Wõmen (我们)
Contemporary Chinese Art

January 25 – April 21, 2013
Womens：Contemporary Chinese Art is an impressively focused multimedia exhibition that explores how an emerging generation of female artists from China artistically mediates cultural and sociopolitical conditions of life in the rapidly globalized context of contemporary China. Taking as their point of departure artworks by Hung Liu (born 1948), a Chinese-American artist who came to prominence after emigrating from China to the United States in the mid-1980s, Womens： focuses on China since it emerged from the social, political, and economic disarray of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) as one of the most radically transformed countries in today’s world. While the artworks by Hung Liu, from the collection of the Kemper Art Museum, attempt to recover the erased history of China (a result of the Cultural Revolution) and dwell on such issues as Westernization and feminist identity politics, more-recent artworks by a generation of female artists born in the 1960s and 1970s, which comprise most of the work in this exhibition, demonstrate an investment in the effects of a homogenized, capitalized, and globalized China. With topics including the impact of global mobility (Yin Xiuzhen) and standardized urban housing (Xing Danwen), the performative online construction of a virtual city (Cao Fei), loneliness and identity struggles stemming from China’s one-child policy (Chen Ke and Cui Xiuwen), and the radical merging of high and low art through forms of digital photography (Chen Man), the artworks in this exhibition share an aesthetic of artificiality and fictionality, all of which variously respond to a country that in a very short period of time completely reinvented itself.

Womens： is the inaugural exhibition of the Arthur Greenberg Curatorial Fellowship, an initiative made possible through the generosity of James Cohan and named in memory of Arthur Greenberg, both of whom are alumni of Washington University. As undergraduate students, these two art history majors curated an exhibition in what was then the Washington University Gallery of Art—an experience that launched both of them into a career-long engagement with the visual arts. The Fellowship is jointly sponsored by the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum in the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts and the Department of Art History & Archaeology in Arts & Sciences. It is a competitive program that offers outstanding undergraduate students in art history the opportunity to curate an exhibition in the Museum’s Teaching Gallery.

We congratulate the winning student curatorial team, Samantha Allen, Elizabeth Korb, and Danielle Wu, for their ambitious proposal and successful exhibition that foregrounds the significance of contemporary Chinese art. We are very grateful to Kristina Kleutghen, assistant professor, Department of Art History & Archaeology, and Meredith Malone, associate curator, Kemper Art Museum, for their time, expertise, and continuous efforts to advise the student curators from the inception to the realization of Womens：. Moreover, our thanks go to the national and international lenders for their generosity in lending their artworks and in trusting and supporting our first-time curators. In addition, we would like to thank Rachel Keith, chief registrar, Jane Neshhardt, managing editor of publications, and Alison Taylor, manager of education programs, for their professionalism, openness, and investment in guiding the students toward the successful implementation of their first exhibition. Last but not least we would like to extend our gratitude to Carmon Colangelo, dean of the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, and Gary Wihl, former dean of the faculty of Arts & Sciences, for their support of this inaugural exhibition of the Arthur Greenberg Curatorial Fellowship.

Acknowledgments

Hung Liu (b. 1948)

Bonsai, 1992
Photolithograph from two plates on Rives BFK paper, 22 1/2 x 30” (57.2 x 76.2 cm)
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis
Gift of Island Press (formerly the Washington University School of Art Collaborative Print Workshop), 1993

Chen Ke (b. 1978)

With You, I’ll Never Feel Lonely–Television, 2007
C-print, 11 13/16 x 11 13/16” (30 x 30 cm)
Courtesy of Star Gallery, Beijing

Chen Ke (b. 1978)

C-print, 11 13/16 x 11 13/16” (30 x 30 cm)
Courtesy of Star Gallery, Beijing

Chen Ke (b. 1978)

With You, I’ll Never Feel Lonely–Table Lamp, 2007
C-print, 11 13/16 x 11 13/16” (30 x 30 cm)
Courtesy of Star Gallery, Beijing

Chen Ke (b. 1978)

With You, I’ll Never Feel Lonely–Mirror, 2007
C-print, 11 13/16 x 11 13/16” (30 x 30 cm)
Courtesy of Star Gallery, Beijing

Chen Ke (b. 1978)

C-print, 11 13/16 x 11 13/16” (30 x 30 cm)
Courtesy of Star Gallery, Beijing

Chen Ke (b. 1978)

