

The Kaleidoscopic Vision of Galina Manikova

An article by Lucy Chen for www.artzinechina.com (February 2007)

From the moment she came into this world, the identity of Galina Manikova was confused. She was born in 1953 after her father a Russian general was exiled on the Sakhalin Island, a controversial island that once belonged to China, Japan and now Russia.

At the age of 20 she fled to Israel from Moscow with her Jewish boyfriend, trying to escape arrest by her father's army comrades. In Jerusalem Galina was educated as a ceramic artist working with photographic methods. She started to experiment, transferring photographs onto ceramics with handmade photographic emulsions.

In 1982 she married a Norwegian, and moved to Norway in 1986, where she has lived ever since. In Norway she extended her experimentation by using cyanotype (also called blue print) on surfaces such as cotton, silk and glass. Cyanotype, the alternative photographic printing process first being used in mid 19th century, is one of the first photographic printing processes in history.

In 2006 she came to China as a resident artist at the Chinese European Art Centre, Xiamen. In the resulting exhibition entitled 'The Great Wall', Galina presented herself as: Fu Yang, a pseudo-Chinese identity.

I. Complex background, multi-layered work

Like other female artists, such as South African-born and Amsterdam-based Marlene Dumas and Iran-born American artist Shirin Neshat, who have emigrated and been influenced by different contrasting cultures, identity has been a prevailing theme in Galina's art. Her multi-cultural background [20 years in the USSR, 13 years in Israel and 20 years in Norway] instilled in Galina a constant sense of isolation, but at the same time increased the complexity of her artwork.

Lyle Rexer, the American critic, vividly describes Galina as "a reluctant Norwegian and a Russian outsider". Her art is her incessant search for the meaning and possibility of her personal identity and offers a chance and a place for people with different identities to meet, to know, to express, to think and to communicate as shown in her Wailing Wall cyber project.

Her exhibitions always have many layers for viewers to explore; her photo- and video- installations keep changing through changes of light, time, transparency and the random juxtaposition of images. Feeling isolated in a foreign land makes her reach out to listen to the others as depicted in her Great Wall exhibition, where there is no real Great Wall to see, not a single concrete brick in sight, but walls of people's wishes on silk.

A cascade of symbol-laden blueprint silk hangings drops from different heights, creating volume and depth. The multi-layered transparent silk has been contact printed from photographs of a little Chinese magic fairy in white mask set against a background of words in several languages. The lightweight silk moves in the light

breeze, constantly changing in front of viewers like a shifting collage. Basic Chinese characters are sometimes the background text, which look ornamental rather than meaningful at first sight, but leave you space to think, to imagine and to wonder.

At her Xiamen exhibition there are over fifty blue monochromic portraits forming a long line and stretching across the other exhibition walls. Some portraits are like ID cards, some are close ups devoid of any background. Chinese and foreign, young and old, healthy and handicapped, office worker and street cleaner, the newly-weds and the dying, they were all found by Galina in the city of Xiamen. On one side of the canvas boards are the wishes of these individuals. The wishes are in the same language as the individual's nationality (Chinese, Russian, Icelandic, Serbian). Ordinary wishes such as "Let my happy days be longer" and "I want to have an interesting job" are revealed; "I want a Porche but can only afford a Benz" contrasts with "How I wish to have two legs and two feet."

The same wishes and portraits are projected simultaneously onto white silk gossamer, hanging and cascading from the ceiling in different layers. Wishes silently floating and flying past the wrinkles, expectant eyes, silent mouths and time-weathered faces of people.

As audience walk past, into and through the gossamer, the work shifts and you discover more layers, secrets and coincidences in the forever alternating space rather than a fixed structure. When audience walk around, their shadows are cast onto the silk, making the space more transient and hard to capture just like a dream. Thus the viewer's experience of the work is unavoidably dreamy, mystical and 3D cinematic.

There comes the necessity to capture and keep the transient life momentarily on the silk wish wall. The silk wall is Galina's contingency measure, a place where wishes are suspended until they are realized if the symbolic fairy is unable to realize them.

In front of portraits hung three white silk curtains with small burnt holes in irregular sizes. Visitors of the exhibition are invited to choose a white, red or black card to write their wishes on. Each colour represents a different set of emotions. The visitors place their wish cards into the holes in the silk curtains thus finding a small outlet to express themselves. The silk wish wall may remind us of our own wish tree. The act of placing the wish notes into the holes resembles lodging prayer notes into the cracks of the wailing wall in Jerusalem.

As a part of the project, Galina Manikova will scan the notes and put them onto her web art project: www.wailingwall.no. As the exhibition travels to New York, Norway and other cities in China, more portraits and new wishes will be added to both the exhibition and the website.

II. "My work is my life and my life is only work."

"My work is my life and my life is only work," Galina states. For her, making art is a necessity, a compulsion and a healing process. "Being an artist is a kind of obsession: one has something inside that has to come out. I cannot stay still more than a day or two, so I start making something new, without even noticing that I am working. The pleasure is to get the devils out, to express oneself freely."

Making art helps Galina to explore her identity and to explore problems that challenge her daily, problems concerning both identity and the aging process.

In her ID installation shown in Photographic Gallery in Copenhagen in 1993, Galina printed old black & white photos of her forgotten childhood onto pillows, carpets and wall hangings, put love letters in Chinese and Russian together with photos of herself and her lovers in 3-D frame to repetitiously remind viewer of her existence and to keep her precious old times and memories alive.

In her Metal Project in Norway 1997 and shortly after her father's death, Galina made two groups of pictures on metal, one group from her sweet and romantic childhood in USSR and another about her awkward life in Norway. According to the Russian saying "Things engraved in metal cannot be removed even by a hammer", those pictures can only be destroyed by melting the metal at high temperature. By making sand-blasted images on cast metal frames, Galina hopes to remember and to be remembered and understood, forever.

In her exhibition Climax Value in Norway 2000, she used transparent photos of mature and old naked ladies, eggs, mirrors, projected videos, texts, transparent textiles, herbs, fragrances and medieval sacred music to create three rooms that represent different phases in a woman's life. The process of aging was impossible to ignore when an image of an old naked woman was projected right on the visitors who walked around. This was Galina's attempt to face aging and preparing to become old.

Some art critics said, "Galina wants to tell the whole life in one exhibition".

"If one can tell a long life story in one book, why not to tell it in one exhibition?" is Gallina's response.

III. When photography is not just photography

Galina's mixed media and mixed-technique work transgresses the boundaries of photography and videos. Moments are de-frozen. Photos are liberated from limitations of frames. Two-dimensional photos became three-dimensional. Textures and depth are added to videos. Uncertainty occurs. Mystery looms. It is forever different, just like the cyanotype process itself. Texts, videos and cyanotype on cotton, glass and silk hangings are simultaneously interwoven, preventing any hard-and-fast interpretation.

Galina remains stubborn and resolute in her quest to explore the boundaries of her chosen medium. She has a desire to bring new expressive, textural dimensions to photographs and video. She presents us a new way of seeing art, video and photography; still that little young Russian girl, dragging her toy truck under the night sky dotted with shining stars of her art projects.