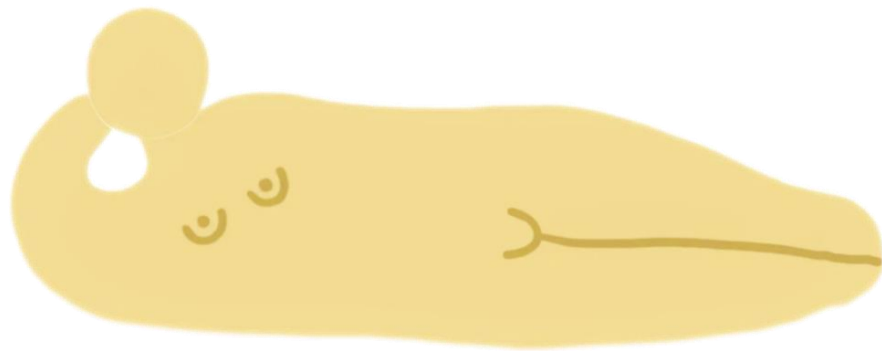


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IN SEARCH OF A ROOM



Exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
  
Master of Fine Arts  
at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

Feng Yumeng

2024

## Abstract

This exegesis explores the significance of women asserting their own space through a series of mixed-media collages and textile embroidery works. Inspired by Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, my artistic creations delve into the interactions between female identity, personal space, and creative expression, while responding to the themes of freedom and personal growth within the context of Chinese culture.

The series of creative works is rooted in my personal experiences and embodies a longing for an independent space akin to Woolf's metaphorical and literal room. My creative practice involves stitching together 100 fabric blocks, each measuring 12cm x12cm, depicting female figures without facial features. This abstract representation embraces the diversity of women's experiences, allowing more people, especially women, to see themselves in the work, thereby fostering broader recognition and reflection.

This project critically examines the complexities of feminism within the Chinese cultural context, where traditional values often clash with contemporary notions of female independence. Although Chinese women possess rights and opportunities, they frequently encounter

societal expectations that restrict their roles and identities. Using colors and various fabrics, these works express the universal desire of women for autonomy and a space truly their own, free from external patriarchal constraints.



Figure 1. Feng Yumeng. (2024, April). *Untitled* [Personal photo of the author].

## Acknowledgments

Over the past two years, my study abroad journey has been guided and supported by many individuals, without whom this journey would not have been possible. This master's program has been a precious experience for me, and I will forever be grateful to all those who have helped me along the way.

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of my first presentation to gradually becoming confident in expressing myself in English. Thank you for patiently slowing down your speech to explain things when I did not understand and for turning spoken words into written text when I found it difficult to comprehend. Your acceptance and understanding made me feel a sense of belonging in this unfamiliar environment, and I cannot express my gratitude enough.

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## Introduction

I grew up wanting to live in a world full of magic. In my own room, everything around me is so magical and beautiful. My room changes with my mood, and so does the view from my window. In that world, I can become a bird, flying freely in the sky and enjoying the beauty of every corner. When I am tired, I can become a mermaid, gently blowing bubbles. While I am cleaning my room, my pillow can suddenly morph into a cloud, drifting lazily out of the window. At night, I dance with the curtain fluttering, leaving the ordinary world behind. In those moments, I feel as if I have discovered the true meaning of the world. However, waking up always brings me back to the mundane path of life. Whether in dreaming or upon waking, the room acts like a mirror, reflecting our inner thoughts and helping us examine and understand our identity.

At the beginning of the master's program, my goal was to delve into my creative practice. Although I was initially unsure of the specific direction, it was after entering the MFA program that I decided to focus on the position of feminism and its expression in artistic practice. This master's journey has provided fertile ground for experimentation, reflection, and personal growth, and this exegesis attempts to document my research and practice.

Inspired by Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, I've been exploring the importance of personal space for women's intellectual and creative freedom. Woolf's assertion that women need financial independence and personal space resonates strongly with me and forms a central theme of my work. While providing a tangible environment for work and reflection, physical space also symbolizes the broader freedom of thought and personal independence required for creative expression (Woolf, 1929). Thus, the room represents both a literal space and the essential conditions that empower women to pursue artistic and intellectual pursuits.

