

Intersectional Feminism in Transparent Contemporary Art

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Abstract

This article examines how intersectional feminist theory can be embodied through contemporary art practice, with particular attention to the Chinese cultural context. Drawing on a practice-led research methodology, the study explores how transparent gauze, embroidered text, and digital image processing collectively construct a cross-media visual language capable of articulating the overlapping social roles and identity tensions experienced by contemporary Chinese women. Two primary installation works — Nine Identities and Seven Layers of Gaze— are analyzed as both artistic outcomes and theoretical contributions. The research argues that transparent materials function not merely as formal choices but as social metaphors, rendering visible the condition of being simultaneously seen and overlooked. By situating intersectional feminism within the specificities of Chinese traditional culture and contemporary social life, the study contributes to a localized feminist art discourse while advancing methodological conversations about the role of artistic practice in social critique.

Keywords: intersectional feminism; transparent contemporary art; Chinese women's identity; installation art; feminist art

Introduction

The fast upheaval of contemporary society has fueled debates over gender, identity, and cultural representation. While globalization and modernization have increased possibilities for women in school, work, and public life, traditional cultural beliefs continue to influence women's social roles and personal experiences. Historical ideas founded in Confucian traditions, such as "men plough, women weave" and male-centered family arrangements, have had a significant impact on social expectations about women's tasks and identities in China. Despite tremendous progress toward gender equality, women frequently face various and even contradictory identities as they negotiate traditional cultural expectations and current societal realities.

In feminist studies, intersectionality has evolved as a critical theoretical framework for comprehending the complexities of women's experiences. Intersectional feminism, first articulated by Crenshaw (1989), contends that gender cannot be evaluated in isolation from other aspects of identity, such as culture, class, ethnicity, and social standing. Rather than seeing women as a homogeneous group, intersectionality acknowledges the different experiences that arise from the interaction of multiple social roles and power systems.

In the Chinese cultural setting, women's identities are influenced not just by gender but also by inherited cultural traditions, familial expectations, social hierarchies, and modernization's continuing effect. These interlocking aspects result in complicated experiences that are frequently under-represented in mainstream feminist discourse. As a result, there is a need for new ways that can disclose and explain these multifaceted aspects of identity.

Contemporary art is an effective platform for examining such difficulties. Through symbolism, materiality, and visual representation, creative activity may disclose unseen societal systems and human experiences that are difficult to describe in words alone. This study takes a practice-based research approach, combining theoretical inquiry with creative production, to analyse women's many identities in the setting of Chinese traditional culture. Using translucent gauze, needlework, sewing methods, and digital image alteration, the project aims to create a visual language capable of articulating the conflicts between visibility and invisibility, tradition and modernity, and individual agency and social expectations.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the rising body of feminist study in China, research on women's identities from an intersectional feminist viewpoint is still relatively restricted, notably in the realm of contemporary art. Existing research frequently treats gender as a separate category, giving little consideration to how cultural traditions, socioeconomic status, and historical beliefs interact to create women's lived experiences. As a result, key aspects of women's identities in Chinese society remain unexplored.

Furthermore, modern Chinese art has become more concerned with social concerns; nonetheless, there is still a paucity of study into how artistic materials and creative methods may successfully express the complexities of women's numerous identities. Traditional female-associated crafts such as needlework and sewing have rich cultural and symbolic connotations, but their potential as important creative languages for examining gender and identity has yet to be completely investigated. Similarly, while the combination of traditional materials and modern technology opens up new avenues for creative expression, it has received scant attention in feminist discourse.

The significant gap refers to the localization of intersectional feminism within Chinese cultural contexts. Much of the extant material is based on Western feminist theories, which may not completely account for the unique historical, cultural, and social contexts that influence Chinese women. As a result, there is a need for research that adapts and expands intersectional feminist concepts to reflect the specific intricacies of Chinese culture.

This research fills these gaps by combining theoretical analysis and creative practice to investigate how women's various identities might be expressed in modern mixed-media artwork. The study uses translucent gauze, embroidery, sewing, and digital visual methods to examine how creative creation may function as both a form of knowledge production and a forum for social reflection on gender equality, cultural diversity, and identity construction.

1.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are follows:

1. To examine women's multiple identities within the context of Chinese traditional culture through the theoretical framework of intersectional feminism.
2. To investigate how contemporary mixed-media artistic practices can visually represent the intersections of gender, culture, and social identity.
3. To develop a series of artworks utilizing transparent gauze, embroidery, sewing, and digital image techniques as symbolic and expressive media for exploring women's experiences.
4. To analyze how the integration of traditional craft practices and contemporary digital methods contributes to the localization of intersectional feminist discourse within Chinese contemporary art.
5. To encourage critical reflection on issues of gender equality, cultural diversity, and women's identity formation in contemporary Chinese society through artistic creation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Intersectional Feminism and Women's Multiple Identities

Intersectional feminism is an essential theoretical basis for comprehending the complexities of women's experiences in modern society. Intersectionality, first postulated by Crenshaw (1989), contends that gender cannot be studied in isolation since women's lives are impacted by numerous social identities, such as class, ethnicity, culture, and social standing. Rather than being oppressed in a single dimension, women frequently face multiple systems of inequality that limit their possibilities, social recognition, and personal autonomy.

Women's identities in China are heavily shaped by conventional gender norms based on Confucian ideals, which have historically emphasized household responsibilities, obedience, and social hierarchy (Yang, 2018). Although enormous societal developments have increased women's educational and professional prospects, conflicts between conventional expectations and new goals continue to impact their lives. As a result, female identity evolves into a dynamic process of balancing inherited cultural ideals with current social realities.

This research uses intersectional feminism as a conceptual lens to investigate how women negotiate different identities in the context of tradition, societal expectations, and cultural transition. Through creative activity, these crossing identities are transformed into visual forms that expose both personal experiences and larger societal institutions.

2.2 Transparency as Material Metaphor

Material symbolism is increasingly important in current feminist art. Transparent and semi-transparent materials are commonly used to depict states of visibility, invisibility, fragility, and social marginalization (Jones, 2012). Transparency produces a paradoxical circumstance in which an item may be both present and veiled, making it ideal for investigating shattered identities.

In this research, translucent gauze serves as both a physical substance and a social symbol. Its layered structure represents women's various identities in family, professional, and cultural contexts. The material's permeability symbolizes the fluid and unstable nature of identity building, while its fragility refers to the societal constraints that women face within patriarchal regimes.

Do Ho Suh's installation practice, which creates spatial experiences characterized by memory, migration, and identity negotiation, further informs the conceptual usage of transparency (Kim, 2017). Although Suh's work is primarily concerned with displacement and belonging, his use of transparent materials offers important methodological insights into the visualization of unseen social experiences.

2.3 Expressionism, Social Realism, and Feminist Artistic Practice

Expressionism and social realism are two complimentary creative methods to tackling themes of identity and social inequity. Expressionism emphasizes subjective emotions, psychological tension, and internal conflict, and frequently uses distortion and symbolic imagery to convey personal experiences (Arnason & Mansfield, 2013). In contrast, social realism emphasizes on the portrayal of social structures and communal reality, emphasizing art's ability to criticize injustice and unfairness.

