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Master in Fine Art
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ARTIST STATEMENT

Together / Alone--Under Suburban Sky is intrinsically tied to my experience moving to the U.S. at the age 40 from Shanghai, China. Life is drama. For this project, I dressed up as an ordinary suburban housewife to show scenes of daily life. I made some images like film footage by using long exposures and 16:9 ratio. The inclusion of dialogue gave an understanding of the tension between family members. Each picture depicts a dramatic conflict. The male, as husband and father, was sometimes physically absent from the images, but actually, he is never fully absent, as he always shows up as a symbol. The main actress, as mother and wife, appears in most of the images, however, she is never fully shown. The mother is not just herself; she represents all females in the same situation.

For the past two years, this project has been the primary source material in creating a body of work that explores the migrant narrative and my suburban housewife experience, albeit through a personal lens. Photography is an effective way to depict real scenes in life and can challenge norms of female sexuality, beauty, domesticity, and identity. While my need to decipher and address my own life is personal, my work has always touched upon universal themes, with the potential to start a dialogue about cultural differences and similarities.

The suburban life is very peaceful. It represents middle-class lifestyle, with a comfortable house, two or three kids, and a hardworking husband. They are living together; however, she feels lonely. In Betty Friedan’s words, the problem has no name.

Li Lin-Liang

May 2020
DRESSING UP AND IDENTITY
My project titled Together / Alone -- Under Suburban Sky, is intrinsically tied to my experience moving to the U.S. at age 40 from Shanghai, China. In my project, I dressed up as an ordinary suburban housewife to show scenes of daily life. For the past two years, this project has been the primary source material in creating a body of work that explores the migrant narrative and my suburban housewife experience, albeit through a personal lens. Photography is an effective way to depict real scenes in life and can challenge norms of female sexuality, beauty, domesticity, and identity.

The feeling of confinement and the difficulty of thriving within an unequal and distorted society are recurrent themes for many women artists, who often appear as both subjects and performers in their works. This is no dry history lesson. Any of these pieces still seethe with frustration and fury. Three female artists are as examples, who use dressing up to critique the identity: Claude Cahun, a pioneer of dressing up artist; Cindy Sherman, the most famous one for her Untitled series; and Carrie Mae Weems, an African American artist whose work highlights in identity. These three artists did their works by taking pictures that shed lights on dressing up. The concept of identity is one of the few themes of the psychosocial theory that has been researched directly by them. The pattern of identity achievement is different for male and female.

Claude Cahun (Figure 1), born Lucy Schwob in Nantes, France in 1894, so often overlooked, but so forward in her thinking about gender. In the 1920s and 1930s, Cahun created a series of dressing up and theatrical self-portraits (Figure 1). She stares defiantly at the camera in an outfit that looks neither conventionally masculine nor feminine gender neutral. Self Portrait as a Young Girl (Figure 2, 1915) is one of the earliest known examples of a self-portrait by Cahun. Her head was strikingly and disconcertedly disembodied, her eyes were wide open. She is definitely alive. Cahun’s 1928 photograph What Do You Want From Me uses multiple exposures to raise questions about gender identity. In some pictures, Cahun holds the viewer’s gaze – in others she looks away to avoid becoming an object.
Many of Cahun’s portraits invert colors and play with photographic contrast. Her work challenged gender roles in a society where these were rigidly enforced.

By the way, her adopted name helped. Claude is one of the few names in French that can be used for women and men with the same spelling and pronunciation. Her works, including her gender neutral name, echoed Virginia Woolf’s theory of feminism. Virginia Woolf, one of the first contemporary feminist criticism in the early 20th century, had noticed that there was a lack of women’s voice in the mainstream discourse. In fact, most of the women in literary works are just saying what male writers want them to say and doing what male writers want them to do. Because females lost their discourse power, maybe they never had it. Cahun gave herself a new name. The adopted name blurred the gender, in order to capture the discourse of power.

