

From Knowing Nothing about People to Knowing Something about Life – An Article for Hsu Wei-Hui's 2013 Solo Exhibition

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Marcel Proust (1871-1922) has once said: "Our vanity, our passions, our spirit of imitation, our abstract intelligence, our habits have long been at work, and it is the task of art to undo this work of theirs, making us travel back in the direction from which we have come to the depths where what has really existed lies unknown within us."

His words should be quoted as the prologue of Hsu Wei-Hui's artistic practice.

Strictly speaking, Hsu Wei-Hui's artistic practice can be regarded as a way to reexamine her inner mind. Through art-making, she keeps revealing the previous wounds, again and again, which have already been covered up. Every time when we look into it, we will be surprised to realize that her heart is getting stronger and stronger in an indescribable way.

In 2005, when she was still pursuing her first master degree at Savannah College of Art and Design in the United States of America, she had adopted the artistic vocabulary of landscape and installation to create a work "Potential Cell No.13 – Nostalgia." Within the sensitive emotions expressed by the work was certain somber sentiment. Observing the moving light-and-shadow on the walls of her studio corridor, she not only saw the uncertainty of the chase between the light and the shadow, but also related it to the sweet and the bitter experiences as an alien in a foreign country. Therefore, she used glass windows and the movement of the natural light to paint translucent blue lines on the glass windows. When the light was reflected on the glass windows with the passing of time, the lines painted with various blues became a cell-like unit radiating rays of light. Like blood vessels, the lines extended forward while entangling with each other. The lines and the rays of light on every window were visualized in different ways, suggesting that the passing of time might have been the same, but the traces which had carved into our minds could not be reproduced again.

For those who had not gone away from home, it would be difficult to understand how the illumination could evoke one's inner nostalgia for home as if the strong emotions were flowing out from the knocked-over crucet.

The warmth of the illumination thus became one of the major spiritual qualities hidden within throughout Hsu Wei-Hui's artistic practice.

More importantly, she did not stop at the exploration of the "real objects" in the illumination. In the following series works – the works which later made her famous, such as "Facial Mask series" and "Guerilla Girls series" –, she gradually deconstructed the substantial existence of the illumination. I was surprised to realize that she could create the "sense of quantity" for the abstract and unmeasurable illumination. After its first appearance in her "Facial Mask series," she continued her experimental exploration of such a "sense of quantity." The illumination in the early work "Potential Cell series" still depended on the brightness of the light to dominate how certain emotion could be understood. However, she further transformed such a "quality" through coloring and piling the facial masks. The quality of the illumination in her early works was thus realized as "the embodied experience of life" in her recent works. From the abstract to the concrete, it does not suggest that the artist has chosen a mundane expression to manipulate the language. Quite the opposite, I believe that the artist again and again polishes her skill to visualize the landscape carved into the depth of the heart through simple and plain language. As how Proust put it, "our habits have long been at work, and it is the task of art to undo this work of theirs, making us travel back in the direction from which we have come to the depths where what has really existed lies unknown within us."

Born in 1979, Hsu Wei-Hui has taken one step after another, following her own artistic context without

any diversion from the tracks designed by herself. Such an attitude is rarely seen among the new generation of young artists in Taiwan. She has once told me that she enjoyed observing the cells of different species under a microscope since she was a child. The experience also influenced the way how she later chose the expression in her artistic practice. The examples include the semi-circular object which is like the cell wall in "Potential Cell No.18 - The Origin," the cell nuclei constituted by Styrofoam cups in "Potential Cell No.16 – Parasite," or even the work "Potential Cell No.19 – Fear Wall" – in which she began to use facial masks as her materials in 2006. There are two major rules in Hsu Wei-Hui's artworks: first, she appropriates the "growing and spreading" quality of cells and fully transforms it into the symbol of "plural quantity" in her works, which psychologically suggests the propagation of life as well as the hidden sense of insecurity in her heart; second, since the work "Potential Cell No.18 - The Origin," she has continuously exploring how to visualize different illumination levels, which further explains her anxiety to be noticed by people around her.

Focusing on the life extension through the propagation of cells, we might be able to explain why she later uses facial masks to pile up a quantity-oriented structure. Even in another interesting works "Guerilla Girls series," we can notice Hsu Wei-Hui's obsession to the plural organic cell growth. However, I still perceive how she expresses the traces of her inner emotions through art-making. "I have had dark skin color since I was a kid, and people in the Eastern society usually laughed at girls with dark skin, thinking of them as ugly, but it never occurred to me that such an experience would even influence my relationship when I grew up," says Hsu Wei-Hui. Therefore, Hsu Wei-Hui told us with honesty that she used facial masks as her materials not only because she indeed liked using daily objects as materials, but also because facial masks were greatly used by the women in Asian countries for skin whitening. Based upon, however, I believe that Hsu Wei-Hui's artistic exploration can be divided into two totally diverse spheres.

