



# Changing Cultures: Zhen Guo, A Retrospective

by Gail Levin

“My life has been—and continues to be—split between two worlds. I grew up, was educated, and learned how to paint in China; however, I would say that I came into my own in the United States—as an individual and an artist. In other words: I learned about the world in China, and I confronted it in the United States.”

— Zhen Guo, 2018<sup>1</sup>

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Cover image

Zhen Guo, *Love, Kindness, Passion, Desire*, 2020, Fabrics and mixed media, 98.5" x 236" x 10"

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<sup>1</sup> Guo interviewed by Amy Gahyun Lee, assisted by Tian Weinberg, “Eazel Sits Down with Zhen Guo (Part II),” June 26, 2018. <https://eazel.net/magazine/34>





Zhen Guo and her father, 1959

**Zhen Guo** is a feminist artist in New York. This fact is astonishing, especially when we realize that she was born in 1955, in China's Shandong Province and that she first developed her artistic talents during the Chinese Cultural Revolution.<sup>1</sup> Her work had not yet come to my attention when in 1991, I organized the exhibition "Changing Cultures: Immigrant Artists from China" for Baruch College's Art Gallery.

That show focused on how Chinese immigrant artists navigated cultural shifts and made artworks that bridged two worlds to express their evolving identities. In China, Guo was focused on identity and individuality in her artwork at a time when educators and intellectuals were still subject to persecution. I would have loved to have included Guo's work from that era in my 1991 show, such as *Phases of the Moon* (1990). She dismissed this work as "too decorative, too commercial," since galleries easily sold it. Thus, Guo was able to earn funds to support herself and her new husband, an artist whose ambition had propelled her to journey to the United States.

Following Guo's success as a student at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou (now called China Art College), she was invited to teach there. Then, in 1985, she married her contemporary and colleague, Wenda Gu, who, like Guo, had studied and was also teaching at the school. Guo, despite her own record of stellar accomplishments, quickly fell into the traditional Chinese wife's role of supporting her new husband's career. When he wanted to go to the United States, Guo agreed to go first since she had relatives living there who could serve as guarantors to help her to obtain a visa.

After only a year of married life, she left in 1986 to enroll at San Francisco Art Institute, but lasted only one semester, leaving to learn English. Meanwhile, she worked busing tables in a local Taiwanese coffeeshop, underpaid, and barely able to fend for herself.



Zhen Guo in San Francisco circa 1988

It was not until July 1987 that her husband joined her in Los Angeles, where she had moved. Guo described her harsh life in America during the first few years of her marriage: going early to school to keep her student visa status; waitressing until six at night; cleaning the home where the couple was boarding—in payment for their rent; toiling until midnight on her schoolwork. She was exhausted supporting both herself and her husband, whose only responsibility was to study English at school: "I silently bore all the burdens of my family, with the hope that my labors would be temporary and that my efforts would help."<sup>2</sup>

Zhen Guo had learned to sacrifice for family while growing up the eldest child of four children born to Communist government workers. Guo's mother, Zhang Shouying, born in 1932, had not been allowed an education and Guo's grandmother suffered from bound feet, the painful practice then imposed on young girls to restrict normal growth and create tiny feet as "sexual props for men."<sup>3</sup> Guo's father, Guo Changfang, headed the propaganda department in Rizhao, working on cultural projects and education. His failure to navigate the Cultural Revolution's shoals compelled the entire family to relocate to the countryside when Guo was still an adolescent.



*Long Life Chairman Mao, 1966, embroidery, 14" x 15"*

In 1966 at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, when she was 11 years old, Guo's mother had her embroider her earliest surviving artwork: a mass-produced handkerchief printed with an image of Chairman Mao. Beyond the obvious political implications, her mother was probably familiar with embroidery's long history in China, where many women practitioners of the art go back at least to the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127 AD).<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, Guo's father's troubles kept her from attending school beyond age twelve. When she was fourteen, her parents sent her to apprentice with a distant relative and learn the craft of sewing. After that, in 1970, the government assigned her, at nearly sixteen, to work in a factory, cutting and sewing clothes. "You were supposed to only consider the government; follow the rules it set," Guo reflected. Yet it was while she worked in these various jobs that she "first touched paint and fell in love" with Chinese painting.<sup>5</sup>

In 1973, towards the end of the Cultural Revolution, Guo wanted to take the examination to apply to study art. However, her father opposed any kind of cultural career, since he viewed those pursuing culture and art to be at risk of being disfavored by the political leaders. Thus, he pushed her toward a safer career in science. Desperate, she ran away from home, traveling more than 200 miles to take the National College Entrance Examination for art. She was accepted to study at the Shandong Art School in Jinan, which she attended for three and a half years, graduating in December 1976.



