

On the Feminine Image as Represented in Xiang Jing's Sculpture

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After Hélène Cixous' proposal of the *Écriture Feminine*,¹ there has been one current to urge that women should return to their bodies and write for themselves. "Let your body speak for you!" has become an aim for later feminine creation. Although Xiang Jing was once dissatisfied "to find myself a female child, one other sex that differs with the male one—that could not possibly be accepted.", she treasures now her feminine existence and finds that "a woman could maintain native things better and express her own experience in better natural way."² Such feminine conscious raising requires years for its maturation. Despite many works of female nudes have been expressed by masculine hands, Xiang Jing stresses, however, that "from the beginning of art history, female bodies have their incessant representations, being put there and appreciated, yet never being taken as feminine "I" so that she could say something for her own body."³ This article then would explore somehow, the distinctive features of the feminine image in Xiang Jing's works as to see their values in context.

It was nearly a fact when Ye Meng (葉夢) once commented Xiang Jing's works: "Most of them are female — children or adolescent girls as subjects of her representation."⁴ But contrary to patriarchal lascivious voyeurism for young and well-built female bodies, Xiang Jing's *Your Body* (2005) (fig. 1) is somewhat weighty

¹ See Zhang Mei-mei. "Language, Body and Representation of Subjectivity: the Aesthetic Dimension of 'Écriture Feminine'." in *Frontier of Literary Theory*. 8 (2000), 70. Readers could further consult Wu Yan (trans.). "The Body that Matters." (Judith Butler) in *Post -Body: Culture, Power and Bio-politics*. Wang Min-an, Chen Yong-guo eds. (Zhang Chun: Ji-lin Renmin Chubanshe, 2010), 157-199.

² Li Zong-tao. "Xiang Jing: Let Female Bodies Speak." *Southern People Weekly* (2007.3.21), 68.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ye Meng, Zou Jian-ping (eds.). *Meili Yuwang*. (Zhang-sha: Hunan Meishu Chubanshe, 2003) , 27.

and far from being slender or beautiful. Liao Wen (廖雯) pointed out: “The crucial thing for Xiang Jing is not that a woman artist has made a female body and image, but that she has ‘remarkable personal language.’” And an interview with Xiang Jing has shown Xiang’s own view: “What I want to express is the true feelings rather than providing seduction..... a new way different with traditional ones to look at female bodies.....hoping to express some inner things, at least my girls are not pretty and lovable ones.” ⁵

Your Body has a huge size that seems to be a parody of male artists’ works, such as Michelangelo’s *Moses* and Rodin’s *The Thinker* with their sublime quality. Xiang Jing asserts that “This is also a male body” and her critic Ju Ju (朱朱) also notes that “This woman exceeds the ordinary man in a huge form and opens all her parts for our viewing without any concealment or privacy.” ⁶ However, Xiang Jing’s works demonstrate her self confidence without resorting to novelties among contemporary anti-hero’s atmosphere. And her extraordinary sized works refers to no great “somebody” as patriarchy requires, but to “nobody” in an anonymous way. Xiang Jing stressed: “Our sense of contemporariness is not determined by means, methods or technologies, but by whether your reflection concerns contemporary spiritual question or not. I merely distinguish good and bad arts and use sculptures to express this contemporariness. Everything could be contemporary for me.” ⁷ If we compare her works with Yang Shu-qing’s (楊淑卿) *The Spring*, we could find the adolescent girl motif in Xiang Jing’s works has her own outstanding features, as Yang’s work remains a feminine tradition of beauty and shyness even its form is more “modernized”. Critic Ju Ju emphasized that “there is a gender ‘degree zero’ or

⁵ Laio Wen. *Huiyan Lanxin: a study of Chinese women sculptors’ creation with college background*. (Beijing: Jiu Zhou Press, 2010), 49.

⁶ Ju Ju. “Within Incantations: Interpreting Xiang Jing’s Works.” *Aesthetic Garden* (2001 no.2), 24.

⁷ Li Zong-tao. *op. cit.*

‘neutralized’ inclination in Xiang Jing’s works that some work of her female nude seems to be made as the mythical first woman, not yet being put between gender struggles in reality.....just a living body! ” In other words, “adopting a masculinized feminine body or androgynous ambiguities, her sculptures of bodies achieve to dissolve some masculine subjectivities.” ⁸



Fig. 1 *Your Body*, 2005. FRP,
Acrylic Paint, H 207 x 160 x 150 cm

One notable thing for Xiang Jing’s works is that even she emphasizes the adolescent girl(even virgin) motif, female bodies under her hands have cool moods and appearances in usual. Xiang Jing once referred to her studio: “My studio is cool in tone, I prefers to paint it in cool color even under hot weather. Part of the cause could be attributed to my too-ready-to-burn character. Cool tone becomes my fire extinguisher and tranquillizer. ” ⁹ As a result, her sculptures of female bodies always demonstrate the minimum and direct human quality, yet seem to be detached from any specific time-space, social class or realistic association. Their solitude and

⁸ Ju Ju. *op.cit.*, p.25. Using female bare head as a strategy to eliminate femininity could also be seen in Taiwanese feminine artist Guo Hui-chan’s (郭慧禪) performative art.

