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Gendering Her Art: The Category of “Woman” in the Art History of Hong Kong

Author

Christina Yuen Zi CHUNG, 鍾宛芝

Tags

Women in Art History Exhibition Histories

Christina Yuen Zi Chung looks at histories of gender-themed art exhibitions and their relation to feminist discourse in Hong Kong

Artistic production centred on the topic of gender has always been embattled terrain—exposing an uneven topography of contested categories and hierarchies that intersect along spectrums of “gender,” “race,” “class,” and “sexuality.” Gender, for example, often operates as shorthand for “women” or “female”—to curate exhibitions around gender, then, can be both a *strategic* and *marginalising* move.

Strategic—given the unequal conditions within contemporary art (and, indeed, in wider society globally), wherein white male artists occupy positions of greater visibility and power despite the prolific work of women artists; and yet also doubly marginalising—as the categories “woman artist” or “women art” produce stereotypical confines that stifle recognition of individuality and innovation beyond established gender norms. The oscillation between these two effects have inadvertently produced a stalemate in further explorations about the power dynamics of gender—particularly ones that challenge white and Chinese male dominance in both the artistic sphere and mainstream society in Hong Kong.

If, for example, the purpose of curating an all-female exhibition is to rectify the under-representation of female artists, does the theme of the exhibition itself need to be based upon their gender? Might this simply create narrow, essentialised notions of what it means to be female in relation to other identities? Can a gender-themed exhibition challenge the power dynamics and structural conditions that led to under-representation in the first place, or would it merely reinforce the status quo, implicitly reifying the unmarked category of “artist” as historically middle class, cisheterosexual male? Deliberations on these questions have been widely explored in Hong Kong through a history of gender-related exhibitions, and also through the work of a diverse roster of female artists who have negotiated this rocky terrain of what it means to be an artist as a woman, without having one’s complexity reduced to the confines of a vague, singular, and yet perhaps not un-useful category: “women’s art.” Beyond academia, activism, and niche art communities, there exists a sense of hesitation towards investigating gender as a topic of deeper analytical discussion in

Hong Kong's mainstream communities—in large part due to the prominence of individual Chinese women in positions of power, and the economic and civic freedoms accorded to both Chinese and white women and men. The general visibility of women is conflated with equality, while patriarchal, socially-constructed gender norms are frequently commented upon but remain largely unchallenged, save through efforts made by women's organisations and a minority group of feminist activists.¹ These norms are more often negotiated in the day-to-day, in a space of relative silence where individuals comply or buck against these expectations influenced by a contested mixture of traditions marked as “Western” and “Chinese”—a legacy of Hong Kong's former colonial rule. Within the contemporary art sphere, concerns about breaking through this silence, and the ambivalence towards gendering art, have produced a circuitousness best summarised by the title of Phoebe Man's essay on gender in Hong Kong contemporary art: “Discussions Always Start From Zero.” Attempts to discuss gender in both wider society and within art circles have been made through gender-themed exhibitions that began to emerge from the late 1980s onwards. Yet interest in these discussions, repeatedly rising and submerging under a growing tide of artistic activity, have shown little indication of a deepening movement until more recent times.

“Woman” as Identity Politics, “Woman” as Solidarity

Momentum reached an apex in the 1990s and early 2000s, during which a wide range of gender-based exhibitions were held in Hong Kong. Large-scale group exhibitions were among the first to emerge, bringing the topic of women artists and gender into the spotlight. Artist groups such as the Hong Kong Female Contemporary Art Association and the International Woman Artists (Hong Kong) Association were established in 1993, which advocated for the visibility of female artists in the contemporary art world through creating a series of woman-themed exhibitions. Organised by the associations, government-run museums, as well as other art groups, these exhibitions included [*Art Works of Hong Kong Women Artists '91*](#) (1991), [*Arts Works of Ten Female Artists, '91*](#) (1991), [*Art Works By Hong Kong & Macau Women Artists*](#) (1994), [*Art Works by Hong Kong & Beijing Women Artists*](#) (1999), and [*Muse Gaze*](#) (2005), among many others. Woman-themed exhibitions continue to provide a platform of solidarity to discuss and further the work of female artists as well as other women in Hong Kong—even if a feminist-rooted examination of gender as a social construct, or of imbalanced power dynamics in wider society, may not necessarily be central to their focus.

