



ARTSY | CHENG XINYI, HU ZI, SARAH FAUX – “FEMALE GAZE” UNDER MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

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When facing a painting, will the artist’s gender identity fundamentally alter the way one sees the work? This simple question has permeated discussions of art appreciation for nearly half a century.

In the context of representational art, the term “female gaze” generally refers to the observation and description of a work from a female perspective. The film critic Laura Mulvey first introduced the concept of the “male gaze” in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). She concluded that traditional films always imposed a masculine point of view onto the viewers who were led to view the world through a male perspective, turning women into mere objects of desire. Since then, numerous works have emerged to subvert this traditional male perspective in art history. Women are no longer passive objects to be viewed. Instead, they now stand up and walk behind the canvas or lens as active observers.

Traditional “female gaze” artworks have focused on reversing the power relations between genders. Three female artists, however, offered varied dimensions for “female gaze” through the use of different perspectives and narrations at three recent exhibitions in Shanghai. Cheng Xinyi, a young painter based in Paris and Shanghai, portrays the males around her through a third-person perspective. By exchanging glances with these males, she examines the parallel relations of desire and power between the two genders. Hu Zi, a painter based in Shanghai, constructs a perspective similar to the “free indirect style” in fiction writing. Through her observation and substitution of male characters, we can gain a new understanding of gender and body. Sarah Faux, a painter from Brooklyn, New York, uses canvas as her body. Through a first-person perspective, she attempts to liberate the true female experience from the trap of a passive gaze.



Sarah Faux: Canvas Is Body

Sarah Faux, an American artist who recently held a solo exhibition—*Pucker*—at Capsule Shanghai, also investigates the relationship between body and gender. What sets Faux apart is her portrayal of females alone—males rarely accompany them. Most of the women she paints are naked and only partially presented.

Every painting begins with a private moment, followed by fragmented movements capturing a female's physical experience in an intimate setting.

In a recent dialogue with the Yuz Museum, Faux mentioned that she had been inspired by American feminist oil painter Joan Semmel, who painted her own body as she gazed down at herself, altering the art-historic tradition of painting a female from a male perspective. Yet, once the body enters the gaze—even if said gaze comes from oneself—the artist nonetheless becomes self-conscious. According to Faux, classical artistic language is permeated with male DNA; in order to escape this language and open a “crack” between the image and the audience, Faux turns her canvas into her body.

“I dream...of creating a sensory setting [on canvas] outside the body, and allowing the audience to fill that white space with imagination and physical memories,” Faux said.

In her paintings, Faux dissects the body, zooming in on body parts. The skeleton is typically the frame of the canvas—or the external contours of the cloth collage. The oil paint poured onto the sketch of the body (coated with a strong water-absorbing primer) is immediately scraped off to create a flat “skin” made visible when hues are soaked into the canvas fibers, while the coarse texture of the canvas resembles skin pores. In this composition, the viewer enters an intimate first-person perspective. What fascinates Faux the most are the moments when one's self-awareness slowly fades, for example, when a female painting subject indulges in dressing up (*Wet Mirror*, 2018), experiences a moment of ecstasy (*White Smoke Rose*, 2018), or plays with her private parts when no one is watching (*Comedown*, 2018).

As John Berger wrote in *Ways of Seeing*, “Only a man can make a good joke for its own sake”, whereas a woman makes a joke to express how she expects herself to be treated by others. A woman's double role of an observer and the observed requires her to constantly monitor and check her behavior as others' impressions have replaced her own feelings.

Faux believes that, in the social space created by the male-dominated patriarchal system, women are typically more sensitive to their appearances and their bodies. “Therefore,” the artist notes, “my paintings present women's real characteristics in the public space, making these images a source of pleasure, rather than a source of shame.”

When facing the intimate movements pushed in front of us in Faux's paintings, we digest the shame about sex, exiting from others' alarming gaze and returning to the important intimacy reserved for ourselves.

Translated by Liuyu Chen

