When a Woman Looks at a Woman: Poetics of the Look in Zhai Yongming's Ekphrastic Writings

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In her 2019 exhibition "We Are All Frida" ("Women dou shi Fulida" 我们都是弗里达), Chinese poet Zhai Yongming uses both photographs and texts to pay homage to the life and work of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo. Zhai's poems accompany images of Chinese women, all Zhai's friends and fellow poets, dressed in *tehuana* dresses, traditional indigenous clothing that Kahlo adopted to express her admiration for artisan traditions and her love for her native Mexico. The photographs share a common compositional characteristic: they show the women at the center of the frame, filling the visual narrative. By using a "role playing technique," they explore how these women, costumed and transformed, present their fictional "Frida" selves for the world to see. One photograph, tagged "Spring" ("Chun" 春), is of particular interest since Zhai characterizes herself as Frida Kahlo, standing with her arms crossed and leaning against a wall. Her attention is directed toward an object out of the frame, and her masquerade attracts the undivided attention of the viewer; she is hypervisible, but at the same time, invisible. She is there, not as herself, but as somebody else.

Reflecting on the nature of self-portraits and masquerade, Claude Cernuschi describes the critical approaches to such visual representations as either expressive or performative. In the former interpretation, artists, through their disguised self-portraits, reveal truths about human existence while hiding behind a mask. Scholars following the second approach, by contrast, tend to see masquerades as the expression of the artist's other selves. Zhai's masquerade as Kahlo seems to lie somewhere in between both views. As she has admitted more than once, she feels a special connection Kahlo's life, work, and personality. It is through the figure of the Mexican painter that Zhai manages to present another version of herself and other women, while

reflecting on the "female condition." Commenting on the name that she chose for her exhibition, in an interview with Xu Jiahe for *Art Weekly*, Zhai explains: "why is it called 'We Are All Frida'? What I want to express is that women have certain 'Frida' traits, self-reliance, and fortitude. Frida once said: 'I don't paint dreams, I paint my own reality'" (Xu Jiahe 2020).[1]

Justyna Jaguścik has already noted Zhai's admiration for Kahlo and the intersections between the lives and works of both. In "Zhai Yongming reads Frida Kahlo: Autohistorias," Jaguścik uses Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldua's notion of autohistoria as a theoretical frame to analyze Zhai's semi-autobiographical writing, as well as how Zhai revisits and reappropriates Kahlo's works as narratives of corporeal affliction. While Jaguścik's interpretation of Zhai's and Kahlo's connections[2] offers intriguing possibilities to discuss the nature of shared and embodied female experiences, an approach to Zhai's writings about Kahlo that focuses on the rhetorical composition of the texts unveils new avenues from which to explore an overlooked but decisive connection: the convergence of image and word. Indeed, Zhai's writings on Kahlo are fundamentally ekphrastic and pictorial, where narrative devices related to the act of looking take on central roles. The use of some of these devices, however, is not restricted to texts whose main theme are Kahlo's works, but can be found in other poems by Zhai as well, especially those where the dynamics between lookers and objects unfolds.

The relation between poetical seers and seen objects is not difficult to forge. The visual is ingrained in the verbal through ekphrasis, a rhetorical figure that, to use the terms of W. J. T. Mitchell, relies on the dynamics between a portrayed object and a "listening subject" who is able "to see" through the poet's lyrical voice (12). However, as Paul Manfredi explains, the relation between seen and seer is not limited to ekphrastic writing, but, much like Zhai's photographic masquerade of Frida, also reveals the poet's multiple subjectivities: "the 'lyrical I' is, apart from a sound conjured in the minds of the reader, also a visually constructed entity, a self-fashioning or self-portraiture of the poet situated in some newly conceived era or moment" (xxviii).