“Woman” as Feminist Critique

Feminism and feminist theory have surfaced in various guises within artworks, curatorial statements, and catalogues of gender-based exhibitions in Hong Kong. The overlap between gender and feminism is clear and almost unavoidable, since feminist studies centres “gender” as its primary category of analysis while investigating how it intersects with other identities like sex, sexuality, race, class, and ability. Despite this overlap, feminist positions have not always been explicit in artistic production and attendant texts. Exhibitions such as [*Manmade: A Project about Masculinity and Art*](#) (2004), which invited “artists of different ages and sexuality to re-examine themselves as gendered subjects,”² and [*Gender, Genitor, Genitalia*](#) (2015), created to “examine feminism and questions digital obscenity,”³ are notable exceptions, as they openly situate themselves within feminist inquiry and challenge the limits of the categories of

“woman” and “woman art” by exploring how men and “male art” have been exempt from scrutiny.

In other instances, hedging direct mentions of feminism or even “woman-only” standpoints, exhibitions and artworks that present clear challenges towards gender norms and hierarchies have been frequently presented as personal, artistic confrontations of silences or taboos. *P-Read: Jam Version* (1997) explored the subject of menstruation in Hong Kong in relation to female experiences, and the [Phallic Contemporary Art Exhibition](#) (1995) sought to “challenge the taboos of sexuality and erotica in our society”⁴—exhibitions like these reflect a range of approaches in regards to explorations of gender, sexuality, and feminism, which indicates a diverse and robust feminist critique despite operating without a feminist label. This method creates a productive ambiguity that enables broad-ranging explorations of gender and sexuality without tremendous social or political backlash.⁵ However, this has also produced noticeable gaps in feminist critique, fostering conditions where the relationship between gender, sex, and sexual orientation have yet to be thoroughly explored.⁶ In an article written for the magazine *Fountain of Creativity*, Chan Sai Lok details a rich archive of works by LGBTQ artists—including Anson Mak, Isaac Leung, and Monique Yim—that have posed critical challenges to Hong Kong’s male-dominant cisheteronormativity. However, in the conditions of this “productive ambiguity” expressed as ambivalence towards feminism, works by these artists have often been exhibited and discussed as separate from works that focus more squarely on cisheteronormative womanhood.

“Woman” without Feminism, “Woman” as Position(s) of Difference

Do artworks that reflect upon or challenge female experiences necessarily have to be feminist? Exhibitions such as [Wo Man: Feminine Art by Artists Based in Macau and Hong Kong](#) (2001) have grappled with this question, reflecting its ambivalence towards feminism and the category of gender as a whole in its curatorial statement: [M]ost artists put the gender issue aside and do what they believe—since femininity is fluid, whatever they make is feminist art. There are no radical feminists in the show. Most treat feminist theories as references of living instead of artistic intention.⁷ *Wo Man* sought to confuse notions of the feminine, including both female and male artists in its show, to reflect that the feminine need not be the sole property of female-sexed bodies. By diversifying stereotypical perceptions of the feminine through showcasing difference as well as similarity, heteronormative gender norms and the hierarchies of inequality they perpetuate can potentially be deconstructed within the arts and in wider society as a whole. The exhibitions [Ma’am’s Box](#) (1999), [“Woman” Wanted](#) (2003), and the book [The Free Tribe: 10 Women Visual Artists in Hong Kong](#) (2000) were among such attempts to exhibit individual difference while threading a through-line among a select group of artists by their identified gender. Although some of these exhibitions and artists explicitly expressed a feminist stance and others presented a more tacit position, the cumulative effect of artistic production in this vein can nevertheless be read as feminist: it disrupts and potentially upends normative notions of gender.⁸ Yet without a wider feminist movement in the social context of Hong Kong to amplify the message of these exhibitions and writings, the feminist impact of these works have largely functioned at the edges of a mainstream conversation that fluctuates between commentary on gender closely hewn to existing norms, and critiques of gender that regard the topic of gender and feminism as passé or even distasteful.