My personal experiences have profoundly shaped my artistic approach and led me to explore feminist theories that resonate with my journey. Growing up, I lived in a boarding school from the age of ten due to my parents' busy work schedules, and later studied abroad in a foreign language environment during college. These experiences left me with a complex sense of belonging and a heightened desire for a space to call my own. I haven't lived at home for about fifteen years. Every time I come home, it feels strange but also familiar at the same time. The bed is covered with sheets and blankets I've never seen before, my childhood desk is filled with things my mother rarely uses, and the closet is filled with clothes that don't belong to me. Real life is the opposite of the world I have always

dreamed of, and these emotions heighten my desire for a room of my own.

This sense of displacement and longing for belonging led me to engage with feminist theories that address identity and social constructs. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity resonates with my experience of navigating different cultural expectations. Butler argues that gender identity is not innate, but rather constructed through repetitive social and cultural behaviors, which means that women can challenge and reshape traditional gender roles through their own behavior and expression (Butler, 1990). As a Chinese woman studying abroad, Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality has been particularly illuminating. Crenshaw emphasizes the diversity and complexity of individual identities, pointing out that women are not just women—they may also have multiple identities related to race, class, sexual orientation, and more (Crenshaw, 1989). These theories have provided a framework for me to explore the multifaceted nature of my own identity and experiences through my art.

This exegesis revolves around four key themes: personal space, female identity, female perspective, and space and freedom in female artistic creation. These themes are not only my interpretation of theory but also a response to real life through my creative practice.

Through this journey, I hope to explore the multiple identities and complexities of women like myself in modern society and advocate for greater freedom of creativity and expression.

While an early 20th-century publication, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* emphasizes the need for personal space for women's freedom of thought and creation, a concept of continuing significance in both Western and Chinese contexts. The first chapter of my exegesis explores the importance of personal space for women, especially in modern Chinese society.

Chapter two examines female identity in classical and contemporary art and discusses my work. It offers a subtle defense of domestic craft, such as embroidery and small-scale works, highlighting the inherent value and significance of these traditionally female-associated materials and processes. Additionally, these works abstract individual characteristics, reflecting both the individual and the broader group of women.

Chapter Three focuses on female artists who have long been marginalized in art history despite the importance of their works and contributions. This chapter examines several representative female artists and their works, analyzing their unique perspectives and expressions in art and exploring how they confront and challenge

gender discrimination. The practices of these artists have not only provided me with inspiration but have also profoundly influenced my creative concepts and methods. Through analyzing these artists, I hope to better understand and learn from their efforts in combating gender discrimination and their advocacy for women's rights.

In the final chapter, I explore space and freedom in women's artistic creation from multiple perspectives, examining how women artists fuse public and private space, redefine and transform space, and express innovative and independent ideas. In my own work, this manifests through the use of textile art to create abstract, room-like spaces that blur the lines between the personal and the universal, inviting viewers to reflect on their own concepts of space and identity.

# Chapter One: The Significance Of Personal Space

## **The Room Is The Door To Freedom**

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf, through analyzing examples of historical women writers such as Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, highlights the challenges they faced in creating without independent space and financial autonomy. Woolf asserts, “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf, 1929). This viewpoint is not only a critique of the societal realities of her time but also a call to action for women to strive for independent living spaces and financial freedom. This was meant to liberate them from the constraints of a male-dominated social and economic structure, which still predominated during Woolf's time.

Despite progress in gender equality in modern society, women in many cultural and social contexts still face similar challenges and barriers. A lack of economic independence and private space remains a major issue that stops women from achieving their intellectual and creative potential. For instance, women in developing countries report having less control over their lives than women in developed countries and are often expected to prioritize family responsibilities over careers, which limits their opportunities for financial independence (Jayachandran, 2015). In some Asian countries, cultural and environmental factors exacerbate the

preference for sons over daughters. When a woman gets married, she is essentially no longer a member of her birth family but joins her husband's family. Under this institution, parents may invest more in their sons' education and other aspects of their sons' development (Ebenstein, 2014), thereby indirectly strengthening the family's economic dependence on men. A Chinese proverb also expresses this view, saying that raising a daughter is “plowing someone else's field (Jayachandran, 2015).” Even in developed regions, women encounter gender-based wage gaps (Blau & Kahn, 2017). The challenge of balancing work and family responsibilities often falls disproportionately on women, leaving them with little personal time or space for creative pursuits. These issues appear in various forms across different cultures, but the main problem remains women's rights and freedom to self-fulfillment in both public and private areas.

