HiLL PUBLISHING

Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science, 2024, 8(8), 1920-1924
https://www.hillpublisher.com/journals/jhass/
ISSN Online: 2576-0548
ISSN Print: 2576-0556

Modern Fiber Art Based on Female Perspective

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How to cite this paper: Yining Shao, Suiyuan Li. (2024) Modern Fiber Art Based on Female Perspective. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 8(8), 1920-1924.
DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2024.08.021

Received: July 12, 2024
Accepted: August 9, 2024
Published: September 6, 2024

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Abstract

This study explores the realm of modern fiber art through a gendered lens, specifically focusing on the female perspective. It examines how female artists infuse their understanding of women's emotions, gender roles, and humanistic social identities into the medium of fiber art. By employing materials and techniques that reflect feminine physical characteristics, these artists depict the female form and humanistic social identity in their contemporary fiber creations. Through an analysis of the relationship between feminism and modern fiber art, this paper aims to investigate the influence of the female perspective on the field, furthering our understanding of the unique viewpoints and forms of expression that women bring to artistic creation. It also considers their emotional expression and cultural concepts within fiber artworks, promoting emotional resonance between the audience and the works of female artists. This exploration injects new creative perspectives into modern fiber art and fosters its innovative development.

Keywords

Female perspective; fiber art; feminism

Introduction

"Fiber art" is an art form that is both ancient and young, integrating the excellent traditional textile cultures of countries around the world, and absorbing the latest achievements of modern art concepts and textile technologies, providing artists with a broad space to explore diverse fiber materials and develop novel art forms (Chen Xuemiao, 2019). In its development, it has integrated the outstanding traditional textile cultures from around the world, while also incorporating modern art concepts and the latest achievements in textile technology. As an art form, fiber art utilizes various fiber materials, through traditional or modern craft techniques, to produce aesthetically pleasing and practical two-dimensional or three-dimensional works. It uses natural fibers, synthetic fibers, chemical fibers, and organic synthetic fibers, and is constituted through a rich variety of techniques such as weaving, knitting, knotting, wrapping, printing, embroidery, tying, dyeing, gluing, and sewing, possessing unique meanings and strong visual impact. Modern fiber art emerged in the 1970s, almost simultaneously with the rise of the second wave of feminism. Fiber art has a natural connection with women, as women have long been involved in traditional crafts such as embroidery and weaving. In the development of fiber art, fiber materials, and techniques are closely related to traditional female handicrafts. With the gradual spread of feminist cultural trends, female artists, based on reflecting on the social and historical situation of female identity, have used fiber materials and craft techniques, which possess softness, toughness, and warmth, as creative media, opening up artistic creation texts that explore women and fiber.

1. The Development of Modern Fiber Art from the Perspective of Women

1.1 Before the 1970s

In the 1960s, fiber art experienced a new artistic exploration, which was closely connected with the second wave of

the feminist movement, giving rise to the feminist art movement. Women who had traditionally engaged in domestic textile work began to reflect on their own roles and discursive power, using their expertise in weaving techniques to initiate a "new tapestry movement," linking textile art with feminist discourse, ushering in a new era of women's awakening. In the late 1960s, feminism was bolstered by the democratic movement in the United States, leading to a second wave of feminism. A large number of women artists and critics actively joined the movement. They targeted the long-standing patriarchal social system and the discriminatory art establishment, creating numerous artworks with strong feminist characteristics and critical messages. The materials they used were predominantly fiber-based, as fiber materials and fiber-based everyday objects were considered to be highly feminine and closely linked to women's social roles. Most of the works addressed the female body, although the concept of the body was still fundamentally exploring issues of women's social identity. This sparked a wave of discussion in modern fiber art. As an art form, fiber art's materials and techniques have long carried metaphorical feminine connotations. Although modern textile technology has been replaced by machines, the symbolic identity of women in textiles has not changed. In the past, women were the creators of textiles, and today they remain the main force in fiber art creation. The rise of feminist art in the late 1960s further strengthened the connection between fiber art and the female perspective, as feminist thought injected new creative perspectives into fiber art.

