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Foregrounding and Backgrounding: An Interview with Guo Qingling

Abstract The works of contemporary artist Guo Qingling were featured in the two exhibitions curated for the HERA project on single women, in Shanghai and in Leiden. Engaging with the problematic of precarity, the exhibitions probed into the experience of women in rapidly changing Asian cities like Shanghai and Delhi. Guo's paintings offered responses to the anxieties, insecurities, liveliness, and, above all, sheer complexities engendered in the intersections of gender, class, and urbanity. The women in Guo's works stand on their own—single in that sense—facing us, or with their back against us, intent on their labor. They are sometimes rendered in bold strokes, sometimes in opacity, oscillating between fragility and fortitude. Born in 1973, Guo graduated from the Shanghai Drama Institute and later became an artist. Known for their visualization of women, Guo's works have been presented in her native China, the United States, and Europe. She lives and works in Shanghai and New York. In this interview, we invite Guo to deliberate on her creative experience, personal life, and concerns with femininity, humanity, and the contemporary world. Our aim is to attempt a dialogue between an artistic project and the academic discussions carried on in this anthology.

Keywords single women; China; Guo Qingling; contemporary Chinese art; paintings

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The works of the contemporary artist Guo Qingling 郭庆玲 were featured in the two exhibitions curated for the HERA project on single women, one in Shanghai (Fei Contemporary Art Center, 2014) and the other in Leiden (Museum Volkenkunde, 2016). These exhibitions probed into the experience of women, particularly single women, in rapidly changing Asian cities like Shanghai and Delhi. Guo's paintings offered responses to the anxieties, insecurities, liveliness, and, above all, the sheer complexities engendered in the intersections of gender, class, and urbanity. The women in Guo's works stand on their own, single in that sense, facing us, or with their back against us, intent on their labor. They are sometimes rendered in bold strokes, sometimes in opacity, oscillating between fragility and fortitude.

Born in 1973, Guo graduated from the Shanghai Drama Institute and later became an artist. Known for her visualization of women, for instance in her *Background series* (Fig. 1), *Gray* (Fig. 2), and *The Second Sex* (Fig. 3), Guo's works have been presented in her native China, the United States, and Europe. She lives and works in Shanghai and New York. In this interview, we invite Guo to reflect on her creative experience, personal life, and concerns with femininity, humanity, and the contemporary world. Our aim is to facilitate a dialogue between an artistic project and the academic discussions carried on in this anthology.[1] Reading Guo's works as creative interventions in images of Chinese women, we learn from one artist's practice how imaginaries of autonomy, respectability, and precarity among Chinese women have changed, and still can be changed. If these three central concerns are formulated by the editors of this anthology as forms of governance, Guo tells us how she eradicates the background of the women in her works in her attempt to foreground the women themselves. This foregrounding amounts to an ambivalent, if not paradoxical, act of freeing them—at least in the paintings, at least momentarily—from governance, and at the same time stripping them of personality, identity, and humanity, leaving them faceless. Fundamentally, her technique proposes new ways of seeing these women, not only the women themselves, but their conditions, their lives, and their worlds, and also our own worlds. For a collection of academic research, this interview delivers a response, as artistic and personal, as it is political and humanitarian, to the painful remark that opens this book: "There is something tainted about the single female body." In Guo's formulation, we must learn to look as if it were the first time.[2]

1 The interview was conducted in Chinese in 2018 and translated for the current purpose by the authors.

2 Further biographic details of the artist and their artworks can be accessed at guoqingling.org.

Figure 1: *Background Series* by Qingling Guo. 2015. Oil on Canvas, 100×125 cm.

Figure 2: *Gray* by Qingling Guo. 2006. Acrylic on Canvas, 100×125 cm.

Figure 3: *The second sex* by Qingling Guo. 2012. Oil on Canvas, 100×125 cm.

INTERVIEWER(S): Let us begin with your series titled *The Second Sex*, an allusion to Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work[3]. When did you first hear of or read *The Second Sex*? What kind of impact did it have on you?

