

Whispers of Resistance
May 1–July 26, 2025

Art
Museum

Works by

Anny Peng, Zhou Wenjing, Liu Xi,
and Cai Yaling

Curated by

Sibei Du

Location

University of Toronto Art Centre

This exhibition is produced as part of the requirements for the Master of Visual Studies in Curatorial Studies at the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design at the University of Toronto.

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Graduating Exhibitions**

In the Interstices of Our Palms

Curated by Sophie Dubeau Chicoine
May 1–July 26, 2025
University of Toronto Art Centre

Careful Crossings

Curated by Abisola Oni
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University of Toronto Art Centre

Dwelling Under Distant Suns

Curated by Yantong Li
September 3–December 20, 2025
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

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Whispers of Resistance

Whispers of Resistance explores the construction of gender roles within traditional Chinese family structures, examining how women are confined to the domestic sphere and primarily defined through motherhood. Focusing on memory, intimacy, time, intergenerational relationships, and maternal sacrifice, the works on display, created by four prominent Chinese female artists, reflect the multifaceted experiences of women bound by family life, offering nuanced perspectives on their lived realities.

Over the past century, the social roles of Chinese women have undergone a transition. The traditional model, wherein women were dependent on their husbands and led lives revolving around the family and children, has given way to a new reality that sees women pursue their own social lives and individual expression. While these changes in social roles reflect the fact that Chinese women have undergone a significant transformation from dependents to autonomous subjects, a shift toward greater independence in areas such as economic opportunities and social influence, societal factors continue to shape their position in social life. Consequently, even as women strive to externalize their innermost desires, the broader societal context and the persistence of belief in the traditional model create a dissonance that leads to their struggle and hesitation. On one hand, women yearn to claim newfound agency; on the other hand, they find it challenging to fully break free from social expectations, such as those that believe women should be nothing beyond devoted wives and mothers, caretakers of

the family, limiting their ability to express their full potential.

This exhibition offers an intimate exploration of the emotional bonds between women. Through deeply personal narratives, reflections, and observations, it aims to foster empathy for the specific challenges Chinese women encounter in their pursuit of identity and autonomy within a patriarchal society, recognizing that their experiences may resonate with those of women facing similar struggles. Chinese feminism is deeply influenced by its unique cultural and historical context. While both Chinese and Western feminisms focus on women's rights and social status, Chinese feminism uniquely emphasizes interconnectedness and harmony between family, society, and culture. This perspective is further shaped by the complex and multifaceted understanding of motherhood in Chinese history and culture, leading to a distinctive interpretation of this role within Chinese feminist discourse.

This exhibition primarily features female artists born in the 1980s who experienced the One-Child Policy, revealing the disproportionate burdens women endured compared to men, such as abortions, IUD insertions, fines, and other forms of oppression and exploitation. The sacrifices of Chinese mothers are shaped by intricate social pressures, ranging from an enduring preference for sons to potential unequal division of household labour and childcare responsibilities, and result in a gradual loss of autonomy, including the erosion of

previously held financial independence and personal time as motherhood takes hold. The construction of Chinese mothers' roles is influenced by both familial and societal pressures, compelling women to conform to norms dictated by social forces. The persistent inequality women face from childhood onward can foster complex emotions—such as suppressed anger, internalized self-doubt, and a sense of resigned helplessness—affecting their ability to develop the autonomy and independence needed to challenge restrictive social models. The pervasive implementation of social inequality, from systemic barriers in education and employment, gender bias in media representation, to unequal distribution of domestic labor within families and internalized societal expectations, making it difficult for women to identify and attribute responsibility accurately.

Whispers of Resistance highlights the significance of the local particularity of Chinese feminism. It seeks to articulate the unique position of Chinese feminism within the global discourse, drawing on specific contexts such as the negotiation of traditional family structures to establish its distinctiveness. This exhibition reveals some of the diverse approaches of Chinese feminist art, showcasing how artists confront and overcome gender oppression, exploring the potential of art as a means to achieve female liberation. For example, Liu Xi transforms her childhood experiences in a male-dominated environment into a powerful tool against social stigma, helping women shed repression and shame to freely express themselves.

Liu advocates for a form of sovereignty over the body and society that women have claimed for themselves, embodying a complex and nuanced sense of pride. Anny Peng employs satire to highlight the issue of women's sacrifices within the family, using humour and irony to spark broader social awareness. Zhou Wenjing's work ignited discussions on Chinese social media, prompting a movement to take mothers to have their IUDs removed, fostering greater understanding and recognition of women's suffering by making visible their invisible pain and reproductive health issues. After becoming a mother, Cai Yaling celebrates and praises women's exceptional maternal qualities while also lamenting the passage of time and mothers' selfless dedication, embodying the transmission and inheritance of the maternal role.

Through diverse artistic expressions, we can appreciate the diverse attitudes of Chinese female artists towards their personal and social experiences. Some artists have visualized and exposed the endless exploitation brought about by structural gender inequality and social conditioning; others boldly challenge and play with taboos, revealing the suppressed parts of women's inner selves; still others accept and embrace the experience of motherhood, regarding childbirth and nurturing as rituals and precious records. Ultimately, the works in this exhibition both expose hidden harm to women and reveal courageous resistance toward the oppression of patriarchy and power structures.