*When Zhen Guo was 17 years old, she left home to study art at Shandong Art School*

Guo was able to enter Zhejiang Academy, having been chosen from the entire nation as one of only two women in a class of fourteen students. This class began in September 1978 and was just the second class after the Cultural Revolution. Most of the faculty was male, but there was one woman, Wang Qingming, who taught Chinese traditional-style figure painting.



*Zhen Guo age 24*

Guo studied with an all-male faculty, learning to make propaganda art, as well as watercolors, oil painting, calligraphy, and book design. Upon graduation, she was assigned to work at the Linyi Art Museum in Shandong, where she produced propaganda posters and helped with both political and art exhibitions. But, after a year at the museum, the government sent her away for a year to instruct peasant farmers how to plant potatoes and organize economically—subjects about which she knew nothing. Then, in 1978, Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) announced a major change of direction with China's "Open Door Policy."<sup>6</sup> As soon as this news reached Guo in the countryside, she applied to continue her study in art school.



*Mother's Love, 1980, Watercolor on rice paper, 37" x 27"*



*Student Posing as Soldier, 1978  
Charcoal on paper 19" X 24.5"*

In one course, Guo worked from life models, learning to sketch in charcoal in a naturalistic Western style. For example, in 1978, she drew a smiling model, posing as a soldier, holding a gun with a bayonet, wearing ammunition hanging from his neck. In 1979, Guo drew women workers cultivating pearls by putting sand into oysters or freshwater mussels and a grandmother tending an infant, both traditional occupations for Chinese women. Guo continued to hone her drawing skill, working from other models at school during 1979 and 1980.

In 1980, Guo painted *Mother's Love*, which her professor criticized for what he perceived to be its "political" message, just as her father had feared. Although the professor had previously liked her work, he interpreted this painting, which depicted two farm women nursing their babies with a mother hen and her six chicks visible in the foreground, as a dissident statement encouraging families to have more children. This was at the time that the government was just beginning to enforce its new "one-child" policy, which remained the law from 1979-2015. Guo responded to her teacher's accusation: "My idea of this painting was simply to express the requirement of nature that mothers care for their children."

When Guo participated in a faculty show, an American collector purchased her 1983 work, *Seated Woman* (Collection: Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, CA). This figure's outline recalls the style of a then recently excavated mural painting of Li Xian's Tang dynasty tomb at the Qianling Mausoleum, dated 706 CE. Guo's *Seated Woman* also includes two collage elements unrelated to Tang murals: a blue-and-white-check fabric in the foreground



and a photograph held in the hand of the sitter, who is drawn in charcoal. Guo and her classmates were emulating collages they saw in art books and magazines from the West—from the Cubist Picasso to Tom Wesselman and other Pop artists.

Guo's *Portrait of a Foreign Student* (1984) also shows how she collaged a real photograph onto her painting. This photograph depicts a student from Canada, whom she recalled told her how much she missed her dog. Guo showed the missing dog in the photo that the student holds in her left hand and as the imagined presence she pets with her right hand. Guo's desire to express emotional content is already evident and would become a major theme in her art.