GUO QINGLING: From 1998 when I first started painting until now, working on all kinds of female subjects, the process was very natural. Each phase had different backgrounds and contacts, including women from different social strata, civilians, fashionistas, women with illnesses, intellectuals, and factory girls. I've tried to be among them, to work with them, to study their profiles and information, or just look at them; all this gave me complex feelings. I was not one of them, even when I was immersed in their presence; I never got too close, but I wanted to explore their lives and motives of living, because we are of the same sex. Many years ago, I read Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex.* Afterwards, when working on the topic of the "intellectual," this term came up, but as my artist statement says, "Starting in 2012, *The Second Sex* is a long-lasting series of works on the female subject, a proposition which is harsh and realistic, yet extraordinary with feminine qualities in humanity. 'Second' is never first, 'second' always hides behind first, here it seems mediocre and lonely. 'Second Sex,' the second humanity and gender traits,

3 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1949).

generally refers to women." I used the title of de Beauvoir's book, but I maintained my own understanding of women and humanity.

INTERVIEWER(S): After so many years, how have you translated the feminist context into your works? How far have you come since your first encounter?

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

INTERVIEWER(S): Compared with your paintings of women from different classes and identities, this "second humanity" sounds much broader and more abstract. How did you choose your characters? What are the "feminine qualities" in humanity? Why is this subject "harsh and realistic?"

GUO: *The Second Sex* series came from books I read during those years, and I became interested in some of the authors or in women with intellectual thought processes. I spent a lot of time researching details of their lives, and I imagined the relationship between their work and life. Even though they've made great contributions or were praised throughout generations, they would still have had certain weaknesses of human nature. I felt like wandering into the other world, listening to rumors circulating between the living room and bedroom. The character I choose to paint must be someone I'm interested in, but I also consider visual effects. My understanding of "feminine qualities" in humanity comes ultimately from my concern with the human being. Humanity is so complex—our behavior or actions can be determined by a random thought, but they are also related to personality, certain situations, and intricate relationships. Female qualities and mentalities always differ from those of men; this has already been analyzed in the works of feminist writers such as de Beauvoir. Existence itself is harsh enough, and you have to experience aging, illness, and death—whether you are human beings or are the surviving world around human beings, you can easily feel lost and flustered (but I think this analogy is more typical on our Chinese soil). When facing a harsh situation, the weaknesses in humanity are infinitely magnified and unconstrained. So when we exert pressure on others, we are also victims. If you look down from high above, we are like ants—dispensable nonentities.

INTERVIEWER(S): Can your other series *Chinese Medicine Institute of Gynecological Disease* be read as the other interpretation of Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*?[4]

GUO: I started working on *Chinese Medicine Institute of Gynecological Disease*, also known as the *Gray* series, in 2006. I hadn't thoroughly read Susan Sontag at that time, but this series really came from deep in my heart. "Chinese Medicine Institute" is the name of a hospital where I went for treatment. The waiting time was always long and boring, so the only thing I could do was observe women who had all kinds of illnesses. I occasionally talked to them, but mostly I listened, to conversations between doctors and patients, and patients and families. Back home, I started to do research on gynecological diseases, and discovered that 85% of women lack awareness of their own health. The human body is like a delicate apparatus, with countless tissue movements when we breathe. In summer 2000, when my father passed away, I saw his face relax. All hardship faded, cells went static, and his body started to decay in the summer heat. This image stayed in my memory, and for the rest of the summer I could hear the cracks in my bones while walking. This series, running from 2006 to 2009, was my usual style, focusing on the essential, using acrylics to mix different shades of gray. The content was always there, but most likely people didn't know.

INTERVIEWER(S): What made you paint the *Urban Single Women* and the later *Background* series (originally named *Factory Girls*)? As an intellectual, and a mother, how would you project your gaze onto them?

