

THE ABSTRACTION OF WHITENESS

Stella Zhang approaches her art with precision. Decisive cuts in her paintings reveal deep openings that can be read as wounds, but there is no blood. The ethereal sensuality suggested by the materials she uses is immediately negated. Tears are stitched together like scars. White sheets, loaded with layers of cultural coded meanings, are stretched, pleated, folded and knotted, intimating the tensions of sleepless nights, tightly wound bandages, and shrouds. Frayed edges in some areas are like dripping, viscous sinews. Sand has been painted on canvas to enclose yawning vulvas. Toothpicks pierce softly rounded organic shapes. Discomfort arises when trying to investigate meaning. Expectations, particularly those associated with femaleness, and the pristine qualities of whiteness, however, fall into question. Yet it is the abstraction of whiteness that is the alluring element of Zhang's art.

Despite feeling as if one has intruded upon intimate expressions of personal angst, Zhang makes clear, strong, feminist statements through her art. To devote her entire oeuvre to maintaining such a sustained vision must reflect her inner conflicts and search for meaning. It takes courage to make such self-revealing work, yet the veiled message, presented through abstraction, is one that is readily understood. It is still daring to make such art in the twenty-first century, when certain cultural mores often frown upon sexual explicitness, especially when made by a woman. Zhang's approach in fact contravenes the decidedly male and acceptable view of what art by women should be.

White on White is an apt title for Zhang's exhibition as the coded languages and double-entendres are many. White in the West signifies virginal purity, in the East it is associated with death. Whiteness is the absence of color, the absence of life; it is the clouded veil that becomes the shroud. Whiteness conveys a sort of innocence, we can become beguiled by it, entrapped by it, and in Zhang's art we find it both beckons us into

yet also repels us from her private world. With installations this changes, this is where Zhang's art becomes interactive. We are not invited to participate as much as compelled to do so. We walk between and under white cloths that are stretched and torn to enter into an interior space of layers of translucent skin-like veils (O-Viewpoint 6).

There is a seduction about Zhang's work. The appealing softness of plush forms, the dream-like atmospheres evoked by her installations, whether walking through a piece such as (Viewpoint 6-7), or making one's way around the towering phalluses (Viewpoint 1-4). The haunting quality of these works that invites closer observation is disrupted by proximity. The abrasive sand that envelopes the large vulva paintings (Viewpoint 5-14, 5-15) is deceiving from a distance as the cloud-like washes become redolent of uncomfortable irritants. The organic, soft forms of phalluses and vulvas (Viewpoint 2-6, 2-13) sprout spikes, like the tentacles of sea urchins, both endearing and repellant simultaneously. The negation of the sensuous mirrors the attraction of opposites; it is the constancy of the emerging and dissolving nature of change that is the essence of the *I-Ching*.

Mostly Zhang's art is about the body, the female eviscerated body that is a vision of interiority. There is nothing intimate or sensual about these paintings. In fact there is a sterility and clinical precision about them that evokes laboratories. Each incision is cleanly cut to reveal inner layers that in turn reveal yet more layers, all of which are devoid of color, of blood and bodily fluids. Monochromatic paintings of the 1950s and 1960s, so significant to abstract expressionist artists such as Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko, insistently rejected interpretive references. Zhang's monochromatic works do not allow such rejections of meaning. They may be monochromatic and abstract, however, they invite, if not implore, viewers to strip away their layers to discover meaning.

In her work Zhang plays with size and scale, from enormous towering phalluses over ten feet high, to installations that encompass whole galleries, to small more intimate works such as the stuffed and spiked organic objects (O-Viewpoint 2-5). A detail of one such piece (O-Viewpoint 2-1) is reminiscent of a rose with its white petals curled tightly within itself as if guarding a secret, yet protected by its thorny exterior. The rose is so beautiful, and yet so vulnerable, its only armor being its thorns. The meticulous sculpting of this labial rose recalls white porcelain *blanc de chine*, the most treasured of ceramic bodies, its whiteness proclaiming its purity, its essential untouchability, yet also its strength.

The confidence with which Zhang works and expresses herself comes from long years of training. From the time that she was a small child she learned from her father, Zhang Ping, the noted brush painter, who was for many years a highly esteemed professor at the Chinese Academy of Fine Art (CAFA) in Beijing. She attended the CAFA High School for artists, where she studied and practiced calligraphy and painted in the classical tradition every day for four years, before entering CAFA as an undergraduate. One could say that she was born to be an artist, essentially it is in her DNA, she had no choice—yet she is a restless spirit. Frustrated by the essential conservatism of the Chinese art world regarding women artists in the 1980s, she went to Japan to continue her studies. She received her Master of Fine Arts degree at Tokyo Art University, and was married, only to find that gendered expectations were also the norm in Japan. In 2003 she came to California alone with her six-year old daughter. With each move Zhang has had to learn a new language along with different cultural expectations. To survive she has had to adapt, and has found strength throughout by making art; she has said that for her art is like medicine, it is a way of healing herself. When cutting into a canvas or an object it is

like cutting into herself. It is as if she wants to cut, remove and scrape away memories that she cannot erase.

The power of Zhang's art is that each piece possesses a pristine beauty. But in an age of skepticism and violence we look for the flaws, the uncertainties, and the vulnerable points. It is almost a relief to find them—the cuts, the abyss-like holes, the spiked objects, the abrasive surfaces. The tensions expressed are both literal and metaphysical, whether they are stretched sheets redolent of restless nights, pierced and spiked objects, sand trying to foil entry, or the fear of invasion by apocalyptic towering phalluses capable of nuclear destruction. By drawing us into her complex world, quite literally through her installations, we face our own fears, but we emerge in an altered state of awareness, and this is where Zhang's art succeeds.

Mary-Ann Milford
Mill Valley, California

Mary-Ann Milford-Lutzker, Professor of Asian Art History, holds the Carver Endowed Chair in East Asian Studies at Mills College where she is chair of the Department of Art and Art History. She received her PhD in Asian Art History at the University of California, Berkeley. She is on the Advisory Committee of the Society for Asian Art, and is a member of the Commission on Contemporary Asian Art of the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco; she is a founding member of SACHI, the Society for Art and Culture Heritage of India. She has curated exhibitions and published extensively on traditional and contemporary Asian Art.