Grace Zhu

Professor Jonathan Ruseki

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Feminist Art Theory: *I Climb, I Backtrack, I Float*

Climbing through dense green forests in mountains, backtracking muddied waters filtered by the vibrant sunlight, and floating upon lilies surrounded by a halo of glittering ripples, the contemporary artist Nadia Waheed successfully conveyed ultimate peace at mind with her exhibition *I climb, I backtrack, I float*. The post-pandemic art series was curated by the experiential designer Ché Morales, who commented that “art should be a seismic experience to remember” (Waheed). Counter-intuitive as it may be, the serenity Waheed provides in her display of self-portraits communicates the final transparency after pandemic uncertainty and her father’s life-and-death issues. The exhibition appealed to feminist art movements that aimed at achieving gender equality in the realm of visual arts. Through a critical lens of feminism, this essay explores the legacy Waheed inherited from Frida Kahlo’s self-portraits and the women’s art movement in New York during the 1970s, as well as how Waheed remixed feminist art theories from her predecessors and made her work more relevant and appreciable for a contemporary audience.

The three paintings chosen from the solo exhibition are relevant to a contemporary reading of feminist art theories, because they approach feminist art through self-portraits, symbolic images and cultural objects - the three categories that comprise the key aspects of feminist art. Overall, the series serves as an example of how the Mexican feminist artist Frida Kahlo had a lasting impact (the interplay between hues and emotional outlet) on contemporary feminist artists. The second painting of Waheed’s gallery *The First Three Months (Mountains)* depicts a removed scene where the curvature of the earth is bending behind a female figure. A sharp contrast between the seemingly omniscient half-divine woman and the dim backdrop testifies Waheed’s self-liberating exploration of womanhood while adding on a layer of post-pandemic uncertainty. What Waheed most directly inherited from Frida Kahlo’s artwork is a story of women between “vigils and dreams” (Bakewell 165). Kahlo had to confront the reality of the “unshakable bourgeois” in Mexico (Bakewell 167), while envisioning a modernized future for women and mestiza. Likewise, Waheed had to digest the trauma of her father and her vulnerability as a woman, while moving on with life in a post-pandemic era. Kahlo’s specialty for creating self-portraits can also be seen in Waheed’s exhibition. Luckily, the artists were brave enough to “know, paint and create themselves” (Bakewell 165), a direct visual art approach to voicing female perspectives. Kahlo and Waheed both encourage self-expression and empowerment of women while challenging the conventional domestic roles of females.

The exhibition connects to the bigger picture of the feminist art movement in New York from the 1960s to the 1970s. The first painting in Waheed’s exhibition *Message From Janus (Day One)* portrays a gray figure standing with eyes open and a brown figure with eyes closed. They face each other, and nod to the two-faced Roman god Janus. The gray and brown figures weave between rich colors, and the contrast of hues symbolizes the sense of displacement and emotional upheaval the artist felt during the pandemic (Waheed). In addition, such a separation of colors mimics the duality of optimism and rage during the women’s movement in art in New York from 1969 to 1975 (Lovelace 4). Optimism and rage may not be as ambivalent as their names suggest - the extreme of optimism might be rage and vice versa. The audience can feel the rage or frustration Waheed experienced when they take into account how desperate she was facing the collapse of her father’s health and the disruption of routines in the context of the pandemic. Yet she digested much of the rage and presented great optimism and relief to the general public. The third painting *The Last Three Months (Lilies)* features pads of lilies illuminated by a halo of light. The key idea of the feminist art movement in New York was that feminism did not necessarily have to be expressed through female figures. For instance, a lot of female artists chose to portray the sewing machine as their outlet to uphold feminism (Lovelace 5). Viewers of feminist art pay tribute to cultural objects such as sewing machines, as they re-experience the hard work domestic women in the past had done to make the clothing industry possible. The artist’s experiences as a woman in the social context (high unemployment in a post-pandemic era), and as a daughter in a miserable domestic context (family medical issues) resonates with the audience through the soft touch of lily pads. Lilies, for Waheed, symbolize purity and renewal of womanhood.

Waheed approached feminism via autobiographical, colorful and allegorical paintings that reflect her quiet focus in the midst of the cacophonous modernity (Waheed), a social and historical context different from the one in Frida Kahlo’s time. The title of the exhibition (I climb, I backtrack, I float) narrates three different yet compatible attitudes towards calamity during the pandemic. “I climb” refers to the painter’s desire to fight upward in times of uncertainty. “I backtrack” represents her search for alternatives when things go against her, including both social and domestic issues. “I float” is a temporary spiritual niche of clarity from the muddy water below her. Frida Kahlo didn’t hide her identity as a female and a mestiza (mixed blood), and she believed in the power of creating beauty out of mixture - reconciling a pre-Columbian past and a modernized future. Waheed does not conceal her identity either. But she does not have to showcase as radical protests as Kahlo, thanks to increasing awareness of feminism in a modern society. One of Kahlo’s approach was painting a miniature of her husband on the forehead of her portrait to reverse the power dynamics of the two sexes - an overt expression of female liberty.