Cahun explored the complexities of our human selves through sensual self-portraits in a variety of costumes, from testosterone-filled weightlifter to bashful Red Riding Hood. “Cahun is often considered through a transgender lens, as a biologically born woman who portrayed and embodies the tropes of conventional masculinity (Emelife).” Actually, Cahun described herself as “neuter”, putting herself outside the usual categories of gender. Her play with appearance challenged the notion of femininity and sexuality and displayed the shifting notion of identity created by dressing up. Though Cahun’s photography focuses on herself, there’s more to the picture. She experimented with identity, gender and the body in her work from a young age.
As an American artist, Cindy Sherman is widely recognized as one of the most important and influential artists in contemporary art. She used to dress up to make herself look like a character in Hollywood films.

Maturing in the 1970s in the midst of American Women’s Movement, later known as the rise of Feminism, Sherman and her generation learned to see through mass media clichés and appropriate them in a satirical and ironic manner that made viewers self-conscious about how artificial and highly constructed “female portraiture” could prove on close inspection. During the Second Wave of Feminism, Sherman turned to photography in order to explore a wide range of common female social roles or personas. Sherman sought to call into question the seductive and often oppressive influence of mass media over our individual and collective identities.

In her *Bus Riders* (Figure 3), the implicit humor of these impersonations (which could be seen as patronizing) comes to the fore as the doyenne of identity manipulation assumes the look, characteristic pose, and personality of a gamut of characters, both female, and male.

In her *Untitled Film Still* (Figure 4) series, each individual image creates a distinguished scene. For example, *Untitled Film Still* #21, reminds me of a scene from an outdated television show or movie, with the woman in the picture as a leading heroine. She was wearing a vintage 1950s outfit and looking captivated by something outside the frame. This creates suspense that nobody knows what happens across the street from this woman. It makes the image not much about what is happening, but more about what happened before and after the moment.
in this image. This narrative element is characteristic of the Untitled Film Stills series. This is her epic series, by which she first made a widespread reputation for herself as a witty commentator on the female role models of her youth, as well as those of an earlier generation.

Sherman’s work has developed a long way from the original scene-stealing 1980s still from films never made that quickly became her unsettling signature. She never stopped. In her recent new picture, Untitled #571 (2016), which described the Hollywood’s golden age. In the picture, her face that launched a thousand gender-studies Ph.D. has cast herself as the aging Hollywood diva, channeling Gloria Swanson and Bette Davis and Greta Garbo. In the glorious 1960s Technicolor, she vamps it up in turbans and pearls on chaises lounges, staring into the middle distance through layers of kohl and unlikely eyelashes. Sherman has become the consummate survivor.

In the 1990s, Sherman’s Untitled Film Still series was heralded as a seminal and early realization of self-consciously postmodernist artistic practice. As Cotton said, “Both the photography and the model in the pictures is Sherman herself, making the series a perfect condensation of postmodernist photographic practice: she is both an observer and observed (193).” In Sherman’s current photographs, she returns her altered image to center stage, in the more direct way that she was escaping from for much of that past. Partly it is to do with the emotional aspects of aging, her sense of mortality. Health and just getting older, Sherman wants her pictures embracing the fact. She is more than 60-year-old.

Carrie Mae Weems has been hailed as the “perhaps our best contemporary photographer, she creates work that insists on the worth of black women- both in art and in life (O’Grady).” As an African-American artist, Carrie Mae Weems focuses on her race, portraying herself as an ordinary black person. Her works explore issues of African American history, race, class, and gender identity.
The Kitchen Table (Figure 5) Series shows various tropes and stereotypes of an African American life. She used her visual language and her sense of justice is extraordinary. It explored personal and familial themes, which combines panels of text and image to tell the story of a self-possessed woman with a bodacious manner, varied talents, hard laughter, multiple opinions.

In Beacon Series (Figure 6), she documented the changing landscape and culture of Beacon, NY, over the course of her three-year artist residency there beginning in 2002. Beacon is a diverse community that has seen many changes over the years as it has evolved from a factory town to a center of arts and culture. Weems places herself as the subject, usually standing with her back to the camera, observing.

In her current project, The Museum Series (2006- present) shows Weems, shrouded in black, traveling to international locations, such as the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Project Row Houses, Tate Modern, Pergamon Museum, Galleria Nazionale D’Arte Moderna and so on. In The Museum series, “In this project, and in the dozens more that comprise her practice, Weems addresses questions of power, violence, exclusion, access and authority — especially as they pertain to race and gender — and dares her viewers to do the same. The pathos in all of her works, from intimate photographs of her family to series involving archival images of enslaved Africans, unites her subjects and viewers in a common humanity (Lescaze).”

