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the
second
sex



Back Series 01, Oil on Canvas, 150x180 cm, 2014



Back Series 02, Oil on Canvas, 150x180 cm, 2014



Back Series 03, Oil on Canvas, 150x180 cm, 2014



Back Series 04, Oil on Canvas, 150x180 cm, 2014

BACK SERIES

GUO Qingling

背景系列 | 郭庆玲

Q: When did you first hear or read *The Second Sex*? What kind of impact did it have on you?

A: From 1998 when I first started painting, until now working on all kind of female subjects, the process was very natural, each phase had a different background and contact, including women from different social strata, civilians, fashionistas, women with illness, intellectuals and factory girls. I've tried to be amongst them, worked with them, studied their profile and information, or just looked at them, all these gave me complex feelings. I was not one of them, even when I was immersed in their presence, I never got too close, but I wanted to explore their life and living motives, because we are of the same sex.

Many years ago, I read Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Afterwards, when working on the topic of "intellectual", this term came up, but as my artist statement says:

"Started from 2012, *The Second Sex*, as a long lasting series of works on female subject, a proposition which is harsh and realistic, yet extraordinary with feminine qualities in humanity. 'Second' is never first, 'second' always hides behind first, here it seems mediocre and lonely. 'Second Sex', the second humanity and gender traits, generally refers to women."

I used the name of de Beauvoir's book, but maintained my own understanding of women and humanity.

Q: After many years, how did you translate the feminist context into your works? How far have you come since your first encounter?

A: Since puberty, the rebellious side of me has stayed in hibernation for a long time, but returned to my blood in the form of criticism. I have always had concerns about humanity and society, which decided my preference for a certain genre of films, novels and art. The aspects of humanity that are most cruel or benign, numb or cold, all impact me. I would never experience de Beauvoir's strict philosophical course, but followed my own shallow understanding. Painting is visual, it represents a part of you and no one would understand if you didn't explain. *The Second Sex* is only a name, never a burden. I thought it was appropriate and adopted it without alteration.

Q: Compared to your paintings of women from different classes and identities, this "Second humanity" sounds very broad and abstract. How did you choose your characters? What are the "feminine qualities" in humanity? Why is this subject harsh and realistic?

A: *The Second Sex* Series came from books I've read in those years, and I became interested in some of the authors or females with intellectual thinking. I spent a lot of time researching fragments of their information, imagined the relationship between their work and life. Even though they've made great contribution or were praised through generations, they would still have certain weakness of human nature. I felt like wandering into the other world, listening to rumours about them between the living room and bedroom. Who I choose to paint must be someone I'm interested in, but I have also considered visual effects.

My understanding of “feminine qualities” in humanity comes ultimately from my concern with human beings. Humanity is so complex – our behavior or actions can be determined by a flash of thought, but also related to personality, certain situations and intricate relationships. Female qualities and mentality always differ from those of men; this has already been analyzed in the works of feminist writers such as de Beauvoir. Existence itself is harsh enough, and you have to experience ageing, illness and death. Human beings can easily feel lost and flustered in this cruel world (but I think this analogy is more typical on our Chinese soil). When facing a harsh situation, weakness in humanity is infinitely magnified, and unconstrained, so when we exert pressure onto others, we are also victims. If you look down from high above, we are like ants, dispensable nonentities.

Q: Can *Chinese Medicine Institute of Gynecologic Disease Study Series* be read as the other interpretation of Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*?

A: I started working on *Chinese Medicine Institute of Gynecologic Disease Study* in 2006, also known as *Grey Series*. I hadn't thoroughly read Susan Sontag at that time, but this series really came from my deep heart. “Chinese Medicine Institute” is the name of a hospital. I went there for treatment before. The waiting time was always long and boring, so the only thing I could do was observe, all women, with all kind of illnesses. I occasionally talked to them, but mostly listened, conversations between doctor and patient, patient and family. Back home, I started to do research on gynecologic diseases, and discovered that 85% of women lack awareness of their own health. The human body is like a delicate apparatus, with countless tissue movements when we breathe. In summer 2000, at the moment my father passed away, I saw his face relax, all hardship faded, cells gone static, body started to de-

cay in the summer heat. This image stayed in my memory, and for the rest of the summer I could hear the cracks in my bones while walking.

This series from 2006–2009 were in my usual style, extract of essence, using acrylic to mix different shades of grey. The content is always there, but most likely people didn't know.

