

# Female Art in Chinese Contemporary Art

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## ABSTRACT

Feminism was introduced into China during the May Fourth Movement. In the 1990s, Chinese female art began to develop. From the perspective of feminism, this article analyzes the female art in Chinese contemporary art from three aspects: discourse power in contemporary art, the predicament of female artists, and the unique existence of female art. It suggests that promoting the virtuous cycle of development about female art and even the whole art field is essential.

**Keywords:** Female art, Feminism, Chinese contemporary art, Discourse power.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Feminism is the thought and proposition of women examining everything, an alliance based on anti-patriarchal political interests, a movement of future human governance [1]. In this way, female art can be viewed as female artists expressing social views and emotions from a female perspective and having aesthetic and creative ideas different from those of male artists. Marsha Meskimmon, a British feminist art historian, who argues that if we ask 'what is a female artist' or 'what is female art', we will fall back into the logic of objectification and marginalization, but, if we take the lead in exploring how female art expresses the sexual difference in its material peculiarity and specific historical trajectory, the potential to generate new answers, ideas and concepts are endless [2]. This leads to a question: How do female artists use gender difference to interpret issues? Xu Hong, a contemporary Chinese female art theorist, has commented on the avant-garde art schools and exhibitions that emerged in China in the 1980s and 1990s: these alleged avant-garde art exhibitions are 'Same-sex Clubs'. Although men and women seem to be equal today, it's still hard for female artists to gain the same status and success as male artists. Indeed, women's access to art, and success within the remit, often depends on class, age, economic status, urban or rural locus, country, 'racial' or 'ethnic' origin -- factors that can cruelly classify women in terms of power [2]. Above all, the plight of female art in contemporary Chinese art needs to be further explored.

## 2. DISCOURSE POWER IN CONTEMPORARY ART

In today's society, science, technology and civilization have developed to an unprecedented height, human perceptions are also advancing, and in the constant acceptance of new things, the progress of the times seems to give equal opportunities to different genders. But the concept rooted in most people's minds is still men in society is more important. This can be seen from the Chinese tradition that the son takes the father's surname, man is often referred as "the head of the family". Men have an absolute discourse power in the whole society, and the art world is no exception. In the pursuit of diversity, women are often placed in a subordinate position and with the neglect of some of their characteristics, such as the most typical example: Camille Claudel's status as a talented female sculptor is not well known, even impossible to see in the writing of art history, but the world relishes her status as Rodin's lover. She is not seen as an independent individual, and the Chinese translation of Camille Claude's film production is straightforward - Rodin's Lover. All of these show that we have always been under patriarchy.

### 2.1 The writing of art history

In art history books, there is few or no writing about women artists. This leads people to wonder: Are there no outstanding female artists in art history? The answer is no, there are many excellent female artists in history, they have to face more difficulties than male artists, such as the inherent constraints of thought, lack of rights, less access to education. However, more importantly, the

writers of art historians are basically men. Although writing history should be objective, art historians unconsciously integrate their positions, views, and aesthetic on artists and their works into own writing. This discourse power in art history makes the female art in a passive and inferior position.

In the 1990s, with the development of Chinese reform and opening-up policy, as well as the influx of a large number of Western feminist ideas, Chinese feminism began to develop. In some contemporary art history books, female art already has a separate introductory chapter. Lu Hong, a historian of Chinese contemporary art, notes in his book that some young Chinese female artists have begun to try to transcend male artists, and give people a refreshing sense of experience. Although these works are far from mature, they have fully shown that female art, as a new genre in contemporary art, deserves attention for its existence [3]. Lu Peng, a Chinese art historian, also wrote about female art: In fact, most female artists engage in art activities because of their innate hobbies and talent. However, a problem that can not be avoided that, compared with men, the status of female artists in art history, just like their status in real social life, is still secondary, and anaemic [4]. Although Chinese female art has finally received some attention since the 1990s, the views on female art by these two theorists and other critics are based on the male perspective, and the initiative and discourse of art history are still mastered by male art historians and theorists.

