Tamed: Hair and Female Subjectivity

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Tamed: Hair and Female Subjectivity

by

Ziya Lin

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
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Abstract

This thesis explores the continued discrimination against women in China today, and examines my art research throughout the study of the Master of Fine Arts degree at University of Calgary. Although, since 1949, Mao Zedong had proclaimed that “women hold up half of the sky,” in fact societal pressure on women to conform is so great that even women’s association have co-opted the derogatory term “leftover women” (shengniü) for defining the unmarried women. Sociologist Leta Hong Fincher has studied this phenomenon and her results are the scientific foundation for my artistic exploration. Through using the image of hair as a metaphor, my art practice concerns the social and cultural containment imposed on women, revealing the dilemmas and obstacles that women experience in their lives. Technically, I have investigated ways of coalescing Western drawing methods and Chinese line art together, and have reoriented the traditional Chinese scrolls into installation art.

Keywords: discrimination against Chinese women, “leftover women”, Western drawing methods, Chinese line art, installation art
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Table 2. Daily domestic labor time of both sexes for both rural and urban areas from 1990 to 2010 (unit: minute) ²

<table>
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<th></th>
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<td>Urban</td>
<td>Rural</td>
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<td>2000</td>
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<td>2010</td>
<td>171.31</td>
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² Ibid.
Introduction: “Leftover Women”

The motivation of my art research is drawn from the phenomenon of “Sheng nü” (“Leftover Women”) in the Chinese society. “Leftover Women” is a derogatory nickname for describing women who remain single into their late twenties. It is a new form of gender bias against women persisting in post-socialist China, as it not only tags women by a demeaning way, but also highlights the problematic double standard to women.

In 1950, the first Marriage Law was established in China, that legally entitled Chinese women to make their own marital decisions. In reality, however, women seem to do not have much freedom in deciding whether and when to marry. If a woman wishes to remain single or to get married later, she will be stigmatized by society. The label of “leftover women” is proof of this, and creates significant pressure to push women into marriage.

One of my female friends, who is just thirty-years-old but remain single, complained that finding a husband is often a topic she cannot avoid when she meets with her family, friends and colleagues. “People just concerned about when I will marry, rather than whom I will marry,” she said. The sociologist Leta Hong Fincher has researched the social problems and gender issues which lie behind the appellation of “leftover women” in her book, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*, and points out the key role the media plays in stigmatizing and leading the public to pressure single women. Further, she demonstrates the causality between women’s rush into marriage and the erosion of women’s ownership in domestic properties and estates. In the descriptions of the interviews in Fincher’s book, the concerns about age are often mentioned by the
interviewees. Chen Su³, one of Fincher’s interviewees, said that she eventually agreed to get engaged to her boyfriend, although she did not like his personality. The reason why she hoped to get married as soon as possible was that she was afraid to be “left behind.” Even though this woman had just turned twenty-six years old, she did not believe she was able to start a new relationship at this age.⁴

This is not merely a problem of one individual woman, but a general issue that other young, single Chinese women, even myself, are experiencing today. Why do people and society as a whole want to pressure women on their marital decisions? In fact, it is an intention to force women to return domestic realm, and it is to do with a traditional belief that getting married and having children are the priorities that women should attend to. Therefore, the home and family are supposed to be the main realm where women should be active, and marriage enables women to assume their traditional family roles. Moreover, the notion of lineage is highly valued in Chinese families and Chinese culture more generally, and, marriage is thus a means to extend a family’s lineage, and women are obligated to fulfill this mission by having children.

It is true that both men and women in China today who are of marriageable age are pressured to get married quickly. However, I am interested especially in why women’s late marriage is excessively magnified in public, but not men’s? Why are only women stigmatized and branded with a derogatory label when they do not marry by a certain age? In looking for answers to these questions, I concurred with Fincher’s opinion that the authorities had played a key role in intervening in women’s marital decisions through the

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³ This case is from the interviews conducted by Fincher, noted in the author’s book.
In 2007, All-China Women’s Federation (also ACWF) defined “leftover women”, and promoted this derogatory term by repeatedly posting related comments on its website, as Fincher noted. It is ironic that, as a national feminist organization which is established to protect Chinese women’s rights, ACWF not only does not protect women, but derided them. According to Fincher’s research, from 2007 to 2013, the state-run media, such as Xinhua news agency, continually published and reposted the news and reports about leftover women, or even set up a column for discussing and commenting on single women. Some of these texts were given controversial headlines, such as “Do Leftover Women Deserve Our Sympathy?”, “Eight Simple Moves to Escape the Leftover Women Trap”, or “Women Marrying Late Shouldn’t Blindly Let ‘Late’ Become ‘Never’”, which contained insulting statements to unmarried women.

Below are two excerpts from these critical texts, reprinted from Fincher’s book, with translations also by Fincher:

Girls with an average or ugly appearance will find it difficult to [marry into a wealthy and powerful family]. These kinds of girls hope to further their education to increase their competitiveness. The tragedy is, … by the time they get their M.A or Ph.D., they are already old, [and worth less and less]. (From “Do Leftover Women Deserve Our Sympathy?”)
For the group of white-collar women who do not find partners, loneliness is a common occurrence. As these unmarried women age, the feeling of loneliness gets worse and worse.9 (From “Women Marrying Late Shouldn’t Blindly Let ‘Late’ Become ‘Never’”)

Apparently, these critiques and threatening statements revolve around the same theme of exhorting women to get married quickly. They encourage society at large to pressure women about their marital decisions by branding them, emboldening ongoing discrimination towards women. Before I wrote this thesis, I searched all the headlines that were mentioned by Fincher on the Internet and found that some of them had been withdrawn, but there are still a lot of similar articles, news, reports, and comments are posted online, they are continually and widely circulated on social media.

As a Chinese female artist, the concern about the phenomenon of “leftover women” urges me to explore the themes of women’s issues and plights, particularly in contemporary Chinese society. Throughout the MFA program, my art practice has been about examining the social and cultural containment imposed on women through the metaphor of hair, revealing the dilemmas and obstacles that women experience in their lives, incorporating my personal experiences and perceptions.

This chapter is an introduction to the hype of the derision and critiques of “leftover women”, based on the related sociological study of Leta Hong Fincher. The concern about “leftover women” captures my interest in the ongoing gender inequality of China that it reveals, and affects me to focus on women’s issues and employ it as the theme of my art practice.

9 Ibid, 15.
Chapter 1 gives some historical and cultural background to the social pattern of demeaning women in Chinese history. It depicts how this social and cultural background informs the general prejudice against women. By extension, this chapter also introduces systemic discrimination against women which can be found in education and workplace, to reveal the actual situation of gender equality in contemporary China.

Chapter 2 is an interpretation of the drawing styles, mediums, and composition that I applied in my artistic practice. It analyzes how I technically coalesce the western drawing methods and Chinese art together, and how I conceptualize and reorient a traditional Chinese painting material in installation art.

Chapter 3 is an investigation on the four installations, *Tamed I*, *Overwhelming*, *Tamed II*, and *Tamed III*, I created during my MFA program. It depicts the concept and motivation lying behind each installation, and the evolution of the subjects and motifs of my artworks. It also analyzes how the abstract concepts are embodied through the particular arrangement of visual components and viewer’s engagement.