For feminist artists, combining these methodologies allows for the simultaneous examination of personal and political aspects of women's life. Emotional experiences become inextricably linked with wider societal situations, allowing creative works to serve as both personal tales and social criticisms.

Expressionist tactics are used in this study to depict psychological disintegration and emotional conflict, whilst social realist approaches give a framework for investigating cultural expectations and gender-based disparities. Together, these techniques produce a multifaceted portrayal of women's conflicting identities.

2.4 Contemporary Artists and Material Narratives of Identity

A number of contemporary artists provide important visual and conceptual references for this study through their exploration of identity, memory, space, and materiality.

Do Ho Suh: Transparency and Spatial Identity

Do Ho Suh's installation *Home Within Home* uses translucent polyester fabric to recreate architectural spaces evoking memory, relocation, and belonging (Figure 1). The layered spatial design produces a visual situation of simultaneous presence and absence, allowing viewers to see architecture as both a physical structure and a psychological place. His approach highlights how transparency may serve as a metaphor for unseen social experiences and splintered identities.



Figure 1. Do Ho Suh, *Home Within Home*. Polyester fabric and metal frame installation. Adapted from Kim (2017).

The present study adopts similar principles of spatial layering and transparency while redirecting them toward the examination of women's multiple identities within Chinese cultural contexts.

Priscilla Edwards: Textile Narratives and Domestic Symbolism

Priscilla Edwards' textile-based installation explores issues of memory, domesticity, and social connection. *Time for Tea!* (Figures 2) uses stitched textile shapes to turn ordinary cultural emblems into immersive spatial experiences. The work shows how traditionally feminine crafts may be repurposed as vehicles for societal critique and identity expression (Edwards, 2020).



Figure 3. Priscilla Edwards, Time for Tea! Detail view. Textile Artist.

From: <https://www.textileartist.org/priscilla-edwards-hoarder-stitcher-and-sculptor-extraordinaire/>

The use of sewing and textile fabrication in this project is inspired by Edwards' ability to turn household labor into critical creative discourse. Embroidered lettering and layered gauze both serve as symbols for women's unseen labor and social expectations.

Pablo Delgado: Transparency and Social Critique

Pablo Delgado's works use transparent materials to explore issues of migration, fragility, and social injustice (Rodríguez, 2021). His use of transparency transforms exhibition spaces into locations of political reflection, enabling visitors to consider concerns of displacement and marginalization.



Figure 4. Pablo Delgado, Transparent Installation. Installation Art.

From: <https://www.isupportstreetart.com/artist/pablo-delgado/>

Delgado's work reveals how transparent materials may function both as aesthetic techniques and political symbols. This dual role underpins the current study's use of gauze as a medium for representing both personal identity and wider societal institutions.

Amanda McCavour: Thread, Space, and Embodied Narratives

Amanda McCavour uses thread and embroidery to create three-dimensional spatial designs that blur the lines between textile art, installation, and architecture (McCavour 2019). She uses suspended stitched structures to transform common domestic materials into immersive settings that investigate memory, embodiment, and personal narratives.



Figure 5. Amanda McCavour, Stitched Living Room. Installation Art.

Her methodology influences the current study in two major ways. First, it shows how frail textiles can convey tenacity and intricacy. Second, it establishes a framework for expanding two-dimensional visual language into spatial experiences, allowing spectators to physically interact with layered narratives of identity.

Benjamin Shine: Material Language and Female Presence

Benjamin Shine's tulle-based works investigate the expressive possibilities of transparency, light, and material metamorphosis. Shine manipulates tiny layers of cloth to create ethereal pictures that appear to originate from and disappear into space (Shine, 2019).



Figure 6. Benjamin Shine, Quietude. Tulle Sculpture Installation.

From: <https://www.designboom.com/art/benjamin-shine-quietude-sky-flow-sculpture-08-11-19/>

Shine's idea of allowing materials to show their natural expressive properties greatly influences this study. While Shine focuses on materials' natural behaviour, the current project uses lighting, computer manipulation, and spatial arrangement to highlight the psychological difficulties encountered by women navigating between tradition and technology.

2.5 Synthesis and Research Gap

The studied literature shows that contemporary artists are increasingly using transparent materials, textile processes, and spatial installations to investigate problems of identity, memory, and social experience. Existing research has looked at transparency as a metaphor for invisibility (Jones, 2012), textile art as a form of feminist expression (Parker, 2010), and installation practices as locations of social criticism (Bishop, 2012).

However, little study has been conducted to determine how these creative practices may be incorporated using an intersectional feminist framework within the setting of Chinese traditional culture. Furthermore, few works have used translucent gauze, needlework, spatial installation, and digital image processing as interconnected tools to investigate women's many identities.

This project fills this vacuum by creating a cross-media creative technique that combines material symbolism, feminist theory, and digital intervention to depict the intricate relationships between gender, culture, and societal expectations in modern Chinese society.

3. Methods of Creation

The results of this study are organized into four interrelated areas: (1) thematic findings derived from interview and media analysis; (2) material and spatial experimentation outcomes; (3) formal symbol development; and (4) the final artistic works produced. Together, these outcomes form a coherent chain of evidence demonstrating how transparent gauze, spatial suspension, and digital processing collectively constitute a metaphorical system for expressing the complexity of contemporary Chinese women's identities.

3.1 Thematic Findings from Interview and Media Analysis

In-depth interviews with four purposively selected groups yielded notably different narratives about identity, social pressure, and self-perception. Urban professional women spoke most consistently about mobility and the strain of reconciling career ambitions with domestic expectations—a tension that aligns with what Crenshaw (1989) describes as the compounding effect of overlapping social categories. Rural left-behind women, by contrast, emphasized familial obligation and the near-total absence of institutional support, their accounts resonating with Collins's (2000) concept of the matrix of domination, in which race, class, and gender reinforce one another in geographically specific ways. Single mothers described their lives through a paradox of autonomy and precarity: independent in practice, yet structurally disadvantaged at nearly every point where they engaged with public systems. Art practitioners offered a fourth perspective, framing their professional identity as a site of cultural negotiation in which creative practice simultaneously reproduces and critiques the social norms it inhabits. Systematic coding and thematic categorization of interviews with four representative groups—urban professional women, rural left-behind women, single mothers, and art practitioners—revealed significant divergences in

identity recognition, social role negotiation, and structural pressures. Urban professional women consistently emphasized career-driven mobility alongside chronic role conflict, particularly the tension between professional self-actualization and domestic expectation. Rural left-behind women foregrounded familial obligation and social isolation arising from the absence of male household members, reflecting the compound vulnerabilities produced by the intersection of gender, class, and geography. Single mothers articulated a paradox of simultaneous independence and structural vulnerability, navigating institutional and social systems inadequately designed for their circumstances. Art practitioners, conversely, emphasized the creative dimension of identity fluidity, describing self-expression as both a personal and cultural negotiation (Crenshaw, 1989).

