

Artist Statement

Su Yang

My practice-led research aims to investigate the ideologies that encourage many young Chinese women to undergo unnecessary and often harmful non-therapeutic cosmetic surgeries in their pursuit of conforming to dominant standards of ‘female beauty ideals’ within contemporary Chinese society. In my doctoral dissertation, titled “Reframing the Representation of Women in China with Feminism,” I analyzed how prevailing female representations in China are shaped by ideologies influenced by global consumerism, Chinese dominant conceptions of feminism as “feminine-ism,” patriarchal notions of ideal female beauty from Confucianism, and the influence of Chinese male (heterosexual) desire, particularly as presented in the traditional genre of European nude painting. This in-depth study complements my creative works, including paintings, photographs, videos, and films, which manifest the visible impulse to these invisible ideologies that have started to transform women’s bodies.

In my earlier paintings, I likened cosmetic surgery to the historical and social regimes that once subjected vast numbers of Chinese women to foot binding, both celebrating the mutilation of women in the name of beauty. Later, I exaggerated the surgical process and outcomes, rendering them as surreal and unsettling images. In my artwork, I take on the roles of both artist and model. My photography and video works explore the same question and do so in a similar format, employing my own body as the artistic medium.

The essence of feminist thought in my paintings is to contrast patriarchal aesthetics and structures while revealing their real-life impact on women’s bodies. These works of art challenge and refute the “invisible ideologies” driving many young Chinese women to adhere to evolving dominant ideals of female beauty. Additionally, I endeavor to use my artwork to subvert conventions linking women’s art with femininity in the male-dominated and conservative Chinese art world.