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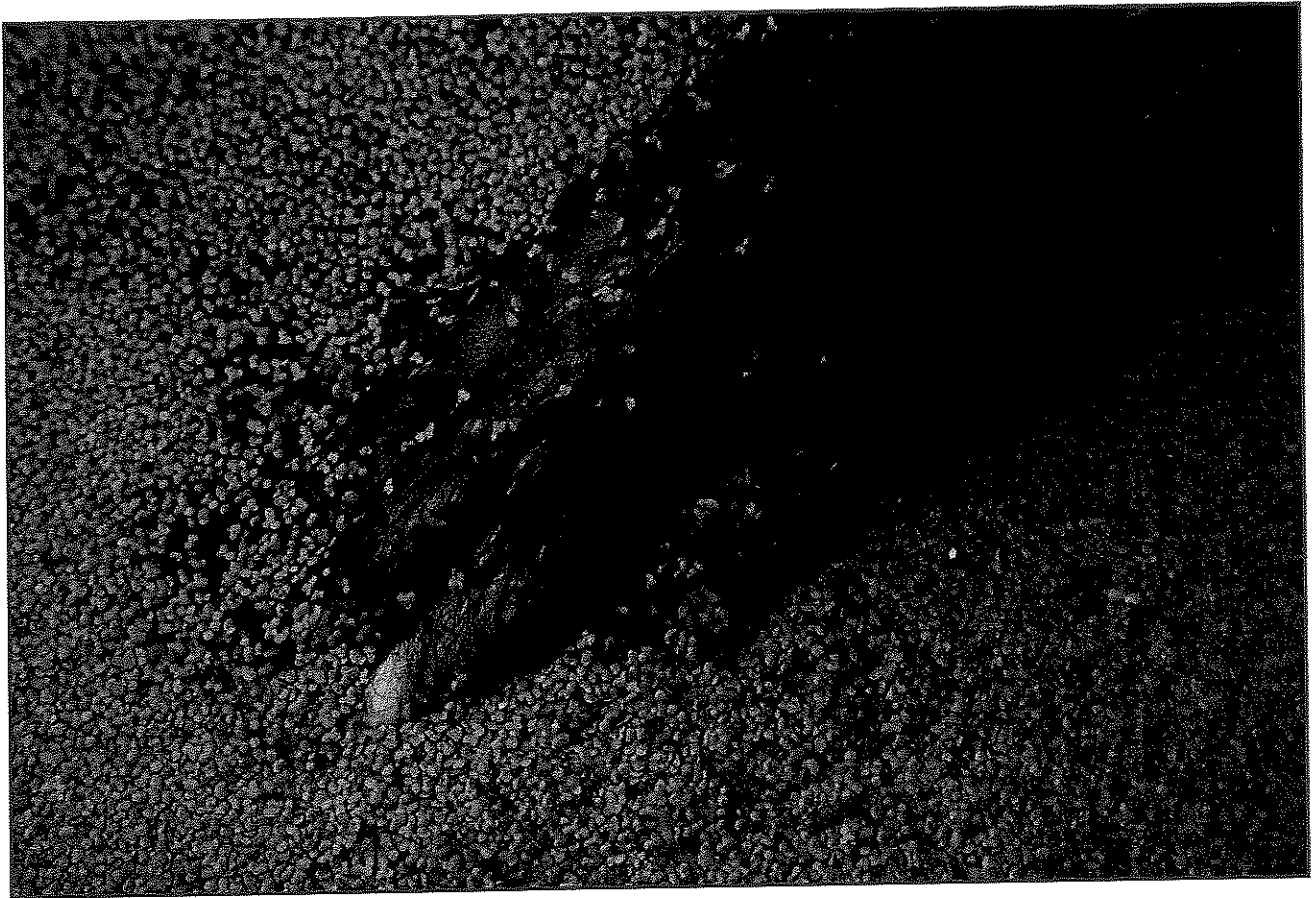
Contact Photography Festival, Toronto, 2014: Blog post four. Through the Body.

