

n. p a r a d o x a  
international feminist art journal



Trans-Asia

volume 29 2012

# Cui Xiuwen's Recent Work *Spiritual Realms in the Material World*

Patricia Karetzky

Cui Xiuwen has had a rich career as an artist and in the last two years her approach to art has changed dramatically.

<sup>1</sup> Even as an art student at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing her works were controversial, for in her paintings she featured naked men, with a highlight emphasizing their genitals, in defiance of the preponderance of paintings of naked females. The subject of nudes in art school stood in contrast to the appearance of the theme in society, for China was, since ancient times, inhibited about showing the naked form in accordance with Confucian principles of modesty.

After art school, Cui joined with three other women friends and artists to form a group called the Sirens to exhibit their work. As men who expressed little interest in women's work run most of the art institutions – museums and galleries, they had to show their art in each other's apartments. The name of the group derives from the tale of Ulysses who had himself bound to the mast of his ship and had his ears stopped up so that he would not be seduced by the siren's song as his boat passed through the straits they inhabited, and as they explain:

**The creation of sirens in Greek tales is a typical aesthetic version of a patriarchal society where women are always**

**described as the combination of apparent angels and inner devils. Under the belief that women are the origin of all crimes, female wisdom and the artistic value of feminist arts have long been denied. It's time for a change. The image of all-powerful man, the pattern in most societies, is bound to be abandoned. Women's voices will be increasingly heard and their natural endowments will benefit people of both sexes.**<sup>2</sup>

Cui soon grew tired of painting and after a major crisis experienced a rejuvenation of her art when she changed its focus to photography and video. Among Cui's videos, two achieved notoriety. The first entitled *Ladies Room* (2000) was footage from a hidden video camera recorder in the ladies room of a Beijing night club.<sup>3</sup>

As the women approach the mirror over the wash basin to freshen themselves, adjust their hair or make up, it soon becomes obvious that these are sex workers who hide their earnings in their underwear; one even threatens a client promising to call his wife if he does not compensate her. On the periphery the female bathroom attendant tidies up. This is a dark side of the great Chinese commercial explosion heralded in the international press.

The other video, *Toot* (2001), a more lyrical video work lasting a few minutes, involves a self portrait, but this was not the original intention. When the model did not show up for the shoot, Cui played the role herself. A beautiful but somewhat demure Cui stands before the camera wrapped from head to toe in toilet paper, like an Egyptian Mummy. Slowly water is sprayed on her and as the delicate tissue begins to dissolve, she slowly raises her arms until she stands in a triumphant posture.

Soon after, she made a video recreation of the *Last Supper* by Leonardo in which she replaced the players with the image of a young school girl dressed in her uniform in *Sanjie (The Three Realms)* (2003). Assuming all of the poses of the disciples—betrayers and saints, the girl looks artificial and nearly comical, but the implications of the substitution are thought provoking. It is a show of bravura to tackle one of the most well known works of art and subject it to the process of feminization. The Chinese title *Sanjie* or the *Three Worlds* refers to Heaven, Earth and the underworld, and each actor in the religious drama is consigned to one or the other on the basis of his actions. Cui remained engaged with the image of the young school girl, an alter ego in her work, for nearly a decade. Every few years when she began a new series, Cui selected a new slightly older model until 2006 when she began her work with a pregnant teenager in the series *Angel* (2006). Cui considered many issues related to adolescence in these works: sexual awakening, gender awareness, and social conformity, but with the theme of the pregnant teenager Cui challenged the morals of contemporary society. Hypocritical at best, China now values youth and beauty, but provides little protection for them after their assets are rapidly used up. So in the wake of the sexual revolution that followed the prudish and restrictive society of the Cultural Revolution, girls were avidly desired, the younger the better; their image dominates all manner of media advertising. But a pregnant teenager has wasted her future, with little to comfort her as she is no longer accepted by family or society; she is not considered a desirable wife. Applying kabuki like makeup to the nubile subjects suggests their fragility and vulnerability. Up until then Cui's works had been produced in color, but in 2009 her mood changed: she became meditative and philosophical. In a series of works entitled *Existential Emptiness* she shot black and white photos of the bleak winter landscape of Northern China, where she spent her early years, and with photoshop altered the images in two significant ways.<sup>4</sup> First she adjusted the contrast so

that the compositional elements became stark abstract forms, lacking many of the specifics of the natural landscape elements. Secondly, she combined the scenes with photos of her alter ego, a now twenty something, who was accompanied by a life size and flexible doll that was fabricated in Japan. The doll is a nearly exact replica of the model, who though still dressed as a school girl, is now clearly past that age. The two are engaged in a number of duets – facing each other in a boat casting about in a lonely lake; lying in the snow; separated by a distance with their feet facing each other; the girl dragging the doll across the snow-filled landscape; or holding the doll before her as they ascend a wintry forest, and more. In some cases the girl is burdened with the doll, in other cases protected by her. The dual persona suggests the dichotomy of body and soul, *yin* and *yang*, live and inanimate, real and artificial. The bleakness of the landscape reduces the figural composition to an iconic statement. What is more, the long horizontal format that Cui favors in these works, along with the monochrome palette, and the monumental scale of the landscape in contrast to the relatively small size of the figures, allude to the great tradition of monochrome Chinese ink landscape painting. Her works invest the traditional scenes with complex and challenging narratives. The series is called *Existential Emptiness* (2009).