In Chapter 4, five visual artists and their artworks herein are discussed. This chapter introduces how the following artists, Winnie Truong, Zhang Chunhong, Mona Hatoum, Annegret Soltau, and Lin Tianmiao, inform my work in the aspects of drawing skills, and how their artworks influence me to employ disembodied hair and domestic objects as subjects.
Chapter 1 From the “Leftover Women” To Women Issues In Contemporary Chinese Society

The Historical And Cultural Background Of The Bias Against Women

I believe that the sarcasm to “leftover women” and the excessive pressure on women regarding their marital decisions can be related to the historical, social systems, in which the society establishes firm principles and standards for women and requires them to follow. In Han Dynasty, around 202 B.C.E. to 220 C.E., the perspective that men are superior to women had been explicitly advocated in the Confucian work, Chunqiu Fanlu (Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals), and this perspective became common as Confucianism became the mainstream ideology in China, noted by Lijuan Shen and Paul D’Ambrosio, the authors of Gender in Chinese philosophy. Based on this ideological framework, the bias against women was further reinforced in the Song Dynasty (960—1279 C.E.), when women’s intelligence and ability were belittled, and they were excluded from the management of political and economic affairs. These restrictions arose out of fear of another matriarchal leader, such as Wu Zetian. A line noted in Shijing (the Book of Odes) demonstrates this fear: “Male intellect builds states, female intellect topples states”.

In another historical book, Liji (Book of Rites), behavioural norms as well as

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11 This woman was the first and the only one officially recognized Chinese female sovereign in Chinese history, she reigned over the country in around 684—705 C.E..
13 This book is a collection of the texts of Confusion canon, its content includes philosophy, morality, politics, rituals, education, and so on. It was written in the periods between the Warring States and the early Han Dynasty, which is around 475 – 202 B.C.E..
principles were established for women, called the *Sancong Side* (threefold obediences and four virtues). The obediences are these: “a woman follows her father before marrying, follows her husband after marrying, and follows her son after her husband dies.” The Four Virtues are “‘wifely virtue,’ ‘wifely speech,’ ‘wifely demeanour,’ and ‘wifely work’.” In early twentieth century, the Chinese feminist He-Yin Zhen (1886–1920) has critically responded to these behavioural principles. In her essay, *On the Revenge of Women*, Zhen argued that the “teachings of ‘men act first, women follow’ were concocted to restrict women’s freedom, [resulting in] the unequal relationship between women and men” in Chinese society.

Essentially, these manners and teachings reflect a patriarchal practice that men attempt to force women into submission through setting up problematic standards for women, thereby acquiring privilege over women. Although these manners are no longer highly praised in today’s China, the perspective that women are inferior to men has been embedded in China’s cultural rules, influencing how women are perceived.

**The Actual Situation Of Gender Equality In China**

Since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese government has made an effort to improve women’s status. The ACWF was also established in 1949 to protect women’s rights. The first marriage law that was passed in

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15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 128
1950 (as noted above) abolished arranged marriages, prohibited the trafficking of women, and guaranteed the equal rights of men and women in marriage and divorce. This law was modified in 1980 to promote gender equality in marriage and the family further. It is progressive that the modified marriage law enforced the provisions to protect women’s interests during asset distribution in divorce cases. During the Mao era (1949—1978), the proclamation that “women hold up half the sky”\textsuperscript{19} is an acknowledgement of women’s abilities and their contributions to the family and society, while also encouraging women to go out and look for jobs.

Nation-wide surveys conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics of the People’s Republic of China demonstrated that Chinese women increasingly made contributions to society as part of the labour force; of married women, between 1950 and 1965, 70% had jobs; between 1966 and 1976, 92% of married women were at work outside the home.\textsuperscript{20} The research of working women in Chinese stated—run enterprises indicates that, in 1982, employed Chinese women accounted for 43% of the total population, which was higher than in America and Japan.\textsuperscript{21} This study also explains that as more Chinese women worked outside the home, they increased their financial contributions to their families, from 20% in the 1950s to 40% in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{22} In the 2010 Chinese Census, the proportion of female


\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
technicians and professionals had increased to 51%. These figures reflect Chinese women’s growing economic independence and their rising social status.

However, can we safely assume that this progress means that gender inequality is diminishing in contemporary China, and we can take a more positive view to the current situation? The social changes and research referred to above demonstrate the rise of women’s status and the changes in their roles in both family and society. Unfortunately, they do not reflect the reality that the problem of bias against women persists in other forms, such as women have unequal pay, restricted employment choices, and limited opportunities for promotions in their careers. As the sociology scholar Priya Helweg stated, the government regards women’s simultaneous participation in the workplace and with their families as the key to women’s emancipation, but it “is first necessary to note the type of work women get, the hiring process in China, and how much energy [women] can direct toward their occupations.”

My observations are also supported by Fincher’s study on China’s gender equality and women’s status that I referenced above. As she stated in her book, the belief that “men belong outside (the public), and women belong inside (the home) has undergone a comeback over the past decade.” Indeed, a high proportion of men and women hold this view (62% and 55% respectively), which increased from 54% and 51% respectively, in the previous decade, according to a survey conducted in 2010 by the National Bureau of

https://tidsskrift.dk/index.php/KKF/article/view/71976/129234

http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2471&context=honors_theses

Statistics of China and the Women’s Federation. Further, another study about Chinese women’s status within the family proves that women’s traditional roles that centre on domesticity, affirming that the inequality between sexes in domestic labour and decision-making had not changed. In Jiehua Lu and Xiaofei Wang’s study, *Chinese Women’s Family Status: Analysis of Chinese Decennial Surveys, 1990–2010*, evidence shows “a [gradual] downward trend in ‘husband authority’,” but the figures still indicate that men, by far, make most of the main domestic financial decisions, such as housing choice, investment, and the purchase of high-end products (Table 1 in the List of Tables).\(^\text{27}\) In the same period, the time women spent on daily domestic labour was also far more than men’s (Table 2 in the List of Tables).\(^\text{28}\) These findings show me that Chinese women continue to be confined by the traditional gender norms. Realizing this, I am very conscious of the dilemmas and restraint that Chinese women undergo in their everyday lived experiences.

**The Discrimination Against Women In Education**

> However, when I enquired about equal opportunity [of] employment and education, people [made] a defended statement like, “women are naturally weaker and more emotional than men so they cannot do certain things.”\(^\text{29}\) – Priya Helweg

Discrimination against women also can be found in the education section, and thus is not only located in the social problem of “leftover women”. As Emily Honig and Gail

\(^\text{26}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{28}\) Ibid., 89

[http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2471&context=honors_theses](http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2471&context=honors_theses)
Hershatter claimed in their research, “women are deemed weaker than men in physical ability, intelligence, and emotional stability.”\textsuperscript{30} This prejudice prompts a belief that women are naturally weaker than men, leading to gender discrimination, which is deeply embedded in day-to-day education contexts.

In women’s families of origin, the parents and relatives show different attitudes towards boys and girls regarding their behaviours. Respondents in Helweg’s survey regarding gender differences in Chinese primary education noted that parents slant to teach girls to be less assertive and to behave modestly, which is considered the performance of ‘good girls’; Boys are encouraged to be ‘outgoing’, they are allowed to have more freedom to participate in society and to take more chances to learn social skills, but girls are ‘locked’ in the home and practice housework.\textsuperscript{31}

The discrimination against women is also manifest in subjects-segregated schooling. For example, Helweg discovered that in middle school, female students are persuaded to study in the pattern of rote memorization.\textsuperscript{32} This orientation reflects a stereotype that female students are traditionally assumed to be capable of learning by rote memorization, but are not as logical and as intelligent as male students.