Posted by [Travis Cole](#) on Wednesday, June 4, 2014 · [Leave a Comment](#)

Through the Body: Lens-Based Works by Contemporary Chinese Women Artists

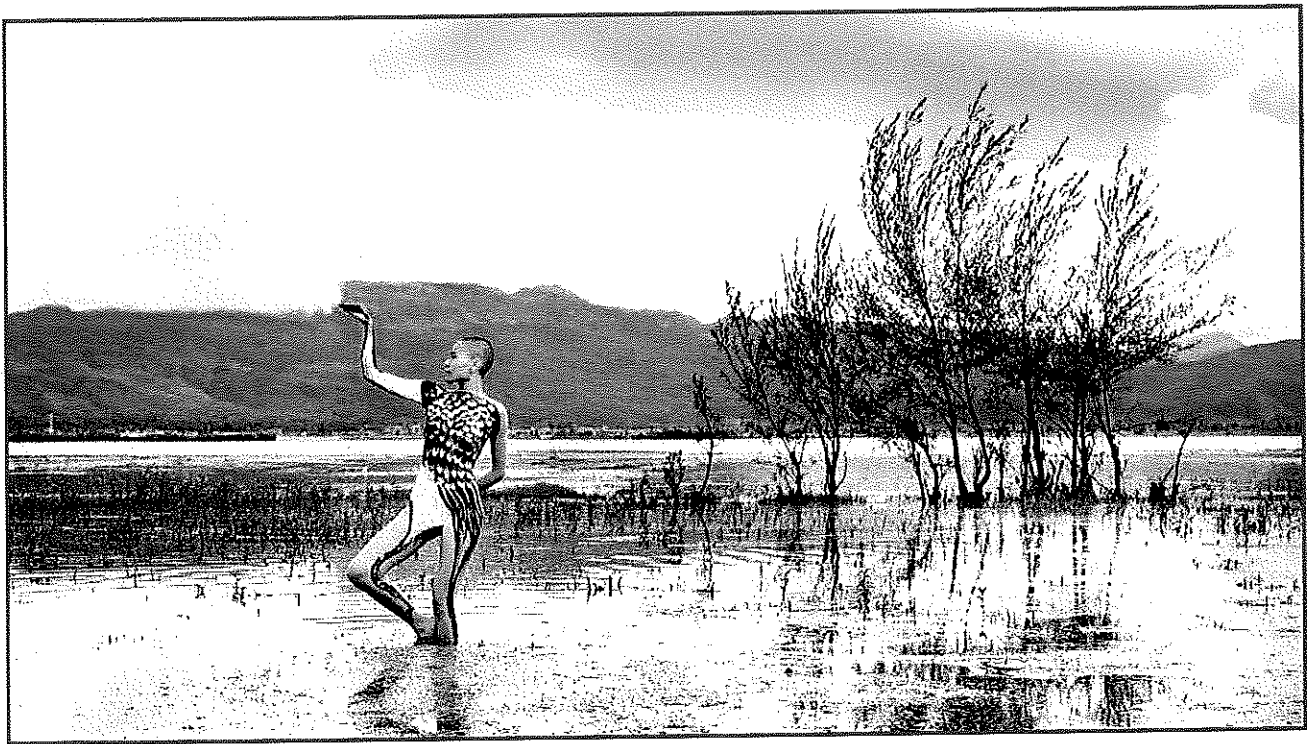
University of Toronto Art Centre, April 29-June 28, 2014

by Magdalyn Asimakis



Li Xinmo, *The Death of the Xinkai River*, 2008. Courtesy CONTACT Photography Festival.

Mid-way through the Contact Photography Festival, the exhibition “Through the Body: Lens-Based works by Contemporary Chinese Women Artists” opened at the University of Toronto Art Centre. Though Chinese contemporary art has had impact on the international art world since the 1980s, the face of Chinese art has been dominated by male artists. Responding to this, curators Matthew Brower, Fu Xiaodong, and Yan Zhou decided contribute to Contact’s exploration of identity by bringing together the photography of eleven contemporary Chinese female artists and collectives whose work explores the social and political circumstances that surround them.



