

Jing Xiang, Speaking With The Body

Zhiyi Zhao

The Education University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen 518000, China

Abstract

Jing Xiang is one of the most famous contemporary Chinese sculptors born in Beijing in 1968. In the "Consciousness-raising" process of Jing, "speaking with the body" has played an important role in her artistic creation. Her works often feature ordinary public individuals in real life, reflecting her struggle for discourse power in interpreting "female identity" and "social identity". In this way, the female body has become "a channel to observe the status quo of contemporary Chinese women" (Smith, 2008). As a result, this paper will focus on Jing's artistic means of "body narrative" and decipher the process of her rising feminine consciousness in two stages: *Keep in Silence* (2003-2005) and *Naked Beyond Skin* (2006-2008). At the same time, an attempt will be made to explore how the works show her reflection on the female body and social identity.

Keywords

Female Consciousness; Jing Xiang; Identity Politics; Body.

1. The Raising of Female Consciousness

1.1. The theory of "Consciousness Raising "

In the 1960s and 1970s, the second-wave feminism introduced the famous slogan of "Consciousness raising" (Rosenthal & Naomi Braun, 1984). In the same period, the Consciousness-Raising Group, a women's liberation organisation, brought consciousness-raising to women in a wide range of practical actions, prompting women to become conscious of their rights and aware of their own subjectivity. Consciousness-Raising became an important theory in the world women's liberation movement, and was seen as an important way to open up and raise women's feminine consciousness (Mackinnon, 2007).

These Western theories and practices have also attracted the attention and consideration of Chinese scholars. In the specific cultural context of China, Xuehong Dai (2016) has reflected, borrowed and innovated on theories of feminism, and summarised female consciousness on three levels:

1, female experience. Starting from personal experience, women go through an awakening of consciousness, and then put the awareness into action. Smith suggested that feminist consciousness began with concrete experience and originated in everyday life (1990).

2, identity Politics. This entails emphasis on women's collective awareness, acknowledging that all women have a common gender structure, and that women groups should identify, support, and collaborate to overthrow the patriarchal paradigm and re-establish a world view. At this stage, the focus of female consciousness shifts from the 'individual' self to group values.

3, the formation of an emotional culture. The male world is used as a frame of reference to understand the unique situation of women in terms of spiritual culture, to explore the 'marginal cultures' created by women outside the male-centred mainstream culture, and to develop new worldviews and narratives.

The process of Jing's female consciousness-raising is relatively consistent with the general direction of these three steps. Jing explores the feminine self via the physical characteristics of women in her artwork initially, such as biological cycles, fertility, conception, and other specific

life experiences. Gradually, she turns her attention to the female community and attempts to destroy traditional views of female identity.

1.2. The Consciousness Raising of Jing

Jing's increased female consciousness has been a process of self-analysis with the continuous output and flow of emotions in her works. At an early stage involving female bodies, Jing's creative genre and style during the period of *Keep in Silence* were not completely "feminist" (Gao, 2007). Jing (2011) claimed that it was not until the *Naked Beyond Skin* that she "consciously" worked on female subjects. Jing presents the subjective experiential recollection and active disclosure of the adolescent self spontaneously as the first step of narration on the female bodies, which invariably corresponds to the first step in consciousness-raising: the representation of the art world from personal experience.

The *Virgin* series is one of Jing's first works when preparing *Keep in Silence*. In Jing's mind, the virgin stage is a special time in a woman's adolescence. "There is also a refusal to grow up in it. I was very much in denial of growing up for a long time, so the concept of virginity still perpetuates my insistence on what is pure, which I take as a strength" (Xiang, 2011. p.11). For Jing, virgins are pure and flawless, they seem to be vulnerable, but their spiritual purity, which resists all external evil forces, is strong enough to defeat the machinations and stains of male power. "Purity" seems to be the "symbol" given to virgins by men who stare at them. Jonathan Fineberg (2017) explained that "after the virgin stage, the sexualized gaze of others made 'her' feel different from the self-consciousness, it is the 'virginity' channel out of the state of purity." Jing's exploration of female body has invisibly breaks down the male's reverie and voyeurism for female sexuality.