These thematic differences directly informed the symbolic vocabulary of the final installations. The divergent life conditions mapped onto the nine identity categories employed in Creative Work 1 (Nine Identities)—self, daughter, wife, mother, friend, worker, artist, scholar, and individual in everyday life—each carrying specific affective and social resonances derived from empirical interview data (see Figure 9 for the full identity mapping framework).



Figure 9. Identity Mapping Framework derived from thematic interview coding, linking each of nine social roles to specific affective and structural pressures across the four participant groups.

Taken together, these narratives confirmed that no single axis of analysis—gender alone, class alone, or geography alone—was sufficient to account for the range of pressures described. This finding anchored the decision to structure the final thesis work around nine distinct identity categories rather than a generic figure of 'the Chinese woman.' The nine roles—self, daughter, wife, mother, friend, worker, artist, scholar, and life participant—were derived directly from recurring themes in the interview data, ensuring that the final installations remained grounded in empirical experience rather than theoretical abstraction alone.

Parallel analysis of female representation in film, advertising, and social media identified three dominant image-types: the independent professional woman, the virtuous wife and mother, and the consumerist woman. What these archetypes share, as Pollock (1999) observes of visual representation more broadly, is a structural logic of partial disclosure—women are made visible in ways that simultaneously contain and discipline them. The semi-transparency of gauze was recognized, at this analytical stage, as a material homologue to precisely this condition: present, perceivable, yet never fully legible on its own terms.

3.2 Material and Spatial Experimentation Results

Iterative material testing was conducted across four experimental modalities: skeletal printing, embroidery (machine and hand), digital image processing, and spatial suspension with variable lighting. Each modality was assessed for its expressive affordance in relation to the core theoretical framework of identity ambiguity.

3.2.1 Embroidery Experiments

Both machine embroidery and hand embroidery were applied to transparent gauze samples to assess their capacity to reinforce the metaphor of identity and cultural memory. Machine embroidery (Figure 10) produced rigid, mechanically uniform patterns characterized by excessive regularity, which failed to convey the subtle variation and fragility associated with the lived complexity of women's identities. The mechanical precision of automated stitching produced an effect antithetical to the fluidity required by the theoretical framework.

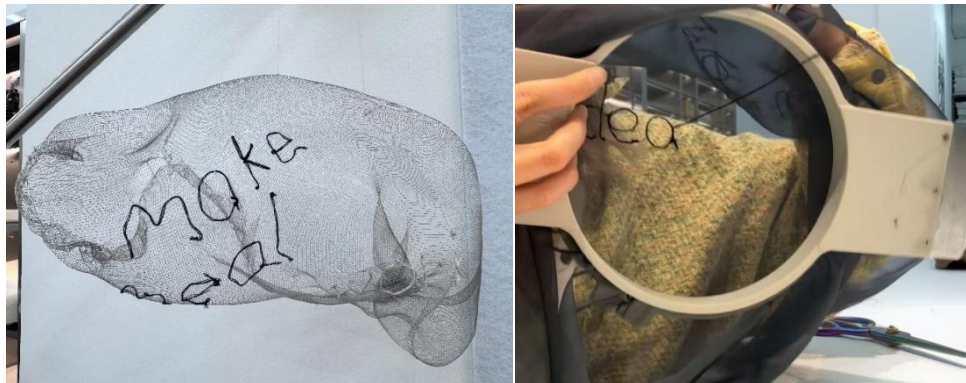


Figure 10. Machine Embroidery Sample. Medium: Transparent gauze with machine embroidery. The rigid, uniform pattern produced by mechanical stitching highlights the limitations of automated processes in expressing the nuanced metaphor of identity ambiguity.

Hand embroidery (Figure 11), by contrast, yielded expressive, irregular stitching that carried cultural resonance with traditional female labor practices. The variability inherent in hand-worked textile production aligned with intersectional feminist scholarship's attention to the invisible labor historically assigned to women (Parker, 1984). Despite its expressive potential, hand embroidery was ultimately excluded from the final installations on grounds of compositional integration: the textile medium, while evocative, introduced a tactile register that detracted from the visual and spatial logic prioritized in the final works.



Figure 11. Hand Embroidery Sample. Medium: Transparent gauze with hand embroidery. The flexible, expressive stitching carries cultural resonance with traditional female labor, demonstrating the methodological value of process exploration even when excluded from final outcomes.

3.2.2 Skeletal Printing and Digital Processing

Initial printing tests using complete X-ray skeletal images produced overly direct visual effects that foregrounded anatomical literalism at the expense of metaphorical openness. The skeletal imagery, while conceptually aligned with the theme of identity as a deep structural burden—encapsulated in the phrase 'identity like gauze, burdened to the bone'—proved resistant to interpretive plurality in its complete form. This finding led to the adoption of digital processing as the primary image-making strategy.

Digital fragmentation, layering, and abstraction of source photographs and experimental sketches successfully transformed bodily references into symbolic expressions (Figures 12–20). The digital workflow allowed for iterative refinement of each of the nine identity images, moving from raw visual material through multiple rounds of editing to achieve a final register that avoided excessive realism while preserving the affective traces of personal and social experience. Figures 12 through 20 present the image formation process for each of the nine identity panels, demonstrating the trajectory from empirical source material to conceptual abstraction.



Figure 12. 'Self' — Image Formation Process. Digital processing transforms personal photography into layered abstraction, symbolizing the foundational yet unstable nature of individual identity.



Figure 13. 'Daughter' — Image Formation Process. Fragmentation of relational imagery reflects the ambivalence of familial role inheritance.



Figure 14. 'Wife' — Image Formation Process. Overlapping layers signify the accumulated expectations embedded in the marital role.

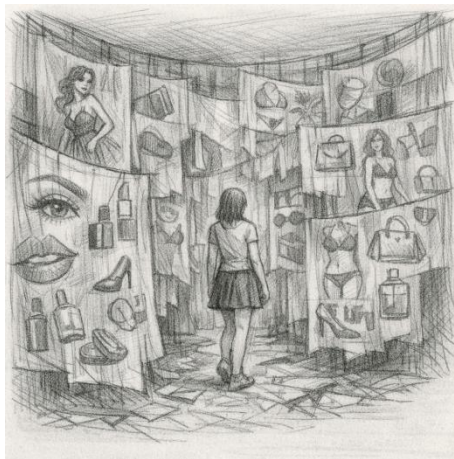


Figure 15. 'Mother' — Image Formation Process. Abstract bodily traces evoke the physicality and invisibility of maternal labor.



Figure 16. 'Friend' — Image Formation Process. Fluid, interpenetrating forms suggest relational intimacy and the permeability of social bonds.

