

IMBODY: Portrait, Gender and the Animization of a New Race

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I

At a time when many of her peers are intentionally avoiding, even resisting the academy system, Song Kun has not. She does not see the training and education she received at the academy as the enemy. In fact, she believes these traditional techniques and skills are a source of nourishment and balance to her intellect and aesthetic. To this day, she still stubbornly obsesses over these traditional techniques, over concrete forms, over the eternal lyrical beauty of Botticelli and the sense of flow of “Cao's robes rising from the water” in ancient Chinese art.

Song Kun uses the term “xiezhen” (“true portrayal”) to sum up her practice. This term, often used interchangeably in Chinese with “portrait,” encompasses multiple layers of meaning. We can trace it back to the concept of the “portrait” in ancient Chinese tradition, which was synonymous with such terms as “xiezhaohao” and “chuanshen.” As Liu Xie of the Southern Dynasties period wrote in *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* in the chapter titled *Emotion and Literary Expression*, “That which is written for emotion is concise and gives a true portrayal (xiezhen), while that which is written for the sake of writing is vulgarly flamboyant and excessive.” Evidently, Liu Xie's concept of “true portrayal” refers not only to a faithful depiction, but also the refinement of emotion and fortitude. For Song Kun, this is naturally not a simple retracing of history. What she cares about is the relationship Liu Xie describes between “true portrayal” and “concision.” This is also where she differs from the ordinary realism of the academy: Song Kun hopes to develop a new aesthetic on a foundation of realism. In fact, each painting has an object and an image motif. To this end, Song Kun spends a great deal of time and effort searching for and reconstructing various related objects and image materials, sometimes employing everyday candid photography. The resulting pictures include objects and figures painted from life, as well as translated images, along with no shortage of products of her imagination and fabrication. The key is in how these image elements are synthesized. In this sense, one could say that Song Kun uses her own practice to reappraise the application of iconography in contemporary painting. In any case, when we hear the word “xiezhen” today, the first thing that comes to mind is not the ancient sense of “true portrayal,” or the realism of the academy, but the portrait photography collections popular in Japan. The term, pronounced

“shashin” in Japanese, was originally synonymous with photography and photographs, but in our minds, it has always been linked to Japanese pop culture, associated with such things as AV (adult video) and dolls. In this way, the characters for “xiezhen/shashin” have become a recognizable sign and schema in and of themselves. This can also explain why she would choose the visual kei SD and BJD dolls (as well as cyborgs and BDSM figures), equally popular in Japanese culture, as objects of depiction, because they, like AV and dolls, are constructed and shaped by a particular gaze of desire.

SD (Super Dollfie) is a line of ball-jointed dolls released by the Japanese company Volks in 1998. BJD is a general term for ball-jointed dolls. They can take on all manner of lifelike poses, and can also be dressed in various costumes and cosmetics, with interchangeable hands, hair, and eyes, and assigned various narrative plots. Like cyborgs, they lie between craft and nature. They are both living things and machines, part of the same derivative system. Song Kun's choice to use them as painting motif and object of depiction is not just out of aesthetic awareness, but also due to their ability to be assigned various characters and identities. It appears she prefers to view them as corporeal mirrors onto the existential reality of the individual or even contemporary man. This series of practices also reminds us that there are certain latent connections between the ball-jointed dolls and “portrait collections” popular in Japan and throughout Asia. We would do well to consider these dolls as a form of “portrait/xiezhen”—a blended form of portraiture to be precise, except that this “portraiture” is not photographic but is instead closer to Li Xie's “concise and true portrayal.” Japan's “figure portraits” treat people as objects of mass aesthetic appreciation, or things, even dolls, just like the ball-jointed dolls. Song Kun, however, is different. In these dolls, she sees a breath of life and light of spirit. For this reason, in Song Kun's eyes they are not playthings; they are a form of life, intimate friends on which she can rely. They do not demand or desire anything from people, and people can control them, but who's to say that people are not being controlled as well? Does not this obsession with dolls amount to being controlled? For instance, the rise of the “otaku” is rooted in this, which Song Kun alludes to with her divisions and dislocations in the painting, and the metal chains installed alongside them.

