

Reconnection: A Feminine Perspective

2/24/09

It is difficult for me to study artwork done by a woman artist without calling into question the identity of the female in the art world, the art market, and history. How do you balance femininity with standard artistic interpretation?

Perhaps this issue would not weigh as heavily in my mind if I had not just had a conversation about this subject before I entered the Cooley. In the library lobby a table was set up to promote an upcoming production of *The Vagina Monologues*. Part of the promotion was a series of images of vaginas—line drawings of vaginas with hands, hair, in many different poses at many different angles. I was asked to color one as I walked by the table and happily agreed. As I began to trace the contours of the labia with a crayon to capture interesting shading a girl came to the table and asked one of the promoters if she thought the open display of images of vaginas is offensive because the vagina is such a secretive and uncomfortable image to some women. She said the images could counteract and reinforce the “split” between genders instead of trying to disperse the differences between men and women.

I find this unsettling and disturbing. In my opinion we have lost touch with the original goals of the women’s movement. We have been conditioned by negative attitudes about feminism as what I believe to be a masculine backlash against women’s liberation. This is what brought me to the Cooley, where I walked into the gallery after this encounter and turned immediately to my left to see Liza Ryan’s image of wind

blowing a woman's hair from beneath to show the back of her neck—and all I see now is the vagina.

Perhaps I have been conditioned by an external encounter now, but I think there *is* merit in exploring this idea of the feminine in art. If the art world is still male-dominated, isn't this a subject worth exploring? We as women have worked so hard to gain equality and in the process we have lost ourselves. When did feminism become a bad thing? It would be silly to blame any gender for the switch, but at a lunch I had with Liza Ryan—at which there were *only* young female art students, there was a general consensus among us that labeling an artwork feminist is a bad thing. Now I think I have been conditioned too much, but every piece in this show seems to scream about women's liberation to me. After all, the title is “spill” and what better representation of such a word than the spill of the red from the womb that burdens us women?

I have to stop here. This is where I would normally say that the aspect of feminism is not the most important aspect of the show because of course there are other merits involved—other interpretations, meanings, etc. But, I am going to follow in the footsteps of T.J. Clark here and say too bad, because the feminism *is* everything good about this work and it *is* the most important aspect and there is absolutely nothing wrong with such a notion. My goal is to revive our gender's importance, freedom, significance, and ability to create dialogue between itself and its counterpart productively. What is left for me to figure out is how the nape of the neck and the movement of hair encapsulate this idea.

2/25/09

“The Dinner Party” by Judy Chicago is a fantastic installation and a true expression of the frustration involved with female artists, but I don’t think these two photographs are quite as explicit a depiction, but I think what they do show, which is I think closer to what I’m getting at, is a general feminine sense and perspective that is relevant to the work.

The black and white photograph of the back of a woman’s head exemplifies such an idea. The subject is located at the bottom center half of the image. Her face remains concealed and unknown, but what is revealed about her? She ignores our gaze, and is primarily covered by a black sweater and long dark hair, but she still seems exposed. The small triangle of the back of her pale neck coupled with the slight patch of scalp that appears because her hair is flying upwards and outwards make the figure look almost naked before us. I am thinking of geishas in Japan with white make-up masks that conceal the woman’s face and neck completely except for a thin line of actual skin that is left bare before the hair-line and clothing. This produces an affect of slight exposure that can heighten sexual desire.

Does this image have sexual undertones? Coupled with the color image of a neck and shoulders right next to it the answer could be yes. The way the neck of the T-shirt swirls like a road around the neck and then through the space between the neck and shoulder—I want to see what is over that landscape. I want to follow that enticing arch to the triangle of black that defines the shape of the neck. I want to see what is over and behind the ridge of the shoulder, but this part remains concealed eternally. The concealment is a major player in the artworks here. In the black and white there is not

only the concealment of the woman's face, but also of the scene in front of her, which is mostly covered by her head and hair. The branches of the trees triangle like her locks into the distance, and even inhibit our full view of the white sky above the figure. We are visually blocked from knowing anything about this image except the image is already exposed to us by the back of the woman's neck. What she is looking at? The scene she conceals comes to life anyway because of her neck. In the second image where the curve of the neck snakes off into the black triangle abyss and the shoulder forms a ridge we are still visually blocked from knowing any more than the shape of the neck, but this piece is interesting because the neck *also* takes on a role as the landscape. It becomes the landscape just as the back of the woman's neck becomes the landscape on which she is focusing.

Is there something about this work that makes it feminine, or suggests that these images are an expression by the hands of a woman? These images require more of a coming into and a becoming than anything else. Is that a feminine motif, or is it just what makes the art interesting? I am questioning now the bold claims I made yesterday. By seeing only one triangle of skin on this woman I am left wanting to see more. Could I in fact tie this image to "The Dinner Party", where the vagina is directly exposed to us, but on our plate—it *is* our plate, as opposed to this image where the vagina only resonates as a wisp of hair and a dot of scalp. Is the "Dinner Party" too bold of a comparison?

How much should a woman reveal and conceal? How much of a woman should be exposed? Should her vagina be explicit, or should she emanate it through other

aspects of her appearance? The answer is somehow both in this instance, but I also think I am getting off track.

The female figure has been an object of artistic scrutiny always—in paintings, in poetry, photography and film. What does it mean when only a fragment of it is visible? We cannot escape this scrutiny, even if so little of us is exposed. I am now becoming more aware of how much of an object of desire a small patch of neck can be. If the female figure has been a muse of artistic endeavor always, then what?