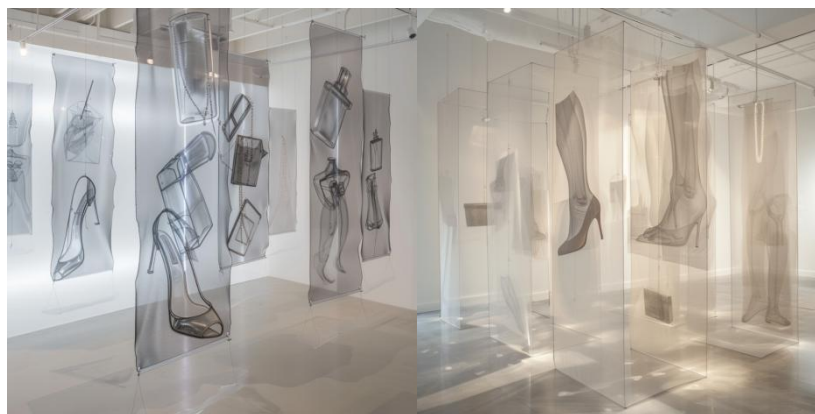


Figure 17. 'Observer' — Image Formation Process. Fragmented reflective surfaces enact the dual position of female subjectivity as both surveying and surveilled.

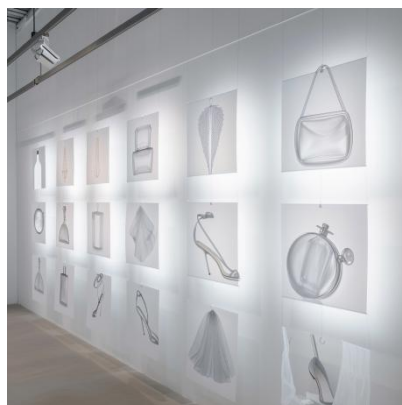


Figure 18. 'Artist' — Image Formation Process. Dynamic abstraction expresses the creative negotiation between individual expression and cultural inscription.



Figure 19. 'Scholar' — Image Formation Process. Structured fragmentation reflects the tension between intellectual aspiration and institutional constraint.



Figure 20. 'Worker' — Image Formation Process. Geometric decomposition of the body references the commodification of female labor within capitalist production.

3.2.3 Suspension and Lighting Experiments

Printing tests across multiple fabric types confirmed transparent gauze as the optimal material for spatial suspension, based on its capacity to produce simultaneous effects of translucency and surface tension under directed light. Under cold white spotlights, gauze panels generated a diffuse floating quality that conveyed the fragility and fluidity of identity. Light projection experiments tested three configurations—top, side, and bottom projection—to assess the resulting shadow patterns and spatial layering effects.

Compact circular suspension was identified as the configuration best suited for evoking the collective dimension of women's social experience: the enclosing geometry creates an immersive environment in which overlapping identities press simultaneously inward and outward, producing the dual sensation of oppression and solidarity described in intersectional feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1989). Individually suspended panels within the circular arrangement preserved the distinctiveness of each identity, ensuring that collective pressure did not erase individual particularity. Variations in light intensity and directionality further reinforced the multilayered ambiguity of identity by continuously altering the visible and shadow zones of each panel.

3.3 Formal Symbol Development

The formal symbolic system developed through the preceding experiments integrates three primary levels of signification: material, spatial, and luminous.

At the material level, the semi-transparency of gauze functions as a physical metaphor for the condition of female identity within patriarchal discourse: simultaneously present and overlooked, visible yet consistently failing to fully materialize in the terms of social legibility (Pollock, 1999). The lightness of the material—its capacity to float, billow, and respond to ambient air movement—adds a temporal dimension to the metaphor, suggesting the precariousness and contingency of identity positions under intersecting social pressures.

At the spatial level, the circular arrangement employed in *Nine Identities* (Creative Work 1) generates a visual and experiential metaphor of interweaving and simultaneity, refusing the linearity that would imply a hierarchical or sequential relationship among identity roles. This compositional decision responds directly to the intersectional feminist insistence that identity categories operate not sequentially but concurrently, each modulating and intensifying the others (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000). The linear arrangement of *Seven Levels of Looking* (Creative Work 2), by contrast, enacts the phenomenology of the gaze: a serial traversal of perspectives that cumulatively produces the observer's awareness of her own position within structures of surveillance.

At the luminous level, light projection operates as a dynamic signifier, continuously renegotiating the boundary between the visible and the invisible. This luminous instability functions as a spatial analogue to the feminist concept of the 'male gaze' (Mulvey, 1975), foregrounding the conditions under which female identity is made visible, partially disclosed, or rendered opaque within social and representational fields.

3.4 Final Artworks

3.4.1 Creative Work 1: *Nine Identities*

Nine Identities consists of nine vertical transparent gauze panels, each measuring 75 cm × 200 cm, suspended in a compact circular arrangement within the exhibition space. Each panel corresponds to one identity category derived from the interview analysis and bears a digitally processed image encoding the affective and social specificity of that role. The circular suspension positions the panels at intervals that permit visual overlap and layering when viewed from within the installation, producing the effect of identities simultaneously inhabiting and permeating one another.

The installation invites viewers to enter the circular space and experience the immersive environment from within. As viewers move through the space, the translucency of the panels creates shifting visual depth, with background identities partially visible through foreground ones. This spatial dynamic enacts the theoretical argument that no single identity is ever apprehended in isolation; rather, each is always already inflected by the simultaneous presence of the others.

The decision to include the identity category of 'individual in everyday life' was made in response to supervisory feedback and is intended to counterbalance the structural and role-based identities with a category that foregrounds the texture and warmth of ordinary lived experience, in alignment with feminist phenomenological approaches that resist the abstraction of women's lives into social role categories alone (Young, 2005).

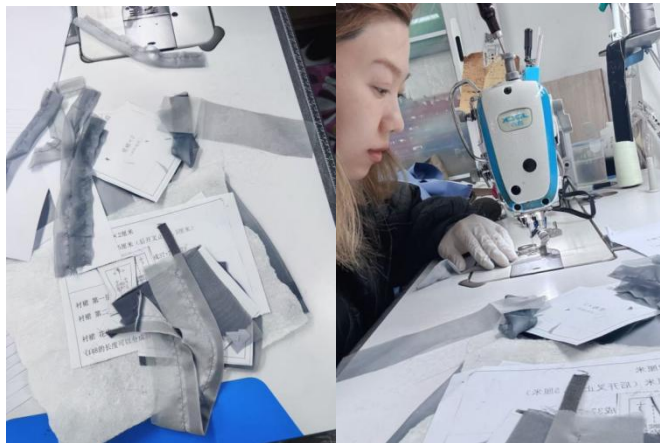


Figure 21. *Nine Identities* (Creative Work 1). Nine transparent gauze panels (each 75 cm × 200 cm) suspended in circular arrangement. Medium: transparent gauze with digitally processed printed images. The overlapping translucent panels create shifting visual depth, enacting the simultaneous coexistence of multiple female identity roles.



Figure 22. Sketch for Nine Identities (Sketch 4). Compositional planning sketch showing the circular suspension arrangement and the spatial relationships between the nine identity panels.



Figure 23. Digitally Processed Images for Nine Identities. Final set of nine abstracted images prepared for printing on transparent gauze, each representing a specific identity category through fragmented and layered visual language.