Cover: Zhou Wenjing, *IUD* (detail), 2014. Blue velvet canvas, copper ring, 40 cm x 40 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Right: Cai Yaling, *August 21, 2012, 2014*. Digital print, 60 cm x 60 cm. Original work: artist's hair, Dacron. Image courtesy of the artist.



About the Curator

Sibei Du is a curator currently based in Toronto. Originally from Guangdong, China, she graduated from University of the Arts London, London College of Fashion with a Bachelor of Arts. Her curatorial practice explores themes of identity, gender, and the body. Sibei has worked as a Curatorial Intern at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto. In 2022, she curated the group exhibition *Uncertain Future* at Zi Museum in Shenzhen.

Curator's Acknowledgments

With heartfelt gratitude, I extend my deepest appreciation to Professors Barbara Fischer and Yi Gu for their scholarly dedication and professional wisdom. Your rigorous mentorship and visionary teachings have laid the cornerstone for this exhibition's intellectual framework. To artists Liu Xi, Zhou Wenjing, Cai Yaling, and Anny Peng—thank you for generously sharing your profoundly thoughtful and emotionally resonant artworks. These powerful visual narratives, through their exquisite articulation of feminine experiences, form the very soul of our collective endeavor. The Art Museum staff deserves special recognition for their technical expertise in transforming abstract curatorial concepts into tangible spacial poetry. To my parents, siblings Siwei and Yalan, and extended family—your nourishing love has been my sustaining force. My partner Zixuan's steadfast encouragement and intellectual companionship illuminated every challenging phase. Finally, to my mother—your spiritual resilience remains the wellspring of inspiration and driving force behind this exhibition's creation.

Public Programs

Opening Reception

Wednesday, April 30, 6pm–8pm
University of Toronto Art Centre

Curatorial Tour

Saturday, May 10, 2pm–3pm
University of Toronto Art Centre

Free and open to the public.
For more information and to register, visit artmuseum.utoronto.ca/programs.

Exhibition Tours

The Art Museum offers in-person guided exhibition tours for classes and groups. For more information or to book a tour, email artmuseum@utoronto.ca.

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Visiting the Art Museum

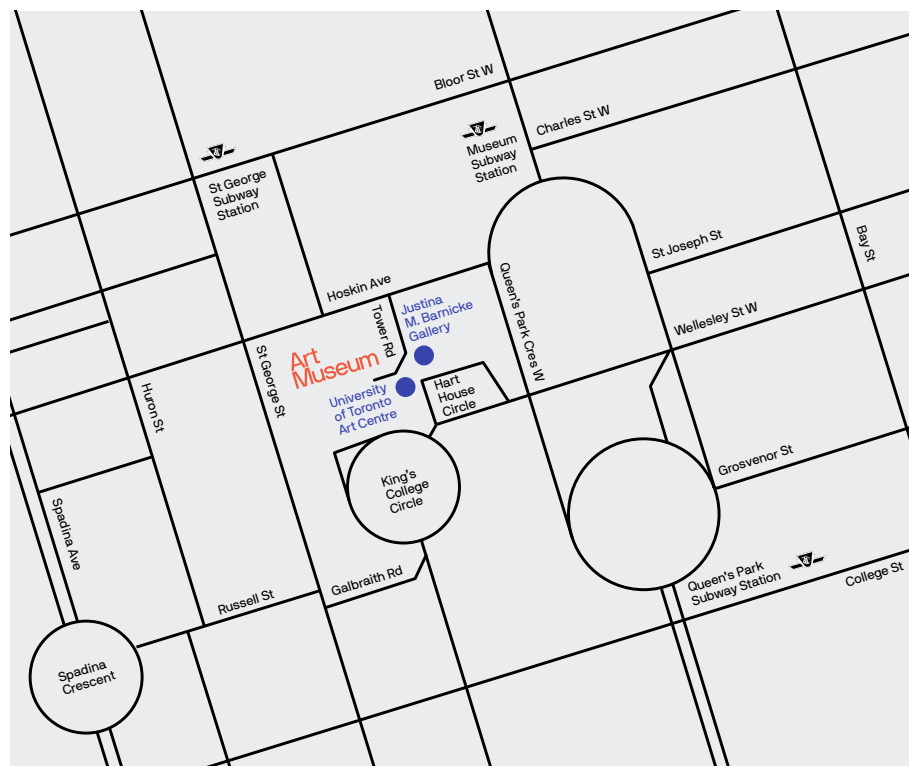
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery
7 Hart House Circle
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H3

University of Toronto Art Centre
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artmuseum@utoronto.ca
artmuseum.utoronto.ca
[@artmuseumuoft](https://www.instagram.com/artmuseumuoft)
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Tuesday	12 noon–5pm
Wednesday	12 noon–8pm
Thursday	12 noon–5pm
Friday	12 noon–5pm
Saturday	12 noon–5pm
Sunday	Closed
Monday	Closed

Closed on statutory holidays.
Admission is FREE.



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