in danger of losing.

The artist may pretend to look at his phone, though he is clearly still watching. Someone may greet him; he smiles, nods, perhaps raises a hand. His English is not the main language here. His attention has moved elsewhere. There is something almost childlike in the directness of his curiosity. He is not hiding his interest very well, but the interest is painterly rather than predatory. He has found, in the middle of the street, a composition that may disappear at any second.

The elements from Wilde's world return here through ordinary life, not as symbols. The convertible is not a modern horse; it is simply an object of brightness and display, entirely at home on a street that enjoys looking at itself. The parasol is not an allegory; it is the most assertive patch of colour in the scene, opening like a fan and making everything else become background.

The tulips are not literary flowers; they are fresh, full, slightly excessive, and for that reason almost unreal. Even the old idea of roses in the blood becomes less dramatic here. It is only a bodily sensation: sunlight, colour, warmth, and the quick red excitement that comes before thought has made itself clever.

What matters is the artist's recognition that such lightness is difficult to paint. Dark rooms forgive painters more easily. Daylight is merciless. Flowers, wind, polished metal, a figure seen against the sun — all these things exist almost in order to vanish. Their charm lies in the fact that they refuse to stay long enough to become serious.

If this becomes a painting

The painting should not be overly dramatic or too crowded. It should be a street scene filled with the heat and lightness of a good day. It is not an objective view of Seymour Place, but the result of one person walking through the street, being struck by colour, and wishing to hold onto that sensation before it disappears.

The central elements may include a woman standing partly against the light outside a flower shop, a row or bucket of tulips, a bright parasol, the reflection of a nearby car, and the pale, fashionable atmosphere of Seymour Place in daylight. The artist's point of view should be felt, even if he does not appear directly. The viewer should sense that someone has stopped in the street and allowed the scene to become a picture. The woman should not be treated as a formal portrait. She is part of a temporary arrangement: body, flower, parasol, reflected light, pavement, shopfront. The parasol may act as the boldest colour plane in the composition. The tulips should feel too fresh to be entirely believable. The car reflection can bend or sharpen the street slightly, giving the scene a brief shimmer of unreality.

The painting should hold the feeling of being seduced by daylight. Not by a person alone, and not by an object alone, but by the way a street can arrange person, object and light into something that appears effortless. The mood is bright, light, slightly vain, and touched by the knowledge that such scenes are always about to vanish.

The essential memory of the chapter is this: the artist realises that some pictures do not need to be invented. They appear briefly in daily life, wait to see whether anyone is capable of noticing them, and then disappear.

Chapter VI

The Borrowed Coat

This chapter should take place at night, after the artist has spent enough time around Seymour Place to begin entering not only its daylight, but its evenings. By day, he loves sunlight, mirrors, flowers, and the pleasure of reading in a crowded place. At night, he is still drawn to company. His English remains imperfect, but he has other forms of fluency: a smile offered at the right moment, a hand gesture that finishes what a sentence cannot, a nod, a shrug, a quick imitation of someone else's tone. He does not always understand the conversation, yet he often understands the room.

The scene should unfold in a small private room of an Italian restaurant near Seymour Place. It is not a formal art-world dinner, but a warmer, looser gathering: a few people crowded around a table, half-finished plates, coffee, cocktails, glasses, bread, perhaps an ashtray, the scrape of chairs and the easy disorder of people who have stopped performing politeness too carefully. Outside the window, London's night light enters softly — warm, slightly dirty, and flattering in the way only city light can be.

The artist sits among friends and almost-friends. He is eating, listening, laughing a little before he fully understands why. He is also watching. Across the table is a person he may not know well, perhaps someone brought by a friend. She appears to be a woman, but wears a sharply cut men's jacket. The point is not disguise. She is not "playing a man". The jacket gives her another way of being at ease. It lends her a line, a surface, a temporary structure through which she seems not less herself, but more comfortably herself.

The artist is drawn to this at once. He recognises the condition. Some people live in one body by day, and at night borrow another manner of meeting the world. A coat, a cigarette, a drink, a lowered voice, a certain way of leaning back in a chair — all these may become small borrowed freedoms. The borrowed thing does not conceal the self; it allows the self to move differently.

The details should remain intimate and precise. The artist notices the way she holds her glass, the relaxed angle of her shoulder, the clean edge of the collar, the way she speaks to the waiter as though the room belongs to her without ever needing to announce it. Beside her, or near her on the table, there is a bunch of deep purple flowers. They need not be explained as irises, nor turned into a symbol. They may simply be restaurant flowers, or flowers the artist saw earlier in the day and now feels returning through another person. Some people, by no effort of their own, make one think of a particular flower.

