Thoughts & Things 02 形象思维
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Madeline Eschenburg

Abstract

The following is an interview with five women working in the Beijing contemporary art world. This interview along with other Beijing artist profiles and exhibition reviews can be viewed on the Open Ground Blog (http://www.opengroundblog.com).

About the Author

Madeline Eschenburg is a PhD student in the History of Art and Architecture department of University of Pittsburgh. Her research centers around contemporary Chinese art with a special focus on the relationship between urban-based artists and rural China. She has published in Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture, and Art Slant. She is currently living in Beijing conducting dissertation research with the support of a Fulbright Fellowship.
One of the issues I have been considering lately is the position of women in the contemporary Chinese art world. While there have definitely been some incredibly influential and powerful female artists, curators, and intellectuals over the last thirty years, the highest official governmentally sponsored positions in the current Chinese art world are primarily occupied by males. Although it seems like there are more female Chinese artists being exhibited than ever before, there are still clearly some structural inequalities that must be addressed.

The Western concept of feminism was first introduced to China at the end of the Qing dynasty and was used as part of the discourse of modernization, symbolizing new, modern ideas of citizenship, gender, and nation. From that time forward, different terms have been applied to this concept, simultaneously emphasizing various female qualities to be celebrated and revealing the ideological and symbolic weight of the female gender in the process of anti-colonialism, revolution, and nation-building. In the post-Mao period, with the ever-visible role of globalization and marketization, the status of women, explorations of female identity, and the concept of “feminism” continue to undergo changes. In the context of the art world, this can be explored through subject matter, medium, and technologies chosen by female artists as well as international and domestic job opportunities afforded to women in the field. In this “Thoughts and Things,” I have chosen five women currently working in the Beijing contemporary art world to answer questions about their experiences and opinions related to this topic. Xing Danwen (郝琴文) is a Beijing-based artist of international repute. Hua Er (画儿) is owner and curator of see + Gallery in the 798 art district of Beijing. Lihui Dong (董丽慧) has a PhD in Chinese art from Tsinghua University and is currently finishing her second PhD in modern Chinese art at the University of Pittsburgh, Antonie Angerer is the co-owner of hutong-gallery I: project space and formerly worked at See Space Gallery in 798, and Emma Karasz is in charge of the residency program at the Red Gate Gallery. I have chosen women from a variety of professional and cultural backgrounds within the field in an attempt to gain a wider-ranging understanding of the multiple perspectives on this complex issue.

Xing Danwen|郝琴文

1. Explain your professional relationship to the contemporary Chinese art world.

请您讲述一些您和中国当代艺术的专业关系？

My relationship with contemporary art in China is pretty simple. My role is an artist. My job is creation. Art is my voice and language. I want my art to express my ideas and point of view, to speak for me.

我跟中国当代艺术的关系是比较简单的。我的角色是艺术家。我的工作是创作。我的作品是我的声音和语言。我希望作品本身能够传递我的想法和看法，替我说话。
2. Could you describe your experience as a female professional in China? According to your experience, has your gender influenced your ability to work effectively within the field?

This problem actually can be looked at from many perspectives. First, I think making art is very individualistic, so in terms of making art, I try as much as possible to remove outside negative influences and repetition. I try to make original artworks and have an original art language. Second, female artists often have a feeling of being overlooked. The primary roles in the art world—curators, critics, and organizers—are mostly men. Women rarely have these roles. The art world overlooks the ratio of men and women. Most people don’t really want to exclude female artists, they just don’t realize the reality of the gender imbalance, and therefore, they don’t make moves to actively change the situation. I am generally the only woman in conferences or group shows, leading viewers to ask, “Why are you the only female?” That question hits the nail on the head. It makes me realize the truth of being “the only one” or a “minority.” Third, according to my observations, when facing a bottleneck, or gender obligations, it is easier for women to retreat, abandon the original plan, or sacrifice themselves. This is the reason that it appears that female artists are scarce or disappearing. They lack persistence and courage in pursuing their ideal careers. It seems to be a gender-specific weakness. Fourth, an artist’s work is often very solitary and private. Especially when I’m travelling to shoot photographs, I have realized that there is an advantage to being a woman. A friendly and honest woman will not be a disturbance to other people. It’s often easier to win over the support and help of a passerby. It’s easier to establish goodwill and amiability. Therefore, it’s easier to take photographs, especially about sensitive topics, or take candid shots.