## **Chinese Women's Spatial Struggles**

In traditional Chinese culture, women's roles and status have long been deeply influenced by Confucian thought, confining their primary responsibilities within the household as wives, mothers, and daughters, lacking independent social identities and creative spaces. Although modern societal changes have significantly advanced women's education and career opportunities, traditional notions still prevail, limiting women's intellectual and creative development.

Liu (2007) notes that despite economic reforms in urban China bringing more employment opportunities, gender inequality persists. Rofel (1999) further explores the impact of economic reform on the personal and social spaces of Chinese women, highlighting that the gender disparities in the modernization process pose greater challenges for women in pursuing personal space and freedom. Karetzky and Zhang (2020) emphasize that contemporary Chinese female artists, despite gaining greater visibility, often struggle with entrenched gender biases that limit their creative expression and opportunities. This echoes the critical question raised by Linda Nochlin in 1971, "Why are there no great women artists?", which has triggered various responses in the Chinese art field. Feminist theories and art critique methodologies migrated from Anglophone contexts to China, undergoing a process of cultural adaptation. Chinese artists have reinterpreted and applied these ideas. Zhu and Xiao (2021) believe that Chinese feminism must remain diverse because these concepts represent changes in the practical consciousness of historical and social development.

In contemporary Chinese society, the meaning of personal space for women remains complex. Urbanization and economic development have provided women with more employment opportunities and educational resources, enabling them to strive for independent living

space and economic freedom. For example, Lin Tianmiao's establishment of her own studio represents a pursuit of creative and personal autonomy. However, traditional family structures and social expectations still put pressure on women to balance career and family roles, as the experiences of women in literary and artistic circles show. (Conor, Gill & Taylor 2015). This dual pressure makes the pursuit of personal space and creative freedom more difficult.

### **Space As Intellectual Freedom**

Personal space is not just a physical area, but also psychological and emotional freedom. Having personal space allows women to truly focus on thinking and creating, free from external interference and pressure. Woolf points out, "A woman without personal space is like a plant without roots, difficult to take root and grow in the soil of literature" (1929). This independent space provides a haven for women to freely express their thoughts and emotions.

Qiu Jin, who lived from 1875 to 1907, stands out as a prominent example of a Chinese woman artist whose works vividly express her yearning for personal and political space. Her poetry and essays frequently criticized the oppressive social structures that restricted women's rights. She laments the limitations placed on women and calls for a revolution to overthrow these societal constraints (Qiu,

2011). It is worth mentioning that she was a female martyr who sacrificed her life to overthrow thousands of years of feudal rule. Fong (2009) explores the evolution of the ideal image of Chinese women, noting that as society changes, women's personal spaces and roles are also continuously adjusting and transforming. These changes reflect the dynamic nature of women's identities and the ongoing struggle for personal and political freedom in different historical contexts. Gaetano and Jacka (2004) analyze the impact of rural-to-urban migration on Chinese women, exploring how migration affected their personal space and social roles. Migration not only changed their physical space but also profoundly impacted their psychological and social dimensions. Honig and Hershatter (1988) describe the unique challenges faced by Chinese women in the 1980s, which persist in contemporary Chinese society still, where women often struggle to balance traditional family responsibilities with current societal roles in their quest for personal space and self-expression. Another example is the work of contemporary artist Cao Fei, whose multimedia projects show the tensions between tradition and modernity in contemporary Chinese society, especially from a female perspective. Her work *Haze and Fog* (2013) offers a critique of the social fragmentation resulting from China's swift urban development. However, her work pushes us to think beyond just China, making us ask more complex questions about how society operates according to class hierarchies and what we can do to

escape oppressive systems. This difficult balance highlights the enduring tension between maintaining family obligations and pursuing individual aspirations and freedoms in a rapidly changing social landscape in China.