After her promising work as a student and then as an instructor at the art school in Hangzhou, she struggled to support herself and her husband in America. The couple soon left for the School of Fine Arts at York University in Toronto, Canada, where they were visiting scholars and each had solo shows.<sup>7</sup> Even as her husband began to experience success, Guo remained devoted to supporting his career first, privileging his goals over her own needs. Yet in their year apart, she observed, both she and her new husband "went through some changes."<sup>8</sup>

Guo's husband, impatient to move to the center of the art world, went to New York without her, leaving her behind in Los Angeles to earn funds for him to rent housing and pay his art school tuition. After six months, she dropped out of school and took a non-immigrant temporary



*Phases of the Moon*, 1988, gouache and acrylic on rice paper, 40" x 40"

permit for the immediate family of Student Visa holders, allowing her to leave California and join her husband. Arriving in New York in 1988, Guo continued making stylized figurative paintings such as *Phases of the Moon*, which she had begun after she returned from Toronto. These pictures recall the flowing lines and asymmetry of *art nouveau*, popular in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. They sold well enough that she could support her husband while he was free to make more personal art and take English classes.

Guo's dedication to supporting her husband was admired by her few American friends, such as the feminist artists, sculptor Nancy Fried and her partner the painter, Christina Schlesinger, yet they wondered why her husband did not take his share of responsibility. Only gradually did Guo begin to grasp her husband's exploitation of her: "Westerners don't understand us. We Asian women are willing to work hard for the family and to sacrifice," she thought. Slowly, she recalls, she began to experience "a sour sense of grievance."<sup>9</sup>

Guo and Wenda Gu separated in 1993 and divorced in 1995. After the Spring 1989 Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing, when troops and tanks massacred student demonstrators, the U.S. government declared in 1992 that Chinese nationals, who could prove they were in the U.S. from June 5, 1989 to April 11, 1990, were automatically eligible for permanent residency.<sup>10</sup> Although this enabled Guo to obtain a Green Card residency document, she was devastated by the end of the marriage in which she had invested so much.

For several years, Guo felt paralyzed by grief and unable to paint. She got a job in New York designing textiles for Cranston Print works, then the oldest surviving textile printing company in the United States. Years later, she reflected, "I had a voice when I was younger, painting as a pure artist. Later I would submit to society's rules and role for women, sacrificing my own ambition and desires. This is when I feel I became mute. I still had language, but I couldn't make noise. It wasn't until my family life started



*Daydreaming, 2000, acrylic and ink on rice paper, 26" x 35.5"*

to fall apart—when my first husband and I separated—that I completely stopped painting. It just became too painful. So, for a period of time, I lost my voice and I was stripped of my identity as an artist.”<sup>11</sup> Processing what she had been through in her first marriage took many years.

After she separated from her husband, she began dating Robert Weinberg, then a criminal investigator with the City of New York who also taught karate, which she would later study with him. Just over forty, she became pregnant and their daughter, Tian, was born in February 1996. Guo quit her job so that she could focus on the baby. She did eventually paint portraits of her newborn child, based on a photograph she had taken. In a portrait called *Daydreaming* (2000), she also painted her new husband with their baby. Once remarried, Guo realized that she had found a spouse who supported and encouraged her career.

Guo painted several more portraits of her daughter. One of Tian at the age of two shows the humor of her attempt to wear adult sneakers. Guo depicted her daughter surrounded by her toys, enabling the viewer to identify with the child's imagination, her fantasy of the cow jumping over the moon. A few years later, Guo conveys a communicative, happy child on her tricycle, creating an idealized world at a time when she herself remained tortured by the enduring pain of her first husband's abandonment. The style and composition of her portrait resemble those made as popular propaganda images during



*Her Tricycle, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 35.5" x 25.5"*



*Learning Chinese, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 22" x 30"*

the 1970s in China. Another portrait, Tian *Learning Chinese*, 1999, was painted after Guo enrolled her small daughter in a Chinese school, during an extended visit she made to be with her dying father in China.