⁹ Ye Meng, Zou Jian-ping. *op. cit.*, 27.

calmness is quite different as compared with those distorted or struggling figures under environmental pressure as exemplified by Francis Bacon's hands. However, female bodies by Xiang Jing defy also that dead stillness, as well indicated in her work *The Center of Quietude* (2007). (fig. 2) It deals with an erotic motif of adolescent exploration of private sexual parts and desires. Such transgression of morality was common and could be traced back to surrealism, as could be seen in *The Great Masturbator* by Salvador Dali or some lesbian motif works of Leonor Fini. But in field of sculpture, Xiang Jing provides one example in concrete image and direct impact.

Her work *To Us* (2007) (fig. 3) leads us also to a convenient association for a lesbian motif of "between us". We see two girls standing one following the other. Their thin faces and bare heads show no slightest desire to welcome any male voyeurism. One girl stretches out a hand to touch the other's side, as if some feminine continuity has been established for their common corporal experiences, including anxieties relating to their breast growth. Besides, Xiang Jing's work *I Am 22 Years Old, But Without My Period* (2007) (fig.4) also criticized, from another dimension, those reclining women as done by male artists' hands, even in an ironic way.

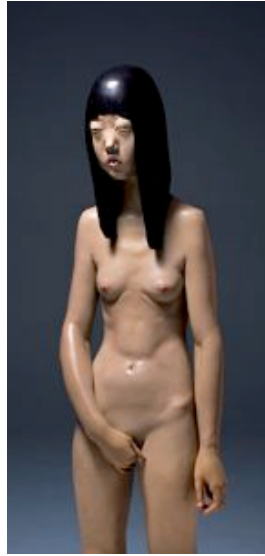


Fig. 2 *The Center of Quietude*
2007. FRP, Acrylic Paint, H
172x50 x 35 cm



Fig. 3 *To Us*, 2007. FRP,
Acrylic Paint, H 176 x 50 x
90 cm



Fig. 4 *I Am 22 Years Old, But Without
My Period*, 2007. FRP, Acrylic Paint, H
30 x 95 x 155cm

However, this does not mean Xiang Jing never took reference from masculine art tradition, but rather tried her frequent hands to innovate it. For example, her *Mortal-Endless Tower* (2011) (fig.5) reminds us Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column*. Yet the piling up of simple geometric forms of the latter has been replaced

by Xiang Jing with ten or fifteen acrobat girls in regular postures and different facial expressions. They all have pliable bodies through strict training so that each of them could reverse their legs as if replacing two hands of her upper girl. This human tower could hardly be realized but could demonstrate nevertheless some ‘feminine sublime’ that distinguished from a masculine one. And these girls could maintain their persistent smile even in hardship, which also could satirize that disciplinary institution forcing them to endure their over-burdened sadness.

One other merit of Xiang Jing’s works rests on her reluctance to exaggerate artificial bitterness, as done by Gina Pane and Orlan, or to distort human figures as Francis Bacon did. She could be comparable with some Taoist who would like to return to simplicity and find that body’s minimum status and calmness imply an alternative plenitude. Xiang Jing’s works thus draw inspiration also from animal in our natural world and she regards them as mirrors of our human existence. As in *Otherworld -- Will Things Ever Get Better?* (2011) (fig.6) Xiang Jing encourages us to a new understanding of that miserable ecological situations in our earth. Those ‘plants-like’ animals are carrying human sadness, as in Jean-Antoine Watteau’s *Pierrot*. We witness the hero’s grief through animal’s eyes.



Fig.5 *Mortal-Endless Tower*, 2011. FRP, Acrylic Paint, H 711 x 120 x 120 cm



Fig.6 *Otherworld-will Thing Even Get Better?*, 2011. FRP, Acrylic Paint, H 217 x 130 x 270 cm

When Xiang Jing once had been asked to express her views on body art of contemporary women artists, she emphasized again “There are lots of excellent women artists. Marlene Dumas once said: “Art is feminine. Any man doing artwork could be seen as a woman!”¹⁰ This indeed corresponds to what French woman thinker Julia Kristeva once proposed: “The pre-oedipal stage, as our gender identity is not yet fixed or normalized, represents some feminine flowing creativity. In a sense, many avant-guard male writers, such as Mallarmé and Proust, demonstrate also such feminine style.” Xiang Jing’s works seem to be imbued with such pre-oedipal, non-verbal or pre-linguistic existential status too. One title of her work reminds us better: *Only silence can maintain silence!* And we need some patience for sure to

¹⁰ Li Zong-tao. *op.cit.*

grasp the proper sense of Xiang Jing's works -- when we could learn to face them well in our own quietude.

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