3.4.2 Creative Work 2: Seven Levels of Looking

Seven Levels of Looking consists of seven black-and-white square gauze panels, each measuring 70 cm × 70 cm, suspended in a linear arrangement within the exhibition space. The work deconstructs the identity of the 'observer'—one of the nine identity categories in Creative Work 1—into seven interrelated yet independent dimensions of the gaze: observing the world, observing others, observing social norms and discipline, observing the inner self, observing identity gaps, observing fluctuation and transformation, and observing emptiness and boundlessness.

The seven panels employ natural imagery—water surfaces, mirror glass, fence structures, candle flames, and atmospheric fog and shadow—as visual correlatives for each gaze dimension, reflecting a symbolic logic in which natural phenomena carry the ambiguity and temporality appropriate to the theoretical concerns of the work (Figures 24–30). The linear arrangement foregrounds the sequential character of perceptual experience while simultaneously establishing the panels as mutually permeable, each gaze dimension partially visible through its neighbors.

The work situates viewers in the dual position of observer and observed, activating what Mulvey (1975) identifies as the complex subject position of the female spectator who simultaneously internalizes the structures of the gaze and retains the capacity for critical reflexivity. This dual positioning is reinforced by the semi-transparency of the gauze panels, which reflect dim traces of the viewer's own figure while displaying the abstract imagery printed upon them.

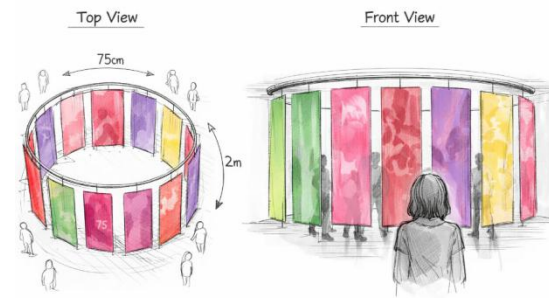


Figure 24. Seven Levels of Looking (Creative Work 2). Seven black-and-white transparent gauze panels (each 70 cm × 70 cm) suspended in linear arrangement. Medium: transparent gauze with printed images and light projection. The linear sequence enacts the phenomenology of the observing female subject across seven interrelated dimensions of gaze.

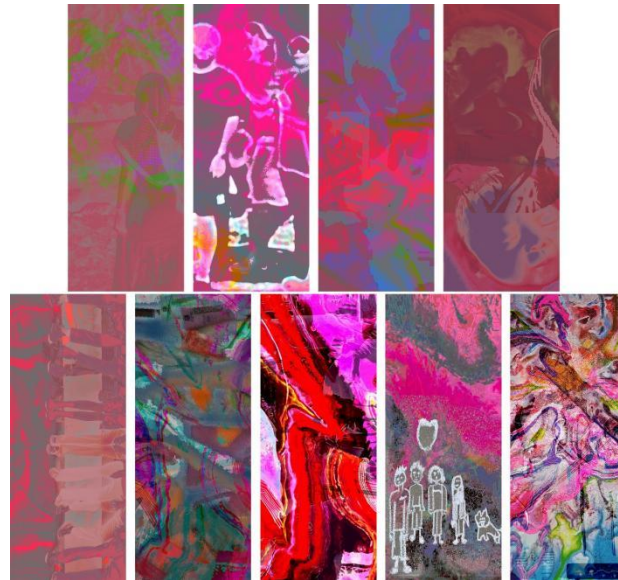


Figure 25. 'Observing the World' — Water surface imagery evoking the fluid, reflective quality of perceptual engagement with external reality.

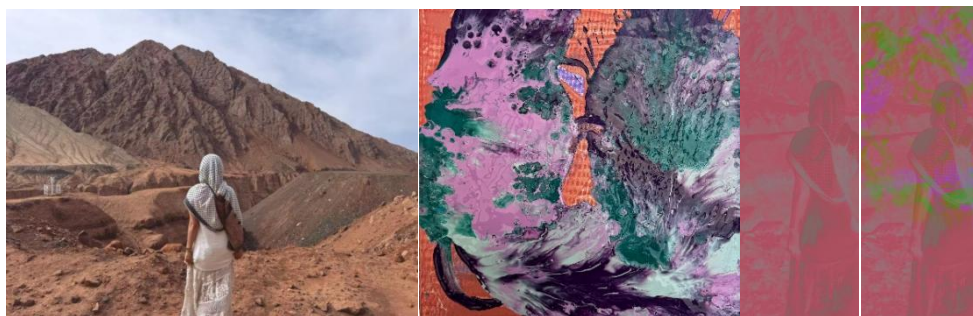


Figure 26. 'Observing Others' — Mirror glass imagery foregrounding the relational and often disciplinary structures through which female subjects observe and are observed by others.

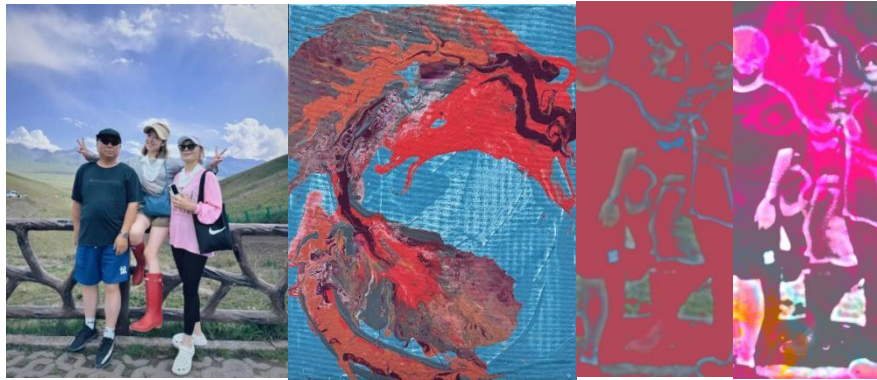


Figure 27. 'Observing Social Norms and Discipline' — Fence imagery symbolizing the structural constraints that regulate female behavior and visibility.



Figure 28. 'Observing Identity Gaps' — Candle flame imagery evoking the fragile, mobile boundary between presence and absence in female self-perception.



Figure 29. 'Observing the Inner Self' — Abstract bodily imagery representing the inward turn of female subjectivity toward self-knowledge and introspection.



Figure 30. 'Observing Fluctuation and Transformation' — Water imagery in motion, evoking the temporal dimension of identity as continuous negotiation and change.

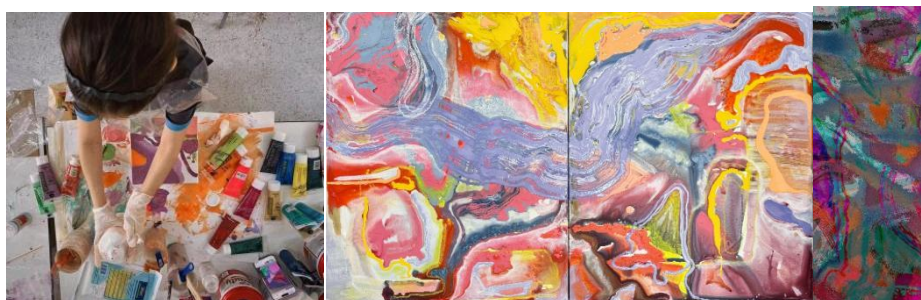


Figure 31. 'Observing Emptiness and Boundlessness' — Fog and shadow imagery suggesting the limits of self-knowledge and the productive unknowability of female identity beyond social inscription.