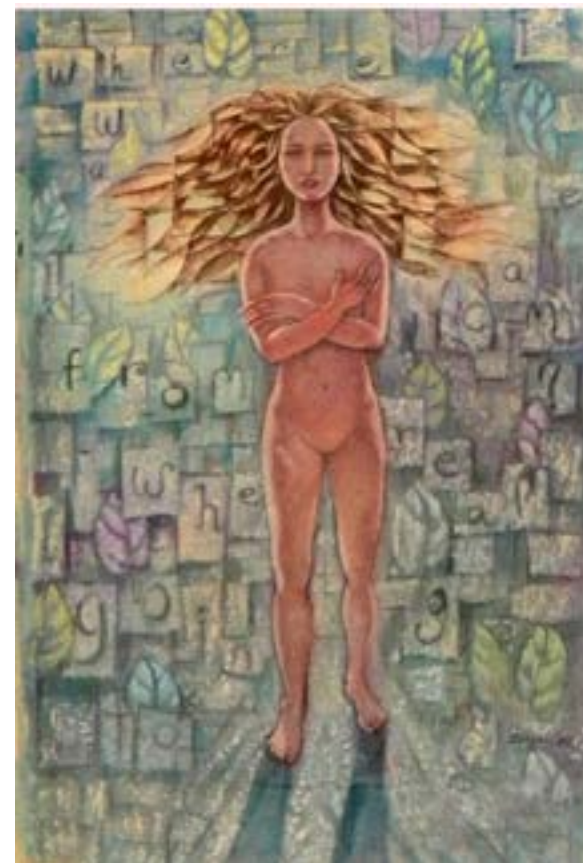
*Supper, 2000, acrylic and ink on rice paper, 29.5" x 41"*

By 2000, Guo was finally able to portray herself and her first husband seated at the dinner table in a double self-portrait, *Supper*, painted on rice paper and one of thirteen in a series she called "Life Death Love." She imagines her left breast stripped away and her broken heart removed and placed on her ex-husband's dinner plate, which is bright red as is his side of the tablecloth. As large visible tears flow from her eyes, he holds his knife and fork, not chopsticks. Her knife and spoon remain unused next to her empty plate, for symbolically, she was starving. Feeling anguish, grief, worry, and jealousy, she was literally "eating her heart out" from the pain she had experienced as a devoted young Chinese wife, who had sacrificed for her husband's success only to have him betray her.

Guo's expression of enduring pain recalls the heart motif in Frida Kahlo's paintings, especially her *Two Fridas* of 1939. When the poet Mai Mang observed similarities between her work and Kahlo, Guo commented: "I think, Frida and myself belong to two different generations. If there are any similarities between us, they lie in the fact that we both tried our best to

use painting to express in maxim our own most memorable experiences of life and love. There is no covering up, no shyness, no frivolity, no utilitarian calculation, no falsehood."<sup>12</sup> Guo defended the emotional content in her work: "No matter whether these scenes may appear too shocking, these feelings too unsettling, they all originate from a heart that is extremely sensitive, fully tested by life, battered and beaten over time, and with profound feelings."<sup>13</sup>

Guo depicted her battered and beaten self in a 2005 metaphorical nude self-portrait, painted in acrylic and gouache on rice paper, which she called *Who Am I?* In depicting herself, Guo says that she borrowed



*Who Am I?, 2005, acrylic and ink on rice paper, 40" x 30"*

the image of the still developing figure of her nine-year-old daughter. While she did not aim for realism, she expressed her feelings of both freedom and vulnerability by depicting herself with wild unkempt hair and with her arms modestly folded across her not yet visible breasts, still innocent. Guo expressed her conflicted adult self in the English letters in the background, which spell out words like "Who" and "Where am I going." Her picture seems to refer to Paul Gauguin's 1897-98 painting, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, a classic image



for those searching for their identity, which Guo recalls seeing in books.

Guo finally did get in touch with her fury, but not until 2010, when she depicted herself in *Self-Portrait*, as an angry caged leopard with pigs' feet and a human face, growling at the world. "This is about screaming and not being heard," she protested, "about not being able to leave the cage." She followed with a 2011 series in acrylic on rice paper: *Suffocation* was the first of what turned into eight grimacing and choking self-portraits. "I wanted to deeply embed anger and hatred, resentment and submission in my art, as well as love and sorrow felt to the bone," she said. She turned to the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, whose work she had read in school after the Cultural Revolution, quoting a passage re-translated from the Chinese as: "Extreme pain is the last liberator of the spirit. Only this pain compels us to understand."<sup>14</sup>

