

Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky

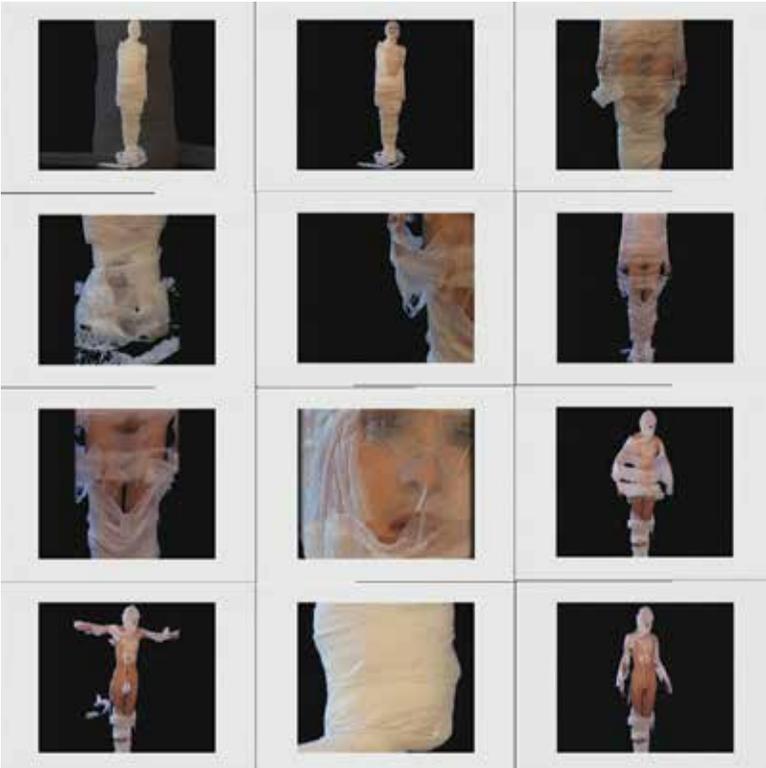
God Bless the Child: In Memory of Cui Xiuwen



Cui Xiuwen's short life ended on August 1, 2018 at the age of forty-five. Although her time was brief, her artistic accomplishments were impressive. Her career was characterized by the courage to continually reinvent her style of art. Notwithstanding her early critical acclaim, she continued to explore new styles of expression despite the artistic community's collective wariness. From the beginning of her career she rejected consistency. I met Cui Xiuwen in 1998 and enjoyed her friendship. I followed her art-making trajectory for twenty years. When I first met her, she was a recent graduate of the Central Academy of Fine Art's (CAFA) department of oil painting and had joined together with three other female artists to form the Sirens, a studio group whose efforts responded to the total lack of available places to exhibit their art.¹ They were the generation of artists who worked from apartment studios and whose friends came to see their small-scale in-home exhibits. Within a few years Cui Xiuwen announced she was not going to paint anymore, and her friends were alarmed. She then set off for Paris. Her first exploration into video-making culminated in the erotic phone call video *Twice* (2001) and one of her most well-regarded artworks, *Ladies Room* (2000), in which she hid a camera in a night club and recorded the women working there as sex workers. We hear them making threats to guilty husbands and see them tucking hard-earned cash into their underwear and primping for the next encounter. A third work, *Toot* (2001), involves a naked Cui Xiuwen wrapped



Cui Xiuwen, *Ladies Room*, 2000, video, 6 mins., 12 secs. Courtesy of Cui Xiuwen Studio, Beijing, and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.



Cui Xiuwen, *Toot*, 2001, video, 3 mins., 33 secs. Courtesy of Cui Xiuwen Studio, Beijing, and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.



in tissue paper; she is sprayed with water, the tissue dissolves, and she raises her arms in a gesture of triumph. Accompanying the video is a tune played on the traditional lute—the pipa—that is based on a romantic tale of war during the bitter battle to establish the

Cui Xiuwen, *Twice*, 2001, video, 9 mins., 12 secs. Courtesy of Cui Xiuwen Studio, Beijing, and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.

Han dynasty in 202 B.C. The music adds another layer of meaning to the performance and alludes to female self-sacrifice.²

Sanjie (2003), or *Three Worlds* in English, another video of this time, was the start of a decade-long project of photographing girls dressed as Cultural Revolutionary young pioneers, wearing white shirts and red neckerchiefs.