3.5 Methodological Transparency and Iterative Outcomes

A consistent finding across all experimental modalities was the methodological value of documented failure. The instability of early gauze structures, the rigidity of machine embroidery, the excessive literalism of complete skeletal imagery, and the limited interactivity of preliminary spatial arrangements each contributed to the refinement of the final works by identifying the boundaries of each medium's expressive affordance. This iterative logic, in which failure functions not as a deviation from method but as a constitutive component of it, is consistent with practice-led research methodology as theorized by Sullivan (2010) and Candy and Edmonds (2018).

The documentation of failed experiments—including skeletal printing tests (Figure 10 in the Creation Process), machine embroidery samples (Figure 11), and preliminary linear spatial arrangements—was retained throughout the research process as evidence of methodological rigor. This approach transforms the research record from a narrative of successful outcomes into a transparent account of knowledge generation through material inquiry, reinforcing the epistemological claims of practice-led research as a legitimate mode of scholarly production within the arts and humanities.

Results

4.1 Pre-Thesis Experimental Works: Iterative Material and Spatial Outcomes

Three pre-thesis works were developed sequentially, each designed to test a specific material or spatial hypothesis before committing to the final installations. Documenting these works in full—including their shortcomings—is treated here not as a concession but as a methodological resource, consistent with practice-led research frameworks in which failure generates knowledge rather than simply interrupting it (Sullivan, 2010; Candy & Edmonds, 2018).

4.1.2 Pre-Thesis Work 1: Gauze Installation

The first experimental work used multi-layered black gauze stitched with nylon monofilament and hand-sewn irregular textures to test whether the material's inherent properties—translucency, lightness, and responsiveness to ambient air movement—could carry the affective weight of multiple, overlapping social identities. The outcome was partly successful. The interplay of layered gauze under directed lighting produced a visual depth that was at once immersive and unstable, with shadow zones shifting continuously depending on the viewer's position. This spatial instability was read, within the theoretical framework, as a formal analogue to the condition Crenshaw (1989) describes: an identity constituted by multiple vectors of social pressure that cannot be resolved into a single stable image.

At the same time, the work revealed clear structural limitations. The gauze panels lacked adequate support, causing the installation to lose its intended form under the weight of overlapping layers. Audience engagement was limited to visual observation, with no provision for participatory or tactile interaction. The color palette—restricted to black—produced emotional intensity but reduced the interpretive range of the work. These findings directed subsequent experiments toward reinforced support structures, greater chromatic variation, and spatial configurations that would invite the viewer into the work rather than positioning them outside it. As shown in Figure 13, Pre-Thesis Work 1: Gauze Installation (75 × 200 cm), constructed from transparent gauze, nylon monofilament, and hand-stitching, employed multiple layers of black gauze to create shifting relationships between visibility and concealment. The interaction of light and shadow across the overlapping surfaces functioned as a material metaphor for the fragility, fluidity, and multiplicity of women's identities under intersecting social expectations. The structural limitations identified in this experiment became an important catalyst for subsequent refinements in material selection, spatial design, and installation methodology.

4.1.2 Pre-Thesis Work 2: Gauze and Acrylic Installation

The second experiment introduced broken acrylic panels alongside layered gauze, requiring viewers to physically walk through the installation. This spatial decision was theoretically motivated: by obliging the audience to navigate the work rather than observe it from a fixed position, the installation transformed Foucault's (1977)

concept of the surveilling gaze—and its feminist reformulation by Mulvey (1975)—from an abstract proposition into a bodily, spatial experience. As viewers moved through the space, reflective acrylic surfaces returned fragmented images of their own figures, collapsing the boundary between the observing subject and the observed object.

The material contrast between the softness of gauze and the sharp, unforgiving edges of acrylic successfully communicated the harshness of social judgment alongside the fragility of identity. However, several practical difficulties emerged: the acrylic edges were insufficiently polished, posing a physical risk to viewers; the text integrated into the panels was printed at too small a scale to be legible at the distances imposed by the spatial arrangement; and the overall composition prioritised visual spectacle over the conceptual precision required by the research framework. These limitations were addressed in subsequent iterations through scaled-up typography, edge refinement, and a reconfiguration of the spatial path to ensure legibility without sacrificing immersive effect. As shown in Figure 17, Pre-Thesis Work 2: Gauze and Acrylic Installation (AI-generated visualisation). Medium: Transparent gauze, broken acrylic panels, printed text; AI-generated image. Viewers are required to walk through the installation, encountering their own reflections in acrylic surfaces alongside text fragments. The material contrast between gauze softness and acrylic sharpness enacts the tension between the fragility of female identity and the harshness of social judgment, translating disciplinary critique into embodied spatial experience.

4.1.3 Pre-Thesis Work 3: Transparent Gauze Dresses with X-ray Prints

The third preliminary work explored the metaphor of 'seven layers of clothing' as a structural allegory for the gradual internalisation of social discipline into the body. Two plans were developed in parallel: Plan A involved seven full-scale transparent gauze dresses printed with partial X-ray skeletal images, suspended in a semi-enclosed spatial arrangement; Plan B employed one-third scale doll garments, layered in a 'nested doll' configuration that compressed the same logic into a more concentrated spatial form. Both plans drew on the conceptual image of identity as an accretion—each social role added as another layer of clothing, until the total weight is carried not on the surface but 'to the bone.'

Initial results were promising at the conceptual level: the combination of transparent gauze and skeletal imagery created a visually arresting tension between surface appearance and hidden structure, and cold white spotlights projected skeletal forms onto surrounding walls, intensifying the psychological atmosphere of the space. Practically, however, complete X-ray images proved overly literal, foreclosing the interpretive openness that the research framework required. This limitation catalysed the turn toward digital processing: by fragmenting and reassembling skeletal imagery through digital means, it became possible to retain the conceptual resonance of the 'bone' metaphor while opening the visual surface to multiple readings. The doll-garment scale and layering also required further refinement before the spatial depth of the 'nested' metaphor could be fully realised. As shown in Figure 23, Pre-Thesis Work 3: Transparent Gauze Dresses with X-ray Prints (AI-generated visualisation). Medium: Transparent gauze, X-ray image printing, transparent fishing line; AI-generated image. Seven gauze dresses printed with skeletal imagery are suspended in cold white light. The co-presence of transparent fabric and anatomical form enacts the metaphor 'identity as gauze, burden into bone,' visualising how social roles accumulate as a systemic, internalised weight. Iterative revision of the skeletal imagery—from complete X-ray forms to digital fragmentation—is documented as a key methodological turning point.

4.3 Material and Technical Experiment Outcomes

Beyond the three pre-thesis works as complete installations, a series of discrete material and technical experiments were conducted to resolve specific questions about medium, surface, and technique. These experiments included embroidery trials on transparent gauze and digital image processing tests, each contributing distinct insights to the final material configuration.