In the ensuing pages, I use Zhai's ekphrastic writings on Kah-

lo as a starting point to analyze the "visuality" of her poetry. I want to consider the relationship between gender and visual narrative acts and devices through a reading of Zhai's ekphrastic writings and poems on historical women or fictional women participating in history, texts structured in a way that relates rhetoric to gendered, disciplining, and phenomenological visual phenomena: the look and the gaze. The place of the visual in Zhai's poetry is pivotal but subtle. Presented as a series of first- and third-person narratives full of references to Chinese history and traditions, Zhai's poems and writings on historical women or fictional women participating in history would seem more obviously to raise the kinds of questions that Andrea Lingenfelter identifies as Zhai's feminine point of view, its themes and revisionist vocation (107), rather than to unravel the relation between rhetoric and visual acts. Yet this relation is not only a crucial theme, but also an organizing and structuring mechanism of Zhai's revisionist poems. Through them, Zhai seeks to reappropriate and *gender* the Chinese tradition by formally intervening into historical and aesthetic regimes of visibility, defining who has the right to look, at what, and to what extent. This intervention (and feminist argument) comes to fruition primarily thanks to the complex set of social relations and structures that the rhetorical device of ekphrasis conjures up.

Ekphrasis is one of those terms that resists easy definition. From the Greek *ek* (out) and *phrazein* (tell), and meaning "to recount," the notion, at least as old as Homer's *Iliad*, evokes a complicated net of ever-shifting relationships. The rhetorician Theon of Alexandria offers what is considered to be the earliest definition of ekphrasis as a complex interaction between the visual, the imaginary, and the verbal: "Ekphrasis is the descriptive speech that vividly brings the things described before the eyes" (□κφρασίς □στι λόγος περιηγηματικ□ς □ναργ□ς □π› □ψιν □γων τ□ δηλούμενον, Theon, Progymnasmata 118.7.8). Modern theorists have expanded, reworked, and problematized this definition. Murray Krieger, for example, sees ekphrasis as an aestheticization of language that evokes a perceptual experience. Very much in line with Theon's understanding of ekphrasis, Krieger defines ekphrastic works as those that mimic the effect that artistic objects have on the seer, but do not precisely account for an actual referent. For his

part, James Heffernan defines ekphrasis as "the verbal representation of graphic representation," which excludes literature about textual referents or based on pictorialism and iconicity (Heffernan 299).

At a fundamental level, then, ekphrasis is a complex rhetorical device with a series of graded possibilities. John Hollander identifies two types of ekphrasis that reconcile Krieger's and Hoffman's conceptions and that constitute the backbone of this essay: "actual" and "notional" (209-10). Actual ekphrasis builds on the description or evocation of a genuine work of art, while notional ekphrasis dramatizes a completely fictional work of art, created by the poet's imagination. To these categories, Peter Barry adds a further subdivision: "actual" ekphrasis can be "closed" or "open" (156-59). When the poem explicitly states that it is not talking about a real or witnessed event but about what is seen in a work of art, then the ekphrasis is closed. Conversely, when the poem depicts an image often mistaken as the description of a real or witnessed event but corresponding to that of an unnamed and actual work of art, then the ekphrasis is open. Barry also divides "notional" ekphrasis into "fictional" and "conceptual" variants. An ekphrasis is fictional when the object addressed by the poem is completely a construct of the poet's imagination but presented in realist terms; it is "conceptual" when a completely fictional work of art is described in "supra-realist" terms--in other words, the depicted object does not and cannot exist in the way it is portrayed (156).

This rhetorical complexity that illustrates the varied dynamics between a seer and a seen situates ekphrasis as a notion that allows the discovery of layers of meaning. As a figure that builds and modifies connotations, ekphrasis has been understood as a mirror of texts, a disruptive lyrical voice, a type of foreshadowing, a critique of representation, and a moment. As a moment, ekphrasis has been characterized as disciplinary, phenomenological, and gendered. In his influential essay "Ekphrasis and the Other," Mitchell explores "the network of ideological associations" and social relations that ekphrasis evokes and on which it tries to prevail (155). The main objective of ekphrasis, Mitchell suggests, is to overcome otherness. He uses the term "the other" to describe visual, graphic, or plastic modes of representation that enter into a competitive negotiation with the written word. This negotiation