3. Do you think that the status of and opportunities available to women in the contemporary art world in China have improved or become worse over the last ten years? In what ways?

In the last ten years, the status and opportunities for women artists in China have improved. For example, there are more female curators and critics in the art world, and women have more opportunities to participate in exhibitions and conferences. Women are also increasingly represented in the art market, and their works are gaining more recognition and appreciation. However, there are still some barriers and challenges that female artists face, such as the gender imbalance in the art world and the lack of support and encouragement for female artists.

4. What does the word “feminism” mean to you, if anything, in the context of contemporary China/contemporary Chinese art? Or, is there another word that would better describe your hopes for the future of gender relations in this field?

Feminism has always been my concern as an artist. I think in the context of contemporary Chinese art, the concept of feminism should be broader and more inclusive. It should go beyond the traditional focus on gender equality and include issues such as social justice, environmental sustainability, and cultural diversity. I hope that in the future, gender relations in the art world will be more balanced and equitable, with more opportunities and support for all artists, regardless of their gender or other identities.
Madeline Eschenburg

For me, once feminism or female art is highlighted or mentioned, it means it is a problem. I don’t like it when people pay attention to these words. In fact, I classify female artists as “minorities.” I think in the art world, the most important thing is to decide to raise people’s understanding about this topic. To actively pay attention to the ratio of men and women in exhibitions, in publishing, and academic activities. Just talking about it is meaningless. The most important thing in this unhealthy situation is to do things to actively make change. I’m not saying we need to lower our standards for female art. Actually, there are a lot of good female artists and works that have not received deserved attention or interest.

Antonie Angerer

1. Explain your professional relationship to the contemporary Chinese art world.

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I cofounded I: project space, a non-commercial art space with artist-in-residence program in the Hutong area. Before that, I used to work in different commercial galleries in 798 and researched on contemporary Chinese art. It is very important to us, my partner Anna Eschbach and I, to offer a platform for art forms, artists, and art professionals that might have no space inside the market-driven art world in China and abroad.

2. Could you describe your experience as a female professional in China? According to your experience, has your gender influenced your ability to work effectively within the field?

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This question is very hard to answer for me, since I am not Chinese and often not confronted with social restriction that my Chinese colleagues have to deal with. I do think that since the Chinese art world is, just like other professional fields in China, very much structured by the guanxi principle, female protagonists are left outside of certain art circles. Therefore a kind of solidarity under female colleagues is definitely there. I personally have not experienced that my femininity has influenced my work here very much.

Because I am not Chinese, I also do not encounter the same social restrictions that my Chinese colleagues have to face. I do think that the Chinese art world, just like other professional fields in China, is very much structured by the guanxi principle, female protagonists are often left outside of certain art circles. Therefore a kind of solidarity among female colleagues is definitely there. Personally, I have not experienced that my femininity has influenced my work here very much.

3. Do you think that the status of and opportunities available to women in the contemporary art world in China have improved or become worse over the last ten years? In what ways?

In the past ten years, the status and opportunities for women in the Chinese contemporary art world have improved, but there is still a lot of room for improvement. In many cases, women are still underrepresented in the art world and are often defined through their male partners, which limits their ability to create and showcase their own art. Additionally, many female artists and curators still face gender bias and discrimination, which can hinder their career development.

I think, according to politically promoted programs like the “Leftover Women” (sheng nü), which put women under social pressure to get married before a certain age, there is a much more conservative trend in China. There are many female art professionals and artists, but it is a shame, because they are often defined through their male partner. In a way, I actually feel like female art in China also often has the female body or the traditional role of women in China as a topic. This might again be fault of the necessity of trying to categorize art. Instead of having an exhibition of female art once in a while, I think that it is necessary to offer them more space to develop independent art projects in general.

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4. What does the word “feminism” mean to you, if anything, in the context of contemporary China/contemporary Chinese art? Or is there another word that would better describe your hopes for the future of gender relations in this field?

In the context of contemporary China/contemporary Chinese art, I think the word “feminism” is nowadays, in certain milieus, branded as being against something. For me, creating new opportunities for women is more important than looking back at the times when we didn’t have rights. It is not about demonizing men, but fighting for more rights and equal opportunities for women.