Lei Benben, Crane, video still, 2009. Courtesy CONTACT Photography Festival.

In these works, the artists play with the concept of *Ti Shi*, a Chinese theory that involves learning through bodily experience. Each work uses the body—whether through mutilation, self-fashioning, role playing, or exploring poses in specific environments—in order to alter the artists' relationships to their environments, and, in turn, draw attention to social issues that inhabit these spaces. The various approaches these artists take shine light on their diverse explorations of the shifting gender politics in China.



Chen Zhe, *The Bearable: Birthday*, 2010. Courtesy CONTACT Photography Festival.

Chen Zhe's photography series "The Bearable" uses extreme close-ups of fragile body parts, like eyes, as well as images of wounds, blood, and clumps of hair to render a dark and uncomfortable visceral experience that is meant to visually echo the artist's internal struggles with depression. In Ye Funa's "Family Album," the artist appropriates the roles of various family members in old family photos, which at once speaks to her desire to identify with her family and her inability to understand their experiences. In Lei Benben's film *Original Face*, the artist uses movement and body paint in an attempt to blend in with the natural landscape that surrounds her. This performance represents the tensions that exist between her desire to connect with her environment, and the insurmountable challenge in doing so.

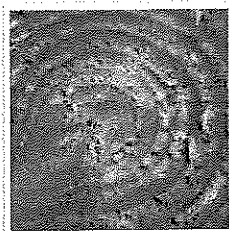


Ye Funa, Grandparents, 2010. Courtesy CONTACT Photography Festival.

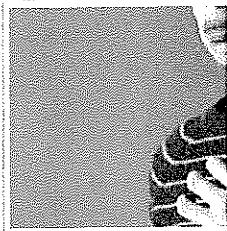
The exhibition does not address Toronto in any direct way, which makes its insertion into this festival all the more strong. It rather translates as a sampling of the visually and socially powerful work that is being produced by Chinese women. What seems to be a resurgence of mainstream interest in women and feminism as of late makes this exhibition a timely one. Maybe there is something in the water, but maybe we are in a moment when there is a need to reassess our perceptions of where we are in terms of progressing gender equality. This exhibition reminds us that there is still a ways to go. In my first Contact blog post, I suggested we might come out of the festival, whose central theme is identity, more self-aware. Interestingly, this exhibition made me think about the self-awareness of the art world, which I participate in, and question why the discussion of Chinese women artists lagged enough in the western world that this compelling exhibition was so opportune.

Magdalyn Asimakis lives in Toronto, Ontario and works as a research assistant in the curatorial department at the Art Gallery of Ontario, she is a regular contributor to BlackFlash Magazine and our Contact Photography Festival correspondent.

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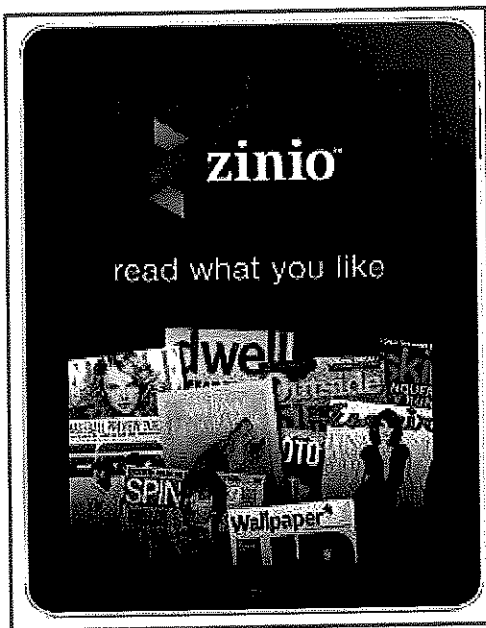
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