In its heightened emotional intensity, Guo's series of grimacing self-portraits recalls Edvard Munch's icon of alienation, *The Scream* of 1893. Like the Norwegian painter, she understands that facial expressions mirror the agony of the soul. She too was dealt a hand of personal trauma and suffered from melancholy. She says that her choking self-portraits express "my own feelings of suffocating: a woman unable to breath—choked by constraints and limits placed on her life, by her duties and expectations to society. She works, struggles, and suffers, but when she tries to speak, she has no voice. Without that voice, she feels worthless."<sup>15</sup>

In her next series of three self-portraits, painted in ink and acrylic on rice paper in 2012, Guo depicted herself boxing and ventilating her anger. She



*Self Portrait*, 2010, ink and acrylic  
on rice paper, 40" x 50"



*The Last Blow*, 2012, ink and acrylic  
on rice paper, 36.5" x 37.5"

called these self-portraits names like *Still Standing* and *Last Blow*. Both the intensity of her emotions and her experience of boxing were real, but she now felt much more hopeful and less depressed than she had been in the years following her divorce. She had come to understand the need for a woman to reclaim her voice that others would silence. This determination is also behind her self-portrait digital print from 2016, *Resistance Takes a Village*, inspired by Hilary Clinton's presidential campaign.

Guo continues to express her personal vision of feminism, often through sculptural installations. In 2013, Guo returned to the theme of motherhood, for which she had been criticized in art school. She began to represent motherhood metaphorically as single voluptuous breast sculptures, sewn in different colorful combinations, settings, materials, and patterns, often from fabric scraps given to her by her supervisor at Cranston Print works. The form of these breasts recalls hats from Chinese folk costumes, such as the *guapi-mao* or Melon-skinned hats which she had depicted in her 1980 watercolor, *Mother's Love*.

Later, from 2015 on, Guo sculpted a series of breasts of lacquered *papier-mâché*, a versatile craft technique with roots in ancient China, in which wastepaper is shredded and mixed with water and a binder to produce a pulp ideal for molding forms, which dry to a hard surface and permit the creation of lightweight strong and inexpensive objects. Guo often drew imaginary figures on the lacquered surfaces with ink, sometimes inscribing messages of love. She eventually exhibited some of these sculptures



*Choking*, 2011  
acrylic and ink  
on rice paper  
40" x 40" each



*Mother and Earth, 2019, ink on rice paper and mixed media, 79" x 118" x 10"*

suspended in front of her ink drawings of landscapes that evoke Chinese traditional art. One example is her *Mother and Earth* from 2022.

From 2013-2018, Guo attached her sewn breasts to punching bags as a "direct and imposing image of violent masculinity," since she viewed the heavyweight boxer as "a symbol of violence and patriarchal society." Guo has explained that her choice of fabrics for the breasts from expensive silk to humble linens represents a multitude of women from different social classes, having diverse personalities.

In 2013, Guo made *Girls' Nightmare*, an imaginary portrait of a 23-year-old woman who died as the result of a brutal gang rape on a moving bus in India in December 2012. Horrified by reading press reports about this violent attack and fearing for all women, Guo expressed her outrage in her painting.<sup>16</sup> Her ongoing concern for women's vulnerability and the lack of protection of women's rights also motivated several portraits in 2022 of other female victims, including *Ukrainian*, which depicts a representative woman from the current war. Guo based her painting on a photograph



*The World Doesn't Want Me Anymore, 2022  
Ink and acrylic on rice paper, 40.5" x 40"*

posted on Facebook of a woman who was injured by Russian shelling.<sup>17</sup>

In *The World Doesn't Want Me Anymore*, also 2022, Guo depicts the notorious case of a woman who was trafficked in rural China and then discovered locked in a hut, held captive by a dog chain around her neck, having been forced to bear eight children. Guo's empathy for the oppressed chained woman also resulted in

*I Feel Your Pain*, a 2023 self-portrait in which she depicts herself wearing a similar dog chain.<sup>18</sup>

Guo's new, more optimistic vision is evident in *Together*, her large three-paneled painting of 2021, which expresses what she believes to be tremendous improvements to the life trajectories that women have undergone in the past 100 years. Painted on rice paper, this triptych shows women's self-awakening and echoes Guo's view of her own evolution. In trying to modernize, Guo is making a statement about how women must continue to obtain their own position and rights. She sees women as: "...people who have been enslaved and slandered for thousands of years, the thoughts and behaviors of feudal and wasteful customs are still reflected everywhere, and they continue to be attached to the old patriarchal thinking. The purpose of this creation is to show the current situation of female society: between the swamp and the ideal, there are those rising, excitement, calling, action, but also hesitation, doubt, watching, sleeping and indifference."