The process of women fighting for personal space is also a process of seeking self-identity and social recognition. By owning and maintaining personal space, women can achieve intellectual and emotional independence. When space and time feel free or mentally emptied, it becomes crucial to rediscover a woman's identity as an 'individual' and understand the importance of 'self' over the collective role. This means achieving self-independence rather than merely fulfilling a group role. This individual growth, while personal, contributes to the broader movement of women's liberation by challenging societal norms and expectations placed on women collectively.

## Chapter Two: Manifestations Of Female Identity

## Female Imagery In Classical And Contemporary Art

In Western classical art, images of women are often idealized, symbolizing beauty, purity, and motherhood, reflecting the gender norms and values of society at that time. Female nudity is common throughout art history, with ancient mythological goddesses like Venus and biblical figures such as Eve and Susanna typically depicted in similar ways: a beautiful woman reclining on a bed. For example, Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, Ingres's *La Grande Odalisque*, and Manet's *Olympia* are classic works created by male artists for the male gaze, reinforcing women's roles as objects of beauty and subordination to men, as John Berger critiqued in his 1972 book *Ways of Seeing* (Berger, 1972).

Renaissance painter Giorgione was one of the first to paint reclining female nudes with his *Sleeping Venus*, and other European painters followed suit. French Rococo painter Francois Boucher depicted Princess Danae from a mythological story, where Zeus infiltrates Danae's locked chamber and impregnates her, appearing in the guise of a golden shower. Therefore, Danae is usually depicted reclining, bathed in golden light, obediently waiting for her fate (Figs & Shore, 2019).

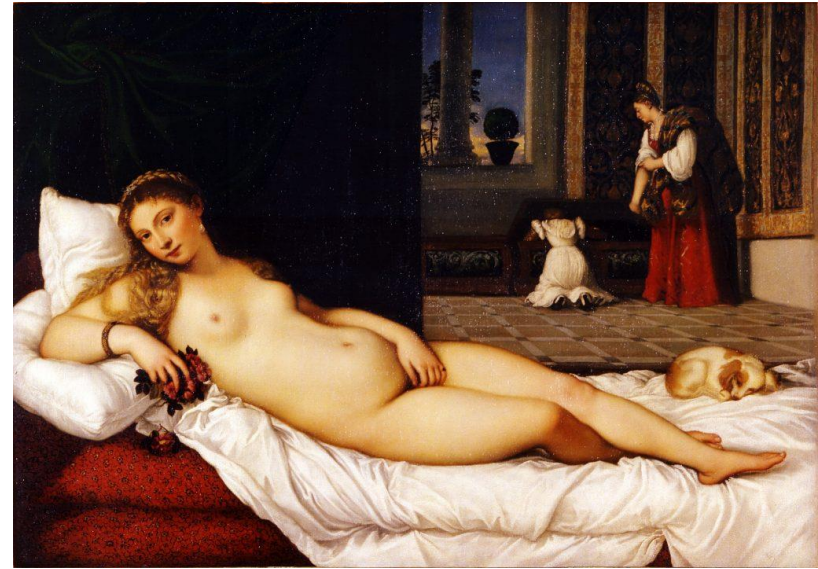


Figure 2. Titian. (1534). *Venus of Urbino* [Oil on canvas, 119 cm x 165 cm]. Florence, Italy.

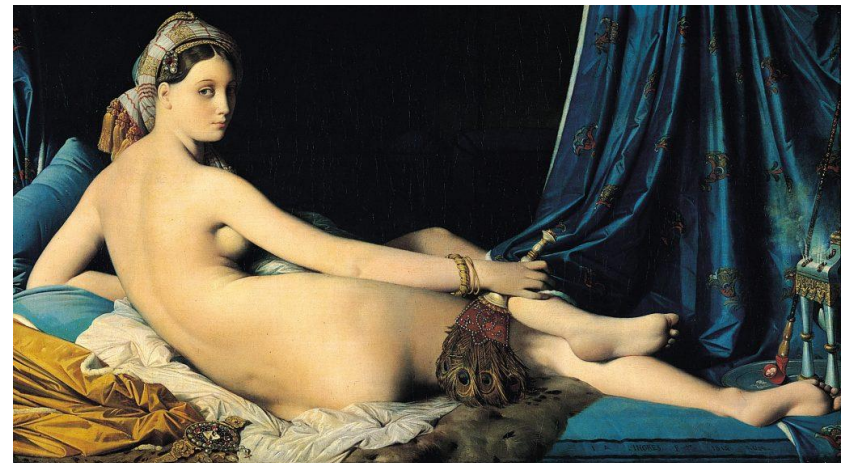


Figure 3. Ingres, J. A. D. (1814). *La Grande Odalisque* [Oil on canvas, 88.9 cm x 162.56 cm]. Paris, France.

