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The Rise of Feminist Awareness and the Feminist Art Movement in Taiwan

Victoria Lu

In Taiwan’s period of democratic awakening in the 1980s, the general social movement’s struggle and revolution fueled the earliest awakening of a female consciousness in political life. One of the pioneers of the woman’s movement at that time went on to become the Vice President of Taiwan. The intellectuals that led the women’s and human rights’ movement in the 1980s also became representatives of the general rise in a female consciousness. In the 1990s, a great number of communities joined the women’s movement bringing younger members and extending the movement’s reach outside of the capital, Taipei to many areas of Taiwan. However, the awakening of female consciousness in the art world occurred much later than in the literary world or in political life.

As art critic Ni Tsai-Chin points out: ‘In Taiwan’s history, feminism was initially nurtured from women’s involvement in politics.’ The earliest feminists to come back to Taiwan, after a higher education abroad, included Li Yuan-Chen, Lu Hsiu-Lien and others who had all focused their energies on political activities. Towards the end of the 1980s, local and returning female artists became the key figures of a new wave in art. Nowadays, the many woman scholars who are active in the art world include Li Ming-Ming, Yen Chuan-Ying, Victoria Lu, and more. Artists included Emily Shih-Chih Yang, Wu Ma-Li, Yan Ming-Huy, Hou Yi-Jen, Chen Hsing-Wan, Chou Pang-Ling, and others. There are also many women working in the theater and cinema.

When aesthetics scholar Lu Chin-Fu analysed the characteristics and groups in the art scene of Taiwan he considered that: ‘The Taiwan art scene in the 1980s coincided with the tendencies of a global art scene. Among the[se tendencies was] installation art, the surfacing of space displacement, and women’s art or feminist art...’
art. Then there was the banana painter Cho Yo-Jui, Yan Ming-Huy who was anti-male, and Teresa L.C. Huang who braided, Victoria Lu who for a time was called Mister Lu, and others. In the West, women exhibited anti-establishment actions on the principles of minority group resistance via various channels in the first half of the 1970s. Even disadvantaged minority art – handicrafts – became an instrument of resistance. The traditional crude and non-elegant crafts have been elevated to the stature of fine art. Naturally, the techniques Western women used were very versatile and included images, performance, and mixed-media which were greatly used; sometimes as autobiographical manifestations, and at other times to express religious feelings.’ The author refers to this mode of expression as ceremonial inclination in this article. ‘No matter what form it may have taken, it is critical of the male viewpoint.’

In reality, prior to the 1990s, female artists’ activities took place at a more individual level. Even with the formation of associations or organizations like The Women Artists Association of Taipei, most groups organized simply gatherings or joint exhibitions, and seldom included any discussion of what a female consciousness might be. The stimulus for any discussion of a female consciousness in art circles came mainly from external forces like the women’s groups outside of art community in the 1990s initiated by Li Yuan-Chen, Wu Ma-Li and others. With the Awakening Foundation, I curated the first exhibition embodying female awakening and its importance at the Eslite Art Space in Taipei. Wu Ma-Li, Yan Ming-Huy, Hou Yi-Jen, along with other female artists held a forum publicly discussing the theme of feminism the first time. During the process of recruiting for the exhibition, some women artists made clear that they did not wish to be labeled as “feminist”, nor did they want to be involved in any feminist movement.

Returning from the US in 1990 after completion of her studies, Yan Ming-Huy (1956-) was the first open advocate artist of a feminist movement in the Taiwan art scene. She publicly admitted her mishaps in marriage and used her marriage as the
content of her work. Speaking bluntly, she used the connotations in her work to awaken a female/feminist consciousness, which created a tidal wave of interest and controversy in Taiwan art circles at the time. Yan Ming-Huy was born after the death of her father and raised solely by her mother. After graduation from Department of Fine Arts at the National Taiwan Normal University, she accompanied her husband to study in the US in 1979. She worked to support the family and raised a son, while studying. She received a master’s degree in 1987 from the Graduate School of Arts at the State University of New York. Two years later she graduated from School of Fashion Design at the Fashion Institute of Technology, where her studies focused on fabric and textile design. Yan Ming-Huy finally completed her studies overseas and returned home to face her ill-fated marriage. During the early 1990s Yan Ming-Huy used fruits metaphorically as sexual organs in a series of paintings. For instance, the core of the half-cut apple in the center of her work

*Three Apples* (1988) was evidently the vulva of woman, something that had not been previously seen in Taiwan. She explained in the article ‘Dream Shadow of Water and Moon’:

‘Few people consider me an artist who uses sex as the subject of my work. In reality, I paint with human nature as a subject. Sex is a part of human nature and painting a couple of women’s busts or a male’s genitals is not painting sexually. I am drawing human nature in a patriarchal society taking advantage of the framework of gender distinction.’