*Rainbow Over the Mountain, 2023, ink and oil pastel on rice paper, 38" x 74"*

In *Rainbow Over the Mountain*, 2023, a landscape of ink and oil pastel on rice paper, Guo evokes her Chinese artistic precursors who searched for harmony with nature. Yet she explores a different kind of abstract alternative reality. She renders, in shades of gray, rocky cliffs, jagged rocks, the effects of falling water. However, looking closely, one is likely to recognize female body parts hidden among the landscape. This metaphorical vision of seeing female anatomical references in nature recalls some of the mountain views of the American Southwest painted by Georgia O'Keeffe. However, she repeatedly denied that there was any sexual symbolism in her work. In contrast, Guo is a feminist activist, determined to communicate her activist message however and whenever she can.

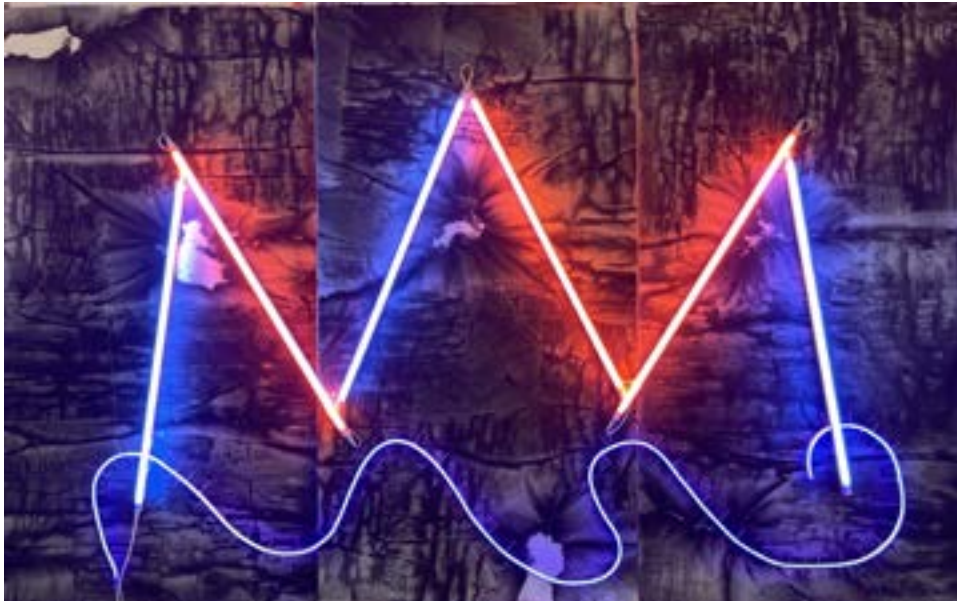
As in the Chinese language, where tone is crucial, attention to the subtlety of tone is necessary to fully comprehend the forms in Guo's ink paintings. It is said that in Chinese painting, black ink can be categorized into five shades: dark, light, dry, wet, and charred. Guo's 2023 series of ink paintings injected areas of dramatic rainbow stripes, a radical innovation, which disrupts this rich but subtle range of tones. In some of these works, the stripes are superimposed on collaged fragments. All these color inserts serve to dazzle, to alert the viewer, and to shock the eye out of any visual or social complacency.

In choosing to feature patches of rainbow stripes on her dark ink paintings, Guo sees these works as "representing LGBTQ people," choosing the commonly used acronym to refer to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. The colorful stripes derive from the rainbow flag, also known as the gay pride flag, which symbolizes lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) pride and its social movements. Its colors reflect the diversity of the LGBT community and the range of human sexuality and gender.

