

Stella Zhang's Expressive Body

Betti-Sue Hertz

Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write your self.

Your body must be heard.

Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth.

- Hélène Cixous

The recent art of Stella Zhang, the Chinese-born San Francisco-based artist, embraces artistic process as an act of feminist will. Highly inventive, her work is a public display of an emotional encounter with a personal and intimate self-referential bodily experience — and is an exploration of both female (and also male) bodies. Muscle, fat, flesh, and skin are represented in various materials including fabric, acrylic paint and metallic thread, and in various formats — including painting, sculpture and installation. The tension between their visual and haptic aspects draws the viewer into the kinesthetic and physiological process of their making.

Zhang's choice and use of materials connect her to numerous women artists of the past several decades for whom the body and its imperatives are central concerns. Indeed, it's no exaggeration to suggest that this is a key part of the past half century's zeitgeist. Consider the painting and sculpture of Louise Bourgeois, Lee Bontecou, and Yayoi Kusama as well as Sonia Gomes, Shinique Smith and Kaari Upson, all of whom reorient textile-based craft and applied arts into a language of feminist critique. Like Zhang, they push materials associated with women's work and formerly of low status — fabric and thread — into emblems of power and desire.

In Zhang's search for a visual language that connects viewers to an unnamable, female struggle, she employs the concept of "0," which appears in a variety of works. She employs, in paintings such as 0-Viewpoint-8-5, 2015 and 0-Viewpoint-8-17, 2014, slits, ovoids, or gaping holes in pictorial fields of monochrome or near monochrome color featuring centrally located openings. Through it we can even see the wall beyond, a disruptive effect vis-à-vis the traditional acceptance of the canvas as its own world. In cases where the holes are a part of a larger pictorial scene such as 0-Viewpoint-02, 2010, other actions — wrapping and knot ties, twisted fabric and bulges stuffed with cotton batten — displace the primacy of the opening — replacing wholeness with messy landscapes of creases, bunching and folds. The actual physical rending of fabric is an undeniable recognition of a more turbulent and psychological relationship within the self and a manifestation of a restless soul.

Zhang, who was born in 1965, grew up raised in a household steeped in the arts. Her father was Zhang Ping (1934-2015), a highly regarded brush-and-ink painter of landscapes and nature, and a professor at the prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA). She attended CAFA for both high school and college, yet despite her social connections and her good fortune — to have largely escaped the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, it ended when she was ten — she recalls much isolation and loneliness. "I only felt safe at home," she wrote, "where I would have the leisure to read and copy art books my dad collected." Later, Zhang would again, become discouraged with the outside world, not surprisingly, when a brief period of liberalization in the mid-1980s, she experienced a more repressive period for artists represented by the near-simultaneous opening and closing of the China Avant Garde exhibition at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing.

In 1990, Zhang moved from Beijing to Tokyo, seeking refreshment and renewal by immersing herself in a different cultural context. She studied Japanese traditional painting at Tama Art University before transferring to Tokyo Art University where she earned an M.F.A. She also discovered another form of repression in Japan that was not overtly political, as in China, but culturally engrained — the repression of women. Zhang felt that this entrenched patriarchy was inhibiting her development as an artist and woman. In 2003, she moved again, this time to the United States, with her 6 year-old daughter, Ellen. She settled first in Palo Alto, where she has been associated with Stanford University, and later, in 2016 to nearby San Francisco. How remarkable is Zhang's trajectory — like that of so many Chinese artists — from her youth in Cultural Revolution Beijing to her present life in San Francisco, a bastion of free-wheeling creativity.

Zhang's recent ink paintings are imbued with urgency in the flow of the ink signifying both expertise and experience. Traditional Chinese landscape painting is a conversation between the artist and outer world, feeling expressed as

atmosphere and set in a space that customarily dwarfs mere humans. The vertical linearity of the central image in 0-Transformation-7, 2016 and 0-Transformation-8, 2016 mimics the notched vertebrae of a human spine. Zhang's marriage of body and landscape is deft and unusual in form, although perhaps not in motivation. Her attitude seems to extend back nearly a millennium to the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368). Its artists cultivated "mind landscape", in which description is enriched by personal feelings. Ancient ideas about landscape painting such as this are also apparent in the works that combine Chinese and Western painting techniques. 0-Transformation-2016-1, 2016 and 0-Transformation-2016-2, 2016, with their emergent high relief surfaces that make literal the topologies of landscape and strike a supernatural tone featuring auratic centers, to suggest starlit nocturnal views.