The artist does not need to appear fully in the image, but he must be present. His presence can be registered through traces: a glass he has half-finished, a piece of bread he has touched, a plate pushed slightly away, a hand caught mid-gesture, the pale reflection of a white jacket in the side of a glass. Perhaps he has just tried to tell a joke with his hands and laughed first at his own failure; perhaps he is pretending to study the menu while his attention is really fixed on the person across the table. The mood of the chapter is not performance, but loosening. Night has allowed everyone in the room to become a temporary version of themselves. No one is entirely disguised; no one is entirely fixed.

If this becomes a painting

The painting should be a warm, slightly crowded interior. The composition can centre on the restaurant table: glasses, plates, bread, coffee, cocktails, an ashtray, half-eaten food, napkins, and the soft disorder of a night that has already begun.

The figure in the borrowed jacket should sit naturally at the table. She should not pose. Her ease is the subject. The dark jacket, the open collar, the glass in her hand and the purple flowers nearby should work together, so that the painting feels less like a portrait of a person than a portrait of a temporary state.

The artist may remain partial: a hand, a sleeve, a reflected outline, or a cup that clearly belongs to him. His partial presence matters because he is not outside the scene. He is part of the warmth, the misunderstanding, the laughter and the looking.

What matters most is the atmosphere of a small dinner at night: the room slightly too full, the light slightly too warm, the conversation slightly beyond language. The painting should hold the feeling that after dark, people are allowed to borrow another skin for a while, and to return it only when morning insists.

Chapter VIII

On the Edge of Collapse

This chapter should take place at dusk, when the day is almost spent but the street has not yet gone dark. It is the hour when sounds begin to loosen: shops closing, footsteps passing, voices becoming softer, traffic receding into a lower murmur. The outside world is still there, but it has started to withdraw.

The artist has been out for some time and is tired. Not dramatically tired, but socially tired: tired from speaking imperfect English, from smiling through conversations, from being surrounded by light, noise, surfaces and people. He returns to the studio, or to a smaller room connected to it, set slightly further back from the working space. This inner room should feel quieter, but not sealed off. The door is not fully closed. Seymour Place is still audible outside.

The room contains tea, a porcelain plate with a few crumbs or pieces of pastry left on it, perhaps a blue cloth near the window or a blue coat thrown over the back of a chair. A screen stands half open, dividing the space into front and back. The room should feel specific, lived in, and unmistakably belonging to the artist — not a generic interior, but a place where work, rest and small acts of hospitality overlap.

Then someone enters. This is not a stranger, but a person who has already begun to appear in the artist's life around Seymour Place. They have just been speaking to someone outside, or have recently left a conversation. Suddenly, they no longer wish to remain among people. They come into the room not with drama, but with a kind of quiet exhaustion.

The artist responds naturally. He makes space at the table, moves a cup, pours tea, or gestures for the person to sit. He does not need to ask too much. There are moments when care is better expressed through objects: a cup, a chair, a slightly cleared place at the table.

The person sits down. For a brief moment, nothing happens. Then they lean forward, place their elbows on their knees or near the table, and bury their face in both hands. This gesture is the centre of the chapter. It is not theatrical sadness. It does not want to be seen. In fact, its force comes from the opposite impulse: the wish to stop being visible, to stop answering, to stop arranging the face for the world. Earlier chapters show the artist observing how people become images in the street, at dinners, in sunlight, in mirrors and in public rooms. Here he sees the reverse: a person refusing, for a moment, to become an image.

The artist understands this immediately. He knows the feeling himself. Too much English, too much sociability, too much brightness, too many people — and then the sudden wish to hide, if only for a minute. The importance of the scene lies in his understanding. He is not watching from a distance. He is close enough to accompany the collapse.

The room should change around this gesture. The tea remains warm. A small edge of light touches the porcelain plate. The blue cloth cools the space. The screen holds back part of the room; the half-open door keeps Seymour Place present but softened. The street continues outside, but the person's buried face causes those sounds to recede.

This is not nineteenth-century languor, nor a romanticised breakdown. It is more ordinary, and therefore more fragile: the moment when a person has had too much day, lets something fall away, and suddenly feels less protected.

