

I'm Stepping High, I'm Drifting, and There I Go Leaping

Sep 13 — Dec 14, 2022 | Xiao Museum of Contemporary Art, China

The exhibition "I'm Stepping High, I'm Drifting, and There I Go Leaping" features 65 works by 49 female and gender-nonconforming artists around the world. Collectively, their practices seek to explore new visual languages and expand the boundaries of the representation of individual and shared experiences, particularly those made complex by gendered perspectives and historical projections. Focusing primarily on the medium of painting and works made in the past five years, the exhibition functions as a survey and an overview of recent activities and experiments in this expansive field.

The title of the exhibition borrows from artist Theresa Chromati's large-scale painting installation. Echoing Chromati's exploration of women's empowerment and body politics, "I'm Stepping High, I'm Drifting, and There I Go Leaping" challenges the conventional and conservative understanding of "women artists" or "women's art" and the role it plays in cultural imaginations. The exhibition employs the terms "woman" and "gender-nonconforming" in a maximally inclusive sense, encompassing all those who identify as such—both the participating artists and the audience—regardless of the gender which they were assigned at birth. As filmmaker and writer Trinh T. Minh-ha has put it: "the idea of two illusorily separated identities, one ethnic, the other woman (or more precisely female), again, partakes in the Euro-American system of dualistic reasoning and its age-old divide-and-conquer tactics." Minh-ha's non-dualistic affirmation of women connects beautifully with feminist writer and organizer Lola Olufemi's argument that the term "woman" is "a strategic coalition, an umbrella under which we gather in order to make political demands... In a liberated future, it might not exist at all."

"I'm Stepping High, I'm Drifting, and There I Go Leaping" is not a show about feminism. While many artists' practices are conceived in intimate relation to feminist thought and resonate with feminist concerns, others exist at a distance from any organized social movements. Forgoing a centered agenda, the exhibition opens a fluid space in which non-hierarchical and unexpected connections can occur.

Drawn mostly from Xiao Museum's collection, the works are grouped into five chapters: "Women Looking at Women," "Body as Landscape," "Psychogeography of the Everyday," "Cognitive Illusions," and "Worldmaking Through Storytelling." The gallery display is organized in a loosely thematic way, guided by an intuitive logic but with no predetermined trajectory set for the viewer to follow. In "Women Looking at Women," artists explore notions of looking and being seen through subject matters such as bondage, performativity, and domestic disturbance to foreground the interplay of self-perception and depiction. Continuing the feminist tradition of challenging the treatment of female bodies as objects or source material, artists in "Body as Landscape" defamiliarize the conventional association of women's body with nature and reimagine non-traditional approaches to the figure as a kind of landscape. Engaging notions of drifting through the quotidian, artists in "Psychogeography of the Everyday" bring lived experiences in multiple places and cultures together through the intersection of movement and space, both physical and virtual. In "Cognitive Illusions", artists invite us to engage with our unconscious biases, assumptions, and discomfort through images that create a seductive and vortex-like experience of immersion. By creating new narratives of power structures and caretaking, artists in "Worldmaking Through Storytelling" envision different realities and histories and encourage us to consider how we relate to one another in the shaping and reshaping of worlds.

The practices exhibited here embrace image-making as a way of rejecting the authority or establishment of received frameworks of intelligibility. "I'm Stepping High, I'm Drifting, and there I Go Leaping" hopes to become a propulsive and generative force, registering a dissociation from conservative norms and sparking dreams of radical imagination.