Q: What made you paint the “Urban Single Women” and the latest *Back Series* (originally named *Factory Girls*)? As an intellectual and a mother, how would you project your gaze onto them?

A: From 2002 to 2005, I quit my university teaching to work for a fashion magazine. *Seafood Series* from this period was actually the environment I'm most familiar with – those urban single women who didn't have to worry about anything, snatched the joy of superficial life. Naming them as *Seafood*, just like my statement at that time: physically present, spiritually observing.

Back Series since 2014 focused on the female workers among messy factory settings, the back view of them working silently, their body movement seem controlled by every necessary procedure, simple and repetitive. I could feel them being happy as usual, but I didn't understand this community. I tried searching traces of this collective online, tried getting closer to them, but it was difficult: the same difficulty as their livelihoods faced. On the canvas, I could only find a position to suit the relationship between us, so I painted their back, a back view of labouring.

Q: Did you try to communicate with them in the factory? You said, “I like to paint their working status which is very touching, especially the back view.” In our collective memory of

Chinese literature, “Back View” reminds people of “father” (a prose in school textbook by Zhu Ziqing). Do you think there is any difference between the “back views” of gender?

A: In the factory, I tried to communicate with them, but I was sure that we were “outsiders” to each other, there was mutual timidity, a certain alertness due to unfamiliar aura. Afterwards I searched desperately on the Internet about their living conditions, I painted vaguely, evaded details. On “back view”, regardless of men or women, the back view of labouring always touches me. I didn’t dare to stare at them for long, fearing that I might offend them, so I stood at the back and observed their habits. I inspected their faces from the photos I took, imagining how they would turn around and appear in my paintings.

Q: How do you see the women in Mao Zedong’s slogan “women can hold up half the sky”?

A: I’m unfamiliar with “women can hold up half the sky”, because I don’t have memories of that era, but I’m sure it must have been a blindly fanatic time.

Q: How do you differentiate between “her” and “them”? To paint “her” as an individual, then categorize “them” as different collectives in your exhibitions?

A: Everyone is unique. Common people have their own stories. When similar stories are grouped together, the appearance of a collective creates more value and strength.

Q: How could you claim yourself as an “outsider” of all other women? Has it got anything to do with your own identity subconsciously, as a “non-local” in Shanghai for so many years?

A: In the 1970’s, my parents worked at Sinohydro Engineer-

ing Bureau No. 8, setting up hydropower facilities around the country, as an on-the-move unit, we moved house all the time. I can't speak any local dialects of our country and never had a sense of belonging, so I often felt like an outsider. Subconsciously, I segregate myself from any community. Having spent over 20 years in Shanghai, this is my home, but I never actually integrated into the city, this underlying sense of being an outsider is a part of who I am since birth.

Q: From early works that resemble the distorted and alluring style of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Egon Schiele, to gradually becoming grey in tone, this represents a shift in the artist's mentality, does it also reflect changes going on in society?

A: I liked both artists very much during university. Anything with life has a sensitive soul. Whether animal or plant, it can differentiate a good or bad condition, hiding one's feelings and adapt for survival. My mind always tends to be pessimistic and isolated, even in my youthful years. All my works from different periods reflect the dilemma of not being able to fit in and watching from a distance. As time goes on, I gave up the thought of "fit in".

Q: Any female community you want to paint but not yet? Such as artists or "The Third Sex"?

A: I don't know and never have a plan. Even having painted women for over a decade, I feel like my work only reflects my supposition of those communities. And the most painful part of creative process is struggling between self-negation and affirmation, enduring life with turns and twists. Still, I follow my own flash of thought, and then distil it through trial and error.



Back Series 10, Oil on Canvas, 100x125 cm, 2015



Back Series 18, Oil on Canvas, 100x125 cm, 2015



Back Series 24, Oil on Canvas, 150x180 cm, 2015



Back Series 26, Oil on Canvas, 150x180 cm, 2015



The Second Sex Series 001, Oil on Canvas, 150x200 cm, 2012



The Second Sex Series 005, Oil on Canvas, 150x200 cm, 2012

Mother's Candle Stand

GUO Yujie

Last summer, I returned to my hometown. The weather was cool and dry, the courtyard was empty, no one disturbed me, there was no internet, just the sun drawing shadows from light and the moon beaming onto jujube leaves, peaceful days and nights. There was nothing to do, I turned my house inside out, hoping to find something old so I can bring it back to Shanghai and make some modifications, maybe it can become something chic.