Once Upon a Time, 2007
C-print, 11 13/16 x 11 13/16” (30 x 30 cm)
Courtesy of Star Gallery, Beijing

Hung Liu (b. 1948)

Trademark, 1992
Photolithograph with collage on Rives BFK paper, 22 1/2 x 30” (57.2 x 76.2 cm)
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis
Gift of Island Press (formerly the Washington University School of Art Collaborative Print Workshop), 1993

Elizabeth C. Childs, PhD
Elta and Mark Steenberg Professor of Art History
Chair, Department of Art History & Archaeology
Arts & Sciences

Sahsbine Eckmann, PhD
William T. Kemper Director and Chief Curator
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum
Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts
I did not come into art with a feminist agenda, and I am not interested in gender-based determinism, but rather in a personal set of feelings and judgments.

—Yin Xiuzhen

Concurrent with China’s incredibly fast-paced economic transformation and its rise as a prominent global power, contemporary Chinese art has developed an increasing international presence since its emergence in the midst of the Reform Era (1978–present). This exhibition is comprised of works by contemporary Chinese women artists, created during this ongoing period of modernization, that variously reflect the disparities between the reality and illusions of modern life. The showcased artists have established themselves not necessarily as feminist or female artists, but rather as individual artists who happen to be women; among their critiques of modernization and the price of progress lays a rejection of gender categorization as inherently limiting. The exhibition’s title encapsulates this approach: the word Wˇ omen (我们) can be read as “women” in English, but it literally translates more broadly to “us” in Chinese. While several of the works engage with gender politics as an extension of personal experience, the featured artworks shed light on issues that affect not only individuals but also the Chinese population as a whole: the formation of Chinese identity in a globalized society, rapid urbanization, and the incursion of sociocultural reforms into the fabric of everyday life.

Central to nearly any process of modernization and intrinsically evident in the chosen artists’ work is the advancement of technology. Hung Liu (b. 1948), the only artist of an earlier generation represented in the exhibition, appropriates older technological forms into a contemporary context. For Trademark (1992), Liu assimilated an early photograph of Chinese prostitutes that was originally produced for a stereoscope, a viewing device developed to create the illusion of three-dimensional images. Liu preserved the rounded corners of the original format to emphasize its historical function, ultimately underscoring photography’s ability to turn its subjects into objects of voyeuristic pleasure. In Bonsai (1992), Liu further emphasizes this objectification by appropriating a photograph of a woman exposing her crippled, unwrapped bound feet, an image that was repeatedly reproduced at the turn of the century in dictionaries and encyclopedias; footbinding, often seen as an exotic and horrific symbol of male oppression over women, continues to define the degree of backwardness in the eras in which it was implemented. Her use of cultural images that identify a disjuncture between modernity and perceived notions of an “uncivilized” past does not end with the victimizing tale of female subjugation; Liu balances the image of the woman in Bonsai with a reproduction of a woodblock print diagramming a man’s internal organs. The diagram—rendered obsolete by both its printed medium and by modern medical advancements—depicts the Daoist belief that harnessing the flow of a man’s qi, or energy, could cure illnesses. This work thus reveals the ways in which gender-based cultural identities were rendered as inaccurate or grotesque in the course of modernization and increasing contact with the Western world. The critical characterization of past generations as “feudal” in China is connected to Liu’s experiences growing up during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) under the leadership of Mao Zedong (1893–1976), a time in which men and women alike were obliged to discard the “four olds” (sijiu)—old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas—and adopt, among other conventions, a uniform Socialist Realist artistic style as part of an ambitious agenda to create a modern socialist nation.