1.2 In the 1970s and Beyond

Modern fiber art emerged in the 1970s, almost simultaneously with the rise of the second wave of feminism. During this period, women artists and art critics actively participated in the feminist movement. Linda Nochlin raised the question of "the equality of women in the art field, which, like equality in any other field, does not depend on the relative benevolence or ill-will of individual men…but on the very nature of our institutional structures and the view of reality which they impose on the human beings who are part of them." Her views inspired women artists to explore issues such as gender equality, women's history, and sexual liberation. In 1972, Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro organized the first feminist art exhibition "Womanhouse", introducing fiber materials into contemporary art to express issues of female identity.

After entering the 1980s, fiber art became more diversified, and women artists began to re-examine their relationships with family, life, and society. Feminist art creation and theoretical research began to diverge, as artists started to explore from their own perspectives, connecting women's self-awareness and social relationships. Fiber artists explored feminine characteristics through materials, techniques, and forms, presenting the unique perspectives of women in modern society. Feminist research in the 1980s took a new direction, with theorists questioning the early feminist artists' focus on the female body, arguing that feminine qualities are not just physiological but also cultural and structural. They believed that true gender equality could only be achieved by fundamentally researching and reconstructing the cultural structure (Liu Jiajing, 2019).

2. Characteristics and Expressions of the Feminine Perspective in Modern Fiber Art

2.1 Characteristics

2.1.1 Feminine Qualities of Traditional Fiber Art

Fiber art has deep connections with women. In traditional textile crafts such as weaving and embroidery, the role of women is indispensable. Throughout the history of art, textiles, and fibers have been closely intertwined with women, and fiber art has become an important medium for women to express their emotions and culture. In the development of traditional fiber art, fiber art has been closely associated with women's traditional handicrafts. The intimate connection between textiles and women stems from the joint influence of historical and social factors. Globally, women have long been the main group engaged in textile work. In China, skills such as embroidery, weaving, and sewing were known as "women's work" (nügong), passed down from mothers to daughters, and from mothers-in-law to daughters-in-law. In the course of the development of world textile history, the relationship between textile labor and women has not only not diminished over time, but has become increasingly close, gradually becoming a unique symbol of the female perspective. At the same time, women and fiber art have formed a firm association in the process of symbolization.

2.1.2 Feminine Qualities of Modern Fiber Art

From the female perspective, modern fiber art exhibits unique forms of expression. Women artists, through

techniques such as weaving, knitting, and embroidery, imbue their works with unique aesthetic and cultural connotations. Fiber materials and techniques have become important media for women artists' creations. Compared to the "women's work" techniques of traditional fiber art, modern fiber art more often expresses women's roles and identity in society. Under the impact of feminist cultural trends, women artists, starting from the familiar fiber materials and skilled textile techniques, reflect on their own cultural and historical circumstances, using the female body as a symbolic symbol integrated into fiber art, resulting in an unprecedented diversity of styles, from flat two-dimensional decorations to three-dimensional installations, expressing questions about identity and social symbolism. They attempt to use the most life-close materials to evoke a reconstruction and identification of their own identity, experiencing the unique feminine qualities of fiber art in the forms and media of the works. This art form not only presents the changing roles of women in society but also conveys their deep understanding and reflection on their own identity and culture.

2.2 Modes of Expression

2.2.1 Employing Fiber Materials with Feminine Qualities

Fiber materials themselves have unique pliability, warmth, and tactility. Fibers impart a sense of security and materiality to humans, and humans in turn imbue fibers with artistry and poetry (Li Sunyi, 2017). Women fiber artists, through the use of silk threads, fabrics, wool yarns, and other soft, intimate materials, express women's experiences and emotions. These artists focus on the cultural connotations and visual-tactile sensations of materials, imbuing handcrafted fiber products with warmth and narrative. Artist Shi Hui's work "Nest" uses the "body" to express care, metaphorizing the inner intelligence and maternal power of women. She bundled thousands of traditional bamboo fly swatters together and sprinkled them with paper pulp, forming a crystalline nest-like structure, suggesting the matrix of life and the energy of reproduction, expressing the rhythm and intimacy of life, and metaphorizing the nurturing of women's inner knowledge and maternal power.

