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How relevant is it to hold an exhibition featuring art created exclusively by female artists today, especially in a city where women's issues have taken a back seat?

In Osage's Women's Work, which runs until August 29, the curatorial team posed this question, and the exhibition of works by 14 artists gave some answers.

Such works have often been labelled "feminist art" – dealing overwhelmingly with gender bias, injustices and societal stereotypes of female sexuality.

Although some artists in this show delve into feminist subject matter, most present works exploring social and global issues not necessarily from a female-only point of view. Women's Work shows that, when exhibited together, a body of works by female artists can make a powerful statement.

Featured are works by artists based on the mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan: Cai Jin, Cheang Shulea, Chen Xiaodan, Doris Wong Wai-yin, Eva Chan, Geng Xue, Ivy Ma, Jaffa Lam Lam, Lam Wai-kit, Sara Tse, Siy Tak-yin, Sun Guojuan, Suzy Cheung Kai-sun and Yuk King Tan.

They show that art by women has evolved beyond depicting primarily the "female experience", as its curatorial team – made up of Christopher Lau, Evangelo Costadimas and Isabel Ching – explains. "We presented an open-ended question to the artists. We asked what kind of work they would include in an all-female show and then let them present their ideas and creations. As a result the show is more of a survey and a dialogue," says Lau.

Costadimas adds that many of the artists do look within themselves for inspiration. "However, through a broad spectrum of displays, Women's Work shows that many are also motivated by socially and politically inspired subjects."

Ching says the curatorial team didn't want a show that dealt with "women's issues" only. "We wanted to show that female artists are concerned about many different issues through many perspectives," she says.

The collection presents artists in different stages of development as creative and social thinkers, through a wide range of approaches and media such as installations, two- and three-dimensional pieces, multimedia, videos and photographic prints.

Tse's intensely personal works show both pleasure and pain. In *Little White IV*, she created a porcelain shell as a memorial to a



Lady Guo on *Spring Outing-Hug* (foreground, left) by Geng Xue, one of Cai Jin's "Banana" series featuring a tub (centre) and detail from Siy Tak-yin's *Desire* (far right).



Desire by Siy Tak-yin. Photos: Dickson Lee

Not all female artists focus on women's issues, as Cammy Yiu discovers

Agenda bender

beloved childhood pet. The image of the rabbit, cocooned and shrouded in eerie white, awakens not only happy memories but also a sense of loss.

"The rabbit is my story. I loved this rabbit. I fed him. I took care of

him. Then he died," says Tse. "During the process of making this, I recalled precious moments. I make each object to keep my memories. Having lost something makes those memories more poignant." Constructing one's identity

within societal expectations is the primary theme in Lam Wai-kit's dream-like images. She shows the travails of trying to fit into a foreign culture in *The Forgotten Land*, a series of prints accompanied by a multimedia display inspired by her experiences living abroad.

"When I arrived in the 'forgotten land', I lost myself. There was confusion from having to bridge different languages and adapting to a different culture. I wondered how I should present myself to others. I was aware that 'identity' is not just being yourself, but that identity is also constructed by society's expectation of you," says Lam.

"In Hong Kong, society doesn't require you to dress pretty, but in Italy it is a requirement. There are specific roles and expectations. A woman must be a woman." In *Desire*,

Siy critiques societal expectations and their damaging effect on those who have been conditioned to accept them without question.

Siy spent two years creating more than 3,000 cloth dolls depicting boys swarming sperm-like towards two mute figures, one of a female and the other a small child.

She expanded the installation through successive exhibitions to translate a long-held Chinese social expectation – that a woman must bear sons – into art.

In *Desire*, the happy smiling boys overwhelm the female figure. "In the installation, the figure is silent because she is unhappy. She is in pain," Siy says. "She cannot express her feelings and is constrained by long-held traditions and concepts."

The work concerns the artist's own grandmother – her desperate desire to have a son and her anguish when she failed and her husband left her to marry another woman.

"My mother also had this desire. She wanted to have at least one son.

We asked what kind of work they would include in an all-female show and then let them present their ideas and creations

Christopher Lau, curator

I wanted to understand why there was this pressure and why it is still happening in today's world," says Siy.

Tan, for her part, highlights the disparity between the rich and the poor. In her video presentation, *Scavenger*, a Hong Kong woman is featured pushing a laser-cut cardboard replica of an "HSBC lion" from Central to Sheung Wan.

A video shows a series of fascinating encounters with people who are disturbed by the idea of the

lion being pushed around by the old woman. The video concludes at the end of the woman's work day, when she is paid for her load of cardboard.

"This work is about our struggle to make a living. I find it disturbing that there are many elderly Hong Kong people still, mostly women, who have to collect cardboard and newspapers to make money," Tan says.

Asked if being a woman helped her to take a more sympathetic view of the female scavenger, Tan says: "Being a 'female' artist is just a label. I am a woman from a certain country, born of a certain age and this will affect the work that I do. "The more pertinent question for me is how my identity as a person affects what I say about society and the questions I pose through my artwork."