GUO: Between 2002 and 2005, I quit my university teaching to work for a fashion magazine, *Seafood.* The series from this period actually grew out of the environment I'm most familiar with—the environment of those urban single women who don't have to worry about anything, and just relish their superficial life. Naming them *Seafood* was just like what I felt at that time: physically present, spiritually observing. The *Background* series, beginning in 2014, focused on the observation of female workers among messy factory settings, depicting them from behind as they silently worked. Their body movements seemed controlled by every necessary procedure, simple and repetitive. I could feel them being happy, but I didn't understand this community. I tried searching for traces of this collective online. I tried getting closer to them, but it was difficult. On the canvas, I could only find a position to suit the relationship between us, so I painted their backs, a "back view" of laboring.

INTERVIEWER(S): Did you try to communicate with them in the factory? You said, "I like to paint their working status, which is very touching,

4 Susan Sontag and Heywood Hale Broun, *Illness as Metaphor,* Vol. 72 (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1978).

especially the 'back view.'" In our collective memory of Chinese literature, the "back view" usually reminds us of the father figure. The famous essay penned by Zhu Ziqing 朱自清 is compulsory reading material for many students.[5] Do you think there is any difference between the "back views" according to gender?

GUO: In the factory, I tried to communicate with them, but we were outsiders to each other. There was a mutual timidity, a certain alertness due to an unfamiliar atmosphere. Afterwards I searched desperately on the Internet to find out about their living conditions. I painted vaguely, evaded details. In this series, regardless of whether they were men or women, the "back view" of laboring always touched me. I didn't dare to stare at them for long, fearing that I might offend them, so I stood at the back and observed their habits. I inspected their faces from the photos I took, imagining how they would turn around and appear in my paintings.

INTERVIEWER(S): How do you see the women in Mao Zedong's slogan "women hold up half the sky"?

GUO: I'm unfamiliar with "women hold up half the sky," because I don't have memories of that era, but I'm sure it must have been a blindly fanatic time.

INTERVIEWER(S): How do you differentiate between "her" and "them"? To paint "her" as an individual, then categorize "them" as different collectives in your exhibitions?

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

INTERVIEWER(S): Why do you see yourself as an "outsider" in relation to other women? Has it got anything to do with your own identity subconsciously, as a "non-local" in Shanghai for so many years?

GUO: In the 1970s, my parents worked at Sinohydro Engineering Bureau No. 8, setting up hydropower facilities around the country. As an on-the-move unit, we were moving house all the time. I can't speak any local dialect of our country and never had a sense of belonging, so I often feel like an outsider. Subconsciously, I segregate myself from any community. Having spent over twenty years in Shanghai, this is my home, but I have never actually integrated into the city. This underlying sense of being an outsider is a part of who I have been since birth.

5 Zhu Ziqing 朱自清 (1898–1948) was a major poet and essayist in modern Chinese literature. The essay Guo refers to is a 1925 one, titled *Retreating Figure* (背影 *Beiying*); it captures Zhu's memory of his father seeing him off at a railway station.

INTERVIEWER(S): From early works that resemble the distorted and alluring style of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Egon Schiele[6] to gradually becoming gray in tone, this represents a shift in the artist's mentality. Does it also reflect changes going on in society?

GUO: I liked these two artists very much during university. Anything with life has a sensitive soul, whether animal or plant. It can differentiate between a good or bad condition, hide its feelings, and adapt for survival. My mind has always tended to be pessimistic and isolated, even in my youthful years. All my works from different periods reflect the dilemma of not being able to fit in and watching from a distance. As time went on, I gave up on the thought of "fitting in."

INTERVIEWER(S): Is there any female community you want to paint but have not gotten around to? Such as artists or "the third sex"?

GUO: I don't know and never have a plan. Even having painted women for over a decade, I feel like my work only reflects my presuppositions about those communities. And the most painful part of the creative process is struggling between self-negation and affirmation, enduring life's twists and turns. Still, I follow my own flashes of inspiration, distilling them through trial and error.