Guo asserts her support for this too often beleaguered community. She uses the rainbow flag, a symbol of gay pride that has its origins in 1978 in San Francisco. This flag eventually became visible worldwide at gay events. Earlier, however, the rainbow served as a symbol of diversity, used, for example, by the First Rainbow Coalition, which started in 1969, when the Black Panther Party formed alliances across lines of race and ethnicity with other community-based movements in the city of Chicago. In 1984, just a few years before Guo first arrived in the United States, Jesse Jackson founded the National Rainbow Coalition, which pursued social justice, civil rights, and political activism—all goals that Guo embraces.



*Behind the Face Masks, 2020, tufted yarn on fabric, 26" x 27"*



*Crown Wears Horizon (Mountains and the River), 2023*  
ink on rice paper with fluorescent and neon lights, 79" x 118" x 5"

In yet another variation on traditional Chinese drawing from 2023, Guo created a series in which she combined ink landscapes with actual lights. *Crown Wears Horizon (Mountains and River)*, uses ink on rice paper combined with oil pastel and fluorescent lights, taking inspiration from Dan Flavin, the American sculptor of Minimal art, who used commercially available fluorescent light as a medium to define space. While Guo continues to work with traditional Chinese means and forms, she unapologetically updates them with technology. She is fearless and eager to use metaphor and to subvert tradition.

Guo has long felt free to experiment with different media. Ironically, Mao's anti-elite dictate encouraging peasant folk artists coincided with American feminists' rejection of elite male artists' Eurocentric aesthetic. American feminist artists' post-modernism borrowed from popular and folk art that had previously been the domain of women's handicrafts and non-Western cultures.

For her latest body of work, Guo has turned to weaving tapestries by hand, first experimenting with the themes of identity in small tapestries from 2020-2025 that she titled *Behind the Facemasks*, *Who is in the Mirror?*, and *Sunshine*, the latter a depiction of a female goat looking in a hand mirror. A fourth tapestry, *Singing in the Sunset*, she wove in 2025, after the elation that she felt moving into her new Brooklyn studio. Before a richly colored sky, she portrays two nude women, one playing a guitar, while the other pets a cat.

From 2023 on, Guo began to make larger tapestries. In *Rising Up* (2025), Guo imagines the death or the end of the time when women suffered abuse. Here she shows newly empowered resilient women rising up—something between *Asparas*, celestial beings in Buddhist and Hindu culture, and female spirits such as nymphs or fairies in Western mythologies.

Guo also focused on the Hindu goddess Kali, who, appearing as a nurturing mother and a terrifying warrior, embodies feminine power for her. She sees Kali as the personification of divine feminine energies, virtues, and joy: as in her *Kali Musician*, whom she depicts simultaneously playing a lute, several horns, and bongo drums.

In *Kali Today*, a purple Kali in the lower right corner wields both a camera and a machine gun, calling to mind Susan Sontag's argument in her 1977 book, *On Photography*: ". . . a camera is sold as a predatory weapon—one that's as automated as possible, ready to spring. Popular taste expects an easy, an invisible



*Kali Musician, 2025*  
tufted yarn, fabric, pearls, 72" x 52"



technology.... Like guns and cars, cameras are fantasy-machines whose use is addictive. However.... they are not lethal... The camera/gun does not kill, so the ominous metaphor seems to be all bluff—like a man’s fantasy of having a gun, knife, or tool between his legs. Still there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture.” For Sontag, the camera was a sublimation of the gun, creating a “soft murder” in the taking of a picture, metaphorically possessing and controlling the world, transforming reality into reproductions.

Guo’s focus on Kali resulted from her realization that Kali was the only Asian among the 39 iconic women featured with place settings on the table of *The Dinner Party*, Judy Chicago’s monumental feminist artwork from 1979, which Guo admired in its permanent installation in the Brooklyn Museum. Like Chicago, Guo depicted in her tapestry, *We are all Kali*, some of the women from historical to contemporary figures whom she has admired most: the Black abolitionist Sojourner Truth (c.1797–1883); the Guerrilla Girls, anonymous artist activists who, since the mid-1980s, have exposed gender and ethnic bias and corruption in the art world; the liberal United States Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg (1933-2020); and the Chinese revolutionary and poet, Qiu Jin (1875-1907), who went to Japan to study and wrote a poem lamenting the lack of feminism in China in 1904.