Yan Ming-Huy stood up to fight for an expansion in feminist understanding, creating paintings, drawings and writing scripts which agitated for a female self-consciousness and self-encouragement. The pressure to do so came from the very conservative climate in Taiwanese society which had imperceptibly generated visible scars in her life. Yan Ming-Huy has now shifted her focus toward exploring Buddhism and seldom appears or takes part in public activities. At the time of Yan Ming-Huy’s calling for the importance of women’s self-awareness during the first part of 1990s, there were several female artists who joined in, most of whom were born in the 1950s.
For instance: Li Mei-Jung (1951-), Tzeng Shai-Shu (1952-), Jun Tsun Tsun Lai (1953-), Fu Chia-Huen (1953-), Wu Ma-Li (1957-), Lulu Shur-Tzy Hou (1958-), Tang Huang-Chen (1958-), Tricia Pey-Chwen Lin (1959-) and the author of this article (1951-) amongst others. There were also a group of artists who were born in the 1960s who took part later, which included Juin Shieh (1961-), Lulu Shur-Tzy Hou (1962-), Lin Chun-Ju (1964-), Elsa Hsiang-Chun Chen (1969-). Though they may not all claim to be feminist artists, nevertheless they have all advocated a female consciousness and this movement is evident in their own artwork or writings.

Among them, Wu Ma-Li was the most active member at the beginning of feminist movement in Taiwan. Wu Ma-Li, (1957-) graduated from Tam Kang University’s department of German language. She studied at the Applied Arts School in Vienna, and majored in sculpture. Later, she transferred to Dusseldolf National School of Art. She returned to Taiwan at the completion of her studies and has written many articles, translated other feminist writings, and was editor-in-chief of a series of art books for Yuan-Liou Publishing Company. Wu Ma-Li focused her work on society and gender issues. Cleverly using the patterns and strategies of social movements to convey her ideas, she also utilizes ritualized art forms to express her aesthetic concepts or make prominent and manifest the act of art itself. After her first individual exhibition at the Shen Yu Gallery in Taipei in 1985, Wu Ma-Li carried out more than twenty individual exhibitions in and out of Taiwan and attended many international exhibitions. In 2001 Wu Ma-Li collaborated with the Awakening Foundation, linking up sixteen women from the community involved in the “Wan Bu” studio. The process of tailoring a “spiritual bed sheet” was a group effort presented via a video recording, a collective work designed to mirror some social issues concerning Taiwanese women and centered on the making of a quilt. For years, Wu Ma-Li has continuously dedicated herself to women’s groups and the women’s movement. Her persistence not only contributed to the spread of contemporary Taiwanese art education, but she has also advocated an art where female consciousness is prominent in both her work and her writings. Her accomplishments in the contemporary art field have set up many milestones which have involved not just championing women artists but...
also doing things that most male artists cannot ignore. She was personally involved in the social democratic process of Taiwan. From her life we not only see the course of contemporary art development in Taiwan, we can also see traits which have epitomized the track which Taiwan’s social reforms took in the 1980s. This cultivator of feminism has incorporated both willpower and endurance and represents a paragon of the avant-garde artist today in Taiwan. (see n.paradoxa’s profile of Wu Ma-Li = The conceptual work of Mali Wu, Taiwan (5,Nov.1997))

The awakening of a female consciousness in Taiwan has been a gradual process. Initially concentrated in the area surrounding Taipei, its influence gradually seeped into the male chauvinist south of the country. In the early 1990s we see a very limited number of works which appeared here that distinctively reflect a female consciousness. At the time, the response of female artists to the issue of “gender distinction” was generally more ambiguous or hesitant. Mei-Hua Lai, slightly older than Yan Ming-Huy, might be considered the earliest female artist to present a “gendered distinction” to issues in the south but due to her low-keyed nature and her residence in the south, she stood on the fringes of the art world in Taiwan.