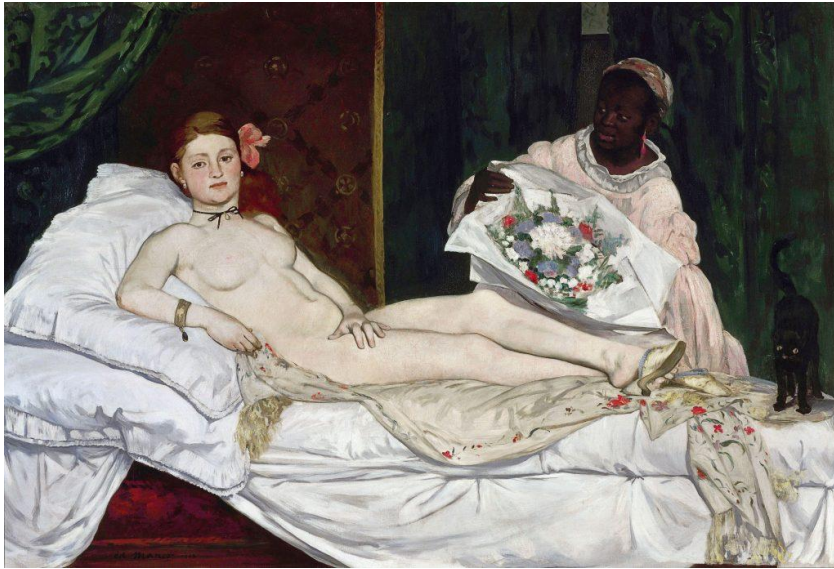


Figure 4. Manet, É. (1863). *Olympia* [Oil on canvas, 130.5 cm x 190 cm]. Paris, France.

In contrast, Suzanne Valadon brings a different perspective to nudity: the female gaze. While artists like Titian, Ingres, and Manet often portrayed nude women in idealized poses for the male gaze, typically reclining on beds with ruffled sheets to emphasize their social role, Valadon's approach is markedly different. Her *Reclining Nude* presents a more psychologically nuanced portrayal. The figure's posture—arms covering her breasts and the line of the crossed leg covering her sex—suggests a sense of vulnerability or self-protection or separates her most intimate parts from the viewer (AleCha, 2013). Valadon's realistic portrayal, which allows the

female abdomen to fold naturally, could be interpreted as a representation of female agency in choosing how to present oneself. This contrasts with Ingres's approach, who added unnatural extra vertebrae in his work *Grand Odalisque* to show a more idealized form of women (Kraut, 2024).



Figure 5. Valadon, S. (1928). *Reclining Nude* [Oil on canvas, 60 cm x 80.5 cm]. New York, United States.

In traditional Chinese art, similar patterns can be observed, as painters expressed their longing for beauty in their works, even though the women depicted were not always idealized as conventionally beautiful. For example, in Zhou Fang's *Ladies Wearing Flowers in Their Hair*, women are often depicted as the embodiment of elegance and nobility (Wan, 2016). These expressions, while highlighting the aesthetic and cultural values of the time, reinforced traditional gender roles and the notion that women were merely decorative and subservient to men (Fong, 1996).

With the rise of feminist art in the 1970s these traditional images were challenged by artists like Judy Chicago. In particular, Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, which redefined female narratives by celebrating women's contributions to history, thus altering public perceptions and advancing feminist discourse (DeBiaso, 2012). As contemporary artists began to re-examine and deconstruct traditional female imagery, female identity was presented from diverse and complex perspectives. Laura Mulvey proposed the 'male gaze' theory in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, revealing how women are often portrayed as passive objects of visual pleasure for active male viewers in film and art (Mulvey, 1975). This theory spurred many artists to reflect on and challenge this phenomenon in their work, it should be noted that, Mulvey's perspective has been critiqued for its binary opposition and neglect of female spectators' subjectivity

(Kaplan, 1983).



