Xiaoxiao Xu

Spider, Snake, Turtle and Dragon

In short

Revisiting childhood memory, treating it as fluid and open to transformation

Born in
China (1984)

Location
China

Year
2026 – Ongoing

Discovered through
The PhMuseum 2026 Photography Grant

Interview with
Giuseppe Oliverio

Abstract
Developed alongside a period of therapy, this collage-based work explores transformation and healing. It draws on methods such as EMDR and Imagery Rescripting, where memory is actively reimagined as something fluid and continually shifting.

Bringing portraits from their personal archive into dialogue with newly made images, Xu assembles, cuts and reworks the material, loosening original narratives and enabling new meanings to emerge. A spider, snake, turtle and dragon recur across the work, forming an evolving symbolic framework, each carrying distinct meanings: protection, entanglement, vulnerability, and transformation. Cuts, overlaps, and material traces remain visible throughout, emphasising tactility and the passage of time.





Winter



Spider, Snake, Turtle and Dragon









A long-distance conversation between
Giuseppe Oliverio and Xiaoxiao Xu
on 22 August, 2026

Giuseppe Oliverio: This project developed alongside your therapy. Did the making of the work grow out of the therapeutic process, or did you enter therapy already intending to make it?

Xiaoxiao Xu: Actually, I came to therapy without any intention of making work about it. I arrived like a blank sheet of paper, really not knowing what to expect. I'd had short-term therapy before, but this time it turned out to be something completely different. For the first time, I had to dig deeply into my memories and work intensely on myself. Along the way, I felt an increasing need to translate everything that surfaced into a visual language. That's how the work gradually emerged.

GO: EMDR and Imagery Rescripting both involve revisiting memory through the imagination. How was the process of translating that process into something physical?

XX: It really evolved over time and alongside the phase I was in during therapy. At one point I was asked to write three letters to my father. After I finished them, I thought, maybe I could accompany each letter with an old family photograph of the two of us, just to give the stories a face.

Over the years I had collected family photographs from relatives. Every time I looked through them, I was moved by the faded images and all the memories they carried. They always felt precious to me, and somewhere in the back of my mind I thought I might one day make work with them. I just never imagined it would happen this way.

Those three letters and photographs set something in motion. I started therapy in April 2024, but it wasn't until the end of 2025 that I began cutting and rearranging the photographs. Back then, I was simply trying to make sense of everything that was happening inside me. It was only later that I realised the physical process echoed the work I had been doing in therapy. The more I cut, the less fixed those memories felt, and the more space there seemed to be for other perspectives.

GO: How do you choose which family photographs to work with? Is there something specific you're looking for in an image before you're willing to intervene it?

XX: Sometimes it starts with an image that appears in my mind, usually connected to a particular feeling or theme I'm working on. If I want to express being haunted, for example, the first symbolic animal that comes to mind is a snake.

From there, I start looking through my family photographs. I'm looking for an image that can hold that intervention, one that already carries a certain tension and leaves room for something else to enter.

Other times, it's much more intuitive. I simply start moving things around, trying different combinations and seeing what happens. Often I don't know whether something works until I actually make it. In this case, I eventually chose a photograph of my father and me rowing on a small lake. A giant cut-out snake looms over my head. As the cherry on top, I gave the boat little legs so it could run away.

GO: You bring your photographs into dialogue with the archival ones. How do you approach shooting new images knowing they'll eventually be cut apart and recombined with the past?

XX: It definitely changes the way I photograph. I'm much more focused and intentional. Instead of thinking about a single image, I'm already thinking about how it might relate to other images later on.

Sometimes I already have a collage in mind before I take the photographs. I know which background I need, I have an idea of the pose, and I go out to make those specific images. It's almost like gathering the pieces of a puzzle before putting it together.

At the same time, I try to leave room for surprise. Sometimes a picture ends up in a different collage than I originally imagined. Sometimes two new photographs speak to each other just as well. What matters is whether together they create the atmosphere I'm looking for.



Family archive © Xiaoxiao Xu

GO: The spider, snake, turtle and dragon each carry a distinct emotional register: protection, shame, tenderness, transformation. Why did you choose them among all the possible terms of the symbolic vocabulary? What does an "open and evolving" symbolic vocabulary look like going forward?

XX: The snake was actually the first symbol to appear. During one Imagery Rescripting exercise I revisited a difficult childhood memory. Afterwards, while still processing it, I said to my therapist, "They were just like two snakes, slippery and entangled with each other." I immediately associated the image of the snake with shame.

As for the spider, I was fascinated by how it can both protect and trap. That resonated with me.

The turtle comes from a gentle childhood memory. My father once gave me a small turtle as a pet. I loved him so much that I wrote poems for him when I was eight or nine. He lived in a large water tank in our garden. After he became ill and recovered, my aunt decided to release him into the river. Watching him disappear broke my heart. That memory has stayed with me ever since.

The dragon arrived completely differently. Not long after therapy started, I had a vivid dream in which a golden dragon and I were flying through the night sky together. At times it circled around me, and at times we spiralled upwards together, almost like a dance. I was surrounded by its warm light and woke up with an overwhelming sense of healing.

These symbols emerged gradually, at different moments in the process. Right now, I still feel I'm with the spider. If another symbol emerges naturally, I'll simply follow where it leads.

GO: The cuts, overlaps and material traces stay visible in the final images rather than being smoothed away. Why is it important to let the process itself remain legible?

XX: They show that these images have been revisited, taken apart and rearranged. Through cutting, moving and reshaping fragments, I'm trying to find a new relationship to what happened. I don't want to hide those traces, because the process is the work.

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GO: Each image in the series works on its own but also contributes to a larger rhythm. There are images intervened in a similar yet different way. Is there a specific narrative logic?

XX: Right now I'm still in an experimenting phase, and sometimes I make several collage versions of the same archival photograph because I'm interested in the different possibilities it holds. As for the narrative logic, I don't think it's linear or chronological. It follows an inner process. I trust the final sequencing will emerge naturally as the work continues to develop.

GO: This project sits very close to lived trauma. How do you navigate the vulnerability of putting something so personal into public view? How did your family members react to the images and to sharing them?

XX: It did feel quite vulnerable to put these images out into the public. Although the work doesn't directly speak of trauma, I think people can probably sense that there's something beneath the surface. At the same time, making these collages has given me something to hold on to, and the courage to continue exploring.

Actually, some of the works are currently on view at the Dutch National Museum of Photography in Rotterdam. I still want to take my family to see the exhibition, and I'm curious to hear what they think.