

What's the problem with M+ "The Four Beauties"? The problem is you!

So, everyone is talking about the notorious "The Four Beauties" photo (my initial translation of the artwork), insisting that it depicts nude Chinese women and more significantly, uglify Chinese women. On the surface it is. But there are a lot more going on which lead to that view. Before I continue I would like to wear two helmets. Helmet one, my source of information regarding the artwork is mainly from the news. I haven't done more research on the official description or read some online forums because I want to express my fresh views first. Besides, further research may bring me to the void of creating another story just based on this (sounds fun). Helmet two, I am going to briefly mention some theories such as male gaze, orientalism and cyborg manifesto. These ideas are what I heard from lessons and made my own interpretations. It may sound different from what you have heard elsewhere and may infuriate some of the lecturers who taught me. In my defense, there is no single way of knowledge. And if it makes sense, it is feasible.

If you haven't seen the photo before, it is some Chinese nude women surrounding some men, in a Chinese historical setting. According to what I have heard, those pictures are based on historical events. I am no historian, so I will not comment on the historical part. What's worth mentioning is the uglification of women, as the women in the pictures look plain and unattractive, at least that's the first impression. Under the circumstance that the artist could have chosen more attractive women, such a photo is accused of its deliberate choice to make Chinese women appear ugly. But that's the problem, who told you that nude women should be beautiful? Having the word "ugly" means that there is the word "beautiful". Ask yourself, do you as a human expect to see alluring female bodies? Therefore, breasts and bottoms which are not in



good shape disappoints you. One may suggest the expectation comes from male gaze. One thing about gender is that it is social construct, ideologies about how each sex shall behave. And the women shall be pretty. And oftentimes we express this idea through our artwork and cultural texts. Don't believe me? Think of all the nude paintings you have seen in a museum. Most famously "The Birth of Venus", the body every man wants to touch. I myself would say it has nothing to do with overflowing hormones, it is just what we view as aesthetically appealing. It is common for feminist to state that women are always objectified to the point that most only care how a feminine body shall be. Now think about it, perhaps because of male gaze, every famous painting or movie has an attractive female character, to shape the relationship between beauty and females. Now it begs the question, what if women can be disembodied, let's say, for robots designed to replicate a human female but has no sexual organs, are they still bound to feminism and all the gender stuff? Funny how that is somehow cyborg manifesto is arguing about, that is whether gender can still be bounded when females (robots) can be born without sexuality. To me the artwork itself does nothing wrong, it is just us humans who have been so used to male gaze.

Another feature worth noticing is how different are the men from the ladies. Only men are clothed in the picture. That somehow reminds me of one quote about men and women, "about the dress code of a banquet, it is better for the gentlemen to wear as much as possible, and for ladies the lesser the better". I don't even know why the quote and the artwork seem relevant to me. What it seems to me is that, men built his reputation with achievement, and women with her body. Doesn't sound too far from the truth, the title of the artwork is "The Four Beauties", of which appearance is highlighted. And when revisiting history, it seems that the highest females can be are queens, or the women of some leaders. There are exceptions but very



few. When the artist of this work claims to blur the line between history and imagination, s/he might mean to deliberately create a subversive image of famous historical event involving beautiful women, another way of depicting history, I do suggest it also reveals something about gender as an ideology, that men stands on achievements, and females rely on their bodies. There can be many interpretations what difference between men and women can signify. I am extremely weak at detecting and explaining signs in texts and art, so I would like to leave this to other experts.

If there is more to argue about “uglifying Chinese women”, it would be about orientalism. To the western culture, the east is unknown, sometimes inferior and absurd. Think of Fu man chu in movies as a symbol. The nude ones in picture don't look grand or glamorous, they look so plain. But that is frankly what nude people look like. You have this feeling, because you have seen nudity from the west, and cultural texts in terms of books, movies and statues make you think what you are seeing in “The Four Beauties” are not as good. That can be a hierarchy of overpraising white men, and place the other races and perhaps sex at the inferior place. Just go watch *M Butterfly* or *Chinese Box* and you will get it, a white man and as an Eastern girl, the former one being the active charming one, typical orientalism. So if there is any issue out of the picture, it might be that we are too affected by orientalism.

Of course I don't deny this particular art work intends to uglify Chinese women. But there cultural factors, including the male gaze, gender bias and orientalism leading us to reach conclusions. It is not just about the artwork, but the audience viewing it who possibly caused problems. Ideologies and social construct are subtly shaping our view that when we have a



glance at some subversive works, we have our comments, and this time the comment is that “it uglifies women”. But not us, we shall see more than regular folks. We know feminism, we know male gaze, we know orientalism. Because we are English majors. We think difference differently!