Figure 6. Zhou, F. (ca. 730-800). *Court Ladies Wearing Flowered Headdresses* [Ink and colours on silk handscroll, 46 x 180 cm]. Shenyang, China.

## ***She In The Room***

*She in the Room* is my first series, and as Gaston Bachelard explores in his *Poetics of Space*, the room is seen as a realm of thought—a place to reflect and express emotions (Bachelard, 1994). This concept resonated with me when I began working on this series. I chose oil pastels as the main medium for their imprecision and roughness, qualities that bring a sense of casualness to the drawings and evoke nostalgia and childishness.

In these works, I explore the room as an intimate, personal space—traditionally seen as a refuge from the outside world, where one can freely think, create, and express themselves. As an international student renting an apartment abroad, the room concept holds unique significance for me. My room, far from home, is where I find solace and a sense of control when facing the challenges of living in a new environment. The unfamiliarity of my surroundings heightens my awareness of the room as a personal sanctuary, influencing the intimate and introspective nature of my artworks.

However, through my art, I began to question whether this sense of freedom is as complete as it seems. While the room provides privacy, it doesn't free me from social expectations and gender norms. These pressures, often subtle, can affect the way women express

themselves, even in their most private spaces.

Living in different cultural environments has made me more aware of how these norms vary yet continue to impact women's lives. In China, traditional expectations often emphasize women's responsibility to take care of the home and maintain the family, even if they are successful in their careers. When I moved to New Zealand, I found that while society values individualism and equality more, men may still have subtle expectations of women, such as expecting them to always keep the home tidy. This has led me to question whether the room—symbolizing personal freedom—can truly escape society's expectations of women. Even in private, are women completely free of what Laura Mulvey describes as the 'male gaze'? In classical art, women have often been portrayed as passive objects rather than as active subjects with their voices (Mulvey, 1975). In my work, I try to challenge this traditional depiction of women in art, treating the room not merely as a backdrop but as an integral part of the narrative.



Figure 7. Feng, Yumeng. (2023). *She in the Room* [Oil pastel on paper, series of drawings each 21 cm x 29.7 cm].

## ***Lying Down***

In the Lying Down series, I transitioned from using paint to incorporating various fabrics for embroidery and collage to create reclining nude female figures. This shift was not only a groundbreaking choice but also deeply personal. As a child, my mother and grandmother often knitted or sewed clothes for me, cultivating my early interest in fabrics and sewing. When I began exploring textiles in my work, I found that these materials evoked a sense of warmth and intimacy. Moreover, the use of fabrics is traditionally associated with domesticity and female labor, which also added multiple layers of meaning to my exploration of female identity.

For this series, I made 100 separate pieces, each one 12x12 centimeters. This process took a lot of work and time. I started by gathering different fabrics, from fabric scraps to decorative textiles. Each one had its own texture, pattern, and color. The selection process itself is an act of curation.

Initially, I used colored felt for sewing, but the effect lacked interest and layering. To enrich my work, I started collecting and buying used pieces of fabric, some with prints and others with different textures. When I combined them, I was pleasantly surprised by the effects of some chance combinations, as a process of addition and subtraction.

These works are small in scale and delicately arranged, each unique yet repeating the same theme. The sewing process was very important as I did all the sewing by hand. I got really into matching the colors of each piece, and I added beads, lace, and ribbons to make them reflect narratives of self and female identity. The act of sewing became like putting together pieces of identity and experiences.

I deliberately avoid giving these figures specific characteristics, because I think when something reflects attributes of a person, it expresses an individualism and personality at odds with the universality of my project. I want to focus not just on individual women, but on all women's experiences together. These abstract figures don't have clear faces. I hope when the audience enters my space, they feel a connection that allows them to also enter their inner world, reflecting on their personal experiences and emotions.