These images are a female perspective of subjects that inspire both genders. The perspective is softer and less revealing—certainly way different from a photograph of a nude female model. But this still seems to be in your face, direct, explicit. I am going in circles now. I need to mull.

2/26/09

While doing research for another class I came across this passage by Liao Wen from the first Guangzhou Triennial exhibition catalogue *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990-2000)* that reads:

I am not sure how a (Chinese) public reacts to the term “women’s art.” Do they find it absurd? Does it raise doubt, contempt, or and inexplicable dislike, in a manner a western artist might respond to the term “feminist art?” ...I examine women’s art from the angle of contemporary art as opposed to that of women’s

painting. In doing so, I have elected not to bury my head in the sand of individual works, like an ostrich presenting its rear without clear context for the audience (p. 60).

Though this passage is discussing Chinese woman artists specifically, I think the method could apply to what I am doing here. These images might not reflect feminism explicitly, but since a woman produced the images, they naturally reflect issues important to women in society today. Women artists are trying to escape the feminist label because it is limiting. Suddenly I don't see the bare neck in the black and white as an object of desire, but as an exposed portion of the anatomy about to be put on a chopping block, or already on a chopping block. Am I the one doing the chopping? Do I hold the sword to bleed this neck, destroy this head, this nameless faceless person?

I just learned that these two images are part of two different series and are not intentionally related, but I guess now that they hang in conjunction they are related, and I am reinforcing this relationship. This point is moot.

I think my primary interest in this study is how we respond to labels and categories when applied to artwork. The feminist label has become negative and limiting because it is the recognition of the female artist's voice that has not been fully heard for centuries. A feminist interpretation depends on how explicit the artist was in identifying herself as a female voice. It's primary focus is the fact that woman can communicate expressively also. But I still feel that if one is a woman creating art then one is a feminist artist by default. The woman is representing her voice as an artist, but every expression she composes is an expression filtered through her female psyche.

Is it possible to tell the difference between artwork by a woman and artwork by a man? Do softer lines, curves, gentler themes, and different rational perspectives all point to a feminine hand? I said before that this work is a coming into, but its paradoxical exposure and blocking inhibit this. I no longer see the vagina. I see the chopping block. The black and white image shows the neck before its blood is to be spilled at your feet, and the other is a different perspective of the same part of the anatomy. The front side of the neck is the last part to see the ax.

The neck is the bridge between mind and body. It is a connection for us as human beings that we take for granted. Without this connection our entire universe would not exist. By showing this connection we are put in the realm between mind and body, a different place that feels strange and surreal. All I see now is Anne Bolyn about to be executed, but this photograph was already executed. Fragments are dangerous because they can be cryptic.

I guess what this piece is trying to do is emphasize that mind and body are connected and one and the same. Analyzing this work is not about sectioning off, but about reconnection, and *that* is the female touch. It is meant to be a connection to itself, the viewer, and every piece in this show. The fact that it was pulled from a separate series and reconnected to another shows that it is part of a larger theme.

Someone just saw me writing in the gallery and asked, “What do you see?” He saw a hawk in the woman’s hair, and exclaimed afterwards that he sees things as they actually are. That is a bold statement. The necks at the chopping block “spill” across a series of fantasies and dreams, to invisibility and finally the face of the hawk, who then

grounds us as we run back in reality to chase the color in a field of black and white. It is in this connection that we find freedom.

2/27/09

I began this discussion with a certain agenda in mind, knowing full well that the agenda would change, or never even get across, as soon as I came to understand the images better. But I must confess that I have gone about this in the wrong way. I have felt blocked from these images because each image is not meant to be scrutinized individually. Before today I was “the ostrich presenting its rear”. Instead of taking these two images of a neck apart I should have been reconnecting each to the rest of the exhibit. I think there are more merit and meaning to this idea than the previous. If I can claim that the idea of outside connection or a connection between other images is a feminine attribute remains unknown, but it very well could be more of a feminine response or expression to create a connection, since our brains are more physically connected anyway, this is plausible. Whether this is true or not, it is a different idea from individual autonomy within a single image, or taking an image apart on its own. These images must be built upon, and this is certainly opposite of previous experience I have had in interpreting artwork. I am reminded now of Martin Kippenburger’s artwork, where meaning is not only found within his individual pieces but also between each and every one of his artworks. In the case of Liza Ryan’s exhibit I am not the sword, but the glue. I am not cutting this neck into little pieces, but letting it act as it’s soul role: as a connection. Is it of no coincidence that these images are placed at the very beginning of

the exhibit? The neck not only acts as a connection between mind and body, but also as a gateway into Liza Ryan's world.

The entire layout of this show is a circle. Any one of these images could be a gateway into this ethereal circle of metamorphosis, and in turn the metamorphosis occurs within the viewer. I have entered this endeavor as a militant, passionate woman and left it humbled and elated. I entered the exhibit as the ostrich looking for vaginas and left it as the hawk. All I have left to say exists within the wisp of wind flowing through a woman's hair or a bird's wings.

Sources:

Liao Wen. "'Women's Art' as Part of Contemporary Chinese Art since 1990."

Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art. Guangzhou : Guangdong Museum of Art, c2002. Pp 60-66.

Judy Chicago (American, b. 1939). *The Dinner Party*, 1974–79. Mixed media: ceramic, porcelain, textile. Brooklyn Museum, Gift of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation, 2002.10. © Judy Chicago.