\textbf{The Discrimination Against Women In Employment}

The discrimination against women also can be found in the workplace. For example, one of my friend who works in an HR department told me that the company prefers to

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 20-21
employ men rather than women, female employees are not prior to assume managerial positions. Here is the reason appear to be the cause of this prejudice: women are supposed eventually will get married, have children, and take care their families, which domestic affairs will preoccupy their time and energy. They are supposedly not able to engage in work as much as men. In other words, because women are expected to assume most of the responsibility for looking after the family, the implication is that they are distracted and have less time and energy for their paid employment. As Lu and Wang argue, “the inequality found in domestic work makes women unfavourable in the labour market.”

Moreover, the prejudiced evaluations of women’s capabilities undermine their opportunities regardless of their performance. The stereotyping that women are largely unable to think carefully and rigorously, and make reasonable decisions leads to a biased judgment that women are unsuitable for the decision-making positions. This thinking supports employers’ preferences to hire men and give priority to men in high positions.

https://tidsskrift.dk/index.php/KKF/article/view/71976/129234
Chapter 2 An Analysis Of Four Exhibitions: The Concept Of Containment And Installation Art

*Tamed I* (March 21-25, 2016, The Little Gallery)

*Introduction.*

I work with hair as a metaphor for my artistic practice centring on women’s issues since the first year of my MFA program, *Tamed I* was the first body of work of my artistic research. This work consists of eleven drawings on scrolls, five of which were exhibited in the Little Gallery, from March 21 to 25, in 2016. The hair in this work serves as a ‘controller’ or ‘authority’ that subjugates women. My motivation for creating this body of work was with the social problem of leftover women (as I discussed in Introduction). Concerns about this problem compelled me to try to capture the resurgence of gender inequality in post-socialist China, where it was assumed that the previous traditional and constraining gender roles no longer existed.
This body of work was also inspired by my personal experience of the stereotype and bias against women. When I decided to study in a Master program, my relatives exhorted me to give up this decision, as they assumed studying for such a degree would postpone the time of marriage. They discouraged me from being ambitious and encouraged me instead to consider finding a husband while I was still young. As what I noted in Introduction and Chapter 1, this belief is built on patriarchal view that women are impelled to plan their lives for marriage and families. This view not only reflects the bias against women being independent, but also reveals a traditional and common perspective that women ought to be family oriented.

Although the laws and regulations of the state are geared at improving women’s status, Chinese women find that they are still trapped within traditional gender roles, being characterized as wifely and motherly.

The word, *tame*, contains the meaning of the training and reining on animals. I used this word as the title because it invokes associations about being trained, controlled and subjugated. I hope the title could give the viewers a direction to decode this artwork, however, the ultimate reading of my artworks could be multiple, and relies on the viewers’ interpretation.

Following the five drawings that I made for *Tamed I*, I created another six drawings as the project of the course of ART 605. These eleven artworks reference the subjugation to women in eleven different social situations. In this section, I divide the eleven pieces into five groups. Each group represents one complex social relation that women face.
Peering (Front and Back).

Figure 3. Figure 4.

The group, Peering (*Front and Back*), includes two drawings about alienation and exclusion. In Figure 3, a female figure’s face is veiled by the hair, and she is peering out at the viewers through the gap in her hair. From the viewer’s perspective, the female figure is the person being viewed; correspondingly, the viewers are being observed by the figure in the drawing. However, the hair casts a barrier between the figure and the viewers so that the viewers have a difficult time identifying her. The hair in the drawing interrupts the viewers’ gaze and invokes a sense of alienation for the viewers.

In Figure 4, a female figure is positioned with her back to the viewers. Her hair is pulled upward as if someone or something above is manipulating her, forcing her to turn away from the viewers. This drawing implies that the norms and principles imposed on women limit their participation in society. Both the female figures in Figure 3 and Figure 4 are isolated, no matter the communication barrier or the controlled posture. Thus, these
two drawings are reflections of the ways in which women are treated unfairly.

**Wrapping.**

![Figure 5.](image1)
![Figure 6.](image2)
![Figure 7.](image3)

The second group of drawings, *Wrapping*, contains three drawings referencing – through the hair – the bound situation of women, but no longer emphasizing the depiction of female body parts. In this group of drawings, the hair is a metaphor of the rope binding the figures: the silky hair tightly wraps and coils over the head, torso, and arm. It makes the female figures speechless, blind, deaf and breathless, restricting the movements of their bodies. In these three pieces, hair entraps the body and consumes the figures’ lives, which connotes the containment of social and cultural principles which are imposed on women.

Further interpretation of the swirling or binding hair in these images could be a defensive posture that women may engage in. It is undeniable that wrapping the body in hair can be read as a protection and self-defense. I imagine these women could use their
hair to create a reassuring shell to cocoon themselves within. This then creates a safe and comfortable environment that defends them from the attacks of people who are hostile towards their desires for independence or feminist ideals.

**Left/Right: East/West.**

![Figure 8](image1.png) ![Figure 9](image2.png)

The third group of drawings, shown in Figure 8 and Figure 9, specifically depict a trapped condition. The hair is tugged in two directions: to the right and left; but which could also be interpreted the east and the west, connoting the competing impacts of traditional Chinese culture and Western culture on contemporary Chinese women. Due to the influence of western feminism, Chinese women are no longer uncritically responding to the inequality and prejudice that they experience. However, in practice, they cannot shake off the yoke of tradition, having limited autonomy in their lives. For example, the issue of leftover women that I noted above, even though legally Chinese women’s freedoms of marriage are protected by law, but in the actual situation, unmarried women undergo excessive pressure and critiques of their families, friends, and even the public. Also, women
are confined by the traditional family roles that centre around domesticity, just as their mothers have been.

**Public/Private.**

![Figure 10](image)

This drawing is inspired by an article entitled *The Last Taboo: Women, Body Hair and Feminism* written by Karin Lesnik-Oberstain. In this article, the author discussed how women’s head hair is valued, admired and seen as a sign of femininity; but conversely, women’s body hair, like pubic hair or armpit hair, is considered trivial, embarrassing, undesirable, and “not feminine”.³⁴ People do not mind male body hair, but female body hair apparently causes people discomfort – to the point that it is taboo. The female body that reveals or displays hair is characterized as monstrous, as it “blurs the boundary that separates a woman from man.”³⁵ This reflection inspires me to question this censorship of

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³⁵ Ibid., 28.
a woman’s body.

In my previous seven drawings, I focused on head hair, but Lesnik-Oberstain’s study made my interest in body hair more specifically, motivating me to introduce it as a subject. Thus, I chose pubic hair as the focus of this drawing because displaying pubic hair opens viewers up to a discussion of the coded ideas that inform what we consider to be private and public.

In this drawing, the overgrown pubic hair is braided, and it veils the genital area, just like a yoke over the female genital, which is suggesting another reading of women’s sexual repression. In Chinese society, sexuality is always taboo to women. Women’s sexual expressions, or otherwise, the so-called violating sexual behaviours, such as premarital sex, are perceived as deviant to sexual morals, but this critique would never happen to men. By speaking publicly about the female genital area in which women are previously shamed for or ashamed of, I hope that this drawing can bring attention to the need to women reclaim subjectivity.

