

Song Jing's works have always dealt with perception of failure, pain, hope and love, both as cause and consequence. At the same time, the layers of time, and their shifts, are a dimension of crucial importance for the artist to express her experiences. These are based on emotions and a fluctuating corporeity more specifically connected to the female cycle. Her work comprises of large series of images that she explores by taking motifs from the landscape and nature. Her interest in nature also stems from her study of theories of matter.

While taking her motifs from nature and the landscape, she detects emotional patterns in her environment and projects them on chosen objects. The different artifacts created by the amalgamation of the disembodied feelings and external objects become visible parts of inner landscapes of emotions. This method has led her to create works that need time to evolve, hence the resort to large series.

In the series presented here, she explores the shape of date kernels. By a flash of intuition, she associated the simple act of eating a date and removing the kernel to the intense physical experience of giving birth. Thereafter, she started collecting the kernels of the dates she ate - until she had hundreds of them. This process took two years. Over that period of time, Jing came to discover the symbolic associations dates have in many cultures. She started using what might be called "psycho archaeology" to delve into collective memories and cultural interconnections as a method of exploration.

Her next action was to shoot, in the very same size, a close-up of each of the kernels she had collected. The process of creation of such photographs involves a scientific approach to the objects captured here. On the other hand, against the background of the two-dimensional photographic series, it is important to reimagine the performative act of eating the dates and the subsequent removal of their kernels. Jing made use of a photolab method that enabled her to photograph the kernels in such a way that they didn't project shadows onto the white background; to her, shadows are prejudicial as they distort the object. The elimination of shadows is not achieved by digital manipulation, using correcting or erasing tools, but by photographing all the kernels under exactly the same lighting conditions, with the very same white background surface. The result is a series of 366 of what seems to be identical photos of date kernels displayed side by side in rows, on the wall.

However, once we get closer to the wall, we realize, first of all, these shapes are not identical, and, second, they are very organic. That is to say, after an initial impression when our eyes captured a fairly abstract shape, we start apprehending these images as having their origin in an organic shape, and perceiving the substantial variations from one to another. As a result of being the exact same size, positioned over the exact same white background with no shadows, and photographed from the exact same angle, the various colours, curves and surfaces of the kernels are being highlighted.

The artist chose to show the side of the kernels with a crack, which gives them even more evocative shapes: at first, one might think of pebbles or shells the artist collected by a river or on the sea shore. Such crack is also suggestive of women's genitalia, as reflected in the title the artist gave to the series: the use of a slash through the word "women" creates an ambiguity as it can be read as referring both to "men" and "women", and is of major signification to stress the paradoxes of the images. The laboratory-like environment in which the kernels are shot might evoke rationalized, calculated procedures, whereas the hot, sometimes honey-brown, skin-like colours of the kernels themselves, as well as their subtle curves and cracks, link them directly to the sphere of the organic, natural world – and to what most cultures in the world have associated to feminine features.

"ALL THE WO/MEN I AM" is referring to the constraints of being a woman and having to follow the patterns and standards imposed by a male dominated society that tends to objectify women and control their means of expression, mainly their sexuality. In the photos shown here, although their individual, peculiar features are enhanced once we see them from up close, the idea that one could create a single model out of them from a distance is quite tempting. Thus, these fairly abstracted objects that remind us of women's genitalia make us reflect on the many controlled patterns of sex, starting with the physical one. In Western art tradition, the depiction of women's sex and genitalia has always been out of the question, for an art concerned with the ideals of beauty could not be "stained" by elements of nature, including the human figure, that would not succeed in capturing it. A beautiful woman's body was then, above all, a passive object of men's desire, and most importantly, her sex was always hidden, or rendered in a very abstract way, for it somehow belonged to the earthly world and the vulgar. This has certainly to do with the way visual culture in the modern and contemporary eras has understood the female figure and her body, since the emergence of classical tradition. Going back to pre-historical and early-civilization visual cultures, the depiction of the female body was, on the contrary, widely depicted. Figurines like the Willendorf Venus were very common in pre-historical times. According to certain theories, such objects might have been small statues of goddesses of fertility, thus the marked and exaggerated breasts and depiction of the genitalia. The rise of the ancient civilizations – whatever this term means nowadays – has been marked by a centralized, mostly male political power. As a consequence, new patterns and standards in the rendering of the human figure prevailed, gradually erasing the previous ways of depicting the female body. Eventually, the "ancient" objects came to be neglected or ignored in any theory of art, because of their "primitiveness". It comes as no surprise that a figurine like the Willendorf Venus now belongs to the Museum of Natural History in Vienna, not to the collections of its twin brother, the Museum of Art History, across Theresien Platz.

A very sarcastic and critical contemporary comics, by Liv Strömquist<sup>1</sup>, actually approaches this issue and recopiates the so-called "primitive" and ancient image of female figures and their accentuated and very marked genitalia. Looking at such images, the diversity of the depiction of woman genitalia is an evidence, a trait that also applies to Jing's series: actually, there is no precise pattern or model of how a vulva should look like. This is also quite true with the date kernels, as they vary in crack, colour or shape.

In the world today, we have been witnessing a huge advance in plastic surgery techniques, notably those that can enhance and perfect the female body. One of the most recent interventions a woman can presently undergo is vulva plastic surgery, with the declared purpose of making it look "more beautiful".

"ALL THE WO/MEN I AM" is a remarkably powerful work as it questions conventions about being a woman, as well as about the woman's body and sexuality.

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<sup>1</sup> Liv Strömquist, *Der Ursprung der Welt*, avant-verlag, 2017.