i. Last night

Familiar faces emerge from behind the trees, watched over by the moon. It stays static in the sky, a sentinel illuminating familiar ground as much the men who are walking in the park can bear. They stand together and apart, no-one quite prepared to take those first steps out into the light; the gulf between bodies — between the possibilities that they contain — becoming more and more vast night after familiar night. The desire to search is propulsive, compulsive, sometimes even more meaningful than whatever it is that might be found.

The world of *The curfew* is vast; the landscape sprawling out beyond mere physical geography, containing vast, mental landscapes. The men that Zearo paints — their bodies fragile and tentative — can never quite look at each other. But more than that, they can never quite look at themselves. Throughout the monumental piece, the most minuscule details flicker with life. With his back to the viewer, stepping off towards the horizon that looms over everything, a man holds a letter in his hand, desperately tight. Another considers a medal, heavy with the weight of masculine obligation, a role that could never fit too easily.

In Pai Hsien-Yun's novel — translated into English as *Crystal Boys,* although the original title is more ominous and echoes the taboo nature of queerness that animates the novel — the protagonist, A-Qing is discarded by school and family because of his queerness; what's described in the source material as a "scandalous relationship." From there, he finds New Park, a cruising spot that carries with it the possibility of not just desire, but community. In Zearo's practice, community is everywhere to be seen, even if there are times when the bonds between his figures are fragile and fleeting; by dwarfing so many of the figures that populate *The curfew*, the relationship between the individual and the communal is cast into stark relief. As if his figures need to define themselves before knowing how they'll be able to fit into a wider community. In its first panel, each figure is solitary, bodies connected instead to the the trees which run the full length of the piece. They're brought together by their relationship to space, and so many of them seem haunted by the stories that have brought them there. Nothing is ever explicit; instead, the work is suggestive, dreamlike, as men seem to drift from one way of being into another.

ii. Daybreak

The sunrise is brief, but almost blinding in *The curfew*. Almost as if the illumination that comes with it reveals something unbearable for the figures in the painting. Lying down, alone on a patch of grass by the rising sun, a figure covers their face with both arms, the way that a vampire flinches away from the dawn. In the park, night-time is sanctuary; freedom from prying eyes, from being seen exactly as one is.

Looking is fraught with tension across Zearo's paintings. It often stretches across both space and time, his figures haunted by their memories. In *Clematis' moments*, a man sits at his desk, looking at and beyond a nude, static figure. The nude isn't seen to be coming or going from anywhere, the way that one never knows quite how they got somewhere in a dream. And more than that, the light on the threshold of the room is blinding, like the sun in *The curfew*. To look, then, is an act alive with possibility, but also tension, and sometimes even dread. The world beyond the spaces — whether domestic, public, or psychological — that the figures are able to carve out for themselves are often a sanctuary for the world that waits for them outside. And so, only so much can be revealed to us, just as only so much is revealed to the men in the paintings. Windows, doorways, and thresholds carry with them the possibility of connection, things that these figures are yearning for. To see them, to be confronted with one's desires with such clarity, is rare. *The pink in the blue hour* is framed through a large window, the figure distant and solitary. They, like us, are looking; for something, rather than at it. Whatever waits for them is beyond the edge of the image, beyond the world as we're able to understand it.

In *The curfew,* the sun isn't in the sky for very long. After all, it's what so many of these figures are fleeing from, always returning to the same sanctuary — with the same trees, and the moon in the exact same point in the sky — in order to get closer to, beyond anything else, themselves. After another day, another night, these men are beginning to find their way towards one another. In one fragment of the park, a group of five men sit in a circle together; others walk together towards the vast ocean at the edge of the park — at the edge of time, really. But the weight of solitude is still heavy; the medal from the painting's first section has been discarded, and some men are hunched against the trees, weeping.

iii. Tomorrow

The trees that do so much to define space in *The curfew,* carving the park into sections, offering solitude and sanctuary for Zearo's figures — sometimes acting like a literal shoulder to cry on — persist even as the painting shifts from exterior to interior spaces. They serve as a reminder of what has led the characters to this place and this moment in time and turn the painting's final section into something haunted and haunting, out-of-joint. There are some figures in the painting that have bled through like ghosts of the past; the solitary man, letter in hand, remains alone. Happiness is possible, but not promised, in this section. The moon remains, this time seen through a small window, watching over the men and offering them the sanctuary that they've been searching for. A man lies, nude, his body covered and embraced by one of the trees. Alone, yes, but at peace.

*The curfew,* like so much of Zearo's work, is defined by the details that are revealed by close examination. Details that carry with them the inherent fragility of the work; bright pastels on paper that, given close enough scrutiny, seem to turn into grains of sand. Into time itself. And yet, so much of the work is about physical materials that are dense. Throughout Zearo's work, leather gloves recur. There are times — in some of *The curfew,* and in *By the west window* — where they represent kink communities. And in *Passers by the pool*, where two yellow gloves linger apart from each other, floating at the top of a swimming pool, they become a shorthand for the connections and desires that Zearo's human figures embody, as the objects themselves turn into characters.

Throughout Zearo's work, complex ideas begin to collapse in on each other. In *The curfew*, space and time become inextricably linked; and throughout the smaller works on display, the gender associations we make with bodies, materials, and colours, collide into one another in a way that offers new ways of considering queerness and desire. As the nude figure in *By the west window* begins to dress themselves, the space around them, illuminated by the blinding light of the window, becomes pink. The colour appears throughout Zearo's work, a refusal to consider masculinity through a single or simplistic lens. In *A pink glimpse*, a figure begins to emerge from a dense pink background. This is what propels so much of the exhibition; the desire to emerge, fully oneself in a way that, until now, seemed impossible.