is often disciplinary, for "like the masses, the colonized, the powerless and voiceless everywhere, visual representation cannot represent itself; it must be represented by discourse" (156). But the negotiation can also take the form of a phenomenological and gendered encounter. According to Mitchell, the phenomenological potential of ekphrasis springs from the interaction between the self (a subject who speaks and who sees), and the other (an object that is silent and seen), and from the act of defining knowledge as the result of that cooperation between the observer and the object being observed. Similarly, the negotiation between self and the other, evoked by ekphrasis, can also be charged by gendered underpinnings that attend to the distinctions apparent in the tripartite relation between a lyrical voice, an addressed object, and the listening subject made "to see." Though this triad does not always imply the presence of two male subjects and a female object, visual relations of power, identifying images as female others, are common in ekphrastic writing. Mitchell emphasizes that "female otherness is an overdetermined feature in a genre that tends to describe an object of visual pleasure" (168). Given ekphrasis' close relation to acts of gazing and looking, the rhetorical figure offers a fertile ground for feminist interventions that challenge male regimes of visuality shielded by a long scholarly tradition.

Art historian and cultural analyst Griselda Pollock was among the first theorists to propose an alternative manner of understanding and rewriting art, cultural history, and the visual relations of power they uphold. Pollock's approach contests values and meanings that insist on oppressing women, considering creativity a distinguishably male virtue, seeing women as providers of beautiful icons for the male gaze, denying women the possibility of being producers of culture, and treating them as signs existing within a masculine narrative. By establishing a link between the visual, political environments, and social structures of power, Pollock discusses how systems of visual representation provide a fertile terrain for the preservation and transmission of ideologies that sustain gender inequality (Pollock 5).

Similarly, in her ground-breaking and equally provocative essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," first published in 1975, film theorist Laura Mulvey explores the disciplinary and gendered dynam-

ics undergirding processes of looking. Drawing mainly on psychoanalytical theory, Mulvey examines how patriarchal structures have been institutionalized in cinema through labor divisions in which men take an active role as gazers, and women become the pleasure-inducing objects of that male gaze. As John Berger explains in the 1977 television video *Ways of Seeing* with regard to European nude paintings:

> Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object--and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.

What Berger and Mulvey both incorrectly assume is that the ideal spectator or owner of the look is always male or masculinized. Neither one addresses the crucial question of what happens when the seer is not male, does not identify as such, or does not engage in masculinized practices of looking. What happens, for example, when a woman looks at a woman?

Precisely because they describe women in the position of observers, Zhai's ekphrastic writings offer a stimulating answer to that question, and gives a sense of how Zhai's feminine lyrical "I" formally intervenes into the discursive space of male-dominated visuality regimes. This essay concerns ekphrasis as a trope that verbally represents any sort of artistic image or vision, whether pictorial or iconic, and also mobilizes social relations of looking. Therefore, I use a comprehensive definition of ekphrasis that allows the inclusion of Zhai's works that do not have direct artistic referents but are pictorial and iconic in nature alongside those that do. My eclectic understanding of ekphrasis extends to Zhai's poems that reflect on topics such as women artists themselves, or women who are part of artworks, whether literary, folkloric, or visual. One of the works discussed here, for instance, is her essay "A Mexican Woman" ("Yige Moxige nüren" 一个墨西哥女人), a work of ekphrastic prose that speaks to some of Kahlo's paintings with which Zhai identifies. The other works I explore include the poems "Scissorhands' Dialogue" ("Jiandao shou de duihua" 剪刀手的对话), and "The Song of the Three Beauties" ("San meiren zhi ge" 三美人

之歌). The essay and the poems invite readers to analyze their gender and visual configurations since they engage in a dialogue with various artworks by women artists, display Zhai's deep cultural understanding of the positions and roles of women in visual history and its optic regimes, and reproduce a set of feminine aesthetics and conceptions that transcend borders. Similarly, the artworks described through ekphrases enhance readers' access to the poems and vice versa, and both demonstrate Zhai's poetic "masquerades" or different lyrical personae.