Notes
2. See, for example, T. Athol Joyce and N. W. Thomas, eds., Women of All Nations: A Record of Their Characteristics, Habits, Manners, Customs, and Influence (London and New York: Cassell, 1908), 532.
3. See Mao Zedong’s seminal statement on the role of art in revolution, known as the “Yan’an Talks,” in Bonnie S. McDougall, Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art”: A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1980).
Fearing arrest and confiscation of their works after the increasing government attention to civil security following China's Avanto-garde and the pro-democracy demonstrations at Tiananmen Square only months later, some artists practiced performance art, which would leave little physical evidence, while others retreated into cities across the world. The work negotiates the city's past and present, suggesting hope for a future in which irreproducible, fragile, and precious, thereby countering the gradual commodification and homogenization of material-based consumption.9 Consequently, the growth rate of China's make-desirable, with the added influence of Western culture and philosophies. For example, the ancient Chinese conception of beauty. Using Photoshop as a method of creating an identity unlimited by the bounds of Western concepts of beauty. Using Photoshop as a method of creating an identity unlimited by the bounds...
preference for boys over girls, a practice rooted in Confucian requirements for sons to carry on the family line in a patrilineal system. Increased abandonment of newborn daughters and female infanticide have generated severely skewed sex ratios as high as 135:100 and intensified the inequality between sexes. Cui Xiuwen (b. 1970) refers to the physical and emotional experiences of both daughters and expectant mothers she asserts, “The goal of art is to realize our own individuality, which is beyond gender.” By commenting on the situation of an entire generation of single children brings an additional set of concerns. A common family system in China consists of four grandparents and two parents focusing all their attention and wealth on one child; this new type of parenting has created a generation stereotyped as self-entitled, materialistic, and narcissistic, known colloquially as “Little Emperors and Little Empresses.” As an only child herself, Chen Ke’s (b. 1978) work focuses not on the privileges but on the challenges that permeate a sibling-less childhood, such as loneliness and monotony. In her series With You, I’ll Never Feel Lonely (2007), Chen photographs objects reminiscent of those found in her childhood bedroom, hand-painting each with a colorful smear that depicts swirling, elusive landscapes that evoke portals into another world. According to Chen, this alternate dream world is populated by young cartoonish girls who manifest her desire for the twin sister that she could never have as a result of the one-child policy. Chen’s painted realms are simultaneously playful and melancholic, depicting the imagined everyday activities that she and her sister would share while underscoring the absence that motivates her to invent an idyllic past. The gesture of the girl in With You, I’ll Never Feel Lonely—Mirror (2007) poignantly captures this feeling of absence: her forehead rests against that of her own reflection, an embodiment of the yearning for a reality just out of reach. The shape of the mirror is reminiscent of an inverted peach, suggesting ironically that the traditional Chinese symbol for immortality is useless here where there was never a life to begin with.

As China overruns the order of world powers, Chinese women artists and their deliberate social commentary have recently begun to gain world-wide institutional recognition. Attention in both China and abroad, however, has tended to focus on feminist trends in their work, often seen as symbols of the nation’s modernization and progress. 16 However, many Chinese women artists avoid identification of their work as feminist, finding the term artistically limiting and unintentionally politically charged. Cui Xiuwen voices this mindset as she asserts, “The goal of art is to realize our own individuality, which is beyond gender.” By commenting on issues commonly encountered by both genders worldwide as well as revealing contradictions between the ideals and reality of modern life in China, the artworks in Women (2007) expose gender as a social construct while pointing to the blurring of national divisions in an increasingly homogenized, globalized world. As such, these artists speak not only as Chinese citizens, Chinese women, or even women in general, but also for today’s global population.


Samantha Allen, BA 2014
Elizabeth Korb, BFA 2014
Danielle Wu, BA 2014
Arthur Greenberg Curatorial Fellows

Meredith Malone, PhD
Curatorial Advisor

Kristina Kleutghen, PhD
Faculty Advisor

Arthur Greenberg Undergraduate Curatorial Fellowship

Artist Biographies

Cao Fei was born in 1978 in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, the daughter of Cao Chong’en, a government-endorsed sculptor. She graduated from the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in 2001. Based in Beijing, Cao produces video installations and new media works which explore perception and reality in a range of places, including the virtual world of Second Life.

Chen Ke was born in 1978 in Tianjiang, Sichuan Province, and graduated from the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in 2005. She currently lives in Beijing, working primarily in mixed-media installations, painting, and sculpture. In March 2012, Chen published an illustrated autobiography, With You, I’ll Never Feel Lonely, drawing on two eponymous solo exhibitions of her work in 2007 and 2012.

Chen Man was born in 1980 in Beijing where she currently resides. After graduating from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 2006, she made her debut in fashion photography with a series of innovative covers for Vision, a leading Chinese arts and design monthly. Chen’s work provocatively straddles the art world and commercial photography, both of which inform her particular aesthetic.