In *Virgin in White* of the *Virgin* series, with the slightly bulging belly, the flabby crotch, relaxed and natural posture, and the confused and dull expression, this glass-steel body with blue-gray skin makes it impossible to spy a hint of the allure of nudity. Invariably, in works from the same series such as *Virgin with Cigarette* (2005), *Virgin in Menarche* (2005), *Virgin with a Sweet Smell* (2005), Jing abandons the aesthetic standards for women's graceful bodies pursue by the male society, their real and flawed bodies stand calmly but slightly forward on the ground as if "walking through the heavy shadow of identity with difficulty" (Feng, 2005).

In fact, in the context of restrained and introverted Chinese culture, the adolescent female body is a somewhat sensitive subject, covered in a veil of obscurity and secrecy. Jing never shields away from these unspeakable experiences. She uses a kind of bare, realistic artistic language to intuitively analyse the inner emotions of women as they face their first menstruation, developmental problems, early pregnancy and other growing pains. Whether it is the girl with her dress lifted up, her big belly, a helpless face and confusion about the future in *Little Fruitie* (2005) or the young girl with her head tilting skyward in *Smell of Childhood* (2005), Jing provides an extremely vivid and full portrait of the struggles and worries that these female individuals face during adolescence. Objectively speaking, such personalized narrative expression is not only an attitude, but also a way for Jing to speak to the world as a female artist. The external gesture of femininity also echoes the psychological state that Jing tries to express in a metaphorical sense (Karen Smith, 2008). In *Keep in Silence*, her unintentional female consciousness leads her to start from the body but not confined to the body, to write about the body and lead to the inner spirit, to let the female image and female fate be rewritten from a new female perspective to show the real existence of the female reality.

2. Ambition Under Large Volume

Since the *Virgin* series, Jing has continued to create sculptures of female bodies of different ages, either in *I Am 22 Years Old but I don't have My Period* (2007), or *Secret in A Twinkling* (2002) in

which an old woman glimpsed by chance on the streets, all of which contain Jing's observation and introspection. Obviously, the theme of "female body" has transcended the individual adolescent experience and entered a cold and deep reality. At this point, Jing is naturally moving towards the second level of female consciousness: Identity Politics. In the interview, Jing (2011) pointed out that in the period *Naked Beyond Skin* she has turned her attention to "a group that belong to the same broad category of women as I do at least".

Naked Beyond Skin, Your Body and *What about You* (2005) show the further awakening of female consciousness of Jing with females depicted in a more open and naked relaxed posture (Smith et al., 2008). Karen Smith (2008) believed that there was monumental significance in *Your Body* and *What about You*. Jing not only enlarges the volume of her work, but also decides to expand the ambition of her work (Fineberg, 2017). With approximately 3 metres in height of *Your Body*, the intuitive change in the volume of the work speaks loudly of Jing's full and surging female consciousness, and represents Jing's growing awareness of her concern for women's issues, as well as the expansion of her thoughts about the value of female community beyond the "individual" - how to give a voice to the female community and claim a voice in the collective consciousness of women. Thus, Jing transforms this mastery of discourse power into an amplification of volume.

The purpose of creating such a huge work is not only to challenge the visitors with a huge vision in space, but also to form a skilful resistance to scale in psychological tactics. After all, in the context of a predominantly male culture in China, Jing's direct exposure of a naked body to public space creates a strangely serious expression. On the one hand, "they" seem to be obedient and humble, while on the other hand, their bold, almost shameless body exposure in the art space shatter the stereotyped and stylized imagination of the female figure in Chinese society (Ford, 2008). Perhaps this rebellion and decisiveness sense can be attributed to two approaches within the remarkable awakening of the Jing's feminine consciousness: a rebellion to social aesthetics, and a reversal of the male desire for voyeurism.

2.1. The Subversion of Aesthetic Rules

Your Body (2005) presents a completely naked body, but the fear and intimidation in the woman's large empty eyes, the skin staining with exposed veins and scars of age, and the thick thighs showing curves, all reveal truths that society avoids telling. If one is to search for adjectives to match the statue's social standards in a patriarchal society, they would probably be: ugly, bloated, shrivelled, horrible and unaesthetically pleasing. It is clear that the media and social systems have solidified our aesthetic view of the female body into a procedural aesthetic under "gaze". In this context, female body is a bodily "symbol" in the service of society without self-consciousness and right to speak, all because of theft and deprivation. Such a female body is naturally demanded to actively pursue the seductive posture, fawning and become passive and perfect consumptive body.