With its opening lines, the essay "A Mexican Woman" claims outright its ekphrastic nature, and its relation to what Mitchell would call a "feminine other," or so it seems:

> When my eyes met with her image on the book, when my gaze surmounted the broad-leaved plants surrounding her, the fiery red flowers, and the monkeys (what she loves to paint the most), I seemed to hear her inner soliloquy and her whispers, so similar to mine. This is a small street in a foreign land; on a small shelf, this is the first book I saw, an aspect. This is a Mexican woman, perhaps to the Chinese eyes she is not even beautiful, but she fascinated me: her wild eyebrows, her provocative eyes and angular face, her thick hair that seems to encircle her thick lips (she always likes to emphasize this in her paintings), her face, it's not so much that it has an air of aloofness, but a sense of indifference, we can also say that it's a rejection of what we see. Her name is Frida.
>
> 当我的眼睛在书中与她相遇，当我的注视越过簇拥着她的那些阔叶植物，那些火红的花卉和黑色的猩猩　（她最爱描绘的事物），我似乎听见她内心的独白和私语，与我的何等一致。这是在异乡异土的一条小街上，一个小小的摊上，我第一眼到的一本书，一张方面。这是一个墨西哥女人，也许按中国人的眼光她甚至不算漂亮，但她却一下子吸引了我：她那野性的眉毛，挑衅似的眼光梭角分明的脸形，似及围绕在她唇边的浓重的汗毛　（她总爱在画中强调这一点），她的脸上与其说是带有一种孤傲的神情，不如说是一种冷漠感，也可以说是对所见之物的一种拒斥。她叫弗里达。

This excerpt describes Kahlo's lyrical, surrealist, folk oil painting "Self-Portrait with Monkeys" ("Autorretrato con monos" 1943), one of a series of self-portraits she completed throughout her life. Through the reference to that painting, the actual and closed ekphrasis neatly reverses the traditional gendered relations of looking, in which a male or masculinized seer, owner of the gaze, contemplates a female object. Here, Zhai's deeply personal and feminine voice becomes the active interpreter of the image at which she is looking. That image happens to be one of another woman with whom she identifies. Yet, as Zhai herself makes clear, when she compares the process of feminine identification to an intimate verbal exchange that results from the complicity and discretion of a whispering act, she also projects onto Kahlo and her work a version of herself. Kahlo's stoic image, then, does not appear as a merely pleasurable object of the viewer's gaze, but as a subject of recognition. Such a personal entanglement between Zhai and Kahlo can be understood, in Jaguścik's terms, as biographical, since both women share common experiences. However, the reading I propose here transcends that personal plane in favor of one in which transnational aesthetics and regimes of visibility play central roles.

One notion that evokes these transnational, aesthetic, and disciplinary dynamics is queerness. By rejecting the ideological imperative of the male gaze, queerness provides us with an alternative theoretical lens through which relations of looking can be explored. Queer spectators occupy positions of looking that reject the gendering/gendered and heteronormative conventions of the male and masculinized gaze proposed by Mulvey and explored by Berger, since, as Chris Straayer notes, the queer gaze does not rely on hierarchical relations of looking, but rather "looks for a returning look" (50-57).

An intriguing part of Zhai's essay is its intimate and subtly erotic undertones inscribed in the process of looking. Zhai's decision to open her essay with an actual and closed ekphrastic contemplative description can be read as erotic since the fragment recounts a first encounter grounded in a fascination with what "can be seen," rather than what "can be known." While the fragment speaks of a process of friendly identification, everything starts with an act of intense gazing. The usage of vocabulary of vision such as "eye" (yanjing 眼睛), "gaze"