In my hometown, I've seen beautiful geometric wooden windows, fading under the sun; I've also seen my peer's wood carved gatehouse, complex and delicate like flourishing wisteria. Unfortunately, my grandpa was a poor farmer, my grandma works hard to feed the family; they cannot afford such luxury deco, leaving no material inheritance behind for their children.

In 1989, my parents built this house with their savings, and renovated it twice since. Mother was thrifty, doesn't throw anything away, so when I looked around, everything was the same as over a decade ago when I lived here. However, these old items - white tiles on the walls, fake leather sofa, TV cabinet which drawer doesn't close, red and white tall glass vase... signifies the decline of handicraft, outdated industries, and chaos of aesthetic perception in the post-socialist era.

There is a candle stand on the windowsill, it is different from everything else, it's bronzed, beautiful and sleek. Above the base, intertwining carving spirals up its body, fitting perfectly in my hands, slightly dense, probably made of bronze. There's

a small plate in the middle to catch the dripping tears of wax, and the holder on top, merely an inch deep, with dent in the middle. I remember when I was young, power cuts were frequent, so we used matches to light the candles, melt a couple of drops into the holder, insert the candle, stabilize it, and there it stood.

There I held this candle stand, fiddling with it, it wasn't a traditional Chinese candle stand, so it wouldn't belong to my grandparents, it looked European or Japanese, but I came from a poor northwest-inland family - how did it get there in the first place?

I called my mother, who had already left to Beijing with my father to take care of my brother's child, be typical "Chinese-style" grandparents. I said, "Ma, I'll take the candle holder". Since I graduated from college, I rarely ask for things from home, partly due to self-esteem, partly because I look down on the stuff from home. My mother was very excited, "Yes! Please take it! I made this when I was a lathe worker at the factory." I was in shock. "You made this yourself?"... "Yes!" she exclaimed.

My mother lived in an unfortunate time. She was born early 1950's, when her body should be blossoming, great famine; when she should be studying, cultural revolution, urban youth exiled to remote labour farms; when she should be having children, one child policy; during middle age, reform in national enterprises, laying-off of workers.

Having your life shaped by an era at its very best.

My mother was especially unfortunate, her parents were landlords, everything was taken during the 'land reforms' and

they were condemned, they didn't make it through the great famine, so she grew up in a children's home. Her life was devastated by "family factor" she had no say in. However she was smart, motivated and very brave. After junior school, landlord's children were not eligible for middle school, so she wrote to the land reform department to make an exception, coming 4th in the county. When recruitment of youth back to cities, her spot was taken, so she wrote to the employment agent, again getting an exception to take the exam, landing in a car parts factory, as a worker.

Since young, mother would proudly tell me, when she got married with father, he had parents and 4 siblings, the bride's token was a basket of buns, after marriage, her 28 Yuan per month salary was the main source of income. "Workers that time!" She used to say with a sigh.

I don't like to listen to mother talk about the past, there is too much hardship and tears within, which I struggle to endure, nor do I want to endure. More importantly, like other youth, we are contempt towards history and the experience of the previous generation, feeling like time starts from today, from myself. In reality, the shift and changes of different eras always leave generations behind, including my parents.

This candle stand caused an upheaval deep inside of me. Mother was always occupied, exhausted and impatient when she got home from work. She disliked housework, things were all over the place, when she cooked, she would put everything in a pot, sometimes even watermelon peel! I was always nagging about her lack of finesse, overly tough, unlike other warm loving mothers, yet I knew nothing about her work, nor did I know she could craft such a subtle and elegant candle stand.

I started to have a new understanding about mother. I imag-

ined, a young female working in front of a wide lathe, wearing blue uniform, worker's cap and white face mask; despite chronic disease caused by extended malnutrition; despite having a second child, and not allowed to take vacations as a punishment under one child policy which caused gynecologic disease; she was still focused and nimble, staring at the machine, cutting and shaping every screw thread. Mother used to say that it was a very technical job, there was no room for error and only smart people can do it.

Life as a child was austere, power cuts were frequent, so I always had to work under candlelight, mother wanted me to study hard and fulfilled a dream that she couldn't. What was the dream? Maybe it was to be a great person, to be free of the life that has troubled her for so many years. She also used to say, "Women need to be financially independent, otherwise they don't have respect in the family". This was the first rule of gender education in my life. From the depth of my heart I respected these strong women, mother and aunts, they were the first generation of Chinese female professionals since 1949, they withstood hunger and hardship, craving for equality and dignity. Their extraordinary hopes were passed to me through the mysterious candlelight.

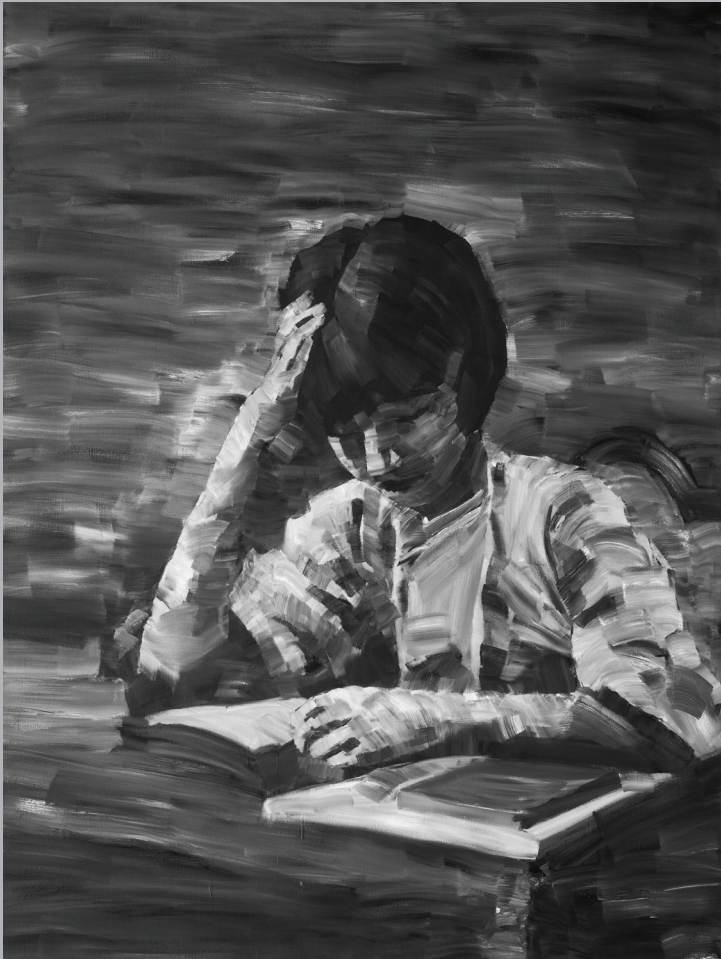
The summer went by in a flash, and I returned to Shanghai, where I lived in a place called "worker's new village". In the 1950's and 60's, Shanghai became an industrial hotspot, in order to house the vast numbers of workers, many "worker villages" were built. At first, each building had 2-3 levels, each unit around 20 square meter, several units would share a toilet and kitchen. In novelist Jin Yucheng's *Blossoms*, he wrote of how "old shanghaiense" were moved out of their petit bourgeois houses into workers villages, how inconvenient and unbearable it was.

Since the 1980's, workers villages were gradually updated, although each unit was still cramped, at least there were individual toilets and kitchens. The outer walls were brushed pink or yellow, looking much cleaner. The factories accommodating these worker villages gradually closed down or moved, replaced by commercial buildings or revamped art districts.

Correspondingly, the socialist history also faded. What people remember now is the French concession area, Eileen Chang's Shanghai, and not the left-wing Shanghai where tens of thousands of people went on strike, nor the Shanghai where textile factory girls produced products for daily Chinese life. A new working class is emerging from construction sites and outskirts factories. Mostly, many factories no longer employ female workers, electricians or lathe operators... those became tacitly acknowledge as men's jobs. Assembly line female workers became unacquainted.

Yet I can identify something about the women in my "worker's new village" that marks an era. They are friendlier, livelier and less xenophobic than you would imagine, the "all for one, one for all" spirit of the socialist era still remains. They like to dance in public squares, participate in collective activities, even in a westernized city like Shanghai; their dance resembles those from Tibetan, Uyghur and other ethnic minorities. They are still full of confidence and energy, and I often think: What kind of history have they been through? What kind of stories do they have? Do they have a skill like my mother, to be able to craft a beautiful candle stand?

GUO Yujie, journalist, gender activist, living in Shanghai.



The Second Sex Series 002, Oil on Canvas, 150x200 cm, 2012



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