4.3.1 Embroidery on Transparent Gauze

Both machine embroidery and hand embroidery were applied to gauze samples to assess whether textile inscription could reinforce the identity metaphor through the register of cultural memory. Machine embroidery (Figure 47) produced mechanically uniform patterns that were visually coherent but expressively inert: the regularity of automated stitching eliminated precisely the subtle variation—the trace of individual decision and fatigue—that gives hand-worked textiles their historical resonance with women's invisible labor (Parker, 1984). The result read as rigid rather than layered, systematic rather than lived.

Hand embroidery (Figure 48) yielded a markedly different outcome. The irregular, responsive quality of hand-stitching introduced expressive variability into the gauze surface, and the process itself carried the cultural memory of traditional female labor—a lineage of skilled, domestic, unremunerated work that Parker (1984) identifies as central to the historical construction of femininity. Despite these qualities, both embroidery methods were ultimately excluded from the final installations: the textile register, while theoretically resonant, introduced a tactile and material density that competed with the spatial and luminous effects prioritised in the thesis works. Their documentation here, however, constitutes a substantive methodological finding in its own right, establishing the boundaries within which the chosen media operate.

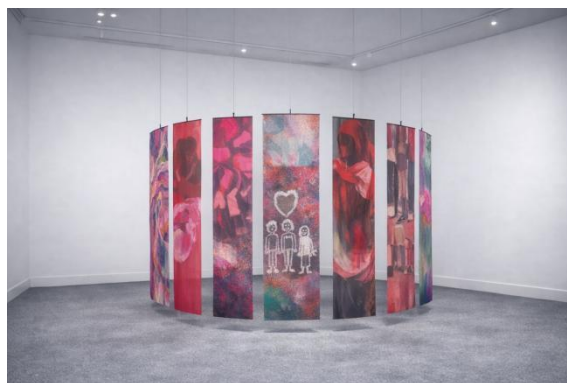


Figure 47. Machine Embroidery Sample

Size: Variable, Medium: Transparent gauze with machine embroidery

Mechanically uniform stitching produces a rigid, regular surface pattern. The absence of expressive variation highlights the limitations of automated processes for conveying the nuanced ambiguity of female identity, and establishes machine embroidery as an excluded medium in the final installation.



Figure 48. Hand Embroidery Sample

Size: Variable, Medium: Transparent gauze with hand embroidery

Irregular, responsive stitching carries the cultural memory of traditional female labor, demonstrating expressive flexibility and historical resonance. Although excluded from the final thesis works, the hand embroidery experiment contributes to the study's methodological record by identifying the affective register in which textile inscription operates.

4.3.2 Digital Image Processing

Personal photographs and earlier experimental sketches served as the raw source material for each identity image. Each was subjected to multiple rounds of digital editing—fragmentation, layering, selective erasure, and chromatic reduction—to move the image away from photographic realism and toward a visual register capable of sustaining interpretive openness. This process was not cosmetic but conceptual: as Grosz (1994) argues in relation to the body and representation, images that retain too much of their indexical origin tend to anchor meaning rather than release it. Digital transformation allowed bodily references to remain present—as traces, outlines, or barely-legible forms—without collapsing into portraiture.

4.3.3 Suspension, Spacing, and Lighting

Systematic testing of fabric types confirmed transparent gauze as the optimal material for spatial suspension: under cold white spotlight projection, gauze panels generated a floating, diffuse quality that no denser or more opaque material replicated. Experiments with panel spacing demonstrated that intervals of approximately 30–40 cm produced the most effective visual overlap—sufficient for layering to be perceptible, but not so dense as to block circulation or obscure individual panels. Lighting tests comparing top, side, and bottom projection found that top-down cold white light created the strongest shadow definition on surrounding walls while preserving the translucency of the fabric itself, reinforcing the spatial metaphor of identity as simultaneously illuminated and shadowed.

4.4 Formal Symbolic Framework

Across the experiments described above, a three-level symbolic framework emerged as the structural logic of both thesis works. At the *material* level, the semi-transparency of gauze operates as a physical metaphor for the

condition Pollock (1999) describes: female identity rendered visible within patriarchal systems but never fully on its own terms, always partially legible, always susceptible to being looked through rather than at. At the *spatial* level, the arrangement of panels—circular in Nine Identities, linear in Seven Layers of Gaze—generates distinct experiential logics. The circular formation refuses hierarchy, insisting on the simultaneity of identity roles in the manner Crenshaw (1989) intends when she argues that gender, class, and race cannot be ranked but only held together. The linear formation, by contrast, enacts the phenomenology of the gaze as a sequential traversal, each panel permeable to the next, building cumulatively toward an awareness of the observer's own position within structures of surveillance (Mulvey, 1975; Channuwong et al., 2026). At the *luminous* level, directed light operates as a dynamic signifier: shifting the boundary between visibility and shadow with each change in viewing angle, the light makes the instability of identity perceptible in real time rather than merely asserting it as a theoretical proposition.

4.5 Thesis Creative Works

4.5.1 Nine Identities

Nine Identities consists of nine transparent gauze panels, each measuring 75 cm × 200 cm, suspended in a compact circular formation within the exhibition space (Figure 49). Each panel bears a digitally processed image encoding the affective and social specificity of one of the nine identity categories established through interview analysis. The circular arrangement positions the panels at intervals that permit visual overlap: standing within the installation, a viewer perceives background panels through foreground ones, so that every identity is seen, at least partially, through the presence of every other. This perceptual condition enacts the central claim of intersectional feminist theory—that no single identity category is ever experienced in isolation (Crenshaw, 1989)—in a spatial and sensory rather than merely discursive register.

The decision to add 'life participant' as the ninth identity category followed supervisory feedback and reflects a deliberate theoretical positioning: against accounts that reduce women's lives to a matrix of social roles and institutional pressures, the inclusion of an identity grounded in the texture of ordinary, everyday experience insists on the irreducibility of lived life to its structural determinants. This addition is consistent with Young's (2005) feminist phenomenological argument that embodied, everyday experience constitutes a form of knowledge that structural analysis cannot fully capture.

The methodological development of the work moved from pure material metaphor—gauze as signifier of ambiguity—toward the integration of personal photography and digital abstraction. This trajectory, from the empirical to the conceptual, is itself a methodological argument: that practice-led research does not move from theory to illustration but constructs meaning through the iterative pressure of materials, images, and space upon one another (Sullivan, 2010).



Figure 49. Nine Identities — Thesis Work 1 (AI-generated visualisation)

Size: Nine panels, each 75 × 200 cm; circular installation

Medium: Transparent gauze with digitally processed printed images, suspended installation; AI-generated image
Nine transparent gauze panels suspended in a circular formation. Each panel encodes one of nine female identity roles through digitally abstracted imagery. The spatial overlap of panels—visible through one another from within the installation—enacts the simultaneous coexistence of multiple identities rather than their sequential hierarchy, responding directly to the spatial implications of intersectional feminist theory.

