

DRAWINGS OF MOTHERING PRACTICES: A NEW NARRATIVE OF BEING MOTHERING

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate how female artists can turn mothering practices into opportunities to get back the self-confidence they have lost. Women in Taiwan bear most of the responsibility to raise children after being a mother. Many of them were well-educated and have professional careers, but the burden of mothering made them struggle between family and career, thus making self-actualization a challenge for them. Based on interviews, observations and image analysis, the researcher focused on the case study of a Taiwanese female artist, Dan-Chi Huang (1982-). Her serial oil paintings titled "Creation of Mother and Children's Image" depicted her two children from babies to preschoolers. Having struggled between managing the family and her career without any support to care for the children from her aloof husband and his family, she felt lost for years. Instead of escaping from these difficulties, she decided to draw her daily mothering experiences. Huang tried to keep the personal feeling of each event in her works, therefore, the works were not only the records of her life but the reflections of her emotions or the projections of her wishes. Without the limitation of narratives, she could tell new stories and brought new viewpoints for her mothering experiences through her works. The research found that Huang's art-making has provided a chance for her to re-encounter herself. She integrated mothering and art practices into a process of re-recognition of self, which allows her to regain confidence and find new meanings for her self-identity.

Keywords: *mothering practice, art-making, story-telling, self-confidence, self-identity*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the recent 20 years, women were encouraged to go for their higher education and pursue success in their careers in Taiwan. Based on the statistics from the Ministry of Education, in 2016 the Master and above program enrolment rate for females across the country rose from 26 percent in 1996 to 43 percent (Ministry of Education, 2017). In addition, statistics on the gender rate in tertiary education of 25 years old and above in 2015, female was 42.1 percent and 4.2 percent higher than male (Directorate General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, 2017). However, when the women got married, they were expected to devote themselves to their husbands' families and their nuclear families, especially those who had children.

Being a mother was a challenge for a woman. First of all, a woman would have to go through the uncomfortable period of pregnant, and then the painful process of birthing the child. Besides that, the seemingly natural connection between women and childbearing has made women's mothering being taken for granted. Therefore, despite the body still has not recover, women still try hard to learn the knowledge of infant care. Just like Chodorow (1978) pointed out, "In our society, as in most societies, women not only bear children. They also take primary responsibility for infant care, spend more time with infants and children than do men, and sustain primary emotional ties with infants". Moreover, women were taught that the development of children was depended on whether or not they provided high-quality caring for their children. If children had any problems while growing up, people were always quick to blame their mother, accusing her of discursive caring. Under the pressure of both the expectations of society and women's potential guiltiness, women were forced to give up their careers and be a full-time mother or chose to struggle between their professional jobs and mothering responsibilities, which made self-actualization a challenge for them. It seemed that mothering practices is an inevitable experience for most women in Taiwan and they needed to find ways to face the crisis for self-confidence. This study focused on how art-making helps women to understand their circumstances, especially female artists in Taiwan, and how they can turn mothering practices to be the opportunities to regain the self-confidence they lost.

2. CASE STUDY

In order to gather knowledge about the mothering practices of female artists, this study conducted in-depth interviews with Taiwanese female artist and focused on the case study, Dan-Chi Huang (1982-). She earned her MFA from the National Taiwan University of Arts in 2016. Huang's serial oil paintings titled "Creation of Mother and Children's Image" depicted her daily mothering experience. She was honoured to be invited by CYCU Art Centre, Cultural Affairs Bureau of Hsinchu City, and National Taiwan University Hospital Hsin-Chu Branch to stage her solo exhibition titled "Reflection on Motherhood: Exhibition by Dan-Chi Huang" which raises awareness about women's mothering experience and brings attention towards these areas.

Apart from being an artist, Huang is an art teacher in high school and a mother of two preschool children. She had grown happily under her mother's protection. Huang did not need to worry about the housework. Without any support from husband, Huang's mother cared for Huang and her brother on her own through her heavy workload in junior high school. She always encouraged Huang to study hard and to find interests of her own. She also reminded her that girls should be well-educated and have a professional career, even after they are married, just as she did. Huang was inspired and believed she could be competent as a good mother even with her successful career.

However, Huang came close to collapsing after being a mother. Without any support from other family members, not even her husband, she needed to take care of her children, do all the housework and trying to get ahead in her career at the same time. Moreover, her mother-in-law would criticize whatever Huang did and asked her to maintain her nuclear family on her own and not become a disturbance to her son (Huang's husband) to launch his career. She felt frustrated and lost. Instead of escaping from these difficulties though, she decided to use drawing to find herself back. By brushing oil painting on canvas, she felt as if she could fly in her imagination and regained courage to face the suffocating situation.

3. IMAGE ANALYSIS

Since 2013, Huang has been creating 25 works for the "Creation of Mother and Children's Image" serial. She depicted her daily mothering experience with her two children from babies to preschoolers. Huang said, "Only when I looked at my children, I could feel brave to be a mother".

3.1. Children's figure

Huang loves to observe the facial expressions and body gestures of her children. For her, it was the privilege and pleasure of being a mother. Through her portraits, viewers not only saw a child but felt the sight of a mother in front of the child. Despite the exhausting infant caring, for Huang, she still wanted to grasp any chances to gaze at her baby.

