



The Wheel of Women: Global Female Artists Expound Lifecycle Themes through 'Calendar'

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Abstract: Since the emergence of the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s, feminist scholars have significantly influenced the study of visual culture, while female artists have made notable strides in exploring form, subject matter, and avant-garde expression. This paper examines the utilization of the "Calendar" motif by several feminist artists as a symbol representing the passage of time. Through this visual language, these artists convey themes intricately linked to the female experience, such as growth, change, maturity, and aging. Their transformative approach extends beyond mere subjects and artistic techniques to encompass a unique perspective characterized by the liberation from external viewpoints and the male-dominated gaze, redirecting attention to the inner world of women. In doing so, female artists offer a nuanced and profound exploration of humanity, emotions, and life experiences, transcending simplistic gender labels and feminist advocacy. The paper explores the evolution of Calendar paintings, shedding light on their depiction of historical and aesthetic shifts in Chinese society. Serving as a hallmark of its era, the Calendar not only chronicles the progression of national capitalism but also mirrors the cultural metamorphosis of old China. Furthermore, the paper explores contemporary female artists' engagement with cyclical themes, illustrating how they navigate the life cycle, natural rhythms, and women's experiences across diverse mediums. Finally, the author's photographic creation is discussed, offering reflections on Chinese women's pursuit of autonomy amidst the interplay of tradition and modernity.

Keywords: Female Themes, Calendar, Cyclical Theme Expression, Artistic Themes

I. Introduction

Every artwork inherently embodies a theme, and in the realm of painting, the theme and thematic elements are distinctly articulated and differentiated. The term "theme" encompasses the spectrum of issues that artists explore in their works, drawn from various aspects of life. It constitutes the central concept or principal idea within the artwork, serving as its fundamental artistic content^[1].

During the Republic of China period, under the influence of Westernization, modern Western culture permeated new-style educational institutions, and art became intertwined with industrial technology.^[2] With the infiltration of Western aesthetic concepts and the impact of economic, technological, and socio-cultural factors, there emerged a pursuit of diverse aesthetic expressions in art. Concurrently, popular art forms like the "Calendar" emerged, amalgamating the aesthetic preferences of the Chinese populace with Western artistic techniques^[3].

The term "Calendar," known as "Yue Fen Pai" in Chinese, denotes a form of advertising poster originating in late Qing Dynasty Shanghai^[4]. It evolved from traditional Chinese solar terms tables and calendar plates initially employed by Chinese and foreign merchants for product promotion. The content of Calendar paintings predominantly features figures such as beauties, celebrities, and historical personages, accompanied by advertisements for commodities like cigarettes, batteries, general merchandise, and insurance^[5]. The name "Calendar" derives from the inclusion of both figure illustrations and product advertisements, alongside the months of the year. Even if the full-year months are absent from the final advertising painting, it retains the designation of a Calendar advertising painting^[6]. Initially, Calendar compositions encompassed diverse elements, including historical narratives, renowned landmarks, and characters from opera. However, post-1910, Calendar advertising paintings began to exhibit a singular thematic focus, highlighting elegant ladies, youthful maidens, beautiful women, and scenes of opulent urban life, executed with consistent brush and watercolor techniques^[7]. The Calendar enjoyed immense popularity following its inception, reaching its zenith in the 1920s and 1930s, spreading from Shanghai to various regions across the country. Nevertheless, with the progressive advancement of photography technology, the Calendar gradually faded into obscurity. It also experienced a period of popularity in Hong Kong but declined steadily following Hong Kong's reunification with China. Presently, the Calendar New Year painting has been recognized as intangible cultural heritage in Shanghai.

As a historical artifact emblematic of its era, the Calendar not only encapsulates the trajectory of the arduous development of national capitalism within a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society, replete with manifold oppressions and exclusions, but also documents the process of aesthetic and sartorial cultural evolution in old China over the span of a century, thereby addressing gaps in research on modern popular art within Chinese art history^[8]. Serving as a symbol of time, the

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Calendar delineates the cyclical and periodic essence of time. Modern Chinese artists portrayed the twelve months of the year through Calendar paintings, often featuring a series of works themed around each month, depicting varying seasonal scenes, holiday festivities, or natural landscapes. Thus, the ostensibly glamorous "Calendar" harbors profound historical significance and artistic allure, rendering it of considerable research and collectible value^[9].

II. Literature Review

Contemporary art offers a platform for the exploration of diverse themes and narratives, providing a space for female artists to voice their experiences and perspectives. This literature review examines various scholarly works that delve into the multifaceted expressions of contemporary female art, shedding light on the societal, cultural, and personal dimensions of women's artistic practices.

Jackson's (2020) review of recent exhibitions highlights the curatorial endeavors aimed at addressing centuries of women's marginalization in the arts. She emphasizes the role of social and institutional structures in shaping artistic production and the representation of women within the art world. In the context of Chinese art, Yongbai^[10] provides a chronological survey of women's artistic development from 1990 to 2010. Despite advancements, women artists grapple with the challenges of resisting essentialist categorizations while asserting their female subjectivities. Sylvester^[11] explores the intersection of feminist activism and Japanese graphic texts, emphasizing their relevance within a global feminist discourse. By analyzing feminist messages embedded in manga, Sylvester underscores the vital role of female creators in challenging societal norms and fostering feminist art activism.

Lane^[12] investigates the use of voice in sound art by women artists, challenging cultural assumptions about women's voices and norms within sound arts practice. Her research underscores the significance of female representation and agency in shaping sound art narratives. BOLAT^[13] proposes a comparative approach to contemporary art education, focusing on themes that differentiate contemporary art from traditional forms. By comparing contemporary pieces with traditional artworks, BOLAT seeks to challenge preconceptions and prejudices surrounding contemporary art. León-Río^[14] delves into the symbolism of androgyny and motherhood in art, exploring how these archetypes reflect the collective psyche of contemporary female artists. Through mythological and legendary themes, León-Río demonstrates the heterogeneity of female artistic expression and its roots in ancient symbolism.

III. Contemporary Global Female Artists' Selection of Cyclical Themes

On Lifecycle and Natural Cycles

Female artists may express the cycles of life and natural cycles through the Calendar. Their works may depict themes related to seasonal changes, growth and decay, life and death, emphasizing the passage of time and the continuous cycle of life through Calendar elements.

Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama often incorporates natural elements into her works, spanning various mediums such as painting, sculpture, and installation. She portrays abstract natural landscapes and the life cycle, utilizing patterns and shapes that repeat infinitely to evoke a sense of life's cyclical nature and the continuum of time. Kusama frequently integrates temporal elements to underscore the passage of time and life's perpetual flux. Among her most renowned works



is the "Infinity Mirror Room" series, comprising installations where viewers are enveloped by reflective mirrors, engendering an illusion of infinite space. Through repeated patterns and shapes, Kusama articulates the cyclical essence of life and the enduring march of time. Another noteworthy series by Kusama is the "Pumpkin" series, often featuring large-scale sculptures with pumpkins as the central motif. These works typically exhibit exaggerated forms and vibrant colors, conveying a profound reverence for the natural world. Pumpkins, emblematic of the life cycle and growth, symbolize the perpetual rhythm of existence.^[15]

Figure 1 : Yayoi Kusama: Infinity Mirror Rooms (Source: Victoria Miro)

Moreover, women exhibit a persistent inclination toward documenting significant individuals and moments. Female artists have the capacity to depict pivotal moments and transitions in a woman's life journey. They may opt to utilize specific symbolic objects, such as birthdays, wedding anniversaries, or other personally significant dates, to elucidate personal growth and development. This symbolic usage not only delineates the passage of time but also encapsulates personal experiences and life trajectories, thereby exemplifying the evolution and maturation of women across different stages of life.

Tracey Emin, a prominent figure in the international contemporary art scene, aligns her practice with popular culture icons such as Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons. Drawing from her personal experiences, she consistently narrates authentic and thought-provoking stories through unadorned artistic language. Emin frequently employs everyday items as vehicles to document cyclical changes, often portraying encounters and emotional experiences in individual lives through autobiographical works like "My Bed," which depict emotional states such as love, heartbreak, loneliness, and joy. In 1995, Emin created the artwork "Everyone I Have Ever Slept With," where she pasted the names of 102 individuals she had shared a bed with onto a tent. This piece propelled Emin into the art world and the public eye, sparking considerable controversy. Many critics interpreted it as boasting about the number of people she had sexual relations with, criticizing it as self-aggrandizement rather than art. However, upon closer examination, viewers discovered among the names her twin brother, friends, colleagues, and other individuals who played significant roles in her life^[16]. Through this tent-like portrayal, the artist depicted their daily lives, conversations, and interactions, creating a poignant portrait of human relationships.



Figure 2: My bed, by Tracey Emin (Source: World Press)

Furthermore, calendars serve as a vehicle to explore the overall life cycle and collective experiences of women. Female artists may present different stages of an individual's life from infancy to old age, highlighting women's growth and changes, as well as the challenges and experiences they face at different ages. They can create unique spatial environments through object layouts, linking the passage of time with various stages of a woman's life cycle, conveying experiences of female growth^[17].

French-American artist Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) created an extensive body of work revolving around themes of motherhood, maternal love, and the maternal body, reflecting the deep emotional bonds between mother and daughter. Bourgeois continually explored the complex identity connections of women, motherhood, and parent-child relationships. Her monumental installation artwork "Maman," a giant spider sculpture, has stood in front of art museums worldwide in recent years. Within the exhibition space, Bourgeois created works exploring her family, gender, and body, embodying a unique domain specific to her. Her works span various stages of the life cycle, often employing symbolic elements to express women's growth and changes. "Femme Maison" (Woman House), a series of paintings, depicts the complex relationship between women and family residences, reflecting women's roles and identity exploration within the family. Through her works, Louise Bourgeois showcases the life cycle and growth process of women from childhood to old age, as well as the various challenges and pressures women face in the family and society. Some childhood traumas accompany her works throughout her life, not only possessing strong personal emotions and expressions but also reflecting the overall experiences and destinies of women.



Figure 3 : Louise Bourgeois: Maman (Ama) (Source: Guggenheim)

Additionally, the use of calendars can explore the physiological changes and aging processes of women's bodies. Female artists may combine calendars with body images, natural elements, or other symbols to express reflections on women's bodily experiences and self-identity. The patterns and colors of calendars can convey the progressive and cyclical changes of women's bodies, such as menstrual cycles, pregnancy, or menopause. This exploration of the uniqueness of women's bodies and their time-related changes also presents women's understanding and acceptance of their own body perceptions^[18].

Judy Chicago, an American female artist, created "The Dinner Party," a masterpiece reflecting feminist art characteristics that affirm women's gender and identity through their own bodies. Her works are highly characteristic of women and often involve themes related to women's physiological cycles and experiences. "The Dinner Party" is a milestone work of feminist art. Presented in the form of an art table, it showcases the lives and experiences of different historical female figures, emphasizing women's physiological

experiences and identity. The piece, first exhibited in 1979, is a massive art table installation featuring the names and images of 39 women representing different historical periods and cultural backgrounds. Each tableware on the table represents a historical female figure, with each female historical figure representing a specific period or social class of women. Through this installation, Judy Chicago sought to emphasize the historical status and social contributions of women and explore the importance of women's physiological experiences and identity in history. The central table of the work is a huge V shape, symbolizing the female reproductive organs, representing women's creativity and vitality. The tableware and decorations on each table are associated with specific female historical figures or themes, including ancient goddesses and modern feminists. This piece, through artistic form, emphasizes the importance of women's physiological experiences and identity in history, echoing the core idea of feminism that women's rights and status should be recognized justly and equally, stimulating public discussions and reflections on feminism and women's history^[19].

Figure 4: Judy Chicago "The Dinner Party" 1974–79.

Ceramic, porcelain, textile, 576 × 576 in. (1463 × 1463 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation, 2002.10. © Judy Chicago. (Photo: Donald Woodman)



Perception on the life cycle

Mary Cassatt, an American Impressionist painter from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, is renowned for her portraits of mothers and children. In her "Mother" series, she utilized the calendar to underscore the passage of time and the bond between mother and child. Similarly, in Man Ray's black and white photography series "Noire et Blanche," the calendar serves as a visual motif, illustrating the connection between women and time, life, and death.



Figure 5: Mary Cassatt's Mother and Child works. Part 1 (Source: Art History School)

Across the works of contemporary female artists worldwide, cyclic themes are extensively explored. Through various mediums like painting, sculpture, photography, and installation art, these artists delve deeply into the diversity of women's life cycles and collective experiences. The calendar emerges as a significant symbol, highlighting the passage of time and the cycle of life^[20]. By portraying the growth, changes, challenges, and experiences of individual women and depicting groups of women, these artworks offer profound insights into women's bodily experiences and self-identity, providing a

visual and textual foundation for contemporary feminism and identity politics.

IV. Calendar and the author's works

In the personal photographic creation "This Year's Flowers Are More Red Than Last Year's" by the calendar's author, the awakening and pursuit of autonomy by Chinese women in the first half of the 20th century are depicted. The author integrates the Chinese cheongsam as a symbolic decorative element into the image, reinterpreting the form elements of the calendar. Reflecting on the past, the author contemplates the circuitous, quiet, and orderly world where women, under the Qing Dynasty's rule for three hundred years, lacked fashion diversity, wearing the same attire across generations without fatigue. However, in the 1920s, influenced by the West and the pursuit of gender equality, women across the nation began donning cheongsams. Despite this, economic power remained in men's hands, leading women to make concessions due to childcare responsibilities. While some professional women sought equality and independence, a latent desire for protection persisted. These complexities imbue the women in cheongsams with a sense of hesitation and hope. Women in the early twentieth century, influenced by Western ideas, ardently championed gender equality, despite the vast disparity between ideals and reality. Through the calendar's promotion of products featuring beautiful women, people envisioned modern life and identified with certain contemporary values, blending traditional culture with the inherent tension of modern women's pursuit of autonomy and freedom. In the consumption process and the gaze of the opposite sex, men and

women sought ways to define themselves. Through this work, the author aims to capture the cultural ambiance and social landscape of Chinese society during that era.



Figure 6: the author's calendar's works

V. Conclusion

In the course of societal progress, both men and women hold significance and contribute distinctively to societal advancement. Women need not engage in a competition of intellect and capability with men; instead, they can leverage their unique perspectives for exploration and creation^[21]. With ample strength, women can cultivate their own fields of endeavor. The author holds reservations towards feminism, noting a perceived neglect of their innate elegance and the qualities of observation and being observed. Instead, feminists are seen as hastily assimilating into male domains, striving to adopt masculine identities. An ideal scenario entails mutual recognition and utilization of the inherent attributes of both sexes in collaborative endeavors, fostering a harmonious composition through mutual appreciation and tolerance^[22].

Female artists intricately explore themes such as the female life cycle, growth, changes, and aging through repetitive motifs. Employing the visual symbolism of the calendar, they convey profound reflections and expressions of women's experiences while evoking resonance and shared experiences related to female identity and the passage of time for the audience. This creative approach underscores female artists' dedication to individual and collective experiences, offering a distinctive and potent expression within the realm of art.

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