Although considering Zhang's work without acknowledging its roots in brush-and-ink painting, would render its characterization incomplete, her art practice does not fit comfortably within only a Chinese reading either. One key to the synthesis that animates Zhang's work lies in philosophy. In classical Chinese thought the order of the world dwells in the things themselves; the artist turns them into works of art. For the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), things have essential qualities that resist human control. Zhang's sculptures live between these two cultural and philosophical worlds, Western dualistic thought and Chinese concepts of continuity and flow; an unstable state where things are mutually shaping and being shaped. Zhang navigates a path in which things and experiences are named and owned, struggling against binaries, while still dependent on them for definition and communication. As she relies on them they melt away in her midst — male/female, black/white, pure/tainted, flat/dimensional. Zhang speaks of tenderness and flexibility as well as the space between reality and dream.

Post-war Japanese "anti-art" offers another clue to Zhang's search for liberation. The influence of the Gutai group of artists (1954-1972), in particular, was key. Its members' desire to reject totalitarianism and the authoritarian state was realized by collapsing the distinction between materials, body and process. This is exemplified in both Shozo Shimamoto's Holes (1954) and Saburō Murakami's Laceration of Paper (1956), where the artist hurled his body through a series of paper screens. Zhang's work combines such forceful aggression with an admiration for the minimalist work of a slightly later art movement, Mono-ha (or School of Things) (1968-1975). Adherents of this approach advocated a return to a more traditional respect for natural materials and their inherent thingness to create sometimes monumental sculptural works of beauty. Nobuo Sekine's Phase of Nothingness — Cloth and Stone, 1970/1994, for instance, emphasizes contrasts in the materials evoked in the title. In a search for an abstract feminist art, Zhang works at the intersection of these two seemingly diametrically opposed Japanese impulses, at times tipping toward one or the other. 0-Viewpoint-010, 2012 — an elongated sac-like form that droops down from the wall to the floor, straining at its physical limitations and evoking the body through its incorporation of weight and gravity — is a nod to Mono-ha and its preoccupation with the natural.

In 0-Viewpoint-3-71, 2017, a work about Mother and Child, the gestating form is emerging from the body-as-landscape in a process of becoming as if the entire uterine sac is caught between the interior and exterior world. It is a powerful work where the body as an active and organic site of production in the biological sense is reimagined as a process for the making of an artwork. The writings of the poststructuralist Hélène Cixous addresses this matter precisely. Deploying her concept of *l'écriture féminine* through such useful metaphors as milk, orgasmic experience, and the ocean; she simultaneously disrupts and deconstructs the stability of the phallogocentric Symbolic Order, "Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write your self," she counsels. "Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth." For Zhang, the drama of desire and the universal resonance of the Symbolic, are as real as the things she makes and uses in their making. Through a journey incorporating brush-and-ink painting, conceptual and anti-art and voluptuous sculptural references to the body, she has found the confident voice within.

Betti-Sue Hertz is an American art curator and art historian and director of the Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University working at the intersection of visual art, transcultural exchange and socially relevant issues. Recent highlights include: public arts director at TLS Landscape Architecture for Shishan Park, Suzhou, China; project curator, Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis; curator for Xiaoze Xie: Confrontation and Disruption at Stanford's Gallery in Washington; and Going Outside: Kunlin He and Yi Xin Tong at Nan Hai Art. She is currently a lecturer in the American Studies Program, Stanford University and the Graduate School, San Francisco Art Institute. Hertz was director of visual arts at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (2008-2015) and curator of contemporary art at San Diego Museum of Art (2000-2008). She was curator in residence at HOW Art Museum, Shanghai during the summer of 2018.