As in Figure 1, according to Huang's elaborate light setting, viewer could progressively see the gradation of the child's hair, fingers, clothing wrinkles, and toes. It was a recreation of a warm motherly sight. However, it also reflected a novice mother's worries. Huang carefully made the curled-up body stretch to the border of the canvas which looked like the endless darkness trapped the baby, as well as Huang.



Figure 1: "Meaning of Mother: my sweet Baby", Canvas, Oil Paint, 90x65cm, 2013

As Buber (1972, as cited in Arnett, 1986) quoted, "Man can become whole not in virtue of a relation to himself but only in virtue of a relation to another self". Through the existence of a child who needed caring, Huang assured herself that she was being a mother. She became aware and perceptive to the voice of a part of herself. She learned that she should be proud of herself for being tough and supporting her family though she was at the edge of collapsing. Once she felt grateful for being a mother, her works turned from a grey tone to one of vivid colours. As in Figure 2, the stiff figure (as in Figure 1) turned to be one of vital fresh with light around the scene. Her mothering experience made her encounter a new self and made her concern with the wholeness of herself.



Figure 2: "Meaning of Childhood: messy home, time to go out", Canvas, Oil Paint, 90x65cm, 2015

3.2. Emotion reflection

Huang tried to capture the personal feeling of each event in her works, therefore, the works were not only the records of her life but the reflections of her emotions. In Figure 3, Huang depicted a shopping experience for typhoon preparations. She enlarged her facial expression with tears and snot. She opened her mouth to call for help but nobody noticed. The only thing she could do was to carry her crying children and run away from being devoured by the dark blue. It was a huge mentality changing point for Huang. She used to lead an indolent life, therefore, the most frustrating part of being a mother was the nonstop working. At the present, she grasped the sign that she was the one to keep her children and herself safe and there was no room for her to hesitate. Inspired by this event, she trained herself to be more aware and this made her more confident to face the challenge of mothering.



Figure 3: "Meaning of Mother: the day before the typhoon is coming", Canvas, Oil Paint, 90x65cm, 2014

Huang loved to hug her children. In fact, research shows that embrace made people feel happy and helps to create better relationship. It was also an easier way to stimulate a child's growth in physical, mental and emotional health. ("Want A Healthier And Happier Child? Start With A Hug!," 2017) For Huang, the intimacy embrace was a direct expression to convey a mother's love to her children. As in Figure 4, the red seat around the figures and more in the background implicated a mother's endless warm embrace. For Huang, it was not only a cinema seat, but a wonderful place to hold her two babies tight and create wonderful memories for the three of them.

In Huang's serial works, she often uses extremely figure proportion not only to record her emotion but to manipulate memories to give rise those common experiences of mothering. As Ricoeur (2004) said, "The manipulations of memory.....result from the intervention of a disturbing and multiform factor that insinuate itself between the demand for identity and the

public expression of memory”. By manipulating memories, Huang valued her banal mothering experiences as a process to find self-identity and brought meaning to her life.



Figure 4: “Meaning of Childhood: the movie theater”, Canvas, Oil Paint, 90x65cm, 2014

4. CONCLUSION

4.1. Encounter new self

“All actual life is encounter” (Buber, 1970). Through art-making, Huang realized that to be a mother was a chance to encounter a whole new self. To be a mother, one needed to be patient to observe infants’ needs and endure repeated actions without language response. By depicting her children, Huang made a distance between herself and the mothering experience which depresses her. When the work is finished, it turned to be the evidence to assure Huang’s relation between herself and her own mothering practice. As Friedman (1998) said, “The first of these two movements Buber calls ‘the primal setting at a distance’, the second ‘entering into relation’. The first movement is the presupposition for the second, for we can enter into relation only with being that has been set at a distance from us and thereby has become an independent opposite”. Through the creation of relation, Huang accepted the frustration of being a mother and coped well with her mothering self.

4.2. Live at present

Art works reminded Huang to live in the present. Despite of the depression from her marriage and struggle between her family and career, which was a thing of the past, the new relationship would still be created in the present. As Buber (1970) said, “The present-not that which is like a point and merely designates whatever our thoughts may posit as the end of “elapsed” time, the fiction of the fixed lapse, but the actual and fulfilled present-exists only insofar as presentness, encounter, and relation exist. Only as the You becomes present does presence come into being”.

Each art work represented a presentness of Huang's mothering practice. Those responsibilities of being a mother, for Huang, turned to be a proud evidence of woman's existence and push her to re-recognition herself.

4.3. Telling new story

According to the dramatic expressions in Huang's work, she tried to create new versions for her memories of mothering experiences. Story telling makes people recreate facts and keep them occupied from what was happened in real world. Without the limitation of narratives, Huang could tell new stories and brought new viewpoints for her mothering experiences through her art works. Moreover, those stories inspired many viewers in her exhibition. Many women who suffered from mothering practices gave their thanks to Huang for her paintings and made them feel as if they are not alone and encourages them to find meaning in their lives. For Huang, art-making made her realize mothering practice does not destroy her life but is an opportunity to find new meanings for her self-identity.

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