Mei-Hua Lai (1948-) graduated from the Fine Arts Department of National Taiwan Normal University. Her stylized painting was developed independently by focusing on recollections in her personal life experiences and developing a style which appeared to be in defiance of any known branch of a school or genre. Women artists from the same generation as Mei-Hua Lai have also painted or expressed an art based completely on the explosion of internal potentials but generally this work has not been influenced by the rigid theoretical framework of the art world. 4

Juin Shieh (1961-) graduated from Fine Arts Department at the National Taiwan Normal University and moved to New York where she received her master degree from Pratt Institute. She is one of the few artists in Taiwan with a doctoral degree in studio art, which she received from New York University. Returning to Taiwan after travels around the globe and married to her husband who has a high tech background, she began living as a wife in the environment of the Hsinchu Science Industrial Park, and has since became a professor at the National Hsin-Chu Normal College. Juin Shieh describes how she represents herself in her work: ‘So I must detach from the mythical mirage I have painted for a long while and turn to examine my own ever-changing stream of consciousness. Painstakingly investigating the relationship between gender distinction and the society, I dissect the symbols and the network of connection
amongst them.’ In her paintings, Juin Shieh has raised her suspicions about symbolic language and tries to subvert any simple reconstruction of these images back into their Western traditions. From the exploration of a pure art, her work extends to a broader human sympathy. From the minuscule “I” in the family clan, her work extended to dissect an anatomy on a human scale and raised in a new way the issue of female identity and its predicaments. She is an artist who manifests a humanitarianism with a black humor. When Juin Shieh’s paintings are placed among a clan of women artists, it is clear she possesses a revolutionary explosive force, challenging traditions with her work. But when her work is placed without gender distinction in the contemporary art arena, she remains a rare and epochal artist who is simultaneously retaining the depth of humanistic virtues and employing remarkable techniques.

Following the development of a feminist art in the late 1990s, more and more women artists were unafraid to face the female body and sexual desire. Works of art which display female characteristics or express female consciousness were no longer perceived as secondary or placed in separate exhibitions and received much more attention on a whole new level. Works exposing women’s genitalia are now considered “chic” in some young artists’ circles. The new generation of women artists clearly face up to this new representation of the female body and to the question of relations using gendered distinctions with a more open attitude. A female consciousness has become the main concern of some of the younger generation and they do not avoid subjects or issues related to these questions.

A more diversified approach toward the subject of female consciousness, the liberation of sexual desire, of sexual appetite and representing more primitive urges have became the mainstream concerns of women’s art expressions in the late 1990s. Some young artists even compete in creating more revealing and sensational means to stir up the controversy of sexuality. The situation is very different from the early 1990s when those of the generation of artists like Yan Ming-Huy were suffocated by controversy and suffered during a completely different era and in a wholly different space-time.

Early on in the awakening of female consciousness, women artists used “sex” as a tool of resistance to compete for equality with man. Sex was what oppressed women and made them miserable even though its representation was flexible.
Toward the end of the twentieth century, when this day and age is quite populated with ideas from a female consciousness, representing sex has become a beneficial tool for self-propagation or has started to serve as a short cut to fame. Sex is now seen as a form of autonomy, joyous, unbridled and impudent.

Lulu Shur-Tzy Hou (1962-) graduated from Taipei Municipal First Girls’ Senior High School and the Philosophy Department at the National Taiwan University, which in order to enter one had to possess a generally acknowledged elitist academic background. Originally molded to become an “obedient daughter”, “proper maiden”, “a dutiful wife and loving mother”, Hou departed for America for her studies in 1989. She first exhibited eight different series of black and white photographic works in 1996 in New York. In her self-portraits she captured the trunk of her body and intentionally omitted the head and visage. Underneath the clothes, she placed a chrysanthemum, a lemon, a banana and other vegetation which people generally associate with sexual allegory in our voyeuristic culture. Her intentional shifting of the line of vision was to allow males to experience the sensation of being stared at, surveyed, oppressed and humiliated by being so closely examined. When Lulu Shur-Tzy Hou publicized the same piece of work in Taipei in 1997, she irritated a few male viewers and brought out a very negative response from male critics.

Liu Shih-Fen (1964-) started off in the Taiwanese art arena in 1988. Since then she has become a peculiar target of interviews by the media. At the age of eighteen, she passed her examinations and worked for an extensive period as a professional nurse at the Veterans General Hospital operation room. Her piece composed of composite media Understanding Hearts and Sound was chosen by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum for exhibit in 1996, and was acclaimed by Japanese curator Fumio Nanjo. After being chosen to be in his 1998 Taipei Biannual Exhibition, she used real human bones covered with an artificial skin membrane made from silk stockings. These were placed on a stainless-steel operation table to which she tied sketches she had made from medical textbooks. This blockbuster exhibition raised many eyebrows and she was then invited to the 1999 Liverpool Biennial show. In 2001, she was also one of the artists selected for the Venice Biennial Show and was later invited to participate in the Florence Biennial. In 1998 Liu Shih-Fen created Feast of Papi, which explicitly displays her grounding in feminist ideas. It depicts with sarcasm, the attitudes of a patriarchal society in so far as it considers women’s bodies as only qualified as an apparatus for spawning or carrying on the family name. An artificial penis was belted
onto a male skeleton and placed on an extravagant baroque-styled dining table as if it were a feast created by women. In the same year she produced *The Multiple Sophism of Skin and Membranes and the Shadow of His/Her Tones* (1999) and in both these works, it is the artificial skin membrane made from silk stockings which clearly characterizes the medium of her work. A 2000 version of *Ninety-nine Gene Mappings About Love* used Liu Shih-Fen’s own gene mapping, and evolved into the version she entered in the 2001, 49th Venice Biennial called *Ninety-nine gene Mappings About Love - Lover’s pupil* where she also used as an image her own cardiac nuclear magnetic resonance chart. Via computer, she joined the image of her nude to form the flashing eyes of lovers which the viewer experienced in a darkened room of the exhibition. Liu Shih-Fen’s artworks range from illustrations, to graphic design, to essay writing, drawing and to conceptual forms of installation art. The multiple displays of her personal ability to cross many spheres of expression, and especially her integration of images from medical technology into her expression have enabled her to be regarded by many as a pioneer. Liu Shih-Fen even though she has experienced international recognition has remained at her post as a nurse and continues to use the medical world as her creative inspiration. She uses her spare time to fully dedicate herself to the creation of her art and to manage her second identity as an artist.

The new generation of women artists from the 1990s like Chang Hwei Lan (1964-), Kristy Cha-Ray Chu (1965-) Chang Hsing-Yu (1971-) have also opened up many new prospects for women in terms of both “concept” and the “handling of medium”. The open dialogue between then has helped to unearth and reconstruct a new interpretation or viewpoint in history. Constantly piecing together, matching, re-grouping and re-generating ideas, it would be correct to say that only sometimes is the issue of gender distinction also considered. Female artists of this new generation tend to integrate work in a performance-type abstraction of ceremonies, which depart from typical classic religion, while exploring human psychology, by examining the interaction between the environment and modes of behavior.

This idiosyncrasy of indirect ceremonial work reveals that the new generation of female artists is more concerned about the meaning of their own egocentricity.
They have shifted away from the persona dominant in the recent past of being manipulated and compelled to act their role into a new situation in which they clearly become the predominant director of their own destiny in life. A keen sense of autonomy amongst the new generation of female artists is manifested here. Because there are no historical resources for both sexes to use, women often compete head-to-head with their male peers in the domain of non-traditional new media. This was also in the 1980s, when a number of outstanding women artists achieved excellence in the field of electronic media and recording arts.

**Conclusion**

The awakening of Taiwanese female consciousness occurred late, at least a decade or two later when compared to the West. Post-1980s, there have been numerous women scholars in the art world who have returned to Taiwan with an education from abroad and worked alongside locally fostered talents to form an enormous lineup. These female intellectuals who have influenced female consciousness may not have all agreed with the concept of feminism but nevertheless feminism and female consciousness as intellectual forces have had a significant impact and substantial influence. Having undergone a decade long journey, the Taiwanese women artists who have emerged during the 1990s no longer conceal their personal views. Their standpoint on feminism is more distinct or definite, and they work without issuing extensive comments or strong denials.

However, few artists with feminist stances have emerged from Taiwan to receive recognition in the international art arena. In spite of their splendid exhibition records, Wu Ma-Li, Lulu Shur-Tzy Hou, Liu Shih-Fen and others still face difficulties in breaking into the Taiwan art market. This fact reveals that the heart of Taiwanese society still rests under “the framework of sexual discrimination and patriarchy”, and that the awakening of female consciousness remains a process of sisterhood and friendship amongst a handful of women in the art world. Overall, even though it could not be claimed that the feminist movement has shaped Taiwan, there have always been pockets of fragmented feminist revolutions. Unable to generate a major influence in Taiwan’s contemporary art scene at present, there is still much space to strive for in the future.

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**Notes**

1a. Please note Chinese spellings for names of artists have been retained throughout this article.
i.e. surname first, then first name (Wu Ma-Li). This is the opposite of the European convention of first name, then surname (Ma-Li Wu).

2. Lu Chin-Fu ‘The Individuals and Clams in the Art Community of Last Ten Years’ *A Decade of Taiwan Modern Art (i)* (Taipei: Taipei Fine Art Museum, 1993) pp. 9-10.


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