Of course women’s rights and the creation of possibilities for women are very important to me. In the context of contemporary art in China, we want to especially give young female artists, curators, or critics the chance to exhibit or work in our space. The word “feminism” is nowadays, in certain milieus, branded as being against something. For me, creating new opportunities for women is more important than looking back at the times when we didn’t have rights. It is not about demonizing men, but fighting for more rights and equal opportunities for women.

4. Guanxi, or 关系, is a Chinese word meaning “relationship.” It refers here to professional relationships formed through networking.
1. Explain your professional relationship to the contemporary Chinese art world.

My major is art history, and contemporary Chinese art is one of my fields of interest.

2. Could you describe your experience as a female professional in China? According to your experience, has your gender influenced your ability to work effectively within the field?

As a female, I naturally pay more attention to gender issues within my research field. As a young mother, I have to spend more time on my family and kids, rather than develop my own social network.

3. Do you think that the status of and opportunities available to women in the contemporary art world in China have improved or become worse over the last ten years? In what ways?

Yes. We can see more female artists, faculty, and curators in the contemporary art world. We can see more and more independent and single women in China.

4. What does the word “feminism” mean to you, if anything, in the context of contemporary China/contemporary Chinese art? Or, is there another word that would better describe your hopes for the future of gender relations in this field?

I feel it means women artists do their work independently, intelligently, and confidently. I cannot figure out another word.

I recognize this term is meaningful for female artists, full of wisdom, and self-confidence in their creations. I cannot think of another word.
Emma Karasz

1. Explain your professional relationship to the contemporary Chinese art world.

I am the program director of Red Gate Residency, an international artists residency in Beijing.

2. Could you describe your experience as a female professional in China? According to your experience, has your gender influenced your ability to work effectively within the field?

For the most part, no, it has not influenced my ability to work. I will admit that I never thought about this much until a previous artist-in-residence at Red Gate made a comment about my role that totally altered my way of thinking about the job, and the kind of image I must project to avoid getting boxed into a gendered conception of what I do. The comment needs some context: earlier this year, I was on a panel at a museum in Beijing with three male artists; we were speaking about the importance of residencies and cultural exchange. I was both the youngest person on stage and the only woman. After the panel, this resident told me that he was very upset that there hadn't been any women artists on stage, and furthermore, that the only woman (myself) was simply “a caretaker.” I was both hurt and outraged. In an attempt to condemn an institution for being sexist and to comment on a larger systemic problem, he was blatantly sexist.

As “coordinator” of the program (as I was for the first year working at Red Gate) and now as director, I manage everything relating to the residency, from applications and finances, to airport pickups, and visits to Chinese artists' studios. Some people have called this a “babysitting” role. Since this resident's comment, I have been very conscious never to be too nurturing, forgiving, “soft”—all arguably instinctual characteristics of mine—for fear that it would cast me off as simply a womanly “caretaker,” as opposed to a capable manager of an international artists residency program.

Because I am a woman, the complexities of my job were devalued. Would this happen if it were a man in the same position? I do not think this experience is unique to China. However, I do think it’s worth noting that the idea of “woman as caretaker” is perhaps more socially acceptable in China than the social circle I come from in the US. To give an example, I recently met a Chinese painter while he was setting up his exhibition. His wife was helping him with the set-up (as family members often do; other times it is the artist’s father, or brother, mother, etc.), and when I asked her what she did, she said “I’m his wife. I help him with his work.” I think that perhaps in the art world, particularly in China, if the man in a heterosexual relationship is a successful artist, then it is totally normal and non-taboo for his spouse to devote her life to his work. I am not sure if the same would be true if the woman were the artist.
Madeline Eschenburg

Do you think that the status of and opportunities available to women in the contemporary art world in China have improved or become worse over the last ten years? In what ways?

In China in recent years, do you think women’s status in the art world has improved or worsened? What changes have you observed?

It is difficult for me to comment on that because I am relatively new to the Chinese contemporary art world and have only been in China for two years. In addition, as a young white woman in China, I have received preferential treatment in countless ways, but this represents a whole other problem, and not one necessarily related to the art world at all. That said, it is perhaps my positive and naive view that the status of women is always changing for the better, especially as we become a more globalized world, and particularly in China, as it plays a key role in that globalization.