By presenting the pubic hair in the public, I also create a reverse effect, in that, while pubic hair is expected to be covered, here is exposed and on display to the public — just as the head hair. This ambivalence informs my next two pieces, entitled Grotesque.
For these two drawings, *Grotesque*, I situated the hair in a surreal situation, making it go through the nose and mouth to suggest the theme of torment. Figure 11 depicts a strand of hair going through the nose and coiling up like a knot beneath the nose. The painful expression on the face of the female figure indicates that she is tormented by the hair.

Figure 12 represents a moment when the hair is vomited from the mouth. It depicts a woman eating and vomiting her hair in anger, which is an extreme behaviour, only done when a person is feeling overwhelmed or is in an extreme condition, such as repression, depression, hopelessness, and helplessness. Vomit is a biological reaction caused by a feeling of disgust, or to purge the body of a toxic; thus, it indicates a sense of aversion and a response of resistance. These two drawings suggest two paradoxical human conditions: one of being compelled and one of rejection and resistance.
Overwhelming (November 14-18, 2016. Gallery 621)

Figure 13. Overwhelming, The 621 Gallery, Art Building, University of Calgary, 2016
The eleven drawings discussed above revolve around the motif of women’s plights in the Chinese culture. They were divided into five sections to refer to five different social problems that Chinese women face. When I reflected on these pieces as a whole, I found they raised questions: What reasons lie behind the social, cultural, and political restraint on women? With this question, I intended to create a work pointing to the patriarchy in Chinese culture and society. Based on the historical and cultural context that I mentioned in Chapter 1, male domination has been deeply ingrained in the culture. It is also the main reason why gender inequality is a deep-seated social problem in Chinese society. This understanding was encompassed and embedded within my second exhibition named *Overwhelming*, a long scroll drawing addressing the imbalanced status of men and women in Chinese culture.

In the three drawings that constitute the series of *Wrapping in Tamed I* (Figure 5, 6, and 7), I aimed to subtract the female body parts and use the disembodied hair to reference and contour the human body. The subtle emerging body makes the work mysterious because it suggests, but does not define, the body. This approach effectively provides viewers with an imaginary space within which to envision the subject.

In the long scroll drawing of *Overwhelming*, although I still used body parts, the difference here is that I combined multiple body parts in the same plane, whereas earlier I used a single body part for one spatial context.

This drawing was not only a test of my skilled practice on the large-scale paper, but also an experiment for investigating how to translate my idea through the method of installation art. Conceiving the composition and drawing the lines on a large scale, but also being close-up to the surface created new challenges for me. Dealing with more than one
figure on long, but attenuated, paper demanded that I pay special attention to maintain the thematic coherence of the work. Drawing the long, flowing, and rhythmic lines on a more than twenty-foot scroll required a greater range of gestures, together with the more expansive use of my body. I needed to move in ways that the eleven smaller drawings did not require. I took lots of strides during the drawing process, and the work was a physically consuming practice. The paper was tacked on the wall; I had to stretch my arm and body to draw a long, but continuous line. Then, I placed it on the floor, walked around it, stepped close and stepped away to see the image, modified the details and adjusted the tone of drawing.

In *Overwhelming*, I used both charcoal and pastel as media that both were affected by my bodily gestures. The lines drawn with pastel were bold and coarse, suggesting the attributes traditionally possessed by men; the smooth, delicate lines drawn with charcoal could be felt as feminine. In this drawing, I used the imbricated, heavy lines to depict a man’s long beard at the top of the paper, while the silky, delicate hair with feminine forms was in the lower part of the drawing. Both masculine and feminine hair signifiers together composed the one piece. The drawing presents the masculine signifier hung higher the feminine signifier, invoking a reading of patriarchal control.

Adding a male beard as a signifier of male authority also resulted in a more literal depiction, since it was positioned in a superior relationship to the female body. However, the male signifier in this form is a too literal reminder, and thus it reduced the mystery of the work. Moreover, the unique effectiveness and relationship of the work to the viewers that I developed in the first installation, *Tamed I*, in the Little Gallery were not carried on in this work.
In *Tamed I* (Figure 1 and 2), the five scrolls created a sense of a crowd, enabling that installation to have a greater impact: the whole body of work represents a group of women, but did not single out any one woman in particular. The viewers actively moved among the scrolls causing slight vibrations of the paper; it was as if the viewers were having conversations with female depictions. When all the scrolls were fluttering together, it seemed that the scrolls too were speaking to each other. The pace of viewers immaterially created a connection between the scrolls, allowing the subjects on the scrolls to interact. However, in installation, *Overwhelming*, the motion of an audience member pacing from left to right, or right to left, does not provide the same meaningful reading or experience of mutual engagement, making the relevance of the content of the work harder to engage with.
*Tamed II* (February 27 – March 3, 2017. Gallery 621)

Figure 14. Installation view of *Tamed II*, in 621 Gallery, Art Building, University of Calgary, 2017
Figure 15. The single drawing/installation view of the single drawing of *Tamed II*

Figure 16. The triptych/installation view of the triptych drawing of *Tamed II*
In the context of Chinese culture, women’s lives are closely bound with their families. The heated discussion of “leftover women” and the critiques about women’s decisions to postpone the time of marriage and childbirth reflect that social concerns are invariably centered on women’s family obligations. Obviously, beliefs about wifehood and motherhood are firmly held in Chinese culture and society, but women’s selfhood is always excluded from these concerns. Extending from the content of women’s dilemmas (Tamed I) and the rule of men (Overwhelming), I took my work with a smaller focus on women’s traditional roles within families by addressing how women are confined by their family roles.

How do Chinese women participate in their families today? Has this changed as some sociologists claim? A common question for women today is how they can balance meeting the needs of their families with their own personal interests or professional pursuits. In contrast, the concerns for men generally focus on achievements of their careers or their contributions to society, rather than their performance within the family. Why does this cultural norm persist, where women are valued more about the family than to other domains? It is these questions that motivated my Tamed II project.

Tamed II is an installation situated within the context of the traditional Chinese family form, where women are usually family-oriented and patrilocal. This work explores women’s family roles and how they may resist the traditional expectations within the family.

In my memory, my mother always struggled with balancing family life and her career. She felt tired with the trivial household chores, which took too much time and energy from

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36 That is a marriage pattern that the couple lives with the husband’s family after marry.
her days so that she lost a sense of autonomy in her life. However, meanwhile, she insisted that the priorities of women in their adult lives should be marriage, motherhood, and home-making. As an adult woman now myself, I find that many of my female peers who have married also have an ambivalent attitude towards their family roles. They are unwilling to centre their lives on home-making, as their mothers had done. However, they also admit that wifehood and motherhood are still very important to them, and they accept to participate in the family in the old ways. This situation is consistent with Fincher’s finding that Chinese youth persist in thinking women’s obligations are to become wives and mothers.37

In another study about the family roles of women in Chinese society, Priya Helweg offers an explanation of this belief in women’s self-sacrificing value, she stated, “society continues to judge [a woman] according to her contributions to the family rather than her success in career despite the fact that she has been able to get rid of the confinement of the house.”38 Thus, the social judgements become a kind of pressure to force women to assume their traditional family roles.