Cui Xiuwen, *One Day in 2004* No. 6, 2005, c-print, 84.5 x 126 cm. Courtesy of Cui Xiuwen Studio, Beijing, and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.



Cui Xiuwen, *Angel No. 13*, 2006, c-print, 100 x 120 cm. Courtesy of Cui Xiuwen Studio, Beijing, and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.



Sanjie is a rebuke to society.

Referencing the composition of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* (1494), Cui Xiuwen substituted a young girl, multiplied by twelve, who assumed the exact poses of the Twelve Apostles in the original painting. In contrast to the darkly clad men in dim light in the Renaissance painting, the innocent young child, adopting the artificial poses in a brilliantly lit interior, is patently absurd. The richness of the work lies in its several possible interpretations. Over the years, Cui Xiuwen found new girls to portray who were

progressively older; on average, every two years she trained a new subject as a model. Many critics saw the models as her alter egos. These photographic series featuring school girls continued as a focus of her work, and in one from 2005 we see a bruised child with her arm in a cast and lying prone in the courtyard of the Forbidden Palace, alone in its desolate alleyways, or her image multiplied and arranged into a crowd of figures. Later in 2006, her new model is shown pregnant, and again bruised, in the series *Angel*, whose title carries with it religious connotations—like a fallen angel, the pregnant child is seemingly a sad case of abuse.

This series came to a close in 2010 with the adoption of a life-sized doll that was fabricated in Japan to be an exact likeness of the artist. The doll appears in the series *Existential Emptiness* (2009) and is posed with a 24-year-old model. Both are depicted without winter coats in desolate winter environments in the northern industrial city of Harbin, Cui Xiuwen's birthplace, and they appear in an abandoned boat in a winter riverscape, dispirited and exhausted, walking along a highway on a snowy night, lying in the snow, and more. The photographs are overexposed to impart to the landscape an extraterrestrial feeling, and the two figures symbolically relate the eternal duality, animate and inanimate, body and soul, death and life.

This work led to Cui Xiuwen's new challenge—to express a spirituality in her art. She began with a video entitled *Spiritual Realm* (2010), in which people living on the periphery of Beijing society were hired to perform



Cui Xiuwen, *Sanjie*, 2003, photograph, 60.8 x 350 cm. Courtesy of Cui Xiuwen Studio, Beijing, and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.



Cui Xiuwen, *Existential Emptiness Nos. 4-6*, 2009, C print, 114 x 400 cm. Courtesy of Cui Xiuwen Studio, Beijing, and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.

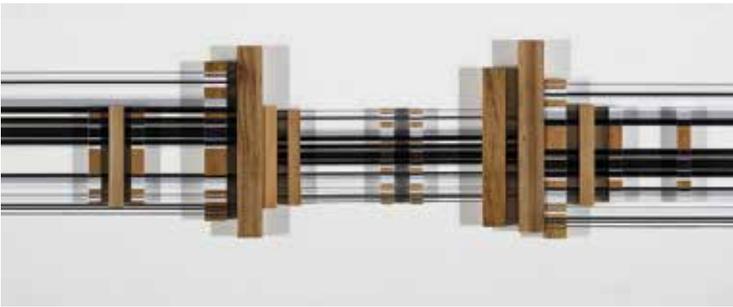




naked and to enact physical movements accompanied by celestial music to express what they might feel if they were in an ethereal realm. She edited the videos of the individuals performing in a variety

Cui Xiuwen, *Spiritual Realm*, 2010, video, 20 mins. Courtesy of Cui Xiuwen Studio, Beijing and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.

of intriguing ways.³ The prospect of abstract art began to interest her, while at the same time she was reading a great deal about science, philosophy, and religion. By 2012, Cui Xiuwen began experimenting with abstract art, and the response from her peers was one of skepticism. She had won critical and commercial acclaim for her works of the last decades and in the West was respected as a feminist artist for the way she represented girls in her works. Now she attempted to represent a fourth spatial dimension with abstract designs. In a series of large-scale compositions, she used painted lines of varying widths in a muted palette that were arranged either in a predominantly vertical or horizontal pattern, with the occasional addition of bas relief elements, creating a new kind of pictorial depth. Some used the primary colours of red, blue, and yellow, and for the viewer, the experience of these artworks could be visually disorienting. Cui Xiuwen also made videos composed of abstract designs.