Whatever which her wor, Weemks’ images are complicated by her position as an artist. Weems’ work represented the first time an African American woman could be seen reflecting her own experience and interiority in her art.

The topic of the self has been long salient in the feminist philosophy, for it is pivotal to questions about the personal identity, the body, sociality, and agency that feminism must address. To be the Other is to be the non-subject, the non-person, the non-agent-in short,
the mere body. In law, in customary practice, and in culture, women’s selfhood has been systematically subordinated, diminished and belittled, however, it has not been outright denied. Since women have been cast as lesser forms of the masculine individual, the paradigm of the self that has gained in the U.S. culture and western philosophy, dressing up female artists’ works are both critical and reconstructive feminist approaches to the self. Cahun put herself outside the usual categories of gender; Sherman explored the issue of the gaze and the voyeur, and Weems took pictures to challenge history.

My project *Together / Alone -- Under Suburban Sky* shows how hard a housewife works every day. The idea of this project is based on my recent life experiences as a mother and a suburban wife transformed from a office lady. Like Friedan described in her book *The Problem that Has No Name*, “The suburban housewife--she was the dream image of the young American woman and the envy, it was said, of woman all over the world. The American housewife --freed by science and labour - saving appliances from the drudgery, the dangers of children, and the illnesses of her grandmother(Friedan, 4).” “Millions of woman lived their lives in the image of those pretty pictures of the
American suburban housewife, kissing their husbands good-bye in front of the picture window, depositing their station wagons full of children at school, and smiling as they ran the new electric waxier over the spotless kitchen floor (Friedan, 4-5).” My life is similar to what she described, however, I still ask myself “Is this all?”

In my project, my husband, my son and I dressed up as an ordinary husband, a kid and a housewife, and I photographed in the real scenes. The domestic scenes are familiar to everyone, for example, in the living room, dinner room, bathroom, bedroom, and so on. The stories are also common to each family, like feeding the kid, watching TV, putting on makeup, having fun with the kid, drying or ironing clothes, cooking, or others happens every day inside the household. Life is like a drama. I captured daily life scenes, which happen every day in every family. The audiences will feel sympathetic with the roles in my images.

In my project, each photograph depicts a dramatic conflict, which happened between the family members. Like mother and son, husband and wife, or wife with herself. When mother is busy with some chores, son wants to play with mother, sometimes he makes mess, and mother has to clean up again. Mother can’t sit down to have a quiet meal, since she still has to be busy between kitchen and dining room doing things. Like every suburban wife, she takes good care of her kid and husband, saying a lot with the morning goodbye kiss when her husband is heading to office. When she wakes up in the bathroom, she looks lost in her face without any feeling. As a female, she needs emotional communication with her husband. However, her requirements sometimes are ignored. She feels empty and lonely. The main actress, as mother and wife, appears in most of the images, however, she is never fully shown. The mother is not just herself; she represents all females in the same situation.

The male, as husband and father, was sometimes physically absent from the images. “Absence” is another feature in my projects. But actually, he is never fully absent, as he always shows up as
a symbol, such as part of the body, bath towel, toy collection, clothes, and so on. He is so important in the family, but he spends more time in office. For a family, female, compared male, often takes more time at home, taking good care of family members, dealing with everything, and doing unfinished chores.

I made some images like film footage by using long exposures and 16:9 ratio, which can show more of the process of each action. For example, when everyone is having meals in the dinner room, mother shows up in several places, sitting on the table, coming out of the kitchen with cups. By the way, she also works on her laptop when she is eating. In the living room, a kid’s train is running on the track, husband’s laptop shows a login desktop, he moves from one couch to another, wife just sits on a side of the couch. In the bedroom, an adult’s feet tell an adult’s private stories. I express emotions and beats via the sequence between long exposures and still life images. Some still life pictures show details in the family space, like necklaces; one wither white rose fallen into sink; white hairs dropped on the laptop; father’s shirt hangs with his son’s; father’s toy collection is standing with kid’s toys. The inclusion of dialogue gives an understanding of the tension between family members.