(zhushi 注视), and the *verbum sentiendi* "attract, seduce, fascinate" (xiyin 吸引), the reference to a secretive act of identification through whispers, and the detailed description of Kahlo's non-standard beauty all suggest that Zhai's authorial voice remains intensively involved with Kahlo's image. The narrative structure of the fragment also reinforces such involvement. The enumeration of Kahlo's facial features, for example, slows down the pace of the narrative, forcing the reader to share Zhai's fascination with Kahlo's exotic looks and her genius as a painter. The looking relationships, established via narrative, between the two women and between the authorial voice and the reader are, thus, those of overinvestment. Zhai explains in her essay "Endurable Blossoms of Destruction" ("Jianren posui zhi hua" 坚忍的破碎之花) that she writes about Kahlo to express her affection for the latter's work as well as her personality, iconicity, suffering, and perseverance, all of which give life to her unrivaled charm (无法比拟的魅力). Zhai's "A Mexican Woman," then, works as a queer ekphrastic text not only because of the intense fascination with which Zhai's authorial voice seems to be consumed, but also because of her consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual and disciplinary institutions of male-female looking positions and interactions.

Through her use of enumeration, ekphrasis, specified emotional and spectatorial agency, and gendering of the narrative voice, Zhai attempts to bring about a change in how women are described and perceived by an external gaze. By using such rhetorical strategies, she also endeavors to legitimize certain kinds of revolutionary aesthetics that question the Chinese version of beauty. Kahlo's beauty, according to Zhai, is not formulaic or traditional, but is similar to Bai Hua's 柏华 ritualistic and martial conception.[3] However, we should not equate male and female interpretations of the beautiful, since women have different conceptions of beauty than men do: "When a woman looks at a woman, she will transform this kind of beauty into an abstraction, spiritualize it" (女人看女人，则将这种抽象化，精神化了). She adds, "the weird part is, I always like beautiful and extraordinarily talented women, the ones surrounding me, the ones in books, the ones in real life, and the ones in mythology" (奇怪的是，我总会喜欢一个美丽的，才华卓绝的女人，我身边的，以及书本上的，现

实中的，和神话中的). Here, the identifying sign of a gendered and queer structure of looking includes an intellectualized and non-standard notion of beauty that, nevertheless, can also be contemplated. In Zhai, we see a woman artist turning her attention toward other women outside the patriarchal institution and its disciplinary male gaze. This is what creates an effect of unexplainable magnetism ("the weird part is that" 奇怪的是), and a relationship of looking that evades the hierarchical and objectifying relations established by Chinese traditional aesthetic mores that are concerned mainly with the satisfaction of male optic desire.

Traditionally, Chinese female beauty has been geared towards the needs of male authorship and spectatorship. As Mary H. Fong notes, "in traditional China artistic creativity was gender specific, exclusively masculine, and the female image that emerged is not what it purports to represent but rather a signification of male power" (22). As an expression of male power, the representation of Chinese beauty, or pretty women (meiren 美人), varies according to the social mores of each epoch, but this aesthetic category seems to have originated during the Tang dynasty. Fong argues that in this period China faced political turmoil between the North and the South. As a result, Chinese painters focused their attention on the daily lives and activities of courtly women since these scenes could divert the attention of their viewers and entertain their gaze. Pretty faces were used in most of these paintings to "captivate the crowds." What a beautiful Chinese woman was supposed to look like was thoroughly explored by eleventh-century art historian Guo Ruoxu. He delineated the traditional standards of beauty as having to rely on "blossoming loveliness and feminine charm," but it was equally important for painters to make the female body and face look severe and proper, in order to dignify beauty through the evocation of purity and female virtue. Fong relates the upsurge of these aesthetics and moral ideals to the strong presence of Confucianism and its patriarchal structures. Since women were given subordinate roles in Confucian society, they had to be visually portrayed as "beautiful but submissive, demure and amiable, unassertive and pleasant, agreeable and good natured." This aesthetic ideal of female beauty soon became paradigmatic, and what started as a didactic practice turned ideological. Fur-