INTERVIEWER(S): More recently, you moved to the United States. Can you talk about your experience with going abroad, and your reasons for doing so?

GUO: Since I attended university in Shanghai, I had lived in the city for twenty years. But I still felt very distant from it and got used to being an outsider. Moving from Shanghai to America therefore seemed very natural. Perhaps what's important is that I didn't want to be molded by a society of that sort into what it wanted me to be. The flowing river of my heart has always wanted to be part of the great ocean. In 2015, my husband Li Xiaofei 李消非 passed the American EB1-A,[7] so in the first half of 2016, I took my six-year-old child to New York, a city that was very attractive to artists. We chose a home near New York and everything began all over again. It's always difficult, wherever you are. Let the difficulties grow in your body, let them blend with your flesh and blood, and then perhaps they will get dissolved, bit by bit.

INTERVIEWER(S): How has the American experience influenced you as an artist, as a woman, and a person?

GUO: Before I came to America, I knew nothing about New York. My experience in other countries did not apply here. In any place, a painter

6 The artist refers to the post-impressionist painter and caricaturist Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901) and the Expressionist painter Egon Schiele (1890–1918).

7 EB1-A is one of the visa categories in the United States.

only needs a room, but with a change in surroundings, the personality of the terrain can influence the artist's state of being. Human nature is the same in every corner of the world. It's quieter here, which allows one to look into one's heart more clearly. It took me a while to get into a creative state, because everything needed adaptation, such as adapting to the pigment, the canvas. When the workplace slowly became filled with my presence, then I truly began on a journey.

INTERVIEWER(S): Would you say a bit more about your latest works? Is there a change from before? Especially on the topic of femininity?

GUO: The new works are an extension of the *Background* series. The "back view" is still in the painting. We never get used to being looked at by "others," nor do we look at "them" for a long time. Usually, social phobia affects lonely people. Even when they retreat into a crowd, they don't feel safe. In fact, what's between people is further than any distance. The people in *Background* seem to look the same as before, but in the process of producing this series, I have been continuously learning about this world and have deepened my understanding of humanity.

INTERVIEWER(S): Do you plan to work on a series on men?

GUO: All life is equal. When we stand in front of a common issue, sexual difference is not the most important. Now I paint less men who I feel fit for the canvas. As I see them only as a "back view," I'm not even aware of the gender difference. If one day there's a need, perhaps I will classify their gender.

INTERVIEWER(S): Your family moved to a relatively "free" country. Why the United States and New York? If there were no language barriers, what would be a more "ideal" country or city?

GUO: Moving to the U.S. seemed like destiny's arrangement. I know there is no paradise. I like many cities, perhaps Berlin, perhaps Stockholm... But most artists do not have affluent, comfortable lives. Life is limited, certain choices and experiences are already happiness.

INTERVIEWER(S): Every country and city has its own unique, complex "social" situation. When you have adapted to the pigments and canvases of America and New York, does the "back view" reflected in your work, go beyond "gender and race"? Does this constitute a "dilemma" for Chinese artists?

GUO: The history of human development is like a mirror, consciously reflecting our flaws. When we discard faith and reject righteousness, we see the black hole of cowardice. I believe no time and place in this world will ever go beyond or put a stop to "gender and race." It is present in Chinese rural cities, Shanghai, Asia, Europe, and America,

so there is always resistance, and there are always provocative topics. Chinese artists grow up in a sick body; their lived experience is their teacher, particularly cruel, and yet faintly hopeful. Life is flawed, and to manage to find some sort of balance is already perfection.

INTERVIEWER(S): I saw that your WeChat avatar is a work in your series. What is it called? Though it is also a female "back view," it clearly differs from what I've seen (she doesn't wear recognizable working clothes, the strokes aren't as crude as before, and it's a full body, not only the back...), why? Can you tell us more about the origin of the series?