All the more surprising then is the recent video *Spiritual Realm* (2011). The young beauty is gone, replaced by actors from everyday life. Instead of exquisite scenery there is an empty studio stage and a brilliant spot light takes the place of the diffuse outdoor mystical light. With no props and no clothes, each individual assumes center stage and enacts his/her own drama. Asked to express their feelings of the spiritual realm, one by one these characters from the urban scene take the stage and move in synch with some internal vision of celestial peace and serenity. Watching them is certainly uncomfortable, the viewer is ever aware of their stark nakedness, their aloneness and vulnerability. Their movements are mechanical and repetitive, surprisingly similar to each other's, often their actions echo martial art *tai chi* exercises. Their gestures are limited consisting mostly of slowly raising their arms up over their head and looking skywards. Few explore the space around them; rather, standing erect, they shift their weight from one foot to the other, sometimes making shallow circles in the surrounding space. There is no suggestion of sexuality in their movements. But this is not the story – there were 100 applicants who were interviewed. Willingly they auditioned for the camera



Cui Xuiwen Images from *Spiritual Realm* (2011) video installation. All photos, courtesy of artist

with an unlimited amount of time to explore through physical movement the feeling of being in the spiritual realm. Though most performed for 2-3 minutes, one participant lasted over half-an-hour. Shot in black and white, because color would distract the eye and add an element of entertainment and a more modern sense of time, the videos are single action pieces. At the Today Museum in Beijing, Cui projected the images on the walls, a group of four on one wall, a group of seven on the other, alternating male/female images. In a more recent exploration of the theme, Cui arranged two groups, one completely male, and the other female. These groups are obviously composed using computer programming and the results demonstrate great artistry in creating compact compositions of naked figures that elicit comparison with Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, in the Sistine Chapel done in 1536-1541, especially the group of the "Saved" on the right of Christ, or Rodin's nineteenth century semi-clad Burgers of Calais. In the complex composition the figures move in counterpoint to each other, the dense grouping forms a sculptural bas relief. From the 100 contestants, 24 were selected whose ages range from 19-57 for the women, and 16-80 for the men. Cui used what in China is called a Street Model Agency, in contrast to a professional one whose models are too well known and versed in performance. This agency which has recently become popular with artists needing subjects for their work has models from all walks of life; Cui engaged a wide range of people: students, extras for movies, a poet and a writer as well as street workers. Although it seems voyeuristic to view



these subjects, and one feels the obtrusive but unseen presence of the director of the exercise, the performance of the actors is solemn, sincere and intense. In the end it is a rather touching enactment of spirituality that infuses all of our imaginings of a world beyond our pain. The participants' response to the performance is also surprising, many felt transformed by it, and reluctant to return to their everyday activities. Like Andy Warhol's dictum of the future when everyone will have fifteen minutes of fame, these subjects are suddenly cast in the spotlight and asked to express what is purest in their hearts. For them, the experience was transformative, they understood the rarity of this moment in their life, when they were at center stage and yet part of a larger project. Invited to the museum opening, it is interesting to note, they declined to



attend, embarrassed perhaps by the public spectacle of the event. Cui says most people at first reflexively respond to the work as sexual, due no doubt to the nudity, but this soon passes into a fascination with this very personal form of trance like movement. Their postures, like choreography, convey a special state of mind.

In conclusion these figures, naked to view; and shot in a brilliant light that exposes all of their unique physical characteristics, individually express their own ideas. Yet as a group they share the commonality of the challenge of physically expressing themselves in the nude, of being vulnerable, of being on view. Seen as a group, there is a great similarity in their physical responses. Moreover, viewed as an assembly of people of the same gender, their bodies share generically similar anatomical parts but are at the same

time unique. What is more the assembly is an artificial construct for these participants did not exist as a group and therefore did not interact with each other. In sum the work is a meditation on human existence: we live within the limits of the human condition and the confines of society, as individuals who come into the world naked and exposed, and in daily life we are forced to exist in any number of groups. Within the stricture of such groups our actions are guided by the inner rhythms of our psyche. Hope drives us through despair. Cui's recent works continue to explore the themes of human behavior, sexual identity, and the issue of the self and its relation to others and now the spiritual realm as well.

Patricia Karetzky is O. Munsterberg Chair of Asian Art at Bard College

#### Notes

1. The Beijing-based artist has had major group exhibitions including the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Tate Modern, London; International Center of Photography and Asia Society and Victoria & Albert Museum, London; and the MoMA PSI. She has had solo exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Bordeaux; Forence Museum; and the Today Art Museum in Beijing. See <http://www.artzinechina.com/display.php?a=168>
2. The Sirens, a pamphlet printed in Beijing, 1998.
3. *Ladies Room*, video, 2000 (6 min 12 sec). see <http://teachartwiki.wikispaces.com/Ladies+Room+---+Cui+Xiuwen>
4. <http://www.jingdaily.com/en/culture/cui-xiuwen-at-eli-klein-fine-art-new-york-jan-19-feb-27/>