Different from female body aesthetics pursued by a patriarchal society, subjects in both *Your Body* and *What about you* were ordinary female bodies in life: natural, real, even bloated and clumsy, as real people in daily lives. This callous emphasis on the realism of daily life and imperfect flesh of the characters in the works is the basic focus of Jing's creation techniques (Smith, 2008). Jing herself pointed out: "I just want to express something real, not temptation... A different way of looking at the female body than traditional art... Express something internal (Liao, 2010)." Obviously, the aesthetic mechanism of the society fails here, and the viewer needs to detach from the traditional aesthetic mechanism and rethink the female body in this context.

2.2. The Rebellion and Reversal of The Male Gaze

The aloof and dismissive expression in *Your Body*, and the relaxed posture in complete nudity in *What about you*, directly defeat uncovered voyeuristic desire of the male gaze. This is because

the female body created by Jing has abandoned any "passive" way of covering up and escaping, and seized the initiative of male pornography consumption in the form of full nudity. According to the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, a woman's cover-up and escapism is, in the eyes of men, the focus of pleasure in men's viewing. The pleasure of watching a woman to remove layers of disguise in front of men until she gives up the last of her hidden defences, is clearly more intense than outright exhibitionism - the controlling nature of the cover-up shows the male scopophilia and desire to dominate power (Freud, 1922).

Jing, however, directly reverses the erotic tendency of the female body and rejected the sexual gaze. Although born under patriarchal politics, "they" are not objects for men's visual and spectatorial gratification. These contradictory plump bodies and the rejection of erotic desire are Jing's struggle for physical initiative. Although the works are presented in large size, what Jing creates is "nobody" rather than "somebody" as previously emphasized by male culture (Gao, 2014). In Jing's world, the body is simply the body. These female bodies with such relaxed, open and comfortable postures, contain a strong and solid energy, which heavily and strongly shatter society's active desire to gaze at the female body. Just as Jing said, "what I want to present is the existence of women who are shielded from male gaze, and women as the subjects who are not under male gaze (Xiang, 2011. p.11.)

In short, Jing exhibits a sharper feminine consciousness at this stage. In these larger works, she has consciously subverted the aesthetic rules and reversed the male gaze, shifting the focus away from the self and towards the female community in general.

In contrast to the vague and unconscious attempts of the *Keep in Silence* phase, Jing's present work shows a strong initiative and clear purpose, demonstrating her growing feminine consciousness.

3. A New Start: The Dissolution of Gender

As female consciousness became firmly established as the platform for Jing's artwork and prompted her to create a large number of works, Jing's focus on female identity began to gradually transcend the realm of gender issues, as she said, "With regard to the *Naked Beyond Skin*, the topic also refers to humanity rather than simply focusing just on gender (Xiang, 2011. p.11)." Jing usually removes the hair and clothes of the characters in the creation to weaken some external status symbols (ibid). In fact, Jing's consciousness of subjective interpretation of identity definition has already emerged in the stage of *Keep in Silence*. As the poet and critic Zhu Zhu (2008) mentioned, the subject in *Your Body* is the "masculinised female body".

By the stage of *Naked Beyond Skin*, gender-ambiguous, identity ambiguous and androgynous bodies appear increasingly frequently in the works. For example, in the work *I To Us I* (2007), a pair of naked human bodies stand close to each other, but at a little distance. In an exquisitely subtle gesture, the right hand of the person standing behind extends untouchably over the bare buttocks of the person standing in front, the two skinless, emaciated bodies seemingly unidentifiable in terms of gender, creating a puzzling tension and mood between two bodies with their slightly closed eyes. The masculinised female body in *The Open Man* remains deliberately hairless. It is a seated nude sculpture, larger than the subject in *Your Body*, but without the aggressive vibe expressed in *Your Body*. It also begins to transcend its gender, sitting like a giant Buddha and looking within its heart. This weakening of gender identity is actually the intentional planning by the artist. Jing often emphasizes that her works are the body with the first-person perspective, they are created subjective. She deliberately refuses to pry and observe with gender consciousness, hoping that viewers will turn their eyes from sexual characteristics to the reflection of inner spirit and the research of human existence (Zhu, 2008).