During my creative process, the critique I heard the most was my works needed to be larger in scale and more ambitious. While large-scale works will indeed recall the experience, my small-scale works are equally valuable as they can emphasize the individual and intimate space, aspects of artworks by women often overlooked in a patriarchal society. For example, the work of Eva Francis in the 20th

century is a collection of small, delicate, and academic floral paintings that embody femininity and tradition. Despite her exquisite craftsmanship, her work remained relatively obscure during the period, highlighting the marginalization of traditionally feminine subjects and dimensions in the art world (Foster, 2021).



Figure 8. Francis, E. (1903). *Snowdrops and violets* [Oil on canvas, 15.2 x 20 cm].  
Touchstones Rochdale, Accession no. 71.

Similarly, Miriam Schapiro challenged the marginalization of women's creative forms by incorporating traditional women's craft materials into her work from the 1970s onwards. Her proposed 'feminine collage' celebrated 'Femininity' by elevating the traditional domestic crafts of anonymous women to the level of art (Schapiro & Meyer, 1977). Through these examples, I have tried to show that the value of small works lies in their ability to highlight the personal and domestic, re-perceiving these spaces as important and worthy of attention in the wider art world.

Woolf's concept of 'the loose, drifting material of life' evokes the idea of transforming everyday experiences into art. She envisions this material being shaped into a form that's both reflective of life and elevated as art. This notion recalls the various items—from paper lace and quills to photographs and Valentine cards—that sparked creativity in the women artists we're examining. These everyday objects, often overlooked, became wellsprings of artistic inspiration (Schapiro & Meyer, 1977). This perspective resonates deeply with my artistic approach, as I too seek to transform the everyday materials and experiences of women into meaningful artistic expressions that reflect the complexity of female identity.