Cui Xiuwen, *Qin-se No. 2*, 2014, phoebe bournei and acrylic on canvas, 50 x 120 cm. Courtesy of Cui Xiuwen Studio, Beijing, and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.

In 2015, Cui Xiuwen won the distinguished commission of the Dame Jillian Sackler International Arts Exhibition Program, resulting in a solo exhibition at the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology at Peking University. This was her last major exhibition, and it was a complicated installation employing a variety of media that filled most of the interior space of the museum with abstract compositions. While she used different media for each room, one of the unifying elements throughout the exhibition was her use of light, which also served as the title of the show, *Light*.⁴ The abstract compositions in each room were linked to human experience by their titles—body, heart, spirit, and destiny. One experienced this exhibition by first walking among large, sculptural, upholstered coloured forms in the first room to the outside courtyard, where thin metal rectangles embraced an ancient garden rock owned by the museum, and then to a light-filled corridor composed of a tunnel of irregular rectangular red metal forms with lighting inserted into them, to the final room and alcove where an abstract painting was projected as light forms on the wall, in the alcove, and onto the floor.⁵

Cui Xiuwen, *Spirit* (from the exhibition *Light*, 2016, installation. Courtesy of Cui Xiuwen Studio, Beijing, and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.



These are just a few examples from Cui Xiuwen's overall oeuvre. She won great critical acclaim and has been the subject of several books,⁶ exhibition catalogue essays, and articles. The account of her career on the CAFA webpage (<http://en.cafa.com.cn/cui-xiuwen.html/>) also lists among her artistic achievements, her extraordinary beauty and elegant fashion designs for which she won numerous awards such as the 2008 Women Beyond the Dream—*COSMOPOLITAN* magazine Annual Fashionable Female Award and the 2010 *L'OFFICIAL* magazine Annual Elegant Female Award.⁷

Collectors and collecting institutions of Cui Xiuwen's works exist around the world. She was the first Chinese artist to be shown at The Tate Modern Museum, London, and her work is held in important art collections including the National Museum of China, Beijing; National Museum of Israel, Jerusalem; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Guy and Myriam Ullens Foundation Brussels; Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Valencia, Spain; AW Asia Foundation, New York; and BSI Foundation of Switzerland, Lugano; and the Brooklyn Museum, New York.

Notes

1. Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky, "Beijingnuren: Five Women Artists from Beijing, Five Different Styles," *Journal of Women's Art* 23, no. 2 (2003), 28–33. Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky, "Laizi Beijing de siwei nyu yishujia," *Shijie Yishu* 2 (2004), 19–23.
2. The tune describes the fierce war that led to the unification of the country under the Han in 202 B.C. The war was between the king of Chu, Xiang Yu, and the Han hero Liu Bang. The song begins with the war and the dramatic ambush of the Han who surrounded the Chu on the battlefield. The leader of the Han asks the Chu soldiers to sing the song of Chu. Hearing it sung, the Chu soldiers start to miss their homeland and retreat. Gradually they leave the battlefield, until only a few thousand are left, and they plan to escape to return home in the early morning. Knowing the situation, Yu Ji, the very beautiful, deeply beloved concubine of the Chu leader, kills herself with his favourite sword, knowing that it is quite impossible for her, a weak woman, to go with him. Her death makes the king very sad, and he cries painfully in despair in front of her dead body. The next morning, when the king of the Chu goes to meet the Han ambush, none of his soldiers are left, and he stands alone with his horse. See Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky, "Cui Xiuwen, "Walking on Broken Glass," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 9, no. 3 (2010), 18–33.
3. Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky, "Cui Xiuwen's Recent Work: Spiritual Realms in the Material World," *n. paradoxa* 29 (January 2012), 62–65.
4. *Light*, Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology at Peking University, Beijing Studio International, May 27–August 27, 2016, <http://www.sackler.org/exhibitions/cui-xiuwen-angels-light/>.
5. Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky, "Cui Xiuwen," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 15, no. 5 (2016), 36–47.
6. Karen Smith, *Cui Xiuwen* (Beijing: Blue Kingfisher Publishers, 2007).
7. Sue Wang, "Cui Xiuwen," *CAFA Art Info*, October 22, 2012, <http://en.cafa.com.cn/cui-xiuwen.html/>.