"Because I have been able to see many dilemmas in the reality of existence, to think about these topics that are not 'personal', and to use this survival-related common topics to provoke self-reflection in the viewers (Xiang, 2011.p.11)." Although she shaped the identity, she renounces the definition of these bodies and pursued the openness and extension of the body in this society. Under the influence of "feminine consciousness", "woman" has been discovered, interpreted, valued and given a new and open identity. As Judith Butler has argued, being a woman - the symbol and carrier of female sexuality - is not a fixed concept (1990). This is not to say that Jing's work is about the representation of androgynism or the gender elimination, but it provides a new reference model for feminist thinking, free from the fixed biological significance of sexuality. In this moment, these defeated bodies are separated from their gender and identity and become simple and light physical bodies. In other words, "the body itself evolves into what Walter Benjamin calls a 'storyteller' and becomes the subject and object of this perpetual daydream" (Gao, 2005).

4. Conclusion

In our cultural context, the body is both the most frequently used artistic medium and the most frequently misinterpreted part of issues involving women. Michel Foucault (1975) also demonstrated in his body theory that the body has always been the object of repression and control under the operation of power. Although women control and dominate their own bodies and survive in this world, the definition of women's bodies is defined and established under the power of men. Living in a male-dominated society, Jing soberly and calmly perceives the surging of female consciousness on the way from body to self-recognition. She uses the physical body as the language of dialogue and interprets her introspective view of female identity in an open and self-narrating way with ease and relief.

Within the growth from *Keep in Silence to Naked Beyond Skin*, Jing has turned from her personal memories to the reflection of female groups. This shift in thinking is not simply a result of ageing, but an increase in inner strength, a process of female consciousness raising. Starting from her personal experiences, Jing presents an inward-looking attitude, and then reflects on her relationship with society through a female perspective. From focusing on self to social group, she finally breaks the shackles of identity and extends her introspective thoughts to concern of human nature. To some extent, the female bodies that Jing created is liberated from the confinement of social attributes and reality, transcending the shackles of the identity and meaning created by patriarchy. "They are not simple symbols of feminism, they are beyond any meaning, different from feminism, and more concerned with the weakness and spirit of human nature" (Gao, 2007). And in the context of female self-exploration, Jing's feminine consciousness is also generated and with her own unique perspective, creating her own artistic vision.

References

- [1] Butler, J., & Trouble, G: *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, *Gender trouble*, Vol. 8(1990)No.3, p.1-25.
- [2] Dai, J. H: *Within Language, Beyond History: About Xiang Jing (Excerpted)*, *Art China*, Vol.17(2018)No.1, p.6.
- [3] Dai, X. H: *A study of the developmental genealogy of the awakening of female consciousness in the West*, *Theory Monthly*, (2016)No.5, p.172-176.
- [4] Fu, D. M: *Totally Naked: The Unquiet Body of Xiang Jing*, *Oriental Art*, (2008)No.7,p.4.

- [5] Freud, S: The unconscious, *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, Vol. 56(1922)No.3, p.291-294.
- [6] Foucault, M: *Surveiller et punir*(Gallimard, Paris1975), p.192-211.
- [7] Gao, R. X: The Representation of the Female Body in Xiang Jing's Sculpture. In *Is the World a Better Place? ,Xiang Jing in Taipei 2013* (The Museum of Contemporary Art Taipei, Taipei, 2013), p. 8-15.
- [8] Gao, S. M: The Poetics and Politics of the Body: On Xiang Jing's Recent Work, *Oriental Art*, Vol. 22(2007)No.12, p.116-121.
- [9] Jiang, M: *In Your Body: Xiang Jing's Works 2000–2005* (Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House, Shanghai 2006).
- [10] Jonathan, F: *Xiang Jing: Rainbow-like dividing line*(CITIC Press Corporation, Beijing 2017), p. 469-495.
- [11] Liao, W: *Wise Eyes and Orchid Hearts: A Study of Female Sculptors' Creations from Chinese Academy Background*(Jiuzhou Press, Beijing 2010).
- [12] Rosenthal, N. B: *Consciousness Raising: From Revolution to Re-Evaluation*, *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, Vol. 8(1984)No.4, p.309-326.
- [13] Smith, K. Xiang J: *Say It Loud. Naked Beyond Skin: Xiang Jing 2006–2007*.
- [14] Xiang. J & Zhu. Z: *The Freedom of Women: An Interview with Xiang Jing*. *China Profiles* (Overseas Edition Artists), (2011)No.11, p.4-11.
- [15] Xiang. J : *Xiang Jing's Works 2008–2011* (TODAY ART MUSEUM PUBLISHING HOUSE, Hong Kong 2011), pp. 34-42.
- [16] Zhu, Z: *Inside the Spell: An Analysis of Xiang Jing and Her Works*, *Meiyuan*, (2011)No.2, p.10.