As an immigrant suburban wife, I have to express my immigrant state. In some images, culture differences evolve to culture conflicts. Chinese people like to dry clothes outside, since they don’t have dryers. When the immigrant mother lives in the suburban upstate New York, she still retains this habit, drying clothes at the yard or deck. Her son, as an American can’t understand it. Mother was involved in American culture, and she tried decorating houses for every holiday. However, it takes a long time to learn culture contexts. In the picture, she did a really awesome job when she tried to decorate the front door and yard. Her son’s true words actually hurt her feelings. Each meal is very complicated, she has to think of the different dietary habits between Chinese and American born Chinese, like foods, cooking way and tablewares. By the way, Chinese-Ameri-
can families always pay more attention to education. I use some “Princeton University” symbols to express her best wish for her son’s future.

In the final vision, I would like to edit my photo book like a film script, which will combine script and storybook. I think this way can fulfill my story about suburban life and emphasizes female feeling: living together and feeling alone. Just like one image shows, she hopes her life can go back to teenage, then she can ride tricycle; meanwhile, her son wants to grow up quickly so that he can wear adult shoes.

Housework is shown to be a vexed life arena. When a mother is overwhelmed with the chores and taking good care of the family, she loses herself. She may miss good opportunities to develop her own career because she doesn’t have enough time and space. She has to give up her own habits and stay at home instead. I am dressing up as a normal mother and wife. I lost myself in tough housework, but still, am trying to figure out who I am.

In the sheer relief, I was not alone. Betty Friedan’s experience encourages me, not only her theories but also her family experiences. In 1947, she married Carl Friedan and changed her name to Betty Friedan. The marriage brought her three children and a family life that went around and round. It didn’t annihilate her talents and ambitions, while she was caring for her family. Friedan still insisted on contributing to some middle-class women’s magazines.

Over hundreds of years, the social demands for females have been constantly changing. Greg Buzwell discussed the free-spirited and independent New Woman of the Victorian ear, uninterested in marriage and children. “The Victorian fin de siècle was an age of tremendous change. Art, politics, science and society were revolutionised by the emergence of new theories and challenges to tradition. Arguably the most radical and far-reaching change of all concerned the role of women, and the increasing number of opportunities becoming available to them in a male-dominated world. With educational and employment prospects for women improving, marriage followed by
motherhood was no longer seen as the inevitable route towards securing a level of financial security.” “Either way, whether viewed as a free-spirited, independent, bicycling, intelligent career-minded ideal or as a sexually degenerate, abnormal, mannish, chain-smoking, child-hating bore, the New Woman was here to stay and, admired or despised, she remained a force for change throughout the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods.” New Woman was different from the traditional figure. Compared to women, what did society think about male? “The man’s power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer…. But the woman’s power is for the rule, not for battle.” (Ruskin, XXV) That means, women just follow the man’s rule, she was just a vassal of man.

Hughes’ article gave us more idea about the gender roles in the 19th century from marriage and sexuality to education and rights, “during the Victorian period men and women’s roles became more sharply defined than at any time in history. In earlier centuries it had been usual for women to work alongside husbands and brothers in the family business. Living ‘over the shop’ made it easy for women to help out by serving customers or keeping accounts while also attending to their domestic duties. As the 19th century progressed men increasingly commuted to their place of work – the factory, shop or office. Wives, daughters and sisters were left at home all day to oversee the domestic duties that were increasingly carried out by servants. From the 1830s, women started to adopt the crinoline, a huge bell-shaped skirt that made it virtually impossible to clean a grate or sweep the stairs without tumbling over.” She used “Separate spheres” to describe the family’s situation, “The two sexes now inhabited what Victorians thought of as ‘separate spheres’, only coming together at breakfast and again at dinner. The ideology of Separate Spheres rested on a definition of the ‘natural’ characteristics of women and men. Women were considered physically weaker yet morally superior to men, which meant that they were best suited to the domestic sphere. Not only was it their job to counterbalance the moral taint of the public sphere in which their husbands laboured all day, they were also preparing the next generation to carry on this way of life. The fact that women had such great influence at home was used as an argument against giving them the vote.” When I tried to figure out the line of
female’ role in history, and how many changed during these years is a big question in my mind.