Cui Xiuwen was born in 1970 in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province. She graduated from the Fine Arts Department of the Northeast Normal University in 1990 and received her MFA from the Central Acad- emy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1996. Cui’s most famous work, Ladies Room (2000), a highly contro- versoial video made by hiding a camcorder inside the women’s restroom of an exclusive Beijing hotel, provoked the first lawsuit in Chinese contemporary art following its screening at the 2002 Guangzhou Triennial. She currently resides in Beijing and works in painting, video, and photography.

Hung Liu was born in 1948 in Changchun and grew up in Beijing. During the Cultural Revolution she was assigned to be reeducated as a rural labourer, but she continued to sketch and take photo- graphs in secret. With a degree in mural painting from the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts, where she also served as professor, Liu immigrated to the United States in 1984. She received an MFA from the University of California, San Diego, and is now a tenured professor at Mills College in Oakland.

Xing Danwen was born in 1967 in Xi’an, Shaanxi Province. She earned her BFA from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1992 and her MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York in 2001. One of the first Chinese female photographers to gain international recognition, her work touch- es upon issues such as sociocultural dislocation and the separation between desire and reality in urban life. She currently lives in Beijing, working in photography, video, and mixed-media installations.

Yin Xiuzhen was born in 1963 in Beijing. She graduated from the Capital Normal University in 1989 with a degree in oil painting. She first established her artistic career as an apartment artist and later began working in large-scale mixed-media installations that convey aspects of individual experi- ences in urban life as they relate to global changes. Acknowledged to be one of China’s most prolific women artists, Yin continues to live and work in Beijing.
Support for the exhibition is generously provided by the Arthur Greenberg Exhibition Program Fund; the College of Arts & Sciences; the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts; and members of the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum.

The artworks illustrated comprise the exhibition on view at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum from January 25 to April 21, 2013.

RELATED EVENTS
Opening Celebration
Friday, January 25, 2013
Member Preview, 6–7 pm
Public Reception, 7–9 pm

Lecture
Melissa Chiu, museum director and senior vice president of global arts and cultural programs, Asia Society

Women Artists in China Today
Thursday, February 28, 2013
6 pm reception, Kemper Art Museum
6:30 pm lecture, Steinberg Auditorium

Gallery Talk
Samantha Allen, Elizabeth Korb, and Danielle Wu, Arthur Greenberg Curatorial Fellows
Wednesday, March 27, 2013, 5 pm

Panel
China’s Women in Interdisciplinary Context: Literature, Anthropology, History, and Art History
Washington University faculty panelists include:
Beata Grant, professor of Chinese and religious studies
Zhao Ma, assistant professor of Chinese studies
Priscilla Song, postdoctoral fellow, assistant professor of anthropology
Kristina Kleutghen, assistant professor of art history; faculty advisor for Women (我们): Contemporary Chinese Art
Thursday, April 18, 2013
6 pm reception, Kemper Art Museum
6:30 pm panel discussion, Steinberg Auditorium

GENERAL INFORMATION
Tours
The Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum offers many opportunities for free, individualized, docent-led tours and education programs. To schedule a tour for your group, organization, class, or friends and family, contact Allison Fricke at 314-935-5624 or allison.fricke@wustl.edu, or visit online at kemperartmuseum.wustl.edu/tours.

Hours
The Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum is free and open to the public 11–6 every day except Tuesday; open 11–8 on Friday. Visitor parking is available adjacent to the building, and the Museum is easily accessible via MetroLink (one block south of the Skinker station).

Contact
314-935-4523 | kemperartmuseum@wustl.edu
kemperartmuseum.wustl.edu
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FRONT COVER
Chen Man (b. 1980)
Golden Fish Goblin, 2004
Transparency on Plexiglas light box, 33 7/8 x 34 13/16” (86 x 88.4 cm)
Courtesy of Zadok Gallery, Miami © Chen Man

BACK COVER
Yin Xiuzhen (b. 1963)
Portable City—Hangzhou, 2011
Suitcase, clothes, magnifying glass, map, and sound element, 31 1/2 x 43 1/2 x 19 1/2” (80.3 x 103.2 x 49.5 cm)
Courtesy of Pace Beijing © Yin Xiuzhen

MILDRED LANE KEMPER ART MUSEUM
Washington University in St. Louis
SAM FOX SCHOOL OF DESIGN & VISUAL ARTS

Cao Fei (b. 1978)
Birth of RMB City, 2009
Single channel color video with sound, 10:30 min.
Courtesy of the artist, Lombard Freid Gallery, New York, and Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou