



The opening night of Stella Zhang's exhibition *0-Viewpoint* at the Chinese Culture Center was tense with apprehension and anticipation from the Center's administration. I gathered with the crowd in the lobby outside the CCC and waited through thirty minutes of speeches from the artist, the curator, the director of the Center, and others before being allowed to view the work. Thinly veiled in the tone of these speeches were warnings about the intimate and controversial nature of Zhang's art, apparently a major departure from the traditional aesthetic of the CCC. While the Center was originally founded by Chinatown locals who wanted to preserve their cultural heritage, the Xian Rui series highlights the work of emerging and underrepresented Chinese artists. This is a much-needed step for the Center's relevancy within San Francisco's art scene, not to mention the vibrant contemporary Chinese art market. Zhang, who was born in Beijing in 1965 but educated both in the United States and Japan, relied upon her personal intuition to create this work, which she claims in her artist's statement to be, "an embodiment of my inner conflict and struggles". This private focus clearly pushed the institution's

boundaries, and curator Abby Chen probably had to fight to get the work in the door. After the speeches, which bordered on excuses for any sensibilities that may be offended, a ribbon cutting ceremony finally opened the entrance to the gallery. My expectations were prepared for erotic fanfare and shock.

After passing by the gift shop, which precedes the exhibition space, I saw all four rooms and the long hallway of the CCC's gallery was filled with pure white work, an untainted palette sustained throughout. Five cylindrical sculptures over ten feet high were installed in the first room, made with stretchy white cotton fabric pulled over a ridged internal structure. As these five tall phalluses towered over me, there seemed little to ponder beyond their initial recognition. I heard later that a male visitor straddled one of the sculptures, laughing and posing for pictures.

As I moved onto the next room, the work's concepts became more dimensional. Dozens of small white cotton-like puffs pierced with sharp wooden spikes lay nestled in a circular cradle of fabric; others hung suspended, hovering from above,

appearing fluid and in motion. Each piece was unique, many bulbous-shaped or egg-like, some with centers deeply creased as though they were about to split apart, multiplying like new cells breaking off from one another. These little cushiony forms felt distinctly bodily, like an internal process of nuclei morphing and regenerating. They could be seen as eggs nestled within the uterus, some clinging and growing, others falling away. However, their tactile quality and the visual interest of their abstracted forms kept them from being anchored to a singular vaginal reference, and allowed a productive ambiguity that kept me lingering longer.

In the third room hung five all white canvases with fabric knotted, stretched, and torn across their rectangular planes. Each held a palpable tension, evocative of something desperately trying to come up for air and reveal itself, only to be repeatedly covered up, silenced, and concealed. Some of these compositions do look like labium and folds of internal skin, but I found myself distracted by these more obvious references. The nuances of the knotting and ripping of the fabric were far more compelling, and to me seemed an

apt metaphor for the resistance and discomfort a woman's personal sexual landscape meets in the public eye.

The last room felt a bit like an afterthought, with a film projection of swirling vapor or smoke spiraling on the carpeted floor. This film was on a loop, synched to some generic, new age, ethereal music and concludes with a projection of the number 0 before repeating itself. After the lofty phalluses and other overt sexual references, I immediately assumed this was sperm swirling and then culminating in the letter O. This assumption was perhaps simplistic and juvenile, but the work suggested little else. The projection felt like a premature experiment with new media from Zhang, and utilized none of her skill with materials and composition, which was what made some of the other work successful.

Along the hallway of these four rooms, twelve paintings were hung, made with sand, glue, and white paint on canvas. They depicted various fluctuations with an oval shape, all abstract trials with the same matter and size constraints. Apparently these were meant to allude to Zhang's feelings about her

twelve different menstrual cycles in a year, or so a gallery assistant told me. Above these paintings, white cotton stretch fabric was hung from the ceiling, interestingly draped and pulled along the length of the hallway. I was mostly distracted by how negatively this affected the lighting of the paintings beneath, and beyond that it felt decorative and unnecessary.

Overall, Zhang was given ample space and freedom to experiment in the gallery, and show a range of material skill and engagement. Conceptually and aesthetically, the strongest works were those left untethered to obvious sexual or physical indication, for these overt allusions flattened any potential for complex meaning. This being said, perhaps it was an important step to fill the first room with enormous phalluses. What better way for the curator to signal to Chinatown, San Francisco, and especially the Center's board of directors, that the CCC is done playing it safe? It was clearly shocking to some people at the opening. For example, what would motivate a man to straddle a sculpture in a gallery, mocking it amidst a crowd of people? What was so threatening or uncomfortable that he needed to turn it into a joke?

The phallus sculptures are not groundbreaking or shocking to an audience versed in Western contemporary art. Nearly forty years ago, we saw Lynda Benglis advertise herself wearing a giant strap-on, Annie Sprinkle filming her cervix, and Carolee Schneemann reach inside her vagina and pull out an internal scroll to read to an audience. What the *0-Viewpoint* exhibition acutely demonstrates is the disparity between the San Francisco contemporary art scene and the artistic sensibilities of the Chinatown community. The fact that this disparity was called into light by the very personal, sexual, and bodily evocations of a Chinese woman, as opposed to a radical or sweeping political statement, is particularly striking. Apparently, one woman's sexuality can be a potent and contentious statement amongst the Chinese and Chinese-American population. And while I found the phallus sculptures to be vacant and one-note, they strategically functioned as an effective icebreaker for the CCC. I can also see them as a deeply liberating exercise for Zhang whose original artistic training was in traditional Chinese ink painting. If this freed her up and allowed her to fully delve into her materials and

engage her ample skill set, as she did with the torn and knotted canvases and the cotton-like sculpture installation, then it was well worth it. When Zhang resists the predictable, she effectively communicates an intimate, sensual, and multifaceted feminine perspective. This is no small achievement, especially with only a white palette, and is a prime example of the success of abstraction when the artist fully and unapologetically commits.

I applaud the CCC for engaging in the very necessary, but also very precarious, challenge of balancing the desire to sustain Chinese tradition and heritage while also gaining relevance for a younger generation. Zhang's work, and all its preceding apprehensions and subsequent reactions, has opened this dialogue. My experience was hampered by the preparatory and apologetic tenor of the speeches at the opening. As a contemporary exhibition space, don't make excuses for the art you show, and don't build expectations to a crowd standing outside the gallery door. Zhang's work can speak for itself.

Lia Wilson

Lia Wilson is an artist and writer living in the Bay Area. She holds a BFA in Printmaking from the College of Santa Fe, during which time she studied abroad for a year at the Santa Reparata International School of Art in Florence, Italy. Currently, Wilson works as a contributing writer for Squarecylinder, an online journal covering the arts in Northern California, and as the Program Assistant for the Visual and Critical Studies graduate program at the California College of the Arts. Presently a thesis candidate in the VCS program as well, Wilson's research interests focus on the art historical category of Outsider Art, its present commercial manifestations, and its limited critical dialogue.