Some might argue that feminist art theories can be misleading so that the audience only pay attention to feminist elements and ignore the artist’s personal feelings or experiences. However, the political statement of calling for gender equality and the interpretation of non-feminist elements are not irreconcilable. As in the case of the New York Women’s Art Movement, voices of pioneer artists were more easily heard and accepted by their male counterparts when they self-advocated in political campaigns. The same logic applies to contemporary feminist artists such as Nadia Waheed - she combined non-feminist components such as half-divine figures of spirituality with the social and political background of a post-pandemic age. Just as Frida Kahlo integrated the Mexican Nationalist Discourse in her self-portraits, Waheed’s incorporation of the larger pandemic backdrop actually made the audience more socially aware of the art they appreciate.

Outside of visual arts, evaluating cultural objects via a feminist lens elevates our consciousness of building an accessible environment for both sexes. For a long time, women were underrepresented across all fields, including both art and science. Contemporary women need to realize that they deserve to be heard while self-advocating through artistic expressions, scientific breakthroughs or any other field. The general public are on the way of fully recognizing the importance of feminist artworks in terms of their wider implication for womanhood advocacy, but promoting feminism via exhibitions or simply self-portraits is still desirable. In the future, we will witness more women who are confident and proud of what they achieve, and not judged by the fact that they are women.

Works Cited

Bakewell, Liza. “Frida Kahlo: A Contemporary Feminist Reading.” Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies, vol. 13, no. 3, 1993, pp. 165–89. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/3346753. Accessed 30 Oct. 2024.

Bakewell introduces the lasting impact of Frida Kahlo and her works on contemporary feminist artists and the general public. The author then develops her essay in a parallel of three sections, which deal with Kahlo’s inner conflict, Kahlo’s creation of “self” as both sacred and secular, and Kahlo’s difficulty in confronting the Mexican Nationalist Discourse. By drawing upon her own experiences with the Mexican art industry and continuous research on Frida Kahlo’s themes of mestizaje and feminism, the author concludes the essay with a belief that Kahlo’s work represents a vivid self in contrast to the mainstream of female figures fading into the mass population.

The essay is relevant to my topic of the critical update for feminist art movement, in the sense that Kahlo served as a model for the self-expression of contemporary feminist artists like Nadia Waheed. What still appeals to the contemporary audience about Frida Kahlo may lie in the fact that she represented a duality of identities - female and mestiza. And what Waheed originally mixed in her exhibition is also a multi-layer of backgrounds - female, daughter and post-pandemic artist. An explanation of why Waheed took a less radical approach than Kahlo is the large contemporary context of the pandemic - the global crisis made people feel less empowered even if they were active advocates for feminism.

Lovelace, Carey. “Optimism and Rage: The Women’s Movement in Art in New York, 1969–1975.” Woman’s Art Journal, vol. 37, no. 1, 2016, pp. 4–11. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26452049. Accessed 30 Oct. 2024.

Lovelace approaches the feminist art movement through a series of campaigns and women-run galleries in New York from 1969 to 1975. She aims to guide readers to appreciate how pivotal these fledgling feminist organizations were in terms of their positive impacts (i.e. freedom of taking different feminist elements like in the case of Waheed’s exhibition) on future generations. These organizations adopted free-form discussion and formed forums where they shared experiences with fellow feminist artists. In addition, the author examined why rage and optimism came alongside. Rage derived from the desperation early feminists felt from general indifference to what they were suffering. Optimism was the approach pioneer feminists took to confront their rage.

The essay, which remixes optimism and rage in the historical context of women’s art movement, is related to the feelings of uncertainty expressed in the exhibition series of Nadia Waheed. The contemporary artist Waheed explores how women can emerge out of the post-pandemic shade that is suffocating for the female self-hood. Lovelace focused on how a post-war environment could be both favorable and undermining for the early development of feminist art. Collective discussions during campaign meetings oriented advocates toward the development of female content, which comprised female portraits as well as cultural objects that pay tribute to women. For instance, sewing machines will be further analyzed in my essay.

Waheed, Nadia. “Nadia Waheed: I Climb, I Backtrack, I Float.” Mindy Solomon Gallery, mindysolomon.com/exhibition/nadia-waheed-i-climb-i-backtrack-i-float/. Accessed 30 Oct. 2024.

The solo exhibition “I climb, I backtrack, I float” by Nadia Waheed featured a series of light-colored self-portraits, half-divine figures and artistic landscape. Waheed depicts self-liberation and resilience in her post-pandemic reflection series after her father’s diagnosis of terminal illness. Her first three paintings are the main focus of my essay due to space limit. Sequentially, the three pieces portray half-divine figures that symbolize new beginnings and transitions, a suspended female figure against a backdrop of dense, green forests, and lilies touched upon by glittering ripples. For Waheed, lilies are considered metaphors for women who believe in feminism with a less radical approach.

What I would like to close read in the exhibition is how the artist updates feminist art from the ideas of both Frida Kahlo and the New York Women’s Art Movement in the 1970s. What Waheed added to feminist art theories is a layer of uncertainty and gentleness while advocating for female rights. Both Kahlo and pioneers in the New York Women’s Art Movement were trying to break the conventional conception of women’s cultural roles (i.e. domestic instead of public). Waheed inherited their courage and took her collection into a public exhibition, which is an update for the ongoing feminist art movement. Early advocates may not have a chance to hold an exhibit of their own.

Note: the first two sources are from the Smith library.