4.6 Methodological Transparency: The Productive Value of Documented Failure

A consistent finding across all experimental stages was that documented failure generated substantive knowledge. The structural instability of the first pre-thesis work established material support as a primary design consideration. The overly sharp acrylic edges and illegible text in the second work directed attention to the practical conditions of viewer safety and legibility that any spatially participatory installation must satisfy. The rigidity of complete X-ray imagery in the third work catalysed the turn to digital processing that proved central to

the final installations. The mechanical uniformity of machine embroidery defined, by contrast, what hand-worked and digitally processed surfaces must avoid. In each case, what did not work specified more precisely what was needed—a logic that Sullivan (2010) identifies as the epistemological core of practice-led research and that Candy and Edmonds (2018) argue distinguishes artistic inquiry from other modes of knowledge production.

Making this iterative record visible, rather than presenting only the finished works, is itself a methodological argument. It proposes that artistic practice generates knowledge not in spite of but through its material instabilities, and that a research account that omits this dimension misrepresents the actual intellectual process. In this respect, the study aligns with the broader turn in feminist methodology toward reflexivity and transparency as scholarly virtues rather than concessions to subjectivity (Harding, 1987).

Conclusions and Discussions

This study looked at whether translucent gauze may serve as a cohesive symbolic and spatial medium for reflecting the various identities of modern Chinese women. The findings demonstrate that gauze is both physically and conceptually successful because to its semi-transparency, reactivity to light and movement, spatial layering capability, and cultural importance in Chinese society. The two installations created as part of the project show how material, spatial, and digital tactics may work together to express complicated feminist notions. *Nine Identities* depicts the presence of various identities without hierarchy, whilst *Seven Layers of Gaze* exposes the richness and complexities inherent in female subjectivity. These works demonstrate that intersectionality may be experienced geographically rather than being conceptualized as an abstract theoretical framework. The study emphasizes the relevance of iterative experimentation in practice-led research. Material failures and design adjustments were not barriers to knowledge generation, but rather necessary components of the research process. As a result, the research confirms that practice-led approaches may produce rigorous, transportable, and theoretically meaningful information in both creative and academic settings.

This project explores how translucent gauze may be used as a culturally placed feminist medium to portray the overlapping identities of modern Chinese women. Unlike other feminist art forms like as photography or performance, gauze has culturally particular implications in Chinese society, including femininity, ceremonial customs, visibility, and impermanence. Its semi-transparent nature allows for both disclosure and concealment, reflecting the contradictory situation of women who are socially visible but frequently denied full subjectivity (Pollock, 1999). Through this material method, the installations translate feminist theory into embodied and geographical experience, resulting in what Meskimmon (2003) refers to as embodied knowledge.

The study adds to the intersectional feminist debate by putting intersectionality into spatial context. The circular layout of *Nine Identities* depicts the relational and non-hierarchical nature of crossing identities, in line with Collins' (2000) idea of the matrix of dominance. Meanwhile, *Seven Layers of Gaze* investigates the interior complexities of a single identity dimension, revealing how female subjectivity is multifaceted, contradictory, and constantly contested. The two works suggest a spatial grammar for intersectionality, with circular forms representing simultaneity and relationality and linear structures representing depth and internal conflict (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000).

The use of digital fragmentation and abstraction serves as a feminist epistemic tactic. By breaking the apparent realism of photographic representation, the artworks reject objectifying modes of visibility and contribute to Haraway's (1988) idea of situated knowledge. Rather of portraying women as permanent subjects, the fractured imagery highlights partiality, heterogeneity, and interpretative openness.

Finally, the study highlights the importance of practice-led research as a method of theoretical inquiry. Iterative experimentation, material failures, and reflective recording all contribute to the formation of knowledge, not just final artworks. The resultant paradigm demonstrates how creative activity may yield transferable theoretical insights while being anchored in unique cultural settings.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the authors would like to give recommendation in four key aspects as follows:

First, this study proposes circular and linear installation forms as alternate techniques for visualizing relational and layered identities, so creating a spatial grammar for intersectionality. This work takes feminist installation art beyond traditional portrayals of visibility and embodiment (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000).

Second, the project promotes feminist material practice by illustrating how translucent gauze may serve as a culturally unique symbolic medium. The study responds to requests for feminist frameworks that originate from specific social and cultural situations, rather than universal assumptions (Mohanty, 2003).

Third, the study advances practice-led research technique by combining qualitative interviews, creative output, and rigorous documentation. The notion of methodological transparency, which includes the reporting of unsuccessful trials, serves as a useful model for future creative study.

Finally, the research adds to our understanding of modern Chinese women's experiences by examining how gender connects with class, location, family structures, and cultural expectations. The findings highlight the importance

of intersectional feminist analysis in the Chinese social environment and contribute to current literature on gender and identity in modern China (Fincher, 2014).

Limitations and Further Study

Several limitations of this study point to relevant areas for future investigation. First, while the participant sample was purposely selected to reflect the different experiences of modern Chinese women, it cannot be considered typical of the whole population. The study focused on four groups: urban professional women, rural left-behind women, single mothers, and female artists. Other perspectives, such as those of ethnic minority women, elderly women, women with disabilities, transgender women, and women in precarious employment, were excluded. Future research should use larger and more purposeful sample procedures to capture the richness and complexity of women's experiences in China's many social, cultural, and geographical contexts.

Second, as a practice-led inquiry in which the researcher also acted as the principal artist, the study is unavoidably influenced by the researcher's positionality, aesthetic preferences, and theoretical convictions. While reflexivity was preserved throughout the study process, other researchers may have interpreted the interview data differently or devised alternate material and spatial strategies. Future studies should use collaborative or multi-researcher methodologies to widen interpretative viewpoints and improve methodological rigour (Harding, 1987).

A additional disadvantage is the lack of systematic audience reception statistics. The research posits that the artworks produce experiences of plurality, visibility, and relational identity; however, these assertions are mostly dependent on creative purpose and theoretical interpretation, rather than actual data from spectators. Future research should include audience reception studies, which use interviews, questionnaires, and observational approaches to study how diverse audiences perceive and respond to the installations. Such study might look at variances in gender, age, cultural background, and acquaintance with feminist theory, offering a more complete picture of the works' influence (Bal, 1996).

Material and technological restrictions determined the project's final results. Experimentation with new materials and interactive technologies was limited due to time, budget, and manufacturing resource constraints. Despite their potential relation to feminist material practice, embroidery and other textile methods were removed from the final works. Future research could look into hybrid material approaches that combine transparent gauze with embroidery, weaving, silk, bamboo, paper, or ceramic elements, broadening the material vocabulary available for feminist installation art and increasing engagement with culturally specific forms of symbolic meaning.

In addition, the installations were immersive rather than interactive. Viewers moved around the sculptures without directly influencing their shape or behavior. Future research might use responsive technologies like motion sensors, adaptive lighting, sound environments, or projection mapping to create dynamic works that react to audience presence and engagement. Such advancements would delve further into the relational and dynamic character of identity, while also broadening the project's involvement with participatory feminist art practices (Bishop, 2012)..

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