## **2.2 Aesthetic discourse**

Simon de Povova in *Second Sex* notes that one is not born a woman, but becomes a woman. Women are influenced by the cultural environment, values, and traditional concepts of the times in which they live, thus forming the alleged feminine characteristics. Under the impact of these ideas, many female artists feel that they have less access to create artwork from female perspective, which to some extent, limits the development of female art. As mentioned above, the aesthetic discourse in the field of Chinese contemporary art is under male domination. With the shortage of female artists, art historians, and curators, the balance of aesthetic discourse is still difficult. Xu Hong makes a point in her article: When it comes to art standards, she has always believed that in the context of contemporary Chinese culture, especially use of “feminist” criticism method, it is impossible to completely set aside “gender identity” and only talk about the “good or bad” of works or theories. As from the art history, the artificial standard of “good or bad” have removed many female artists ‘out’ of history! -- not conforming to male tastes and standards. Judging from the general theory of artistic development, human beings have accumulated a set of standard systems for talking about and evaluating art,

but it does not mean that this system can prove that it is absolutely accurate and perfect, because any value system is historical and in the process of development.[5]. In contemporary exhibitions, the selection process of artworks must be first approved by the curator, so as to cater the male-dominated aesthetics, in this way, female artists cannot fully show their female identity. For instance, in the book of *Old mistresses : women, art and ideology* ( by Griselda Pollock & Rozsika Parker) ,they used Angelica Kauffman, an 18th-century female painter, as an example to show that these female artists are less appreciated for their academic attainments, but pay more attention to her own beauty and charm. Although their membership is recorded in this way it is highly significant that female artists could only be present as pictures within a picture and that their features were so differently portrayed that they could be easily mistaken for part of the studio furniture, on a par with the casts and models amongst which the educated gentlemen of the Academy stand or lounge.[6] In art history, human have accumulated a set of standard systems for evaluating art, but this does not mean that this system can be self-evident accurate and perfect, as any value system is in the process of development. If this is acknowledged, it is normal to emphasize female identity as a challenge to the habitual art evaluation standard [5]. Female artists and male artists have distinctive experiences and ideas, which requires the public to judge the artwork of these two creators from different identities.

## **3. THE DILEMMA OF CONTEMPORARY FEMALE ARTISTS**

Throughout the art history, female artists who can compete with masters such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Monet, and Picasso do not exist. We can't subvert classical historical notions, but this partly reflects the fact that women who want to innovate is not easy in social process. After May Fourth Movement in China, western feminism art had a great impact on female artists. However, in the 1990s when female art developed, China did not form a feminist art movement like West, so there was no clear creed for Chinese female art. Women were still in a passive position in the society.

When women are engaged in the art industry, they're in a difficult situation. If female artists violate male-dominated aesthetic standards, then the artists themselves will be subject to criticism. Besides, in the past, society was bound by the traditional ideology that women should focus more on family and less on career. As a result, they cannot obtain the same status and success as male artists. On the other hand, in exhibition, each piece is labeled with the author's introduction: name, gender, date of creation, so the public tends to look beyond artists' work to examine their personal lives,

and female artists themselves are often under more social pressure than male artists. In fact, the public should focus on the artwork itself, rather than judge its quality after knowing the artist's gender. Even so, on the road of pursuing artistic equality, there are still many excellent and creative female artists in contemporary art to challenge this patriarchy and promote female liberalism.



**Figure 1** Emily Mary Osborn, *Nameless and Friendless*, Oil Painting, 104\*84cm, Tate Modern and Tate Britain, 1857.



**Figure 2** Hong Liu, *Soliloquy 13*, Oil Painting, 150\*150cm, 1998



**Figure 3** Xiuzhen Yin, *Wash the River*, Performance Art, 1995.

#### 4. The Unique Existence of Contemporary Female Art

Exploring the creative thoughts and processes of female artists, we can find that those female artists concern the small parts of things with their delicate emotions and unique perspectives, showing their own introspection. In 18th century, Emily Mary Osborn's artwork named "*Nameless and Friendless*" (Figure 1) fully demonstrated to the world the female artist's examination of herself and others. The display of the situation allows the audience to feel the nuanced emotions of everyone in the picture, the pressure and embarrassment of female painter to accept the eyes of other men in the painting shop room, to summon the courage to sell her painting in the patriarchal society. At that time, the painter's work deeply reflected the problems in male-dominant society and the situation faced by female artists, so many female artists thought that the painting could be regarded as a "common self-portrait". Similar to Emily Mary Osborn's work, Liu Hong's works also reveal the issue of viewing and gender. Liu Hong, an outstanding contemporary Chinese female artist, whose "*Soliloquy*" (Figure 2) -- the woman with red cloth blocking the face is being watched by outside, losing the chance to communicate with others. This is an artwork created from feminist perspective to strengthen female identity. In an article written for the 2011 feminist painting exhibition of the National Art Museum of China, Xu Hong mentioned that although Chinese contemporary female art is influenced by Western feminist trends, Chinese female art has different environmental and cultural backgrounds. The works of those female artists are obviously different from Western female artists in some aspects. Chinese female art works are more implicit and depressing, and the pain of being destroyed and torn apart is more

obvious, sad and helpless than indignant. In terms of painting language, female artists are much obscure. They borrow more habitual symbols than creative symbols, but because the ingenious transformation makes the cultural meaning of the works richer, the direct impact of their works is reduced. In contemporary art, there are also some female artists whose art are not only care about female but about social issues: such as the famous Chinese female artist Yin Xiuzhen, her performance art work "Wash the River" (Figure 3,1995) expresses the social and environmental problem of serious water pollution. This shows that female artists also have the same broad horizon and concern for social issues as male artists. For these female artists, their concern are not self-observation and gender examination, but to look at the global and current hot issues to create excellent artwork. If only focus on gender differences, it will easily make female artists concern more on female expressions, such as female artists like to use flowers, silk, and other representative images in their paintings. These are easy for artists and audiences to be imprisoned in this type of artwork, and female art can not develop more widely, but become narrow. Therefore, feminist criticism is extremely important, as Linda Nochlin points out in her book: In the male-dominated field of art, female art has become increasingly important, not only for the voice of female, but also for the development of liberalism, for emancipation of stereotype [7].

Above these problems, if not revealed by female artists, may be difficult to promote them to the world. Like race and culture issues, gender issues are controversial, so that feminist art is more precious under this context. When female artists and male artists have equal position, it is a new progress in the field of art. Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker make a point in their book: Even if women are granted the same rights as men, sexism and patriarchy will continue to exist. This is not simply a problem where patriarchy sets up obstacles to women's development, but that society is based on the structure of sexism. Even if there were opportunities for nude sketching or other education in the past, women's works will still be regarded as inferior, because meaning is controlled by men. No matter what institutional changes are made, this difference will continue. Female art needs to have the same status as male art, whether in art or art history. This is because not only female art can reveal some unique problems, but also can make art history more richer and comprehensive. What we need is a complex, not a single history. Perhaps only when the unique existence of female art is no longer unique can the writing of art history be truly perfect, the art field is truly balanced, and the gender issues in society will be truly solved.

## 5. CONCLUSION

As Xu Hong point out in her article: Chinese society, history,cultural traditions, and the development and survival of women have their own problem and characteristics. Therefore, China's feminist criticism theory and feminist art criticism practice have their own goals and growth environment.[5] A perfect system is inclusive and pluralistic, and female art is an essential part of artistic progress. In Chinese contemporary art, outstanding female artists are emerging, although there are still many difficulties to overcome, the female identity, delicate emotion and unique perspective make their works more appealing, reveal more issues that are not easy to find in the patriarchal society. To be specific, the awakening of female awareness of rights and the need for female identity promote the development of female art. At present, with equal educational opportunities, women can get more development space, so female art historians and theorists have more opportunities to intervene in art history writing, enrich its perspectives and methods, and provide more reference value and comprehensive content; For artwork, the balance between ideology and aesthetic would be conducive to creation, the acceptance of artwork will naturally increase, so as to promote the virtuous cycle of development about female art and even the whole art field. Chinese Contemporary female art needs to raise and solve problems in a more targeted way. In artistic creation, women's art cannot be trapped in rigid themes in order to cater to the eyes of male curators under the patriarchal system. In the history of art, female art historians continue to participate in the writing of art history, which is more conducive to an evaluation system independent of male-dominated aesthetics.

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