_Tamed II_ is an installation containing two visual components:

- A single drawing of hair selected from the series of _Tamed I_, where the strands of hair extended out in an upward and downward dynamic. This scroll drawing acts as the reference of the female figure. (Figure 15)
- A triptych of Chinese antique furniture. Two round-backed chairs are displayed on the

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left and right separately, while a narrow tea table is placed in the middle. This typical design and combination of furniture can be seen in the living rooms of Chinese families, and so suggest a portrayal of the family as a whole. (Figure 16)

In this installation, I intended to subtract the depiction of a woman’s body, but used the disembodied hair as the signifier of female presence. As Heather Hanna wrote, “hair is a component of the physical body, it demonstrates the concept of embodiment, [and it manifests the body as a bodily extension] by its symbolic qualities.” The disembodied hair is a metaphorical presence of the body, avoiding explicit description while offering the viewers multiple potential interpretations they may make from the drawings.

To avoid the literal interpretation of men, which the man’s beard easily signified in Overwhelming, I experimented with introducing a male marker through the presentation of objects that are associated with men. Based on the familial context of this work, I chose to depict an antique-style piece of furniture as a symbol of male dominance within conventional family forms, but one which disembodies the male presence. The separate placement of the images of armchairs symbolizes a basic heterosexual family form that is constituted by a man and a woman. Specifically, in Chinese traditions, this furniture arrangement was the setting in which the master of a family, generally a man, was served.

The very deep seat and the large gap between the armrests does not make for a comfortable sitting experience; rather, they force the sitter to sit in a rigid posture, which suggests and highlights the authority and majesty of the family heads. By displaying the

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single piece opposite the triptych (Figure 14), I intend to create a tension between two visual components. Ideally, the two visual components – the furniture and the woman opposite it – are in conversation with one another, visually speaking. This installation format indicates that the woman in the single drawing is confined within the family, but she is also isolated. She cannot master an individual identity within a family context, as she is expected to stand on a side and be ready to serve the whole family, rather than being a person who herself has leisure time to sit down. We are reminded a scene that the men get to sit on the throne, but the women serve the tea. Also, the drawing shows the hair constraining and demolishing the antique furniture, the woman with her back to the furniture amplifying the refutation and rejecting attitude towards the historical family roles and principles imposed on Chinese women for centuries.

Using the antique furniture to symbolize the traditional family patterns, Tamed II offers a critical response to the patriarchal family norm. Conceptually, it reveals the fact that domesticity continues to be the main part of Chinese women’s lives. When they return home, by being the main family caretakers, they reflect that the structure of family life has not changed. However, it is also true that Chinese women are no longer so easily accepting their traditional family roles and the unequal domestic relationship. They are becoming aware of developing their own individual identities and rising up from this prior subjugation, taking a confrontational posture.
Tamed Ⅲ: Thesis Exhibition (August 11–September 24, 2017, Nickle Galleries)

Figure 17  installation view of Tamed Ⅲ, in Nickle Galleries, University of Calgary, 2017

Figure 18  Cutting board and axe

Figure 19  Spatula and sword
Figure 20  Bamboo-weaving
winnowing
pans and stretcher

Figure 21  Wok and shovel

Figure 22  Meat fork, ladles, and trident
Since *Tamed II*, the motif of my work has been incorporated with the interpretation of women’s confrontation and resistance. In the *Tamed II* installation, the singular scroll that connoted a woman is displayed opposite the antique furniture which signified traditional family form and principles. This composition indicated the tension between two entities; the opposite position was indicative of women’s disapproval of the confinement of domesticity, and the imbalance of household duties in the domestic realm. Grounding on the theme of *Tamed II*, I drew the inspiration from personal events to social discourse, also combining my attention to feminist campaigns of today’s China.

Feminist campaigns are controversial and marginal in China, as they lack the support from both the government and the public. Feminist activities in the public sphere, in most cases, are attended by excessive censoring and monitoring by the government. On November 25, 2015, for instance, a feminist art exhibition was suspended by the Beijing authorities. The goal of this exhibition was to generate social attention about the physical violence, psychological or verbal abuse against women. Minutes before the opening reception of the exhibition, the local government informed the curator, Cui Guangsha, that this exhibition had to be cancelled as it did not pass the official censors.

Holding a feminist perspective is perceived as deviant among the Chinese public. A recent event of some students in the ‘Gender and Society’ curriculum at Beijing Foreign Studies University makes this evident. In 2013, seventeen pictures of female students were posted online, with each picture presenting a young female student holding a white board on which she had written her feelings and understandings about her vagina. As the initiator

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40 This exhibition was eventually held in France in March, 2017, and entitled *Violence XX-ELLES.*
said, this event was inspired by the play with the same title, *The Vagina Monologues*, written by Eve Ensler in 1996. This event aimed to privilege attention to female subjectivity, and appeal for respect towards women. This courageous action instead encountered the unprovoked invective of the public. Some people criticized what these young girls did, calling it shameful and indecent, just because they talked about their vaginas, a word deemed dirty, obscene, and erotic in public setting.

*Tamed III* is an acknowledgement of the feminist groups of China. It reflects the struggle in the actual practice of feminism, but also questioning the absence of men in feminist campaigns. Further, my goal in this installation is to raise questions about the predicament of China’s feminism: How do feminist activists raise their voice in the social sphere? Are they active in, or pushed away, from the frontline of fighting against the inequality of and discrimination against women? What restrictions do they undergo in striving to achieve an equal gendered relationship? Can they be successful in their campaigns, and impact society to reclaim women’s rights? In a country ruled by men, a culture imbued with gender imbalance, who and where are China’s feminists? Is there really any feminism in China?

This body of work consists of fifteen small drawings on over life-sized scrolls of Xuan paper suspended from the ceiling of the gallery. It is composed of two components, an outer ring of ten drawings and five drawings presenting in the inner (Figure 17). The ten scrolls comprise a three-quarter circle with an opening for the audience to enter the work. These scrolls are embodiments of women, while the drawings, which are chosen from the series of *Tamed I*, depict ten different pictures of the controlled conditions of women. The specific composition suggests a discourse in that women voluntarily organize themselves
and form a community, representing that these women rise up in a collaborated way to collectively confront the issues.

In the inner part, five drawings of reconstructed tools are displayed, which are surrounded by the ten outside pieces. These tools are designed after kitchen objects, but the kitchen utensils are reconfigured as objects of manual labour: the hair is cast as a rope for binding, wrapping, and combining; a cutting board is bound to an axe handle, so that the board could be as functional as the blade of axe (Figure 18); a spatula and a handle of a sword are fused together, and is transformed into a dagger (Figure 19); four vertically parallel bamboo-weaving winnowing pans are tied together, which constitutes a stretcher (Figure 20); a wok is bound with a long handle, composing a manual tool which looks like shovel (Figure 21); two ladles are connected with a meat fork and a sabre handle, which forms a trident (Figure 22). By reconstructing these items in transposing way, a new identity arises for the kitchenware, and they are transformed into tools for labour, or even weapons. Even while original functionality of kitchen utensils is undermined, they retain associations to women’s kitchen labour. In these drawings, kitchenware is empowered by acquiring menacing qualities, the result is an evocation of women’s fight for equal rights.

The compositional form of having the ten figure drawings surround the five tool drawings suggest a distinct association between the two portions, creating the implication that the reconstructed objects are produced by women. Further, this installation offers a feminist critique about the imbalanced distribution of housework to women, informed by the theme of Tamed II. By representing collaboration and efforts made by feminist groups working together, the work echoes the united and cooperative mode of contemporary Chinese feminist campaigns. While the Tamed II installation represents the voice of
resistance raised by an individual woman, rooted in a personal feminist stance, the *Tamed III* installation makes an appeal for female communities, rooted in a collective stance. Additionally, by leaving an entrance to enable viewers to see the drawings in the area between two components, I hope that the viewers will see a discussion of a group of women emerge, creating a sense that they are invited to engage in this conversation.