In exploring feminist themes, fiber artist Yin Xiuzhen also extensively uses this type of soft, feminine fiber material, such as textiles, fabrics, and yarn, which are widely used in her works *Portable City*, *Thinking*, and *Clothing Trunk*. These materials not only express her love for childhood textiles, but also convey her understanding and insights about life. Her works are based on the artist's real-life emotions, with unique personal imprints. Another artist focused on the female perspective, Zhang Xiaoxue, is adept at creating works that combine softness and resilience through multimedia fusion. In her representative work *Return*, she used hundreds of women's underwear to create a spherical installation, incorporating technological elements and using an electric drive to make each piece of underwear move slowly and rhythmically, like breathing. This installation mimics the oyster shell that nurtures pearls, metaphorizing the inclusive character of women. She chose women's underwear, which has a strong visual impact, as the creative material, intending to arouse the audience's attention and reflection on the female group.

2.2.2 Employing Fiber Techniques with Feminine Qualities

Women artists are delicate, sensitive, and inclusive, yet also free, independent, and clear-sighted. In recent years, women artists have become increasingly focused on women's self-awareness. As fiber artists pay more attention to the expression of female emotions, the techniques they employ also reflect their ideological consciousness, beginning to incorporate fiber techniques with feminine qualities such as sewing and weaving into their works. For example, Judy Chicago's *Birth Project* series works, through embroidery and textiles, celebrating the theme of motherhood and the creative spirit, expressing the pain, mystery, and miracles of the birthing process. Works like *Birth Tear* abstractly depict the child emerging from the vagina, with the female body seeming to split open and emit light, a work of great ingenuity that has influenced many textile art practitioners.

Chinese fiber artist Lin Tianmiao's work *Sewing* reflects the traditional women's embroidery work scene. She used white cotton threads to wrap ordinary objects such as sewing machines (Lu Keqi, 2024), stoves, cradles, and mirrors, combined with traditional women's needle and thread techniques. This work consists of an old-fashioned children's sewing machine wrapped in thread and a video projection of manual labor. Lin Tianmiao's installation work emphasizes the importance of women's labor, which has historically been seen as the exclusive domain of women, known as "women's work." She has incorporated "manual labor" into her installation creations and exhibited them in public spaces, affirming the value of women's handicraft labor in the domestic sphere. Starting from individual experiences and individual consciousness, their creative methods are supported by individual handcrafted creations, expanding to discuss the position of women's daily activities and handicraft labor in the social value system, establishing an

important dimension of feminist art (Liu Jiajing, 2019).

2.2.3 Expressing Feminine Bodily Characteristics

If materials are the foundation of modern fiber art, then the body is its best means of expression. From the male perspective, the female body is often viewed as a carrier of desire or an accessory, while women artists see the body as a symbol of free will and independent consciousness. They use the display of the body as a way to express their own thoughts and positions. As American feminist critic Adrienne Rich stated, "The reclamation of the body by women is a revolution far more powerful for human society than the workers' reclamation of the means of production." (Many women artists, from a unique female perspective, focus on female physiology such as the female body, uterus, and childbirth, using soft textile materials to integrate these feminine qualities into their fiber art creations. New York sculptor, feminist, and social activist Susan Grabel creates figurative sculptures, prints, and collages using handmade paper, clay, and mixed media, exploring the human dimension of social issues. In her 2014 work *The Venus Cycle*, she explored the bodies of elderly women, showing the traces of life left on the body over the years. In an era that worships "white, young, and thin," these traces are often seen as aging, but in her view, each stage of life has its unique grace and strength. Through repetition, humor, and classic quotation, Grabel challenges traditional prejudices against the aging female body, affirming women's self-worth. In her 2019 work *Birthday Suit*, she conveys the power of confidence through nudity, not as an idealized or perfect physical specimen, but immersed in the uniqueness, form, folds, quirks, shadows, and scars of the body. Through meticulous expression, the work demonstrates how women artists explore and express their profound thoughts and emotions through the body and materials.