“Woman” as a Site of Tradition and Change

The popularity of gender as a topic within the contemporary arts of Hong Kong waned towards the mid-to-late 2000s, although community art exhibitions related to women were ongoing and have been active throughout. Often presented by women’s welfare associations in Hong Kong, these exhibitions frequently feature the artworks of their constituents and relate fabric, handicraft, and the decorative arts to women, given their associations with femininity. While exhibitions along this vein can be seen as essentialising and rarely regarded in the same category as contemporary art, exhibitions like [*Nu-Hung: The Quilt Project*](#) (2003) and [*Jaffa Lam Laam Collaborative: Weaver*](#) (2013) are notable exceptions. Both exhibitions feature community art projects intended for a contemporary art audience while involving women in different grassroots communities as co-creators of the artworks. They afford opportunities to reflect upon the relationship between traditional craft and traditional gender norms while examining contemporary conditions of living, labour, and class for women in Hong Kong—recontextualising these practices in a new era. Social change, reflected in many of the stories these women reveal in the process of their collaborative artmaking, indicate the absence of an essential, static set of gender norms. The category “woman” is constantly reconstituted, shifted, and renegotiated through the ages, responding to the call of its times.

New “Woman,” New Futures

A recent revival of interest in the topic of gender can be understood as a response to the global phenomenon of renewed engagement with feminism, also reflected in broad trends of contemporary art. Large-scale retrospective exhibitions of feminist art have been conducted in art-world epicentres, and the word “gender” has found its way back into curatorial statements and exhibition titles in Hong Kong.⁹ Yet in order to produce lasting effects beyond a momentary trend in the art economy, this wave of interest requires a deeper consideration of what inquiring into gender and feminism can offer for Hong Kong’s future.

The Umbrella Movement, despite its failure to make political gains for universal suffrage, was nevertheless successful in producing a loud and unmistakable cry for change. To look into gender through feminism is to examine the infrastructure of power with the intent to transform. Art stands at the crux of this transformation in an age of visuality; and in a city increasingly banking on its creative industry to generate international recognition and capitalist revenue, it is all the more important that a feminist intervention interrupts hierarchies of power that produce and maintain the status quo. In the face of rising housing costs, worsening labour conditions, and a lingering unease about Hong Kong’s political future, the desire for change persists as an unanswered question in spite of dampened hope—is there not an alternative? With an understanding that these socio-economic forces subsist upon prescribed expressions of the category of “woman” and exert its greatest impact on the city’s most marginalised—queer women, transwomen, women from ethnic minorities, women who are domestic helpers and sex workers, among others—we must also ask ourselves: Can we afford to not be feminist?

It is perhaps time to shed some of the productive ambiguity that has characterised Hong Kong’s exploration of gender and feminism within and outside of the arts. A new generation of artists and feminist activists are visualising and vocalising their challenges towards gender norms and its hierarchies of power. For these efforts to take root and foster a broader feminist movement, different genealogies and histories

of feminism in Hong Kong need to be uncovered in order to build upon a foundation anchored in and shaped by the city itself. Archives of artworks and exhibitions that have already theorised widely about gender, women, labour, class, and sexuality in the context of Hong Kong will then be vital resources for our city's future.¹⁰ Through re-examining the past and embracing an alternative, feminist Hong Kong, we may find ourselves awakening to a new topography of possibilities.