Evidently, Song Kun's corporealized psychological rearrangement, the so called “Imbody,” is not just the corporealization of the dolls, nor is it just in order to draw attention to humanity's existing

logic of “embodiment” and cyborg aesthetics. Just as the double entendre in the term “Imbody” implies—it is both “embody” (to make physical or corporeal), as well as “I’m body” (flesh in itself)—in a certain sense, the artist’s reappraisal of the body and its subjectivity is in order to liberate these dolls from their state of being controlled, and to bestow them with a new living form that transcends that of people and of dolls. This new living form maintains the existing social (industrial) logic and order between people and dolls, while also infusing it with a layer of transparency and aura that transcends this structure and logic.

Song Kun has found an aesthetic meeting point between Botticelli and these doll forms, but she has not directly imported Botticelli’s techniques here, instead only making partial use of flat brushstrokes and outlines. In any case, Song Kun is not depicting invisible forms. To the contrary, they all have basis in concrete motifs. These bases provide a foundation in reality, rather than an ideal archetype. Song Kun’s depictions maintain precise generalization, a generalization that is at once rooted in her fluency in realist techniques, and also more than a little inspired by the minimalistic splashed ink of such Southern Song dynasty Zen painters as Mu Xi and Liang Kai. It is in the latter that she found a transcendent resonance. It is also an “animizing” generalization, one which keeps its distance from Botticelli’s meticulous detail. Of course, this does not imply that Song Kun has discarded details altogether. To the contrary, she is quite focused on capturing individual parts and finer aspects of the body, which is where the life and emotions of the subjects of her depictions manifest. They manifest in such places as the figure’s gaze, the gaps between the fingers, creases in clothing, the unseen depths of the heart, even in specific marks of the brush. These self-sufficient details are often impossible to control, or places where the artist gives up control, or perhaps one could say they are the leftover fragments of life in a controlled body. They form an extreme contrast with the equally highlighted naked mechanical joints. This contrast is uniform through color and brushwork. Her customary technique is to refine a sense of transparency or translucence from gray tones. This “transparent gray” embodies a sense of the mechanical, while also bestowing the forms in the painting with a unique sense of life.

Aby Warburg said, “God is in the details.” Warburg’s doctoral thesis was on Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* and *Primavera*. In his essay, he profoundly revealed Botticelli’s expressions of life in motion and the “youth, beauty, love, death and grief” behind it.¹ Though Song Kun has not read Warburg,

¹Wu Qiong, “Shangdi Zhu Zai Xijie Zhong”—*Abi-Waerbao Tuxiangxue de Sixiang Mailuo* (“God is in the Details”—*The Conceptual Thread of Aby Warburg’s Iconography*) part 1, in *Xifang Wenming Zaixian* (Western

she has captured the aesthetics of motion and living forms of “Cao's robes rising from the water” in the details of *The Birth of Venus* and *Primavera*, and her own depictions carry this same beauty and youth, love and death as well. In fact, “chimera” images first appeared long ago, in Mesopotamia in the second millennium BCE. Such images emerged again repeatedly in ancient Egyptian and Greek art. These forms represent a divine force that can drive evil from the mortal world. Based on this, we could say that Song Kun uses doll, machine and cyborg bodies to replace the animal side of the chimera, while retaining the human side, which is likewise filled with the light of life. For Song Kun, they are neither dolls nor beasts but perhaps an animized race of future beings, beings fusing the genes of dolls and humans. Perhaps, for the artist, they represent humanity’s destiny, or are already humanity's reality.

Like many artists who moved to Beijing from elsewhere, Song Kun has moved home more times than she can count in recent years. Her three-person family has almost grown accustomed to this migratory state, even numb to it. Born in Inner Mongolia, Song Kun is no stranger to the nomadic life. She may have grown up in a city, but the naturalist culture of northern China exerts a profound influence on her. In her youth, she often dreamed of the non-pretentiousness and freedom of the “vast skies, open lands and wind blowing across the herds on the grasslands” from that familiar folk song. Years later, however, she discovered that the (post) human social project had utterly transformed this pure land of ideals. She has no intention of grieving over this reality, or of conceiving a utopia. She is more concerned with how to perceive and depict this reality. Perhaps it was precisely this experience of growing up in Inner Mongolia that drew her unconsciously to view “Imbody” as a new race.