GUO: In the *Background* series I made in Shanghai, there were already full body "back views," only the dimensions were greater than the current works. In the series I began producing in 2014, the initial painting was different from what it is now. From 2014 to early 2016, the main characters in these works were female workers in the factory who were easily recognizable. These works originated from my observations during an excursion to the factory, where I found their working "back views" had a sense of simplicity. I looked at them working and resting. It wasn't easy to communicate with them, because we were outsiders in each other's eyes. People have a natural defense against an unfamiliar presence. Afterwards, I researched the female workers' living conditions and made many preparations, but it was still difficult to enter their lives. So I painted ambiguously, without details, to express the conditions under which we all got along. After I came to America in 2016, the new works were still called *Background*. This time without the same soil to extend the subject matter, I began to take an interest in the subjects in my new environment. But my feelings towards the "back views," that is the state of "people getting along," remained. In the process, I hesitated for a long time, experimented a lot on the canvas, and finally slowly began to express things in a relaxed manner that suited myself. So now, the "back views" in the paintings display multi-ethnicity, which is related to my current living condition. It is just like on the other side of the globe; I only switched the subjects to explore the topics I'm interested in.

INTERVIEWER(S): Another common feature in the paintings is that all the women are alone. Why is that?

GUO: In the initial paintings, I had a background behind the "back views," but I felt the "back views" were undermined as a result. So I abandoned the background, and the sense of alienation came to the fore. When there is no background, it is like the first time I saw "them" [the women]. This feeling remains clear to me even now. So, the works in this series depict people standing alone in the paintings. This series is called *Background*—in Chinese, "back view." In fact, everyone is not

that important, because to anyone except the "self," everyone else is "back view," and easily forgotten.

INTERVIEWER(S): Although you said, the figures are "people" and their genders don't need to be differentiated, the artworks are clearly depictions of women. Why?

GUO: Looking back, most of the figures I painted ended up being female. For this reason, I also feel confused. My paintings have never contained landscapes, small objects, or scenarios. They have never narrated a story. It's as if I especially isolated the figures in order to paint them. But I never define myself as a "portrait painter," because I don't paint portraits, but rather people in life. Scheler[8] argues that no period in history is like the contemporary one, in which people are so puzzled by themselves. It is like being in a cramped space, in the face of these "back views." I pace back and forth, like I want to chat with them [the women]. I'm the same kind as them: a daughter, a wife, a mother. I share with them the same body and internal structure. I want to segment the details in the face of complexity. The homogeneous depiction of gender allows me to go deeper in understanding the behavior of "people." But we are so different, individually, like parts that never intersect with each other. Unfathomable.

INTERVIEWER(S): If someone says you are a female painter, or a feminist painter, what do you think? How do you define yourself?

GUO: Since the nineteenth century, "feminism" has gradually transformed itself into an organized social movement, which has had a huge impact on people's traditional beliefs. The awakening of the feminist consciousness of future generations is the direct benefit of this. Most women have forgotten that all this is hard-fought human progress, but the problems will never disappear. Often, I don't care about being introduced as a "female painter," because I think such a distinction is outdated and meaningless, and I've never been seen as a "feminist" artist; at least I'm not an easily injured hedgehog. The important point is that I pay more attention to the women themselves, from their physical condition to their way of thinking, and certainly, these cannot be separated from the environment surrounding women. Around 2003, I paid attention to women's physiological and psychological diseases. I researched the literature extensively, and then painted a series of works, as mentioned earlier, called *Gray*. During this period, I realized that the two genders will never reconcile; one side will never know the other, and this is due to our complex human nature. In the face of humanity, both genders are weak. In social structures, the strong are always above the weak. Almost no one can

8 The artist refers to Max Scheler, German philosopher (1874–1928).

stand on the opposite side of the conflict or really look at the issue from another perspective. Even if we are all weak, the weak step on the weaker. Everywhere we see wounds and scars. In the face of the disputes that emphasize gender disparities, I'm even more supportive of all those who have been abused and unfairly treated, even though the world itself is unfair.

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Figures

Fig. 1–3: Photo: Li Xiaofei.

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