Chinese women artists are notoriously underrepresented. We have a resident who has come back to the residency several times in the last year because she is writing about women artists in China. The fact that this hasn’t already happened is indicative of inequality, but similarly, the fact that it’s happening is a sign that there is cause for it now, and that women artists are finally receiving more attention.

Actually, most of the people I know working in the art world in China are women. Often they are not the “artists,” but the people running what goes on behind the scenes. Most of the time, men are creating the information and the women are disseminating it. This does not necessarily mean they are less powerful, but it does mean that there are gender roles in place. This must be changed.

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In the contemporary art world, I would say that a better word to describe my hopes for the future is “equality.”

I hope for equal representation. As we know, female artists are underrepresented in China. The familiar idol-worship of artists that goes on everywhere is almost entirely allotted to men. It would be very good to see a better gender balance between those making the art and those who run the art institutions.

Hua Er

1. Explain your professional relationship to the contemporary Chinese art world.

In 2008 a friend and I established the see + gallery. This is a gallery only for photography located in the 798 district of Beijing. Before this, I lived in Shenzhen for over ten years. In terms of my relationship with the contemporary Chinese art world, I could trace it back to that time, because at the end of the twentieth century, I already had curated a few shows for some painters and photographers. When I opened the gallery in Beijing, I decided on the focus of my gallery: photography. Because in the contemporary Chinese art world photography was a weak field, most of our audiences only knew about European and American photography from the ‘80s and ‘90s, so I wanted to help expand that frame, even though the significance of the development of this period is difficult. In terms of the background of this form, from the beginning, I always gave priority to exhibitions of famous foreign photographers. Between 2008 and 2011, an internationally renowned critic helped to co-curate an exhibition with close to twenty photographers from America, Germany, France, and Japan. In 2012, besides continuing the “big name” series of exhibitions, I also curated The History of Photography: Stephen White Collection, and Color Photography History Collection. These two exhibitions were the first ones in China that spanned 150 years of the history of photography. At that time, we also continued to care about and support the work of Chinese photographers, and for the past several years, we have had many exhibitions of Chinese photographers and made many recommendations for others to exhibit them, which is a great achievement. Until now, see + gallery has become well known within the field.

2008年我与朋友一起在北京创办了see+ gallery。这是一间纯粹的摄影画廊，坐落在北京798艺术区。在这之前我曾在深圳生活了十几年，要说与中国当代艺坛的关系，也许可以追溯到那个时期，因为在上世纪末我已经为一些当代画家和摄影师策划过一些展览。在北京创办see+时，明确了三个定位，那就是以影像为主。因为摄影在中国当代艺坛是弱势领域，也许从大众对其的认识上仅仅相当于欧美的八、九十年代，所
2. Could you describe your experience as a female professional in China? According to your experience, has your gender influenced your ability to work effectively within the field?

I don’t define my experience as a female professional experience, because my work has never had clear gender expectations or discrepancies. Just speaking from my own experience and luck, in my job right now, women seem to be more attentive than most men in terms of management.

3. Do you think that the status of and opportunities available to women in the contemporary art world in China have improved or become worse over the last ten years? In what ways?

在中国近十年的过程中，您觉得女人的地位与机会提高了吗？如果提高的话，表现在哪些方面？

Without a doubt, the status and opportunities for women have increased. Not only in the household, but also in terms of their role in society, women no longer only reside in subordinate positions; they have actively taken more power, and even freedom of speech. Take the art world for example: in the last ten years of the establishment of the structure of the art world, women continue to hold a large proportion of the leadership roles.

毫无疑问，如今女人的地位和机会都有所提高。不论在家庭，还是社会角色方面都已经不仅仅屈于从属地位，掌握了更多的主动性，甚至话语权。以艺坛为例，在近10年成立的艺术机构里，女性做掌门人的一直占据着很大的比例。

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在当代中国／当代中国艺术背景中，您来讲，“女性主义”这个词有什么意思？还是有没有一个另外的更合适的词来表达您对了将来男女关系的希望？

I’m sorry, but I don’t have any special understanding in terms of this question.

很抱歉对于这个问题，我没有特殊的了解。