Christina Yuen Zi Chung is a writer, translator, and PhD student researching the intersections of decolonial feminism and Hong Kong contemporary art at the University of Washington, Seattle.

Notes

1. Organisations such as The Hong Kong Council of Women, established in 1947, have advocated for women's rights in the public sphere, including lobbying for greater representation of women in Hong Kong politics. The Hong Kong Chinese Women's Club and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) have consistently provided welfare-based services for underprivileged women. Other organisations such as the Association for the Advancement of Feminism and the Hong Kong Women Workers' Association are more firmly located within a feminist position, and its members, such as Ho Chi Kwan and Dora Choi Po King, are noted proponents of a feminist movement in Hong Kong. A more comprehensive overview of feminist activism in Hong Kong can be found in Adelyn Lim's book: *Transnational Feminism and Women's Movements in Post-1997 Hong Kong* (2015).

2. Quoted from curatorial statement of *Manmade: A Project about Masculinity and Art* (2004): <http://www.para-site.org.hk/en/exhibitions/manmade-a-project-about-masculinity-and-art>

3. Quoted from curatorial statement of *Gender, Genitor, Genitalia* (2015): <https://www.facebook.com/events/1445782452408927/>

4. Quoted from "Rude bits included," *South China Morning Post*, July 23, 1995.

5. This may be attributed to Hong Kong's encounters with coloniality and its negotiation of "glocal" socio-economic changes throughout its history. The need to adopt flexible, strategic positions emerges in day-to-day interactions: Hong Kongers mix and code-switch amongst Cantonese, Mandarin, and English as linguistic expressions and modes of being to adapt for personal, social, economic, and political advantage.

6. Chan Sai Lok's insightful article 「何須『畫公仔畫出腸』? 盤點香港視覺藝術同志作品」 presents a thorough exploration of how LGBTQ+ Hong Kong artists and the topic of sexuality have been elided in discussions of gender and vice versa: <https://www.fountain.org.tw/r/post/hk-lgbt-art>

7. Quoted from curatorial statement of *Wo Man: Feminine Art by Artists Based in Macau and Hong Kong* (2001): <http://www.para-site.org.hk/en/exhibitions/wo-man-feminine-art-by-artists-based-in-macau-and-hong-kong>

8. Although this allusion to a definition does not represent feminism in its full, feminist theory in almost every variety problematises gender norms that we take to be "natural." This establishes the grounds from which a feminist movement calls forth equitable change. To address a wide range of women in different socio-economic, political, and physical circumstances, feminist theory intersects with queer theory, critical race theory, and disability studies, amongst others, to explore how different identity formations are utilised to structure society and its power hierarchies.

9. These include *Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting* (2017) exhibited at MoMA PS1 in New York; *Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947–2016* (2016), presented by Hauser & Wirth in Los Angeles; and *NOW: A Dialogue on Female Chinese Contemporary Artists* (2018) held at the Center for Chinese Contemporary Art in Manchester. In Hong Kong, more recent exhibitions on gender include *Ambiguously Yours: Gender in Hong Kong Popular Culture* (2017), *Women in Art: Hong Kong* (2018), and *What Do You Want for Tomorrow* (2016).

10. In addition to the resources referenced above, Leung Po Shan's 2003 essay "In Anticipation of Men's Art: Re-Reading Women's Art in Hong Kong" is another notable example of theoretical work on gender and Hong Kong contemporary art that serves as a precursor to this essay. Leung's own perspectives are presented alongside interview excerpts from Hong Kong artists, reflecting their varied attitudes towards feminism and the category "woman" in relation to their art.

Banner image: Jyoti Bhatt, *Glimmering Horizon*, 1968. Jyoti Bhatt Archive, Asia Art Archive Collections.

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Author

[Christina Yuen Zi CHUNG, 鍾宛芝](#)

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Date

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Address

11/F Hollywood Centre, 233 Hollywood Road, Sheung Wan, Hong Kong

Telephone

[+852 2844 1112](#)

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