ther exploring this argument, Fong explains that "gender ideology provided Chinese painters the expediency to represent the female image as an 'object of the male gaze' that was admissible in Confucian society" (23). Painters, however, were not the only ones with the prerogative to portray female beauty. The literary imagination also contributed to the establishment of idealized feminine imagery by providing sources of inspiration to visual artists. Painters used the widely accepted conventions and styles of pretty women (meiren) poetry as inspiration, as Ellen Johnston Laing puts it, to "enhance their depictions of beautiful women." In particular, palace-style poems, which focused on beautiful women in love, tended to characterize these women as courtly ladies obsessed with their physical appearance. The ideal temporal setting of these poems was spring and autumn, since poets often compared female beauty to a flower: "lovely and desirable in spring, faded and pathetic in autumn" (288). In addition, any direct reference to sexual pleasure was omitted in favor of suggestive narrative clues and hints left for the readers to decipher. Filmy sleeves that drew the attention of the audience towards the bare skin of the arms, for instance, operated as subtle indicators of sensuality, or entry points to "concealed parts of the woman's body" (288).

Zhai writes against the backdrop of this pretty women (*meiren*) tradition to offer a meditation on the meaning of feminine aesthetics and artistry. The title of her essay "A Mexican Woman" invites a reading of the text to understand how Zhai defines herself as an artist, and specifically as a woman artist seeing and writing about the experiences and work of another woman with a non-standard kind of Chinese (or Western) beauty. The title also raises the question of why Zhai would closely align herself with the aesthetic taste, personality, life, and unusual looks of a woman who is neither her conational nor her contemporary. Zhai makes it clear, however, that Kahlo's magnetism springs from a series of distinctive and exceptional psychical and intellectual attributes. Gérard de Cortaze has called these traits, borrowing from Yeats, "a terrible beauty," a fragility that mimics a life that García Márquez described as "thirty-nine years of suffering." Interestingly, de Cortaze's appellative also refers to two other issues. The first has to do with Kahlo's eerie aesthetics in which an ideological vocation, an obsession with

death, blood, pain, and illness, strange worlds filled with fascinating icons, and fearful lines converge. The second alludes to Kahlo's particular looks: "a wild cat gaze, sometimes sceptic, sometimes affectionate, disdainful, and possessive, extremely sweet" ("mirada de ocelote, ora escéptica, ora zalamera, desdeñosa y posesiva, muy dulce," de Cortaze 77). Though both Zhai and de Cortaze characterize Kahlo's beauty as unusual (不普遍意义上的), Zhai constructs it as dauntless and intimidating rather than as terrible, and this quality of Kahlo's looks seems to apply to her work as well. The looking relationships established by these two modes of aesthetic contemplative engagement are crucially different. De Cortaze offers us an appreciation of Kahlo's beauty as something that we may not want to see, whereas Zhai's conception rather speaks of features that may make us uncomfortable. Zhai herself identifies this kind of gendered distinction that separates how she understands Kahlo's beauty as opposed to other male onlookers. For Zhai, the indomitable nature of Kahlo's beauty comes from her eyes and her eyebrows, and Kahlo's eyebrows not only provide Zhai with inspiration to write, but also have a quality that many men describe as fierce and fiendish (凶相 *xiongxiang*) (Zhai 11).

Despite her celebration of unconventional beauty, for Zhai the aesthetic category can also be terrible, but in a different sense than the one proposed by de Cortaze. In her actual and open ekphrastic poem, "Scissorhands's Dialogue," inspired by Kahlo's "The Two Fridas" ("Las dos Fridas" 1939), "Henry Ford Hospital" ("Hospital Henry Ford" 1932), and "The Broken Column" ("La columna rota" 1944), Zhai criticizes what Jaguścik has correctly identified as "hegemonic beauty," or what I prefer to call beauty as an ideal of perfection. The difference between these terms is subtle but crucial: the first refers to an act of imposition; the second emphasizes an act of learning. Jaguścik has discussed the implications behind the impositions of beauty standards: in "Scissorhands's Dialogue," female beauty is a painful kind of aspiration that contrasts with the female shared experience of bodily suffering depicted in the poem (Jaguścik 1316). However, despite being imposed, these hegemonic regimes of beauty heavily rely on pedagogical practices that invite women, in this case, to take ownership of their own beauty fantasies, or to do beauty work, a series of tasks that Zhai relates