The work, however, continues to pay attention to the domestic realm where gender inequality can be distinctly found. Unlike the general interpretation of women’s family roles in *Tamed II*, here, in this work, I narrow my focus to the kitchen, where the work was primarily done by women. This, of course, is because from a traditionally perspective that kitchen work, specifically cooking, is perceived as women’s work and obligation. The presentation of kitchen utensils evokes the labour often associated with women, who prepare food for whole family day after day.

*Tamed III* is an installation that explores the ways that today’s Chinese women defend themselves from pervasive and pre-existing cultural and social biases against them. It invites the viewers to engage in a feminist discourse on the topic of women’s confrontation to traditional values and expectations, and the obstacles they face as they go forward with this struggle.
Chapter 3 Method as Meaning

Line drawing and installation art are the main art forms I applied in my artistic practice throughout the MFA program. I have fused traditional Chinese art with Western contemporary art in my line drawings since they are informed by the methods of Chinese calligraphy, the line drawing of Chinese painting and Western drawing methods. The composition of my work also embraces the concept of empty space of Chinese painting.

I used a hybrid medium: combining a Chinese painting medium (Xuan paper scrolls) with a western drawing tool (charcoal). Unlike the traditional form of Chinese painting, where the scroll is hung on the wall, I employed the Xuan paper scrolls as visual components that carry connotations in the mode of installation. This chapter presents a detailed analysis of these visual methods I applied in my art practice.

Composition

Cropping.

The eleven drawings of Tamed I embodied constraints on women by confining female body with hair. In the drawing process, I used masking tape to create a sense that the image was cropped. The function of this cropping was the same as using a frame. A frame traditionally is a visual presentation for highlighting the art piece and attracting viewers’ attention to the image, while also setting it apart from the surrounding environment. Therefore, the cropping visually helps to develop a form of conversation between the viewers and the subject.

Cropping is also a visual presentation for connoting the idea of ‘control’ or ‘restraint’. Before drawing the subject, I used the tape to compose a quadrilateral drawing area; then I
drew the strokes outwards across the inner edge of the tape. When the tape was removed after finishing the drawing, these strokes were tidily cropped, creating a straight edge that was left around the image and that abruptly broke the dynamism of the drawn lines. This cropping and interruptions served to evoke the associations with shaping, limiting, and restricting.

**The use of empty negative space.**

I used the concept of blank space, pervasive in Chinese painting, in these drawings. Chinese painting has been influenced by Daoism which advocates the interplay of the opposite, but complementary, forces move the world forward. When this understanding is applied in the composition of Chinese painting, an art piece is the result of the interaction and complementarity between the empty space (the negative space) and the drawn space (the positive space). The blank space is considered positive, as it shapes the design as much as the drawn space. As artist Weimin He stated, the blank space “conveys information by means of a lack of image,” it is where the viewers’ mind can rest, as “there is no need for the touch of brush.”

Namely, the blank space enables viewers to make an assumption or imagination on the drawn space (or the subject) that they see, thereby improving their engagement. For my eleven drawings of *Tamed I*, each piece was drawn on a sixteen-feet long by thirty-seven-inches wide Xuan paper scroll. However, the dimension that the drawing itself occupies is twenty-two-inches long by eighteen-inches wide. The amount of blank space left on the paper evokes the expansion of the figure and makes the drawing

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mysterious.

Medium As Method

Drawing medium: *Xuan* paper and charcoal.

The *Xuan* paper is the embodiment of woman and the representation of traditional feminine qualities in my artwork, as it is naturally white, pliable, and has a high fibre content, delicateness, and thinness. I have interpreted these properties as the reference of the qualities of womanhood such as gentleness, sensitivity, and fragility. Scrolls of this paper traditionally hang on the wall in Chinese art. However, when I suspend it from the ceiling of the gallery, the vertical standing scroll looks like a monumentally sized person standing on the ground.

I used *Xuan* paper for the installation because of its delicateness, lightness, and pliability. The property of delicateness supports the idea of the experience of harm. This fits my use of sharpened charcoal as drawing tool on the *Xuan* paper. Too pointed charcoal easily rips and scratches the fibre of the paper, leaving fluff on the paper’s surface. This fluff is a visible material damage made by the charcoal; it manifests the fact that sketching on the delicate paper is a practice of ruining the paper. The *Xuan* paper in my work acts as the metaphor of Chinese women, and the damage made on the paper suggests the abuse or violence directed to these women, an outcome not achievable by other drawing tools.

When I first started to produce the drawings, I tested three different tools – specifically, a brush, charcoal, and a fine-tipped marker. Although both the brush and marker can make the small, thin, and delicate lines to some degree, I could not achieve the calligraphic quality I sought as much with the charcoal as with the brush. However, only the charcoal
caused a change in the material condition of the paper, leaving a distinct, tactile trace.

The Xuan paper’s soft pliability and lightness enhance viewers’ engagement by facilitating interaction. I display the paper by suspending it, the viewers’ movements as they come close to or between the scrolls easily causes the paper to flutter and move. This interaction between the viewers and drawings not only reaffirms the arrangement of visual components on a floor, but also dictate the movements of the viewers, encouraging a conversation between audiences and the scrolls in the space.

**Scrolls and compositional space.**

The Xuan paper scroll as a visual component in my installation art, rather than a drawing material is taken from the Chinese painting. The paper itself thus suggests a meaning; it becomes an aspect of what I intend to convey to viewers. The arrangement and composition of the scrolls, the spacing between them, and how they hang within the architectural space of each gallery (The Little Gallery, 621 Gallery, and The Nickle Art Galleries) all inform the viewers’ interpretations of the art work. In my last three exhibitions (*Tamed I*, *Overwhelming*, and *Tamed II*), I respectively experimented with the placement and positioning of the scrolls by forming the scrolls as compositional elements that speak to my unique intentions for each of these installations.

**Composition in Tamed I.**

In my first exhibition, *Tamed* (March 21-25, 2016. The Little Gallery), five scrolls hung in the gallery without a systemic order in composition. The free arrangement here suggested that the social issues that women face were of equal weight or importance. The
viewers could freely navigate between the scrolls, and each scroll was an independent component depicting a unique story. However, as viewers navigate their ways through them, this could connect them, conceptually weaving them together as a group of images, ideas, and then a group of people. This arrangement allows the viewers to envision the five artworks as a story about the constraints over women in the Chinese culture, rather than as depictions of any individual person of a certain age, race, social class, or so on.

Composition in Overwhelming.

The installation, *Overwhelming* (November 14—18, 2016. Gallery 621) is an interpretation about the superior-inferior positions of men and women in the Chinese culture. The twenty-three feet long scroll was hung in the gallery, with the upper part of the scroll suspended aloft, while the rest lay on the floor. This scroll drawing was composed of two contrasting signifiers suggesting of male and female: the image of a male beard was on the top; the silky hair with female body forms was depicted below. The way I installed the scroll, with the male signifier hung at the top indicated the subjugation of the female below.

Composition in Tamed II.

The third exhibition entitled *Tamed II* (February 27–March 3, 2017. Gallery 621) is a progression of *Tamed I*; in both, the Xuan paper was conceptualized as representative of the female form. This installation is a discourse generated by two main components: an individual scroll with a small drawing and a triptych with the drawings of Chinese Ming style furniture. I created a dialogue between these two components by installing the
individual scroll opposite to the triptych. The space between the single drawing and the triptych provides a passage for viewers to walk between the two portions. In this installation, the single scroll was likened to the female, and the triptych suggests the portrayal of family and the traditional family order of China. This particular composition is confrontational and places viewers in a sympathetic position to the vulnerable subject.

**Line Drawing**

The line work is the main drawing vocabulary of my works. I translated the strands of hair to the strokes and lines on paper. As the hair is thin and thread-like, the line can appropriately capture the character of this body element in the drawing. In my line drawing, I merged the western drawing method and the calligraphic approach of Chinese painting to the line. In particular, the naturalistic description of the depth of space and the realistic depiction of the objects are the skeleton of the western drawing method. Further, charcoal drawing is a common art form in Western art. While working with the distinctive Xuan paper but with charcoal as my medium, I fuse Eastern and Western working methods in my process. I also rely heavily on the Western art form so that the works, in essence, perform a theatrical play. This application of installation art has helped me to simulate the role of the characters represented by the hair subjects.

The immediacy of my line drawing is associated with Chinese calligraphy and line drawing in Chinese painting. Writing in Chinese calligraphy is not a process whereby the artist writes the text; rather, they ‘draw’ the Chinese character stroke using the line. The aesthetics of Chinese calligraphy are related to the linear changes and movements generated by the artist’s gesture and psyche. The writing is considered the mark left by the
motions of the artist’s hands, but also as the imprint of their mind. Namely, the line casts a material mark of the movements performed by the physical body, and it is the vehicle conveying the artist’s subjective emotion and intuition. As the British art historian Laurence Binyon claimed, “painting, for the Chinese, is a branch of handwriting.”

The line drawing of Chinese painting is developed from the calligraphic method, and thus it retains the calligraphic quality, but highlights the artist’s memorization and subjectivity. This is because line drawing requires the artist to “observe the object closely, then stores this observation in memory. When the artist conceives the design of what he intends to paint, he swiftly transfers the mental image with [a] sure stroke on the paper.” This drawing approach triggers a combination that the artist’s subjective perception is embedded in the naturalistic depiction of the object.

The mark-making in my drawings are characterized as both mimetic and calligraphic – I deliberately I drew the lines by incorporating the calligraphic method, Chinese line drawing, and western drawing approaches. Before I drew the strands of hair, I used a wig as a visual reference for human hair. I arranged the artificial hair in various conditions, such as braiding, coiling, wrapping, being dragged or pulled. I then observed and investigated the movements and the appearance of the interwoven hair. Just as with the line drawing approach of Chinese painting, I memorized my observations and eventually located the recalled images in a range of actions in my whole forearm.

The lines in my drawing are falling into two types: the loose, fine, curly lines created


out of mindful arrangement; and, the organized, coarse, straight lines carried out by instinct. The fine-drawn lines simulate the intertwining hair strands. These marks were drawn by the swift, slight rotation of my hand and wrist. The drawing of the coarse lines came about through the repetitive and monotonous movements of my arm and shoulder. These instinctive actions caused the lines to overlap, many layers of sketching darkened and clouded the lines, creating a shaded effect. This shading helped to depict a sense of thickness of the strands of hair in the same way that the volume of an object (or the depth of space) is created by shading in western drawing.

Additionally, the curly, small, fine-drawn lines and the straight, thick, coarse lines represent two different conditions of the hair. The former captures the feature of the scattered hair. The later depicts the organized, strong status of the hair, conveying a sense of tension and the concept that the hair is empowered. When the lines convey two sensibilities simultaneously, they provide viewers with a visual experience of oscillating between the binary effects of organizing and scattering, monotony and rhythm, and relaxation and tension.

Overall, in my work, I see the process of drawing as a consumptive, meditative but instinctive practice, and my line drawing reflects the intersection of my gesture traces, the imprint of my mind, and an intimate connection with the material. As I occasionally rubbed the surface of the paper, a relatively small amount of charcoal dust was rubbed off onto my hand during sketching. Multiple instances of rubbing, combined with a degree of pressure applied to the paper, ruined the smooth surface of the paper, clouding and even erasing the image at times. Thus, I needed to have patience, while also applying less pressure to the paper. The amount of care I took in this process reflects the intimate interplay and
relationship between an artist and the materials.
Chapter 4 Influences of Other Artists

Hair has been both as a subject and as the metaphor in my artistic practice. Other artists who work with hair or its associated material have influenced my works technically, aesthetically, and conceptually, and I discuss them in this chapter.

As Leila Mckellar stated, hair is used as a subject in artworks because it “plays a prominent role in social rituals, and in personal life experiences, which makes it become a potent subject for artists.”⁴⁴ Hair is public but also personal, and its malleable nature allows it to be used to describe personal narratives or express social concerns. Moreover, hair can act as the substitute or metonymy of the human body. As Mckellar argued, hair “can avoid representing the body directly.”⁴⁵ As an extension of the physical body, hair easily evokes associations to the body.

In my first installation, *Tamed I*, hair was a metaphor of containment applied on Chinese women, as it entrapped and contained the female body. Then I experimented with disembodied hair in *Overwhelming*, and started to suggest disembodied hair as a reference of the female form in *Tamed II*. In *Tamed II*, disembodied hair is an implication of the body, the long, flowing, silky features of hair presented are an evocation of feminine qualities; thus the hair connotes the representation of women.

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⁴⁵ Ibid, 172.
Winnie Truong


Winnie Truong’s paintings inspired me to use lines to depict hair in my work. In Truong’s paintings, hair is neither an ornament nor an extension of the body, but becomes a vehicle reflecting the artist’s personal understanding of what is considered beautiful and grotesque.

The beauty she creates comes from the lively, silky, and flowing hair which is likely a scarf or fur surrounding the body. This creates an illusion that the female body is enveloped and cocooned in the overgrown hair, invoking a sense of comfort. The vivid colour of the hair creates a visual pleasure. Simultaneously, the hair also invokes discomfort as the
overgrown hair appears in unexpected places like the face and torso. Further, Truong creates an illusion that the body parts are emerging from the hair.

I found Truong’s work to be a good example for me of the use of hair in drawing and painting. Her ambivalent and ambiguous presentation of hair, either as beautiful or as grotesque, orients her works towards dualistic interpretations, suggesting the potential of hair in the realm of art. Her approach influenced me to investigate hair as a potential subject in my artistic practice.

In Truong’s work, the drawn lines are neat and carefully arranged, with each single line as a distinct component of the composition. She takes care to the details of the twists and movements of the hair in a meticulous way. The hair is divided into groups of different sizes, and she draws and arranges the lines within that space. Her paintings mainly provide a sense of cautiousness, reflecting the artist’s elaborate arrangements and design of the lines.

