Dream Life

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Dream Life

by

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Master of Fine Arts in Photography and Related Media

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Abstract

Dream Life

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Dream Life, is a series of photographic work based on the contemporary Chinese phenomenon known as social media celebrity (SMC). In order to achieve an identical trendy “perfect” appearance, numerous young women undergo cosmetic surgery, apply on bold makeup, and use heavy Photoshop on their social media photos. I aim to criticize this practice and question how this distorted aesthetic standard for females is developed. By reconstructing the elements that the SMCs are showing, I want to show the absurdity of this “dream life”.
Extended Artist Statement

I never considered my family to be a typical Chinese patriarchal family. For a long time, I thought I was very lucky, as my parents respected and encouraged the development of each of their children. That is, until my father’s affair was revealed nine years ago. My father and mother still haven’t divorced legally for economic reasons. Throughout this time, I have received numerous phone calls and text messages from my mother telling me how much she was wronged and unfairly treated. My mother has always had a very passive role in her marriage no matter how angry she was. It is this nightmare-like, nine-year family situation that pushed me to think about issues I had never thought of before: what is wrong with the role of women in today’s Chinese society and what other problems evolve from that?

For thousands of years in China’s history, women occupied a lower position than men. Women were expected to be obedient to men, and normally were not allowed to participate in social activities. Chinese feminism has developed slowly and is passive and mild in comparison to the first, second and third waves of feminism in western countries. Feminism theories are usually misinterpreted and repulsed in China. Foot-binding is a cruel custom in ancient China that has an appalling long history around nine hundred years. Women used long cloths to wrap their feet tightly, making their feet deformed and small, the most ideal length is less than 4 inches, having a pair of small feet is a status symbol and are considered to be a mark of beauty.¹ The process of foot binding is an unbelievable torture, It makes the bones bent and deformed, it causes skin necrosis and

bloody feet. It also has high probability causing severe infection and lifelong disabilities.² Foot binding is a product of the development of a patriarchal society to a certain extent, it is entirely the oppression and control of women. Once the woman's feet are bound, they will be greatly limited in all aspects of daily life, and can only stay at home. In this way, male are a lot powerful than female become a sheer fact, and women are made subservient. At the same time, women tend to walk mostly on their heels because of the deformity of the foot, this makes the inner thigh muscles more developed and vagina tighter, in order to provide more pleasure for men during their sexual life. Till now, women still haven’t stepped out of their passive roles as they performed in the old tradition. In the ancient time, women made their feet deformed to fit in the small shoes that represented beauty and status, nowadays, women hurt themselves by doing physical alteration in search of “perfection”. This history is not only related to how women are seen by men, but also to how they see themselves. It is the standards behind the gaze that distort the images of Chinese women.

My project, *Dream Life*, is based on a contemporary Chinese phenomenon known as social media celebrity (SMC). Many women in China want to gain fame on social media. Since the emergence of the SMC economy, this practice has come to dominate trending topics, public opinions, and fashions on social media platforms. The majority of participants in the SMC culture are young women with almost identical, perfected facial features, including large double eyelids, a long nose, plump lips, and a pointy chin within a small face. There is a specific name for this kind of similar look — “social media celebrity face.” The common elements used by SMCs to create their fame are: having an SMC face, wearing haute couture clothes, travelling around the world, living in luxurious hotels, and so on. Therefore, the idea of beauty in the contemporary moment is directly

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tied to fame. This beauty is industrialized. In my works, I represent how these SMCs live their lives. I took studio portraits of the typical scenes in the SMCs’ daily lives based on their social media feeds. Using artificial props, the same make-up style, and photoshop enhancement, I adopted the same techniques the SMCs usually use to create their dream images.

The SMCs we see are women wearing top-brand clothes and traveling to Paris, London, or New York, but in fact they make some adjustments to these designer clothes and mass-produce them at the factory to sell in Taobao, the biggest online shopping platform in China. According to report, SMC ZhangDaYì earned 46 million dollars in 2015 from her online clothing shop, which was two times the annual income of Fan Bingbing, one of the top actresses in China. They are representative figures in two huge industries. However, because SMCs earn money through using social media and online trading platforms, which normal people also have easy access to. This cause many women think that they only need to have a similar face and then can live a rich and happy life without realising it is an industry with an investment failure rate of up to 95 percent. In Haute Couture Factory, I let the model wear a high-end designer dress and pose in the middle of a pile of clothes like a mannequin. Behind the model is the background paper for photographing and cardboard boxes for shipping, stacked together as high as the ceiling, indicating that this is a segment of the entire industrial process. In this mess, I want to remove the superiority of wealth that SMCs are trying to build on the internet and reveal that they are just a small part of the consumerist economic.

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Beauty is supposed to be subjective in the eye of the beholder. However in today’s world, our perception of beauty, especially the beauty of the body, is not innate, but is greatly influenced by social values. “In all judgements by which we describe anything as beautiful, we allow no one to be of another opinion.” Immanuel Kant wrote this in Critique of Judgment. The notion of beauty for today’s Chinese woman is more like a precise ruler for a harsh standard.

A problem derived from the socially constructed beauty is that it changed the meaning and model of success of a young woman’s life. A woman does not have to rely on her own hard work or talent; she only needs to have a “beautiful” face to achieve men’s appreciation for her appearance and live a wealthy life. This further solidifies the idea of women being accessories to men. These seemingly beautiful and easy measures of “success” are in fact the poison that keeps women in a passive state. They can only gain the economic support from others’ ever-changing subjective view on how they look. Their lives are commodified. By using contrasting strong artificial lights, strange scenes, and mannequin-like models, I sought to deconstruct the elements of the “dream life” that SMCs are creating and reconstruct absurd scenes to destroy the ridiculous fantasy that this huge SMC industry is building.

The most typical thing SMCs do are having afternoon tea in a fancy place with their plastic SMC friends, or taking selfies and posting on their pages. In Plastic Sisters, I satirize this phenomenon and highlight the issue of the harsh standard this society puts on females. There are three young women in this image, but they are actually the same person with different outfits and hairstyles that I Photoshopped together in one image. Apart from the women’s feigned poses and their stereotypical feminine dress, I am

making a joke of their ignorance as they act out living a rich life, such as using a champagne glass for wine while using a wine glass for champagne. I also intentionally put a high table in the middle, ridiculing their misinterpretation between high tea and afternoon tea. ORLAN is a contemporary French artist known for the radical act of changing her appearance with plastic surgery; her work on beauty elicits shock and disgust. She said “I have been the first artist to use aesthetic surgery in another context—not to appear younger or better according to the designated pattern. I wanted to disrupt the standards of beauty.” The most important part of in *Plastic Sisters*, is how I liquified the model’s face and waist dramatically as SMCs do to their pictures to embody a beautiful female ideal. The interesting thing is, when I show this picture to others, most of them do not even realize their faces and waists are not natural. Since when have we become so used to this unrealistic view of females and why do we consider it natural?

In *Flamingo Baby*, I use a flamingo pool float and fake palm trees to represent the seemingly cozy lifestyle of SMCs. The lower part of the model’s body is twisted the other way around so that the breasts and butt—the representative feminine parts of the body that elicit visual pleasure—are on the same side facing the spectator. With this distorted gesture, the woman is still holding a mirror checking her appearance, presenting herself in a performing way. And if we look closer, not only are the fake breasts balloons filled with water, the butt is also faked by shadow and highlighted makeup. This distorted posture is directly tied to visual pleasure from the perspective of male gaze. In response to this view, women are presenting themselves as objects, which is self-objectification. Overwhelming images are promoting demanding requirements on women’s appearance; this information causes women to form an unrealistic perspective that they should have or

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should strongly approach the appearance and behaviour of those “ideal” female images, which perpetuates objectification and self-objectification.

I reconstruct the steps involved in lengthening legs and line engraving surgery in *Blossom*. This scenario depicts another typical SMC’s lifestyle. The woman is wrapped in a bathrobe with a white towel on her head, lying in bed surrounded by roses. Many metaphors describe women as flowers. Woman are expected by society to be beautiful and attractive like flowers. However, their time to bloom is short-lived. Pursuing a young look regardless of the cost is not something only a few women are doing. I intentionally build this scene like an altar; the woman in the middle of the image, appears to be sacrificing her health to youth.

Marrying a rich man must be the most important part of this “dream life.” The model wears gold bracelets and necklaces to represent wealth in a traditional Chinese wedding in *Golden Marriage*. Chinese wedding jewelry is laced with meaning and imbued with culture. The jewelry is traditionally given by the groom’s family, signifying that the bride is welcome into the fold as a treasured member: It is said that having a woman in your home is like having gold. In the southern part of China, this custom has gradually evolved into the belief that the more gold the bride is wearing, the richer the groom’s family is. The red gauze on the ground and the black square behind her seem to warn us that life never gives anything for nothing, and that a price is always exacted for what fate bestows. The title *Golden Marriage* is on the one hand literally referring to a dream marriage that is full of gold, and on the other hand also referring to golden wedding which is 50th anniversary, that represents a long marriage. Ironically, these gold bracelets are like shackles on the women’s arm, implying such a marriage seems to be a beautiful dream, but in fact it is a cage, a prison, that the woman cannot break free from in her life from this moment.
The aesthetics I produced in these pictures is very uncanny. On one hand, it is how popular female images on social media usually look like. On the other hand, it reflects how strange and inhuman these women look like in the photos. Through these images, I aim to demonstrate how this “ideal life” is manufactured and assembled according to a rigid standard. I use contrast color in the image and mimic the shooting style of advertisement, in the hope that through these forms of expression, my pictures seem beautiful and attractive to the audience at the first sight, however, after a while, they realize they are looking at something totally opposite.