not only to bodily appearance but also to psychological investment: "Women will always go to great lengths for beauty […]" (为了美，女人永远忙着); "For beauty, women bleed in secret […]" (为了美，女人暗暗淌血); "For beauty, women will suffer heartbreak […]" (为了美，女人通断肝肠, trans. Andrea Lingenfelter). When isolated from the rest of the poem, these lines seem to "play the role of a supplementary, ironic voice" that reflects on the willingness of women to endure physical pain and that contrast with the unvoluntary bodily pain experienced by Zhai and Kahlo (Jaguścik 1313). However, when read in conjunction with the stanzas preceding them, the lines also function as a commentary on the adherence of women to the social norms of beauty work. In this regard, the tone of the lines becomes not so much ironic but lamenting, as the lines appear in clear opposition not only to involuntary physical pain, but also to the unattractiveness related to the unhealthy body. According to Zhai, women engage in beauty work because of the promised rewards of social expectations: "Glass and diamonds / Both catch the eye with their allure / Spurring women to madness" (玻璃或钻石/还有撩拨人的自光/促使她疯狂, translated by Andrea Lingenfelter 71). Beauty, then, is constructed in the ekphrastic poem as an ideal that must be pursued and that pushes women to the limits of their sanity. Perhaps most important, beauty is a category that needs to be criticized. In "Scissorhands's Dialogue," Zhai responds precisely to the unrealistic and non-mimetic traditional representation and expectations of beauty with a description of its horrors.

Another poem that questions the Chinese traditional notion of beauty is "The Song of the Three Beauties" (San meiren zhi ge 三美人之歌). While not strictly ekphrastic, the poem relies heavily on pictorial descriptions and iconicity to examine relations of looking and to reflect on the gendered nature of various literary works. By describing the intimate lives of beautiful legendary women, the poem brings to light feminine experiences that have been obscured by the male representational tradition. Zhai starts her criticism of beautiful women as a category and their biased representation in these intriguing terms:

Three women	三个女人
One wears red	一个穿红
One wears white	一个着白

One is wrapped in black	一个周身裹满黑色
walk shoulder to shoulder	并肩而行
Their gaze sometimes slashes the air	她们的目光有时割破空气
sometimes wears again those lights	有时又穿过那些光亮
they multiply their kind	繁衍自己的同类
and the colors inside their hearts.	连同她们内心的颜色。

Through this strategic description of women dressed in different colors and carrying these colors in their hearts, almost as constituents that synecdochally describe a hidden part of the self, Zhai illustrates the predicament of feminine representation in Chinese folk, literary, and visual traditions. Compact, obscure, and yet concrete, these opening lines set the cryptic tone of the poem, which sets out to teach us a great deal about how language and representation articulate women's lives. There is indeed a sense in which the poem tests the limits of what is to be revealed, concealed, or represented. In these opening lines, the question of visibility of the feminine experience lies at the heart of what Zhai presents before our eyes in the form of narrative clues: three women dressed in red, black, and white. The women are distinguished by color rather than by name or physical attributes, and it is through these staggering hints that Zhai also talks about what happens in their inner worlds. Zhai also uses these narrative clues to regulate the flux of narrative information and establish what she, as an authorial voice, wants us to know about her characters, and how she wants to portray them. The narrative tension produced by this selective concealment of information and the use of color codes is so effective that by the end of this introductory stanza, the reader cannot help but ask: who exactly are these women? Why do they wear red, white, and black?

Zhai offers an answer to these questions in the subsequent lines by means of a structured composition and the use of iconicity and metonymy. "The Song of the Three Beauties" is divided into three parts or color icons (red, white, and black), each metonymically corresponding to one of the three beauties. The poem follows a basic pattern of offering puzzling quotations that outline the inner predicaments of the three

women, who are also the protagonists of three of the four greatest Chinese folk tales: Lady Meng Jiang (孟姜女), Bai Suzhen (白素貞), and Zhu Yingtai (祝英台). At the beginning of "Red" ("Hong" 红), Lady Meng Jiang is quoted as saying "In this auspicious night, my whole body is red" (在这花好月之夜/我全身红色). In "White" ("Bai" 白), Bai Suzhen repeatedly states: "for my beloved and for the child I carry in my belly" (为了我的情郎与我的腹中的孩子). In "Black" ("Hei" 黑), Zhu Yingtai establishes: "if he dies, I don't want to keep living / with my breath I will furl his hollow image / and smash the stone tablet" (如果他死了，我也不活着/用呼吸卷起他空虚的影子/用石碑捣烂). This same line is repeated, with variations, throughout the section.

What we find in juxtaposing these three sections, colors, and stories is a kind of parallelism in which the quotations or voices of the beauties represent both externalizations of their inner world and ironic expressions of the outer world of literary and historical representation, all to reveal dissonant depictions. These beauties, whom male imagination has deprived of nuanced portrayals and who share the common characteristic of living lives centered on their male companions, are constructed in the poem with complex layered images and deep meanings. Lady Meng Jiang wears red to represent her (in)auspicious wedding night, her desire for happiness, but also her suffering for the death of her husband. Bai Suzhen wears white to remind us of her name (*bai*, white) and her status as a non-human (white snake), and also to reclaim the purity and refinement, in both literal and metaphorical terms, of her soul. Finally, Zhu Yingtai appears dressed in black to refer both to the night and to the tragedy of her lost love, but also to point out a special kind of feminine boldness that tends to be thicker than the darkest night. The multivocality of the beauties' images, established by the quotations and the colors, map out a reversal of the power relationships of looking. Under Zhai Yongming's gaze, Lady Meng Jiang, Bai Suzhen, and Zhu Yingtai become more women than beauties, and their images grow in representational power.

These iconic representations of beautiful women, and Zhai's writings on Kahlo, are rich with implications. The way in which a woman looks at another woman, according to Zhai, is essentially dif-

ferent from that of a man. It is an act that emphasizes symmetrical relations of looking as much as it is an act of resistance against the male gaze and its regimes of visibility. This rebellious quality becomes possible thanks to a skillful use of ekphrasis. In Zhai's hands, ekphrasis has a liberating function that challenges hegemonical modes of visual entanglements. This is important because, as feminist visual and critical theory has showed us, excavating new forms of imagining and engaging with the visual "without rehearsing stories of dominance, victimisation and false consciousness" is necessary (Kérchy and McAra 218). Zhai avoids replicating such narratives by creating an elaborate sociological and aesthetic critique of beauty and beautiful women. Beauty is seen both as a physical attribute and as an aesthetic notion related to regimes of visibility. The alternative beauty of Kahlo and her work, the horrors of beauty work and beauty as an ideal type, and the traditional beauty of Lady Meng Jiang, Bai Suzhen, and Zhu Yingtai become avenues for Zhai to raise her concerns on the visibility of feminine experience. Indeed, the inner world of women was not a priority in the Chinese male representational tradition, which featured neither feminine messages nor feminine thoughts. The full range of women's desires and visions of the world were invisible to the visual and literary minds of the time. But through her writings, Zhai centers the beautiful images of female others and objects of ekphrasis and turns them into a nuanced subject of artistic representation and mutual recognition. Perhaps more important, Zhai makes women's beauty into an experience that exists in multiple colors, that can be narrated in feminine terms, and with which multiple women, as in a masquerade, can identify.

Notes

[1] Unless otherwise specified, I am using my own translations.

[2] This type of relation based on identification is confirmed by Zhai herself in her essay "Jianren de posui zhi hua guanyu 'Yige Moxige nüren'" 坚韧的破碎之花关于《一个墨西哥女人》.

[3] Zhai refers to a stanza of Bai Hua's "Beauty" (Meiren 美人): "You must salute me, lovely firing squad/death has already arrayed itself/and begun gushing from mountain to city" 必须向我致敬，美的行刑队/死亡已整队完毕/开始从深山涌进城里.

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