2.2.4 Expressing Feminine Identity Characteristics

Women artists, from a female perspective, incorporate feminine identity characteristics into fiber art, which include not only personal background and social status, but also social, political, and gender identity. Initially, the female body was confined to the framework of gentleness, purity, sexiness, and elegance, reflecting the dependency of the patriarchal gaze. However, the norms and demands of the patriarchal system have sparked a rebellious feminist spirit. As feminist art has gradually developed and gained attention, women fiber artists have begun to reflect on their own identity roles, focusing on the values and ideals that society considers. In Lin Tianmiao's work *Open Intuition*, a tangle of ropes decorates the exposed heads and legs of three female bodies, and the artist, through the use of household items and everyday objects in her creation, whether wrapped in white thread or reassembled, reflects on women's lives and trivialities, with the entangled white threads evoking women's being trapped by domestic chores. She held that as a female artist, her creation is precisely to express the voice of women. In the reconstruction of female identity, Egyptian artist Ghada Amer, with the "role of women in society" as the theme, combines traditional embroidery techniques and abstract expressionist painting to create a series of flat works that break through the traditional female image. Her work symbolizes the incompatibility between traditional embroidery techniques and modern female images, which has caused great controversy in social and art circles. In the work *Private Rooms*, Amer translated the Quranic verses that restrict women into French and embroidered them on clothing, shoe racks, and shelves, using the act of "sewing" to metaphorize women's work, challenging society's stereotypes of women and attempting to reconstruct the female identity.

3. The Influence of Feminism on Modern Fiber Art

3.1 Ideological Significance

The female perspective has brought new creative directions to modern fiber art, further encouraging women artists to express their reflections on female identity and social roles through their works. Feminism emphasizes gender equality, focusing on the status and rights of women in society, and conveys the voice and power of women through artistic creation. The application of different materials and the expression of themes among artists show diversity. Whether in the field of fiber art, feminist art, or painting, artists from different backgrounds may use different perspectives and methods when expressing the same theme, but based on the female perspective, the works convey more of women's questioning and criticism of the unfair treatment they have long suffered under the patriarchal society. For women artists, more and more people in the field of fiber art are telling stories from the female perspective through materials and techniques or the identity of the female body, which has become a unique force in driving the development of modern fiber art. Women artists have broken through the barriers between the inner spirit and the external environment, and in the creative attempts of different materials, have merged their spiritual world with the

everyday objects of life into rich creative expression (Ai Lei'er, 2019).

3.2 Aesthetic Significance

Women artists, through fiber material techniques, have exhibited unique feminine qualities and emotions, creating a distinctive aesthetic style. Fiber art has become an important medium for women to express themselves and explore social issues. Compared to other art forms, the uniqueness of fiber art lies in its simultaneous artistry and sociality of textiles. It is not only closely related to production and life, but also occupies an important position in cultural society. Women artists, through fiber art works, have presented soft, delicate, and emotional qualities, creating a unique aesthetic style. They use soft materials such as textiles and threads, and through techniques such as weaving and sewing, integrate personal emotions and social issues into their works. This aesthetic style not only breaks the boundaries of traditional art but also endows fiber art with unique visual charm and emotional depth. Fiber artists convey the voices of women, explore social issues, and promote social change through their works. The uniqueness and diversity of this art form have made fiber art an important position in contemporary art, constantly evolving and innovating.

4. Conclusions

The combination of fiber art and the female perspective can be traced back to the rise of feminist thought. Female artists utilize flexible, warm, and sensuous fiber materials and techniques to express female bodily characteristics and social identities, thereby enriching the expressive forms of modern fiber art. From the female perspective, modern fiber art exhibits unique artistic features, focusing on the properties of materials and the language of fibers, while emphasizing the application of traditional crafts and techniques. These characteristics are closely linked to feminine qualities. Plus, the symbolic elements associated with women in fiber art are also tightly connected to feminism, making the integration and development of fiber art and feminism inevitable. When female artists work with fiber materials, they pay attention to the materiality of the fibers, which have an intimate relationship with humanity from the start. The choice of materials showcases feminine qualities, further expressing concerns and reflections on gender issues, bodily rights, and social expectations. Throughout the development of modern fiber art, women have played an indispensable role, whether in the use of fiber materials or in the practice of artistic concepts. Through their choices of materials, exploration of techniques, and introspection regarding their bodily identities, women artists have constructed a discourse that includes female characteristics, bodily identity, and symbolic metaphors. Based on the female perspective, independent-thinking women artists have injected new creative viewpoints into modern fiber art, propelling its progress and innovative development. Their efforts have not only garnered widespread attention in the art world but have also brought about profound reflections and transformations in society.

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