Tue-Sun and public holidays, 10am-7pm, Osage Kwun Tong, 5/F Kian Dai Industrial Building, 73-75, Hung To Road, Kwun Tong. Inquiries: 2793 4817

Take a factory, add talent and spin

Kristina Perez

There has been much talk in artistic and commercial circles on the mainland recently about the need to invest in young designers so as to move from a "Made in China" economy to a "Designed by China" one.

This thinking is reflected in the 11th Five-Year Programme (2006-2010), which identified creative industries as a "point of growth".

A number of areas are now labelled "creative clusters" by many city authorities. Shanghai, which saw its first "creative cluster" in 2004, now has more than 80 of them.

These clusters are meant to breathe new life into dilapidated industrial plants in urban areas by using innovative architecture to transform them into offices and galleries for creative professionals to form new artistic communities. However, the line between creative and commercial ventures is not always clear.

The 798 Dashiyan Art District in Beijing inadvertently started this trend in the mid-90s when artists moved into the former Bauhaus munitions factory in search of cheap studio space. Often dubbed the Soho of China, the area has been

home to contemporary Chinese artists such as avant-garde painter Yue Minjun, whose works now fetch millions at auctions. It has also become one of Beijing's tourist attractions. But critics say this gentrification has caused 798 to lose its edge and that smaller galleries and artists' studios are moving out.

Nevertheless, 798 is cited as a model by government planners deciding the fate of Beijing's assorted disused factories. Whether an organic artistic community can be recreated on spec is a question they don't seem to have considered yet.

In 2006, the Beijing municipal government launched a heritage initiative to conserve industrial sites by designating creative clusters.

The boldest of these is Jingmian Spin City, the conversion of a recently closed factory near the Rem Koolhaas-designed CCTV tower in the historic weaving district of Beijing.

Spin City will convert not only 60,000 square metres of factory space but a total of 140,000 square metres, including the surrounding land given by the municipal government, into what is being heralded as a "creative embassy". Plans for it include a hotel,

education centre, design studios, workshop space, exhibition centre, and museum. Graphic designer Su Tong, co-founder of the Created in China Industrial Alliance (CCIA), heads the project. He has a grand vision for Spin City which extends to launching a city design alliance to give designers more clout when negotiating with corporations.

If you have a government come in and say we're developing a creative zone, 'Come on in!' – it just doesn't work that way

Paul Liu, head of a project management firm

The CCIA is a government-owned company and an offshoot of the International Creative Industries Alliance Beijing under the municipal government. It counts the Hong Kong Design Centre among its members.

"Spin City will provide an entire industry linkage, including a bank, legal services and copyright protection," says Su. It will also link designers, architects and investors.

Su's major complaint about 798 is that it has no central management, a mistake he says will not be made with Spin City. He says the new project will seek international partners.

While Spin City is still largely a government project, in Shanghai the conversions of factories into creative hubs have been mostly private initiatives.

Paul Liu, chairman of a project management company responsible for Shanghai's latest private factory conversion called 1933 (after the name of a building), says he too is unconvinced that creative clusters developed and run by the government will work well.

Liu's own project, an art deco abattoir, has been leased to his company by the Shanghai city government and is part of the Hongkou district's long-term plan for reviving the area, including a vast plaza next to the complex.

"What they're hoping is that the activities in this area will spark the rejuvenation of the surrounding area by bringing in a lot of flow and



Interior of the 1933 building in Shanghai before its restoration (left) and a bird's-eye view of Spin City in Beijing (right). Photos courtesy 1933 and Spin City



people," says Liu. "At the same time they hope the people we bring to work in this building will generate tax revenue that over time will repay their investment."

Full government control has its drawbacks, he adds. "I'm always very sceptical about government-mandated creativity. The way things have developed overseas – and the same has developed in Shanghai – is that artists congregate in one place, usually because it's cheap, and then people start talking to their friends and people start gathering and there is a critical mass and it accelerates," says Liu.

"But if you have a government come in and say we're developing a creative zone, 'Come on in!' – it just doesn't work that way."

Asked whether Jingmian Spin City could sustain itself, Su says he's confident of revenue flow.

"One will be the rent from the commercial spaces. Since it is a good location, the value is very high. The other is that by incubating new industries it will make the companies stronger. We also expect the exhibition centre and its hotels to be a profit centre and the renovation of Jingmian costs a lot less than constructing a new building," he says.

The project will be officially launched at the Third China Cultural and Creative Industry Expo in Beijing later this year and Su thinks it will take three to five years before CCIA's plans for Spin City are fully realised.

Financial considerations inevitably lead to the question of how best to balance creativity with commercialism.

Liu, in Shanghai, says that with government projects, things can sometimes get off track.

"I think there will be a big difference between what they want and what actually happens. It depends on the economics. There will be a big conflict between trying to be edgy and creative and the commercial imperative that arises from all of these [types of] projects."

Even for Liu, the biggest challenge with 1933 is "to find the right balance between making it commercially viable and making it completely commercial".