



The
PROMISING
Afar

The title 'The Promising Afar' is rendered in a stylized, digital font. 'The' is in a blue, cursive script. 'PROMISING' is in a bold, blocky, purple font with a white outline and a slight glow. 'Afar' is in a pink, cursive script. The text is set against a background of horizontal pink and white stripes. A yellow, pixelated line with small circles at its ends loops around the text, suggesting a digital path or a glitch effect.

The Promising Afar is a personal project—a series of illustrations that revisits early 2000s China through the lens of childhood memory, forgotten technology, and quiet melancholy. This body of work explores the future we once believed in. The pixelated reflections, glitched forms, and surreal digital fragments blur the boundary between reality and illusion, echoing how technology optimism promised us a better future.

At the heart of the series is a lone protagonist: a teenage girl in a typical Chinese school uniform, her thick bangs and colorful plastic hair clips grounding her firmly in a shared visual memory. She moves through these familiar yet unreal spaces—classroom, grandmother’s home, streets after new year’s eve—without awe or surprise. Her subtle expression and quiet presence evoke both detachment and searching. She is a witness to forgotten places, the only one left wandering through a fading generational dream.

This work is ultimately about hope, cultural transition, nostalgia, and isolation within collective memory. It speaks to the fragile beauty of remembering, and the ache that the promised afar never arrived.



The protagonist sits alone at the center of a classroom. The chairs and desks have been pushed aside, leaving her in a hollowed-out space where joy once gathered. Windows UI-like .png tabs floated in the air contains fragments of decorations: they hint at a celebration long gone—or one that never truly happened. She leans gently against one, aware that the celebration isn't real, but unwilling to let go of the memory piece. Her solitude contrasts the imagined festivity, casting a solemn shadow over a space meant for laughter.

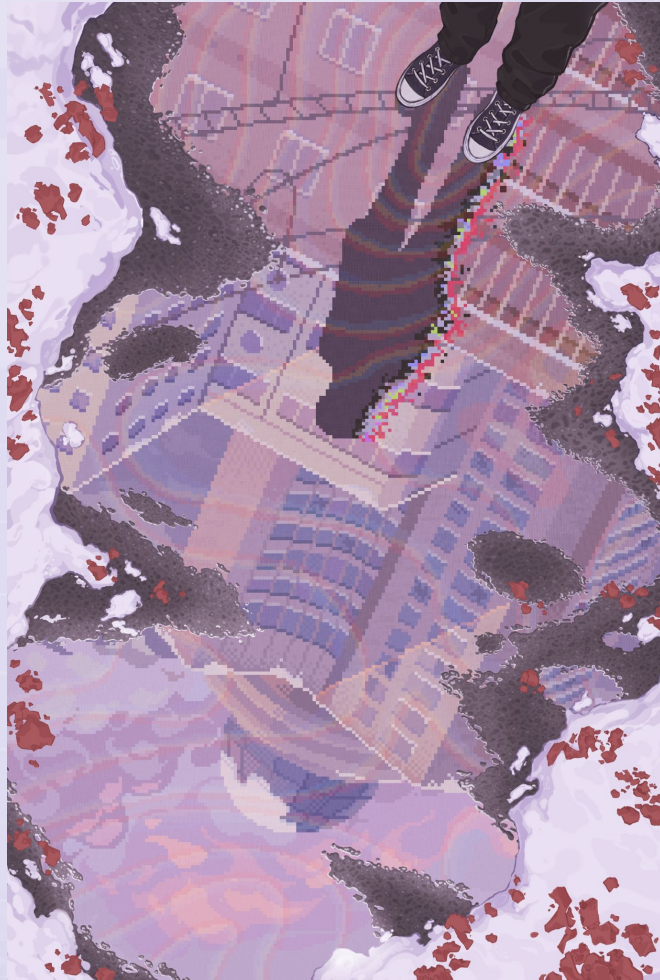
- A quiet ache for past joy that no longer resonates.
- Clinging to unreachable memories
- Contrast between communal celebration and private loneliness



Rows of monitors glow softly in a sunlit computer lab—the kind many first encountered in childhood. The girl stands among the machines, her body rendered in a transparent checker pattern—an unfinished self, like a file still loading. Her face appears repeatedly on the screens, each bathed in that iconic blue-sky Windows wallpaper. These looping portraits reflect how digital spaces have shaped yet fragmented our identity. While the setting recalls the hopeful beginnings of a connected world, there’s an underlying tension: the dream that the internet would unite everyone and bring understanding has never arrived.

-Disintegration of identity in digital age
-Nostalgia for 2000s tech optimism, and the space that shaped it





A quiet winter street unfolds beneath the remnants of a celebration long gone. The futuristic building, clad in blue glass and crowned with an almost UFO-like structure, once stood as a symbol of faith in technology and curiosity. Scattered across the snow are torn red papers—what remains of fireworks, once vital to New Year festivities but now fading due to shifting cultural norms. The puddle reflects not reality, but memory: a pixelated silhouette of the girl lingers in its surface, glitched and unstable, suggesting that this scene no longer exists—except in her recollection.

- Aftermath of celebration and cultural erosion
- Imagined futurism
- Fading memory and reflection





Amid iconic old furnishings—a sewing machine, metal bed, and bulky TV that once defined countless northern Chinese homes, the protagonist sits among relics of another era: CDs, tape recorder, scattered media that once carried voices, dreams, and distant broadcasts. A glowing, Frutiger Metro-styled effects gently rise from the disc she holds, yet her gaze stays fixed on the disc itself—searching, remembering. The surreal contrast between the mundane room and the ethereal forms evokes the feeling of memory reawakening: not just as nostalgia, but as a quiet act of rediscovery.



- Personal inheritance
- Childhood enchantment and loneliness
- The optimism of early media in contrast to quiet, lived interiors






When I first began this project, I was drawn to a growing trend on Chinese social media often tagged as “Y2K dreamcore”—a digital nostalgia built from old photos of childhood: supermarkets, school classrooms, stairwells. At first, I thought I simply wanted to capture these familiar memories through illustration—to preserve a personal archive of childhood in the early 2000s.


But as I researched and reflected more deeply, I began to understand what was really behind this collective nostalgia. It's not just longing for the past, but longing for the future we once believed in. There was a quiet but powerful belief that life would keep getting better. The rise of technology, the optimism of a new millennium, and the relative simplicity of childhood all fed into that dream: that the future would be brighter, kinder, more connected. That a “promising afar” waited for us, just around the corner. Of course, things didn't unfold that simply. The world has become more modern, more efficient, but also more fragmented, more competitive, more uncertain. And that contrast is where this series was born.

I chose to revisit the spaces from my own childhood—northern China, born in 2001—not just to remember them, but to reimagine them. Each scene blends the ordinary with hints of technological fantasy: glitch effects, transparency grids, interface windows, visual metaphors for a digital dreamscape that overlays the past.



At the center of this world is a lone girl in a traditional school uniform. She's not a direct self-portrait, but a symbol of that era: a quiet witness navigating these warped memories. She simply exists: watching, remembering, and gently reaching for a future that felt so near, yet never arrived.

For me, *The Promising Afar* is not just a return to childhood. It's a reflection on how we once dreamed. It's always the moment before the dream comes true that feels the most haunting.



—Anzhi Li