If this becomes a painting

The scene should take place in the quieter rear part of the studio, connected to the working space but slightly removed from it. The composition should be close and oblique, so that the viewer feels the artist's proximity rather than a distant observation.

Several objects should be clear: two teacups, a teapot, a porcelain plate with remnants of food, a blue cloth or blue coat, a half-open screen, and a door or opening through which the dusk of Seymour Place remains faintly visible.

The figure who has entered should sit near the centre. The chair may be slightly turned. The body leans forward; the elbows brace; the face is buried fully in both hands. This gesture must be unmistakable. It is the true centre of the image.

The artist should appear close to the viewer, but only partially: half a body, a shoulder, a side of the face, or a hand still holding the teapot. His presence should be strong because this is not a scene of detached looking. It is a scene of being there.

The painting should not show a person collapsing alone. It should show a collapse being quietly accompanied. The emotional weight lies in that difference.

Chapter X

Choosing the Frame

This chapter should take place in the daytime, preferably on an afternoon that is bright but not warm. The artist walks into a frame shop near Seymour Place carrying a newly finished small painting, or perhaps only an empty wooden frame. The painting is modest in size — almost like a book tucked under the arm. It has not yet fully entered the state of “artwork”. It still feels close to studio life, as though it carries a little of the room’s air and the artist’s hand upon it.

The frame shop is full of things that are, in their own discreet way, extremely seductive: strips of wood, gilt mouldings, blue and cream mountboards, sheets of glass, rulers, knives, sawdust, and the practised hands of the shop owner. The artist finds all this quietly fascinating. He cannot necessarily explain, in fluent English, what he wants. So once again he relies on gesture — indicating size with his hands, pointing at colours, holding two frame samples together, consulting his phone for translation, then abandoning the phone and trusting his eye instead. His presence in this chapter matters a great deal. He is not “researching British art history” in any academic sense. He is simply standing there, in a real shop, on a particular afternoon, seriously hesitating between one frame and another. Will this gold look too English? Will this blue feel too much like an old portrait? Will a simple wooden frame suddenly make the little painting too formal? He takes pleasure in noticing such distinctions. It is the same small aesthetic vanity with which he judges the hanging of a restaurant painting or the arrangement of flowers outside a café. A frame, he realises, can alter the whole social character of a painting in an instant.

A faint echo of *The Blue Boy* may enter here, but only lightly. Perhaps there is a deep blue mountboard sample, or a piece of blue velvet placed beside an old gilt frame. The artist sees it and feels, at once, that this blue is somehow English. It is the blue of portraiture: clear, self-possessed, a little distant, touched by tradition and the discipline of lineage. It does not need to become an explicit quotation. It is enough that it appears as a colour experience — one of those moments in which art history returns not as knowledge, but as taste. Another thread may come through the glass. The framer lifts a sheet to test it against the painting, and for a moment the glass catches the artist’s face, along with the shoulder of someone standing nearby. Unlike the larger mirrored reflections of earlier scenes, this one is brief and accidental. A face almost enters the frame, then slips away again. It is less an image than a passing suggestion of one.

The Britishness in this scene should remain tactile rather than intellectual. The blue mountboard carries something faintly Gainsborough-like; the old gilt moulding has the politeness of an English portrait tradition; the glass reflection feels like a contemporary self already on the verge of disappearing. The framer’s hands bring these elements together and quietly determine whether the small painting will remain a private object or begin, at last, to look like art.

If this becomes a painting

The central focus should be the worktable of the frame shop. On it lie several frame samples, the small painting, a deep blue mountboard, and a sheet of glass. The framer’s hands are visible, pressing a gilded corner against the edge of the picture. The artist stands beside the table, but only partially appears: perhaps the sleeve of a white coat, a hand holding a phone with a translation half-open, or a lowered profile concentrating on the choice. The figures do not need to face the viewer. The real action is the testing of the frame. It is an ordinary gesture, but one with unusual resonance: a small painting that has grown out of the artist’s own lived time is being touched, measured and redefined by British craft tradition. What matters most is not narrative, but atmosphere.

The painting should hold the everyday intimacy of the shop — the frame samples, the blue card, the glass, the dust, the owner’s hands — while also preserving the more abstract tension beneath it: an East Asian artist abroad, standing in an English frame shop, unexpectedly captivated by the leftovers of British art.

Chapter XIX

Absence

The lighter this chapter remains, the heavier the absence should feel.