Guo laments that feminism is not accepted by most women artists in China: “They avoid characterizing themselves or their art as feminist—even though it’s quite clear they are addressing feminist issues.” Her opinion concurs with other observers of Chinese contemporary art.<sup>19</sup> Combining Western philosophy and art with her background in Chinese aesthetics, Guo sees her own art as reflecting her life experience both in China and in America. Her art communicates the high drama of that life.

Gail Levin, Distinguished Professor, Baruch College and the Graduate Center, The City University of New York



*We are all Kali*, 2025, tufted yarn, fabric, pearls, 73" x 53.5"

## Endnotes

- 1 For a more general account of Zhen Guo's career, see Gail Levin, "Between Two Worlds: Zhen Guo's Journey to Feminist Art," *The Journal of Asian Arts & Aesthetics*, Vol. 8, 2022, pp.41–57, published by the Tainan Art Museum & Ainosco Press, Taipei, Taiwan.
- 2 Zhen Guo, "I stood up from the ruins—How I became a feminist artist," unpublished ms., 2020, n. p.
- 3 Robert Hans Van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China: A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 B.C. till 1444 A.D.* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 218.
- 4 Margaret Lee, *The Art of Chinese Embroidery*, Country Bumpkin, 2014.
- 5 Patrick Rolandelli, "Art and People: Eazel Sits Down with Zhen Guo," (Part I), Mar. 20, 2018, <https://eazel.net/magazine/21>.
- 6 Guocang Huan. "China's Open Door Policy, 1978-1984." *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 39, no. 2, 1986, pp. 1–18. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24356571>.
- 7 Guo's 1987 show was at Yangtze Art Gallery, Toronto, Canada.
- 8 Guo, "I stood among the ruins," n. p.
- 9 Guo, "I stood among the ruins," n. p.
- 10 "Green card giveaway aids Chinese dissidents," *Baltimore Sun*, July 1, 1993.
- 11 Guo quoted in "Art and People: Eazel Sits Down with Zhen Guo."- July 1, 1993.
- 12 Guo quoted in Mai Mang [pen name of Yibing Huang], "Guo Zhen: My Heart Is Red," exhibition catalogue (New London, Connecticut: Connecticut College, 2012).
- 13 Guo quoted in "Guo Zhen: My Heart Is Red."
- 14 "It is great pain only which is the ultimate emancipator of the spirit; for it is the teacher of the strong suspicion. . . ," in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science (Die fröhliche Wissenschaft)*, also translated as *The Joyful Wisdom or The Joyous Science*; published 1882; second edition 1887, 3.
- 15 Zhen Guo to my Baruch College, CUNY class, May 17, 2022.
- 16 "Woman Dies After a Gang Rape that Galvanized India," *The New York Times*, December 28, 2012.
- 17 The photograph Guo found and transformed into her painted image became the subject of conspiracy theories and false claims online, but the photograph proved to be authentic, although attributed only to Getty Images. See <https://www.bbc.com/news/60554910>
- 18 Vivian Wang, "The Secret Campaign in China to Save a Woman Chained by the Neck," *The New York Times*, March 5, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/03/05/world/asia/xuzhou-china-chained-woman-incident-activists.html>
- 19 Didi Kirsten Tatlow, "Authentic Voices; Feminism's Coming of Age in China," in Y. Tong (ed.), *Zhongguo nuxing zhuyi yishu* [Chinese Feminist Art], Beijing, China: Today Art Museum, 2018, 35.



Women's life trajectories have undergone tremendous changes in the past 100 years. Women's self-awakening is the origin of the great changes and will also be the driving force for women to continue to find their own position and rights. Among this group of people who have been enslaved and slandered for thousands of years, the thoughts and behaviors of feudal and wasteful customs are still reflected everywhere, and they continue to be attached to the old patriarchal thinking. The purpose of this creation is to show the current situation of female society: between the swamp and the ideal, there are rising, excitement, calling, action, but also hesitation, doubt, watching, sleeping and indifference. Where will the power shown in the alternation of the birth of life and the death knell go?

— Zhen Guo



Together, 2021, acrylic and ink on rice paper, 79" X 118"

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— Gail Levin, Curator

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