For the exhibition, these four pictures will be framed in fancy golden frames. In the past, an extravagant frame had the function of adding to the extravagant nature of the art, which can emphasize the owner’s social status. In my work, however, these frames have an ironic implication rather than aesthetic function. Golden Marriage is printed the largest, because it speaks to the idea that the female is an accessory to the male—and this is the root reason for this whole issue.

Based on Sigmund Freud's concept of scopophilia and phallocentrism, Laura Mulvey says that there are two central forms of male gaze: “pleasure that is linked to sexual attraction and scopophilia pleasure that is linked to narcissistic identification.” In Mulvey’s theory, the male gaze denies the female the human identity attributed to the male. It classifies women as ornamental objects to satisfy men’s sexual fantasies. All of the models in my work have fake eyes on their eyelids. This denotes that the female has less power to gaze back in our patriarchal society. I hope that in this exaggerated, dramatic way, the audience can see these pictures that talk about our daily real life from a

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surreal point of view. Laurie Simmons she took portraits of women in *How We See* project, the subjects’ closed eyelids have realistic eyes painted on them by a makeup artist. She explores the notions of beauty, identity, and persona through masking and disguises, while I am using this approach in a different way for a different narrative. The similar part between my work and Laurie Simmons’ is we both ask our models to close their eyes, and eyes are the representation of activeness. But the way we paint the models’ eyes has huge differences, compare to Laurie Simmons’ work, I deliberately paint the eyes very fake instead of making them look real. By painting the same fake eyes on every models’ eyelids, I aim to remove the individuality of every person to talk about repetitiveness and mass produce.

The commercialization of the SMC since 2016 has gradually developed into a mature industry chain. According to a recent report, as of May 2018, the total number of followers of SMC reached 588 million; in the context of a total population of 1.386 billion in China, this means 4 out of 10 people are following SMC. What I am concerned about is impact that such a huge industry has on the objectification of women based on their appearance.

I took facial portraits of nine different young women. All of the women have their hair tied back so that the audience can see their facial features and the shapes of their face more clearly. After shooting, I worked with these young women individually, using Photoshop on their faces to alter their appearances to reach an “ideal look” from their perspectives.

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After Photoshop, all nine portraits looked almost the same from a certain distance. Of these nine young women, more than half have undergone cosmetic surgery. When closely examined, the portraits reveal the surgical scars, visible even under heavy makeup, such as scars left on the eyelids after double eyelid surgery. Viewers begin to realize that they are different people in the portraits if they look close enough. In the exhibition, each of these nine portraits prints is 20 by 30 inches. They hang together from a ceiling bar. Every subject in the picture is similar to human size, so they create a floating wall that is at least 65 by 95 inches as a whole. I see these nine portraits as an organic whole and so I entitled it All of a Piece #1.

Beside the nine portraits, there’s a iPad on a pedestal showing a piece of my video work titled Silence. I recorded these women without any make up individually talking about how they feel about their appearances and about others’ opinions of how they look, what parts of their body they do not feel satisfied with, what kind of cosmetic procedure they want to undergo. They finally show their true faces without any disguise, but the audio cuts out, they remain silence to the audience, their voices cannot be heard.

Attached to the back of each of the nine facial portraits is a portrait divided into nine equal parts. This half-length portrait is composed of nine layers of different women’s portraits in the same transparency. Different layers of shoulders and arms have obvious dislocations; the hair scattered on the shoulder has different shapes. However, the facial features of the portrait look very clear, which indicates their faces are highly similar. I removed the nipples on the subject’s breasts to match the plastic feeling of the face. The hanging fish lines on the subject’s body are looming in the dark, which is the metaphor of the women’s role under the patriarchal culture - we can barely see it, but it is dominating us like a puppet. I entitled this image All of A Piece #2.
The number nine has special meaning in Chinese culture. It is associated with the emperor, thus is the metaphor of “the highest,” “the ultimate,” or “the most.” These two parts of my work are intended to describe the abnormal sameness of aesthetic standards and to illustrate how much young women have done to themselves to meet such harsh standards. We are looking at repeating, similar, passive faces, instead of different active individuals. I feel sad about it.

In conclusion, *Dream Life* explores the popular idea of beauty and the life style of Chinese women through an iconic contemporary figure: the SMC. In a world where the idea of beauty is tied to fame, capital, and online social values, women still haven’t stepped out of the passive roles they performed in the old tradition. Even though they may feel happy living a “dream life,” their happiness is passive, and their lives are mass produced.

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Haute Couture Factory, 2019

Plastic Sisters, 2019
Flamingo Baby, 2019

Blossom, 2019
Golden Marriage, 2019
All of a Piece #1, 2019
Thesis Exhibition View, *All of a Piece #1, 2019*
Thesis Exhibition View, *All of a Piece #1*, 2019

Thesis Exhibition View, 2019
Bibliography