It should take place in the afternoon, or perhaps towards evening. The artist goes out as usual. He passes the places he knows, nods to familiar faces, exchanges a little small talk, pauses where he often pauses. Nothing dramatic has happened. No one announces bad news. No event declares itself. What changes is something much quieter: he slowly realises that there is a person he has not seen for several days.

This is not the kind of disappearance that belongs to melodrama. It belongs to habit. One becomes used to seeing someone at a certain hour, in a certain corner, by a doorway, in a shop, near a window, beside a piano, at a particular table, turning up almost as part of the furniture of one's day. At first, one does not think much of it. Then, one afternoon, the fact becomes undeniable: the person is not there, and has not been there for some time.

The artist does not respond with immediate sadness. He continues with the afternoon as one does. He sits down somewhere, perhaps with a drink, perhaps with his phone in hand, perhaps simply looking without purpose. Yet the ordinary things around him begin to sharpen.

This chapter should begin with a plate of strawberries.

A plate is set on the table — white porcelain, perhaps, or silver — with fresh strawberries on it, still bright, still carrying their green tops, as though they had been picked only moments earlier. The artist, who is always susceptible to colour, is naturally drawn to their red. Under ordinary circumstances he would have enjoyed them simply as colour: the satisfaction of seeing that particular red gathered in a white dish. But this time the strawberries do something else. They are too fresh, too present, too insistently alive. Their vividness makes the absence in the room feel more distinct, as though everything else has remained in place while one person has quietly been removed.

Then there is the piano.

It need not be a formal performance. Someone may simply be pressing a few notes, or practising absent-mindedly. The sound is intermittent. A phrase begins, then stops. A few notes fall, then are left unfinished. It is the kind of music that seems not to complete itself, and that incompleteness matters. It feels like a sentence left half-spoken, a door left ajar, a cup still warm, a plate of strawberries just set down, but the person who ought to be there is not there.

In earlier chapters, the artist has watched people becoming images — in sunlight, at dinner, in mirrors, in passing, in company. Here he begins to feel, more seriously than before, that absence can also become an image.

This belongs very much to his own way of living. He is not someone who performs emotion loudly. When faced with this kind of absence, he continues to sit as usual. He may glance at his phone, look out of the window, notice the flowers on the table, smile at someone in passing. But inwardly he already knows that the afternoon has changed.

Several details may accumulate gently:

a plate of strawberries no one touches;

an empty place near the piano;

the scent of lilac drifting in from outside;

a phone held in the hand but never really looked at;

a smile offered in conversation, followed by a small hollow feeling once the moment has passed.

The lilac should remain very light in the chapter. It does not need to appear as a bouquet. It may simply arrive as a scent through the open window, or as a faint purple note outside. The strawberries are the red nearest at hand; the lilac is the purple at a distance. One is immediate, one is remote. Between them lies the whole afternoon, and the person who has failed to appear in it.

The artist's presence should be especially ordinary here. He may have just taken a photograph of the strawberries. His phone screen lights briefly, then goes dark. He opens a book, but does not really read. His sensitivity to daily detail is no longer being used only to discover beauty. For the first time, it becomes a way of registering absence. He realises that when someone is gone, the table, the air, the colour of fruit, the fragments of piano music all begin, in their own way, to speak for them.

If this becomes a painting

The painting should not be crowded. It should be built from a few clear things, with enough emptiness around them to let the absence take shape.

At the centre is a table. On it sits a plate of strawberries, ideally in a white porcelain dish or on a silver tray. Nearby there may be a book, a phone, and a cup not yet finished. At some slight distance there is a piano; perhaps only part of it is visible, with a hand just entering the frame near the keys. Outside the window, or through an opening, there is a trace of lilac — not necessarily the flower itself in detail, but some faint purple presence that belongs to the air beyond the room.

The absent person does not need to appear. On the contrary, the point is that the painting should allow absence to remain invisible while still being strongly felt. It should be held in the empty place, the pause between notes, the untouched fruit, the incomplete gesture.

The artist also need not appear frontally. He may remain only as a hand, a reflection, a sleeve, or the phone on the table that clearly belongs to him. This helps the image keep the right character: it is not a narrative of disappearance, but a record of perception. Through the artist's eye, strawberries, piano notes and afternoon air begin to articulate what no one says aloud.

The most important thing the painting should hold is this: once a person is no longer there, the world does not become empty all at once. Instead, ordinary things begin to take on the burden of saying so. Absence, it turns out, also has a shape.