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Song Kun is no feminist. She keeps a wary distance from radical feminist manifestos and actions, even tires of them, but that does not mean she ascribes to patriarchy. To the contrary, her practice bears the marks of gender everywhere. Virtually all of the cyborg bodies she depicts are female. This is of course also because women have long been the objects of the gaze, objects of power and control. One could say that the images of women in every era are constructed by the male gaze. This fits with the shaping of the Super Dollfies and ball-jointed dolls, which is determined to a great

extent by the gaze and aesthetic leanings of the masses, constructed by the gaze, products of social (consumption) engineering. For this reason, Song Kun's depictions do not only highlight the subjectivity of the body itself, but also reappraise women as a social role and their passive and fragile side. In this particular regard, they are no different from the dolls. This is what draws the artist in, and this is what bestows her actions with energy and rich imagination.

Song Kun pays little heed to the art system, and holds out no hope for this system, or the world, becoming any better. "Man is everywhere in chains" (Rousseau). This is perhaps why she has grown increasingly interested in the structure of the human body. In 2016, during a forty day residency at an art institution in a former Berlin women's prison, she had a much deeper experience and perception of the confinement of the body, of punishment and resistance, of order and dissent, and of the natural properties of gender and social identity. The layout of this latest exhibition (*IMBODY – Feeling Real · Nude*, 2019) also clearly incorporates various elements of a prison scene. The walls of the exhibition space are painted in a light flesh tone, blending with the female bodies in the paintings, and various industrial chains, chrome control panels and instruments (medical or sexual) are hung around the space, alongside the binding of the body, all coming together to form connotations of bondage porn. In this way, a magical chemical reaction takes place between the two extremes of the desire and confinement of the body. This is the source of inspiration for the concept of "Imbody." Perhaps, as the artist sees it, there is no essential difference between the contemporary art exhibition space mechanism, which has descended into a commercial production line, and prisons and BDSM spaces: they are all products of human complexity.

It is just like the fascinating relationship between the body structure of ball-jointed dolls and people. Song Kun says, "You can dress them up and pose them however you want, but you can't change their basic structure or range of motion without completely breaking them."² The human body is actually the same. It is often being controlled or toyed with, but as long as it does not exceed the inherent limited freedom, it can continue to survive. The music video *Looping* (2019), featured in this exhibition, is undoubtedly the best footnote to this series. In the video, a popping³ dancer mixes cyborg, shadow boxing, cosplay and other various movement styles and performance forms

²Lu Mingjun, Discussion with Song Kun, September 11, 2019, Song Kun Studio, Beijing, unpublished.

³Popping is rooted in a mime performance of robot movements known as "robot style" that involves controlling the tension and relaxation of various muscles and joints to produce a "wave" or "pop" effect. Incorporating such street dance styles as the "robot" and "wave," this is a style of movement that combines freedom and order.

to the rhythm of the music, accompanied by the minimalist lyrics—“eat me, kid me, imprison me, copy me”—in a mechanical reproduction of the poses the artist creates. Though the body in the music video has not been completely homogenized and transformed by social (consumption) engineering, and still retains its physical properties as flesh, it remains in a certain state of confinement. But what Song Kun wishes to convey is that even so, we can still feel the body's limited freedom. And this has made her increasingly firm in her belief that a person's vitality is determined by their tenacity and circuitous wisdom. This is not so much the predicament and fate of the body as it is the basic motivation and strategy of survival. As Christoph Wulf said, “Since ancient times, people have always used the body to obtain the human image. This image of the body is the image of humanity, just as human performance is always bodily performance.”⁴

Three years ago, in the exhibition *Asura Sukhavati* (2016), Song Kun fabricated an island. In her eyes, this island was not just the pure land, it was also the human realm, as well as hell. To this day, her art remains rooted in this keen sense of reality. She has created a series of illusory people, an illusion of neither past nor present, but a vivid vision of the current reality. It is just like this city in which she lives. The class divisions of society as a body are the same in nature as the divisions in a psychological break. This is another layer of implied meaning in *Cyborg Body, Hierarchical Dislocation*. In fact, the nude (gray) tones of the paintings, the division and dislocation of the images, and the sense of distance all allude to this mechanical, estranged world. For Song Kun, painting is a carrier for reality and a spiritual outlet, and because of this, her practice has never departed from the self-referential mechanisms of painting. As discussed above, she feels that it is not difficult to resist or discard conventions. What is difficult is finding room to move forward within conventional language and aesthetics. It is the same with our bodies. “Dancing in shackles” is itself the convention, even if it is one that is under constant attack.

⁴Christoph Wulf, *Bilder des Menschen: Imaginäre und performative Grundlagen der Kultur*, Chen Hongyan, trans., Peng Zhengmei, proof, Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2018, p. 57.