

## **The Feminine Nature and Appearance –**

### **Hsu Wei-Hui's World of Art**

Written by Chen Bo-Cheng (Art Critic) ◦

National Culture and Arts Foundation Magazine, Taiwan ◦ 2011, 12, No25 ◦ P22 ◦ 23 ◦ 24 ◦ 25 ◦

#### **Prologue**

The pure white T-shirt is hung high above as if it is a huge white cloud spreading on the ceiling of the exhibition space. It is also like the ceiling mural in a cathedral, while the divine ray of light is penetrating the clouds, leading us into a beautiful world of the contemporary fancy clothes. The winding lines in the pure white light have created a spiritual catwalk, offering an imagined runway show featuring shirts blossoming like lilies. The viewers who look up to the show seem to experience certain religious ecstasy provided by fashion in the contemporary world.

Although it seems that the large-scale space installation suggests certain spiritual yearning for the current fashion trend, the artist's choice to use white shirts as its material, meanwhile, implies her reflection on the over-exaggerated colors and the elaborate shapes in the contemporary fashion world. Following her previous exploration, Hsu Wei-Hui reveals her almost-unnoticeable question and reexamination while she appears to celebrate the consumerism and the female bodily attractiveness in the contemporary visual culture in her recent work "Bloom."

In Hsu's oeuvre, viewers can always see how she, from the perspective as a female artist, anxiously questions the visual culture in the fashion world – which imposes their own standard on females to define facial and bodily attractiveness. No matter whether it is about facial masks or white shirts, Hsu Wei-Hui's artistic practice always emphasizes the contemporary portraits of the female attractiveness as well as the viewpoint of the consumer society. In her work, viewers can always notice the female nature and the female appearance hidden behind the works, mildly inviting viewers to reexamine the visual violence in the fashion world and the consumer society. With her soft resolution, the artist keeps fighting against the pressure on women imposed by the visual culture in the fashion world.

#### **I. The Woman behind the Facial Mask**

When Hsu Wei-Hui exhibited her works at ART TAIPEI for the first time, the most impressive image must have been her artistic exploration with facial masks. In this impressive series, the artist uses facial masks to construct a world of certain kind of women. In her installation work "Camouflage," in the lace web made by facial masks exist various female accessories made of facial masks, such as clothes, high

heels, hats, or even purses. Although the pure white space and object seems to highlight certain fantasy-like aura which is usually associated with young women, the lace web wrapped in a circular shape, on the other hand, insinuates the relationship between the female body in the contemporary society and the consumer objects in the fashion world. It seems to suggest that it is only under the cosmetic masks can women's faces be approved by the society; or it is only when wearing fashion can women's bodies be noticed and emphasized. It is this secret woman who hides herself in the world of facial masks revealing the link between the work and its title.

If we describe the soft and indistinct posture in the artwork "Camouflage" as the artist's whisper to question the society manipulated by fashion, then the yellowing faces in "Day by Day...Day by Day..." reveal the naked truth of how women eagerly cover the inner emotions and the traces of aging under the facial masks. Interesting, "Day by Day...Day by Day..." makes a response to Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, although it is not by purpose. In Wilde's story, the main character Dorian Gray remains forever young through a portrait which ages as Gray's substitute. The portrait in Wilde's imagination seems to turn into the purchasable and disposable facial masks in the contemporary society, which replace these women to suffer from the pressure of aging and decaying every night and day.

If the artwork unintentionally echoes the story created from Oscar Wilde's imagination, what hidden in the work can also be understood as the true spirit of the woman. "Day by Day...Day by Day..." is thus given the possibility to make a response to the art history. According to the historical context of portrait painting and sculpture, what a portrait pursues is not simply to describe or to capture the appearance. Instead, what it captures is the inner spirit and the aura of a person like Dorian Gray's portrait. If we view the work "Day by Day...Day by Day..." from this aspect, we might say that the artist unintentionally inherits the tradition of portrait painting, while facial masks are thus adopted as the new materials to create the portraits of contemporary women.

The masks become the metaphor of a society manipulated by fashion, and the woman hidden within can only survive in the lies which have once deceived the forever-young Dorian Gray. Through these facial masks, Hsu Wei-Hui builds a soft and pure white space for the unknown woman to protect herself, while she also uses facial masks to visualize the woman's inner anxiety. In the work, the artist adopts the concept of "fashion" as a disguise, through which she unceasingly reveals the woman's true nature sealed within the yellowing twisted masks in front of viewers.

## II. The Guerilla in the Fashion World

If we understand the soft quality of the “masks series” as a position to fight against the objectification of women in the fashion culture, then we might be able to predict it in Hsu's previous works before the masks series that the softness will be used as a raid on the fashion culture.

In Hsu Wei-Hui's installation work "Guerilla Girls" in 2005, viewers can see little pink soldiers in skirts attack from everywhere regardless of their petite size. In this game-like installation, Hsu Wei-Hui dresses these little soldiers with skirts made by herself, puts on the pink makeup for them, and places them everywhere in the space. Through the contradiction of colors, costumes, or postures, the artist thus creates certain child-like stubborn cuteness.

Such an artwork constituted by toys shows us the artist's unyielding nature hidden within the pink. Although the work title is based upon the models of the little soldiers, we can also trace it to a group of women artists as pioneers in the feminist movement in the 1980s if we reexamine the term more carefully. These female artists wore gorilla (which sounds like "guerrilla") masks and made public appearance in the art society as well as the art system. They chose a witty, humorous but yet insinuating way to make their art, through which they started a series of guerrilla raids on a patriarchal society which oftentimes went astray. Therefore, the work "Guerilla Girls" can also be regarded as the dedication to these pioneering female artists.

However, unlike the Guerilla Girls' attack on the patriarchal society in the 1980s, what Hsu Wei-Hui attempts to attack is more about the “beautiful” illusion constructed by the visual culture in the consumer society. In other words, the artist invites us to see the hidden criticism insinuated in the masks series. The work "Guerilla Girls" thus provides viewers with a vision which criticizes and questions the fashion world through the guerilla battles in her following works. Or, we might say that it is in "Guerilla Girls" that we see how the artist creates a guerilla-like game to fight the visual culture in the fashion world.

### **III. The Unyielding Nature of the Softness**

People usually associate feminist artists with superwomen who make strong and organized arguments to fight for their belief. Unlike them, Hsu Wei-Hui looks more like a fashion girl who lives in a metropolitan – gentle, graceful, and always making herself to appear beautiful. However, what hidden within the artist's pretty appearance is her unyielding resolution.

In her work "Errant Alien" in the "Far from Home series," viewers can see a CRV wrapped with cheongsam fabric traveling around the land of snow. The artwork "Because of a Dream" in the same series features a pillow and a map which are put in a toolbox covered with cheongsam fabric. These works might seem feminine, their inner quality, nevertheless, reveals the artist's unyielding spirit of her individuality.

It is the unyielding nature hidden within the softness that reveals the explicit determination from the gentle touch. If we see through the softness, we will soon discover the persevering toughness of Hsu Wei-Hui's artistic practice. It is also the duality visualized by the masks.

### **Conclusion**

As a woman, Hsu Wei-Hui always looks into the female body and the female face in the contemporary fashion world. Her oeuvre, meanwhile, continuously invites viewers to adopt the critical perspective while examining the objectification of women in the fashion world through its gentle appearance. In Hsu Wei-Hui's artistic practice, the guerilla girl hidden behind the facial masks keeps fighting the manipulation of fashion.