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# The Future Looks Feminine

The seven women in curator Hou Hanru and Clara Kim's *Everyday Miracles (Extended)* reimagine the world. By Jennifer S. Li

An all-woman show is no longer a novelty in major American museums. In 2007, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, organized “Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution” and the Brooklyn Museum mounted “Global Feminisms” with a cast of international artists. What makes curator Hou Hanru’s latest project, “Everyday Miracles (Extended),” stand apart from these precursors is the way it addresses the Asia-Pacific region—a focus yet to be explored.

“This is not a simple touring show,” says Hou. “Everyday Miracles (Extended)” is a collaboration with curator Clara Kim of REDCAT gallery in Los Angeles and will be presented in three successive stages at two California venues. The first phase (opening September 30) and the second (opening November 12) will take place in San Francisco at the Walter and McBean Galleries at the San Francisco Art Institute. Phase three opens on November 18 at REDCAT and will run concurrently with the second phase in San Francisco.

The show features seven artists from across Asia: Mumbai-based Shilpa Gupta, Jewyo Rhii from Seoul, Chen Hui-chiao of Taipei, Quezon City resident Ringo Bunoan, Hamra Abbas, a Pakistani artist living in Boston, and Beijing video artist Kan Xuan, who will all show work in both cities simultaneously. The concept for the two-city exhibition originates in the China Pavilion of the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007, also curated by Hou under the title “Everyday Miracles.” In Venice, Hou brought together four leading female Chinese artists—multimedia artist Cao Fei, sculptors Yin Xiuzhen and Shen Yuan, and Kan Xuan—and presented what he believed to be a still underappreciated, underexposed segment of contemporary Chinese art on the art world’s biggest stage.

For this United States showcase, the curators’ choice of artists presents a view of femininity that critiques what Hou describes as the staunchly “male-centric model of modernization” and the generally “macho Asian culture.” In conversation with *ArtAsiaPacific*, Hou cites

the writings of Indian theorist Homi Bhabha on postcolonial identity as a philosophical backbone for the exhibition, particularly Bhabha’s critique of overly simplified binary systems of categorization and his explorations of the cultural hybridity that was created under the colonial system. As a result, “Everyday Miracles” is filled with complex installation works addressing the contradictions of national and individual identity caught in the crosshairs of traditional and modern lifestyles.

History, memory and dreams—of either the collective or the individual—are sub-themes evident in many of the included works. A contemplation of the legacy of the 1947 Partition of the Subcontinent, Shilpa Gupta’s *In Our Times* (2008) is comprised of two old-fashioned-looking steel microphones, connected to each other at opposite ends of a seesawing boom. Each microphone plays a recorded speech spoken in a woman’s voice, one by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, and the other by Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India. As they move up and down, creating a ghostly aura as the sound oscillates, the aspiring words of Jinnah and Nehru put the continuing strife of the two countries into high relief, raising the questions of what became of the two leaders’ lofty dreams.

Gupta’s socio-political commentary continues in Los Angeles with *Untitled* (2008), a series of large-scale posed photographs of Indian youths clamping each other’s mouths, eyes and ears shut, and set in scenic grassy plains or on the beach. The massive photographs are beautiful and brilliantly colored, but betray darker themes in their depiction of sensory deprivation and stifled communication.

The pairing of contradictions also activates the work of Chen Hui-chiao, who also directs the Taipei art center IT Park. In San Francisco, Chen will combine previous works into a new installation entitled *Winter* (2009). A queen-sized bed draped in a quilt of orange ping-pong balls adorned with silver beads shares the gallery with a shimmering rug

of sharp needles supporting a messy lattice of silver thread. The pair of familiar but oddly rendered objects creates a surreal, threatening domestic scene. At REDCAT, in Chen’s *Sound Falling II* (2006), the small orange spheres are gathered into an organic, abstract form, seemingly tumbling down and dismantling.

Domestic objects return in the sculptures of Manila-based Ringo Bunoan, who similarly creates everyday objects out of unusual and incongruous materials. For *The Wall* (2008), to be presented in San Francisco, Bunoan collected hundreds of used pillows and stacked them like sandbags. This compilation of pillows—figuratively embodying hours of sleep and bearing the traces of individuals’ bodily fluids—intermingle to form a soft monument to people’s unknowable dreams.

Society’s desires are taken up in Hamra Abbas’s *Love Yourself* (2009), a provocative installation in the form of a sex shop. Made for the San Francisco portion of the show, *Love Yourself* is comprised of shelves lined with erotic toys handmade by the artist. With stylistic touches recalling traditional Muslim culture, Abbas’ invented objects evoke the fully liberated future of the modern female.

As an Asian women and the exhibition’s co-curator, Clara Kim sees “Everyday Miracles” as an exhibition that “supports practices that begin with an implicit understanding of the multiplicity, subjectivity and individuality of experience.” Kim remarks, “Only through the collectivity of these varied microcosmic positions might it be possible for a universality to be gained.” The world, in other words, needs to consider the social and political propositions put forth by these seven artists, as their laments, anxieties and aspirations attain global relevance.

1. SHILPA GUPTA, *Untitled*, 2008, photograph on flex, 300 x 120 in. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris. 2. RINGO BUNOAN, *Wall*, 2008, used pillows, dimensions variable. Installation view at Silverlens Gallery, Manila. Courtesy the artist. 3. CHEN HUI-CHIAO, *Winter*, 2009, digital rendering for a mixed-media installation. Courtesy the artist.