When I read Mrs. Beeton’s *Book of Household Management*, which was a guild book for several women at that time. She listed more than 90 rules for the mistress, who had to observe. There were numerous rules, including how to manage the family, how to maintain the house, hiring the handyman, which kind of clothes he can wear, when he should get up and go to bed. There were more than half rules about organizing a home party, like how to write the invitation cards, how to prepare foods, wines, how to serve the guests, arrange the carriages, and so on. She said, “Of all those acquirements, which more particularly belong to the feminine character, there are none which take a higher rank, in our estimation, than such as enter into a knowledge of household duties; for these are perpetually dependent on the happiness, comfort, and well-being of a family. In this opinion we are borne out by the author of *The Vicar of Wakefield*, who says: ‘The modest virgin, the prudent wife, and the careful matron, are much more serviceable in life than petticoated philosophers, blustering heroines, or virago queens. She who makes her husband and her children happy, who reclaims the one from vice and trains up the other to virtue, is a much greater character than ladies described in romances, whose whole occupation is to murder mankind with shafts from their quiver, or theri eyes.’(80)”In my mind, this is a super housewife. However, I can’t find the rules about how to take good care of kids. And I worried about how to remember so many rules. However, I still have to ask myself, how many changed in these years?

In the 1960s and 1970s, newspapers, magazines, books, and broadcasts all advocated that women’s duties were to serve their husbands, have children and take care of their families. Measuring a woman’s success depends on her husband’s career, her children’s education and the layout of her family. As Friedan said in *The Female Mystique*, “experts told them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training,
how to cope with sibling rivalry and adolescent rebellion; how to buy a dishwasher, bake bread, cook gourmet snails, and built a swimming pool with their own hands; how to dress, look, and act more feminine and make marriage more exciting; how to keep their husbands from dying young and their sons from growing into delinquents.” (Friedan, 15) At that time, the popular advertisement was “Cooking delicious food for the family is the ultimate joy of life.” This is the image of “happy housewives” advocated and shaped by the media. Only in family life can we achieve happiness and self-realization, which is the expectation and orientation of women in society at that time.

When Friedan wrote her *The Female Mystique*, the world was experiencing great social and ideological shocks. In the same time, the civil rights movement in the U.S. had blossomed and fruited, and the slogan of “equality” was deeply rooted in the hearts of the people. In 1963, the publication of *The Female Mystique* aroused great social repercussions. She compared the family to “comfortable concentration camp,” calling on women to break through the shackles of the family into society and end gender discrimination against women. Amanda described, “*The Feminine Mystique* is credited with starting the second-wave of feminism,” and “while Friedan influenced generations of women, it was the French existentialist philosopher and feminist Simone de Beauvoir who influenced her most, so much so that her book, *The Second Stage*, is a play on words of de Beauvoir’s work, Le Deuxième Sexe (Amanda, 20).”

Nobody knows how to liberate housewives, how to let housewives’ dreams come true. “I think, in fact, that is the first clue to the mystery: the problem cannot be understood in the generally accepted terms by which scientists have studied women, doctors have treated them, counsellors have advised them, and writers have written about them. Women who suffer this problem have lived their whole lives in the pursuit of feminine fulfilment (Friedan, 17).” I can take pictures to complain about my busy and empty life. The suburban life is very peaceful. It represents middle-class lifestyle, with a comfortable
house, two or three kids, and a hardworking husband. They are living together; however, she feels lonely. As Betty Friedan’ book titled “The problem has no name.”

Looking at history as a way of better understanding the present, photography can be used as a powerful weapon toward instituting political and cultural change. While my need to decipher and address my own life is personal, my work has always touched upon universal themes, with the potential to start a dialogue about cultural differences and universal similarities.
Cite

Bibliography


*R The Problem that Has No Name*, Penguin Random House (UK), 2018


TOGETHER / ALONE
- UNDER SUBURBAN SKY

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Archival Pigment Print
25x20

Morning Kiss
Archival Pigment Print
25x14
White Hair
Archival Pigment Print
16x20

Jeans
Archival Pigment Print
20x20
Make Up
Archival Pigment Print
25x14

Halloween Coming
Archival Pigment Print
16X20
Arrived at Home
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16x20

Drying Clothes on Deck
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Protects Son
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Busy in Cooking
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You Are The Best
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Night Night
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