From learning about Truong’s paintings, I translate each strand of hair into lines and create the effect of thickness and denseness of hair through compounding the lines. The main different in my drawings is that I combined the fine, loose and tangled strands of hair to re-present the natural form of hair. There are no coloured effects in my work. Instead, through the black and white, I intend to bring a serious tone to the subject and elicit an affective oppression in the viewers, which corresponds to the theme of my work that the hair in my work is modelled to indicate the female issues persisting in society.
Chunhong Zhang

Chunhong Zhang is another artist who works with the image of disembodied hair in drawings that I turned to for insight and inspiration. Disembodied hair has been the recurring subject of this artist’s artworks in the motif of personal experience. In a triptych entitled *Three Graces* (Figure 24), three drawings of long, black, straight hair are displayed together, referencing the portraits of Zhang and her sisters respectively. This body of work addresses the close relationship and individuality of two generations. The relationship between the artist and her sisters is as siblings, but at the same time, they are also independent individuals. *Life Strands* (Figure 25) is a long scroll drawing elucidating different stages of a woman’s life, which the artist describes as reflecting “the radiance of
youth, the twists, and turns in midlife, and the frail stage comes with age.”46 In Zhang’s drawings, the hair is identified as symbolic portraits of women, standing for identities, and suggesting the lived experience and stories of an individual.

Her drawings are done by charcoal, combining with the application of fine lines in traditional Chinese painting. She uses highly fine lines to draw the small hair threads precisely and depicts the smooth, silky and soft texture of hair by applying the charcoal from light to dark. The scroll is the main presenting form of Zhang’s drawings, contributing to accentuate the length of hair.

Zhang’s works exemplify the bodily representation associated with disembodied hair. I am inspired by her subtle choice of using disembodied hair as a metaphor of women and the employment of Chinese painting skills of her drawings. This artist’s way of presenting the drawings as scrolls also influences my choice of medium in art practice, but I turn the scrolls into the connotations of the female form, or women, in my installations.

Annegret Soltau


Annegret Soltau is an artist who uses actual lines, threads or yarn, to make the interpersonal connection and containment visible and tactile. I am especially interested in her etchings of portraits in early period creations (Figure 26) that the figures are wrapped by the hair, but only the eyes and nose are shown.47

I see the act of wrapping the body in Soltau’s etchings as a suggestion of torment, but also protection. Wrapping the body evokes viewers’ fear of entrapment of the body,

connoting a meaning of containment; meanwhile, the hair looks like a cocoon enveloping the body, it situates the body in an enclosed but safe condition, protecting the body from attacks and harm.

In the influence of Soltau’s works, I have repeatedly employed the motif of wrapping in my drawings for visualizing the notion of constraint. In my works, specifically in the series named Wrapping of Tamed I, wrapping is an act of both kindness and aggression. In Tamed III, I forge ahead with my art practice on wrapping the subjects in hair, extending the signification of wrapping to the meaning of combination.

Mona Hatoum


Hair has been a recurring theme in Mona Hatoum’s sculptures and installations, both as a medium and as a representation of female identity. In *Recollection*, Hatoum displayed some hair balls (Figure 27) as the embodiment of women. These hair balls were made of Hatoum’s fallen hair that it took the artist six years to collect, they represented the bodily traces that a woman left in a place.\(^4\)

In Hatoum’s another work, *Keffieh* (Figure 28), she used women’s hair to knit a headscarf, making a replacement on the material of a familiar object. I see this work as a precursor of her other sculptures that she alters the appearance and original functionality of household items for exploring the notion of home. The examples of this kind of

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sculptures are the series of No Way (Figure 29), and Grater Divide (Figure 30). No Way is a stainless strainer that its holes are plugged with studs by the artist. Likewise, The Grater Divide is a room folding screen, but its appearance is a scaled up cheese grater. The similarity of these three sculptures is that the household items have experienced reconfiguration.

I am inspired by Hatoum’s manipulation on kitchen utensils that she transforms the common domestic objects into uncanny works by giving them macabre appearance. The household items connote the domestic life, while the hazardous qualities imply a sense of aggression and hostility. Hatoum’s kitchen-utensil pieces influence me to examine furniture and kitchenware as the embodiment of the notion of family and the evocation of women’s domestic labor within the installation of Tamed II and my thesis exhibition respectively.

My thesis exhibition has also been influenced by the work of the Chinese artist Tianmiao Lin, particularly her installations entitled *Bound and Unbound* (Figure 31), and *More or Less the Same* (Figure 32).

*Bound and Unbound* contains eight hundred pieces of household objects and tools. The objects she chooses and displays, such as kettles, sewing machines, pans, cooking pots, prams, bowls, teapots, and so on, are commonly used by women in the family setting. They can be linked to the daily household work of women, like cooking, cleaning, and child care, thus evoking associations with women’s labour in their domestic lives.

The practice of binding the tools and objects with cotton threads, which disables their original functions, is an implicit expression of boredom, or even resentment, towards domestic labour. This piece is unlike her other works, where the artist’s personal perceptions about women’s lived experiences are addressed through the female body. This work is more connotational, the objects themselves offering an intersection of signifiers of housework and the metaphorical extensions of women’s household labour. As the presence of household objects orients the artwork towards the specific context of domesticity. Further, the large numbers of household items indicate the weight of the work load that women shoulder in their household chores.

Lin’s interest in women’s domestic labour moved me because her work mirrors the lives of most of my female family members in that they undertake the main responsibility of homemaking uncomplainingly. Her work helped me to focus my own work and pull forward themes that are important to me: the context of family, the concerns about the imbalance of household labour between men and women within the family; and the reflection on the perspective that women’s lives should revolve around the home.
Inspired by Lin’s use of household objects, I departed from the use of the female body in my art practice, but aimed to apply relevant objects as a new visual vocabulary in my work. In *Tamed II*, I introduced Chinese antique living-room furniture to signify the form of the family and embody the traditional family values that exist within Chinese culture.

The destruction and reconstruction of tools and synthetic human bones within *Loss and Gain* informed my latest installation, *Tamed III*, which constitutes my graduating exhibition. Lin dismantled the structure of tools and synthetic human bones and grafted the components of the tools onto different parts of the human bones. By this joining, the original functions of both components are voided by the artist, being transformed into sculptural form.

In *Tamed III*, the objects what are common in the kitchen undergo a transformation. By juxtaposing, rearranging, and transposing manual tools and kitchenware, I give a new social meaning to the objects we are familiar with. This composition questions our general recognition and experience of this kitchenware.
Conclusion

The focus on the topic of “leftover women” impels me to concern about the discrimination against women, and the plights that contemporary Chinese women face. I employ this concern as the motif of my artistic research, focusing on the concept of containment. This thesis has made a reflection on all my art projects throughout the MFA program, *Tamed I*, *Overwhelming*, *Tamed II*, and *Tamed III*, in the aspects of the concepts of each installation, the use of hair as metaphor, the evolution of subjects, the space composition in galleries, creating process and techniques, and other artists’ influences on my work.

Regarding my artworks as a test bed, I experiment with utilizing installation art as a way of exploring the interplay between viewers and the artworks. From learning about the four installations I created, I find that the image and material presenting within an installation are shown as signifiers of connoting specific meaning and context, giving viewers a direction to decode the concept of the work. Arranging the visual components in a particular order could create a connection between the visual components, and turn them into a distinct conversation. Correspondingly, if viewers experience the work through the mutual engagement, such as causing a change in the condition or position of the components, it is as if an experience of action and reaction between viewers and the work.

My artworks are inspired by personal events, reflecting how a young woman view and perceive her surroundings and her lived experience. I also see my studio productions as the results of the research and examination of social and cultural issues or topics. Because we engage in the interactions with other people and our surroundings, what we experience with and perceive in our lives are articulated with the social and cultural context that we are
engaging in.
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