The idea of the work "Potential Cell series" started from her experiences of living and studying alone in the USA. The change of environment made her insecure. Therefore, she was very anxious about everything in her life. In other words, the uncertainty of life became the starting point of the series works. As for the development of "Facial Mask Series," it was based upon the certainty of life – a kind of certainty that combined the dissatisfaction about the present situation and the desire to change it. These two major themes have affected the way Hsu chooses the materials as well as the final visualization of her works. Nevertheless, they indeed build up a close relationship in terms of spiritual inheritance. The artistic vocabulary is eventually pushed to the maximum when a great amount of works in "Guerilla Girls series" have been done.

After the division of Hsu Wei-Hui's two major artistic themes has been completed, one can also see the subcategories in her works decided by her arrangement of the psychological expressions. Most of the works in "Potential Cell series" were made during her studies in the States. Her anxiety woven into the works is thus clearly seen – including the worries and the hopelessness about her situation and the future career as an artist. Therefore, we can see the illumination and the quantity-oriented objects which seem to reveal her desire to be warmly surrounded and to be acknowledged by the society. After returning to Taiwan in 2009, she created "Facial Mask series." It indeed provided a space for her artistic expression. However, once she returned to the home country she was familiar with, the nostalgia soon turned into the daily routine. Consequently, she had to come up with a more profound contour about the self in such a situation. "Facial Mask series" thus started discussing something more about the female beauty. She represented the carved traces of life from a multi-dimensional perspective, transforming "Facial Mask series" from the superficial expression into a facial-mask-sculpture with various emotions inside.

From the perspective of social psychology, a "facial mask" and a "mask" are definitely two different tools with different functions. A facial mask helps us to construct and to pursue an external psychological intoxication which is represented in a relatively formalized way. It is purely a temporary personal behavior. A mask, on the other hands, can be used as the magic potion to strengthen one's inner self – similar to the comic or cartoon heroes who usually depend on certain costumes or masks to take off their identities as ordinary persons and put on the identities as heroes. Therefore, masks help people to escape from the ordinary reality and to avoid the life routine which common people are confined within, offering them a possibility to go beyond the ordinary reality and to become

someone with “super power.” On the contrary, facial masks are purely used with one sole purpose – the one and the only function to change the ordinary appearance while it has its limitation within certain period of time.

Facial masks’ function in daily life provides a perspective for Hsu Wei-Hui’s artistic exploration. The initial inspiration might have been her identity as a female. While she grows old and becomes more emotionally mature, she also sees facial masks as something more than the daily objects for women to take care of their skin. Instead, they can be used as the tools to write down the essence of life. I particularly appreciate her idea to create a mask-like body, which is slightly full in shape, by piling and accumulating the thin delicate facial masks. Since the “flesh/body” is being colored layer by layer (the coloring process in the making of the works undoubtedly replaces the illumination in “Potential Cell series,” while the luster of the illumination now has been removed – “color” is the only thing remains), the facial masks’ function of skin care no longer exists. Instead, it establishes the ecology to express the prime and the decay of life. For example, in her work “Transforming...(No.1)” in 2011, the front clearly reveals that the facial masks here are longer the ordinary white ones we are familiar with, but are withering and yellowing. The accumulation of a great amount of them even reminds viewers of the wizened look of those who approach the end of their lives. It is indeed an explicit but yet ironic representation. In the work “Smiling to Life,” on the other hands, the front is the fresh, bright, and colorful facial masks which look like flowers, revealing the infinite energy of the materials created by Hsu Wei-Hui. Interestingly, the bottom of the work is a mirror, through which viewers can see the faces behind the blossom (in fact, it is just the typical look of a facial mask) to experience the moment of speechless.

As what has been mentioned above, “Facial Mask series” is the reexamination of what we have already known about people, while she further extends the concept in “Guerilla Girls series.” “When studying in Georgia, the USA, I was always worried about the public security of the state, so I started the series works featuring the modified toy soldiers,” says Hsu Wei-Hui. She painted the toy soldier models in pink, having them to wear military uniforms on top as well as the exaggeratedly colorful skirts (the interrelation between the pink color and the floral skirts created a visual effect which was similar to the illumination), while each of them was holding a weapon in one hand and posed in a charming way with the other hand. In these series works, Hsu Wei-Hui continued the representation of the quantity-oriented propagation function. Thousands of the pink soldiers appear from everywhere, creating the overwhelming visual effect of invasion at the moment when we sees the image. Such an effect has a totally different psychological implication from how we associate the quality of facial masks with softness and caress. The girls’ height in “Guerilla Girls series” on the one hand transforms the social convention that the female can only take the second place; on the other hand, it strengthens women’s indispensable power through the infinite growth and propagation of life. There is certain deep sense of humor hidden inside Hsu Wei-Hui’s personality. It first appeared in “Facial Mask series,” and was fully expressed in “Guerilla Girls series.” Slowly and gradually, the transition of the environment has made her to realize that life cannot be fully improved or fulfilled by facial masks only. Therefore, she has learned to reveal her past stubbornness and cautiousness in a light-hearted way. It explains why she uses facial masks to capture the four seasons of one’s life or why she puts the guerilla girls in a fairytale-like reality. It is her psychological system to protect herself when she again takes a pure and sincere step toward her ideal.

Hsu Wei-Hui’s artistic practice starts from the self-knowledge about life, but she has experienced something more profound while she is given a space to reexamine herself through the art-making process. A space like this not only extends her artistic pursuit but also creates a future of profundity to be expected.