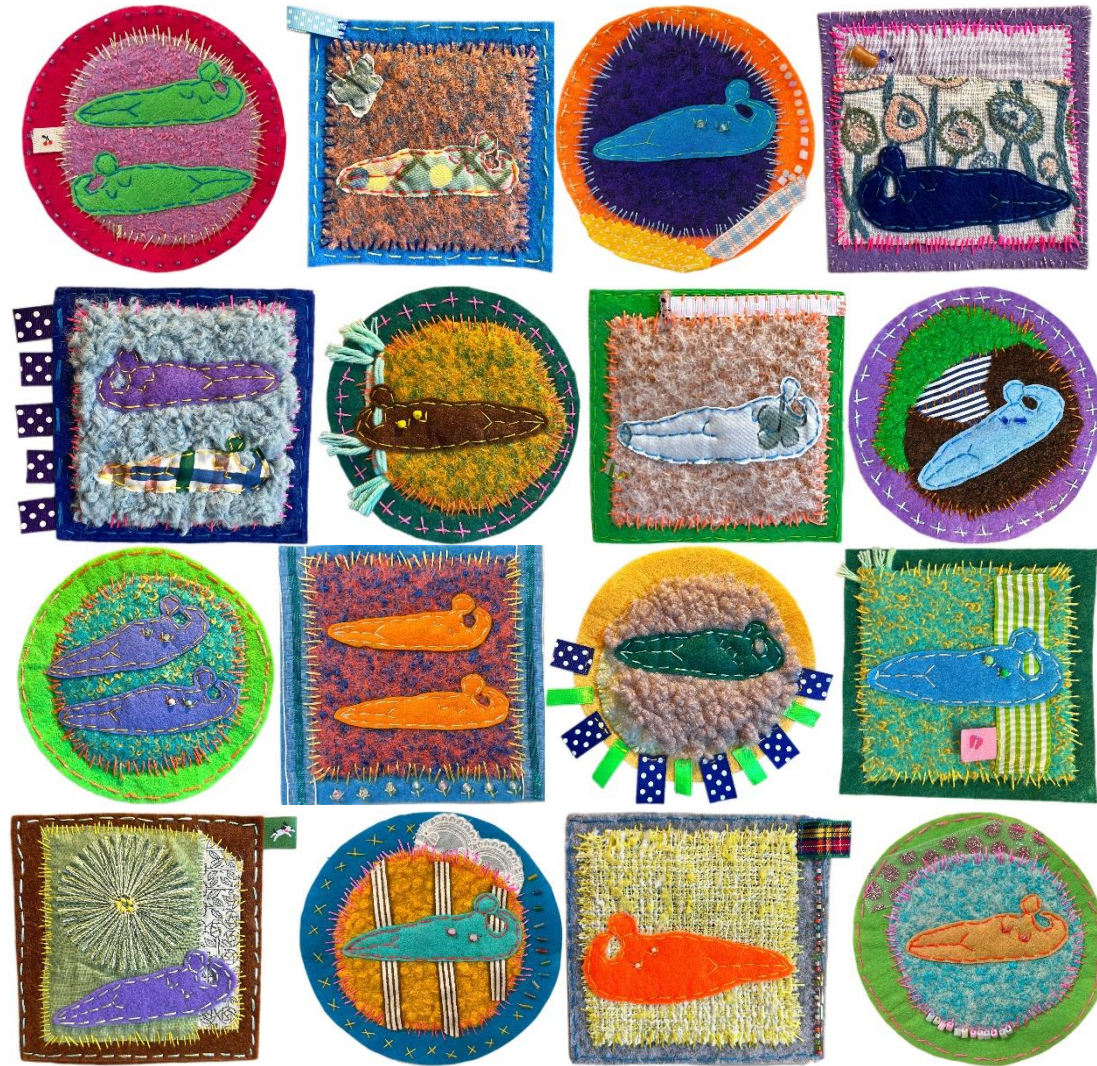


Figure 9. Feng, Yumeng. (2024). *Lying Down* [Fabric mixed materials collage, series of works each 12 cm x 12 cm].



Figure 10. Feng, Yumeng. (2024). *Lying Down* [Fabric mixed materials collage, series of works each 12 cm x 12 cm].

## Chapter Three: The Unique Perspectives Of Female Artists

## Chinese Female Artists: Redefining Boundaries

In China, contemporary female artist Lin Tianmiao is well known for her installations using thread, textiles, and other materials often associated with feminine craft. Her work challenges traditional notions of femininity, beauty, and motherhood. As Lin stated in an interview, “I believe materials have attributes, genders; they can distinguish between female and male, and through art, we can completely transform the identity of materials or add content to them” (Lin, 2019).

In her work *Bound and Unbound*, Lin Tianmiao uses many white threads, winding them around various objects to create visual unity amidst confusion. She explained, “These threads are not just restraints; they are also a symbol of connection, reflecting women’s ongoing efforts to find their place and value in society” (Zhang, 2022). Lin Tianmiao’s ‘line’ becomes a concept or thought-provoking symbol. Starting from the ‘line’, she saw the characteristics of ‘borderline’. The ‘line’ allows her to feel the boundaries between things, but if people break them, can things remain the way they were? Where is the line between men and women?

Lin Tianmiao’s work also often explores the relationship between family and female identity. Her installation, *Mother*, uses household

objects and textile materials to explore the interconnectedness of motherhood and female identity. These works not only reflect the multiple roles of women in the family but also reveal the pressures and challenges women face within the family and society.



Figure 11. Lin, T. (1997). *Bound and Unbound* [Installation, dimensions variable]. Beijing, China.



Figure 12. Lin, T. (1997). *Bound and Unbound* (detail) [Installation, dimensions variable].  
Beijing, China.

Another Chinese female artist, Xiang Jing, uses fiberglass sculpture to explore the inner nature of human nature (Turner, 2012). She portrays the raw, imperfect reality of the female form while emphasizing its philosophical essence. In her personal exhibition, *Your Body*, Xiang Jing presents a magnificent life landscape of women through body narration. This series addresses gender-related life questions and survival challenges faced by women from childhood to old age. Xiang Jing wants to convey is that ‘woman’

represents an independent and free existence, an existence endowed with inviolable dignity, and she represents a world beyond desire and noise, towards peace and dreams (Zhu, 2008). As written in *Poetics of Reverie*, “Any man or woman who walks down and still further down the ‘slope of dreams’ will find the serenity of his anima deep within. He finds it by walking downward, not by plunging downward. This indefinite deep place is the haven of feminine serenity. In that serenity free from worries, ambitions and schemes, we find peace that is suited to us, and our entire being finds rest (Bachelard, 1971).”

In these works, Xiang Jing subverts the traditional male-centric perspective of viewing women's bodies as they have within art history. She offers a self-respecting portrayal of the female body in a first-person narrative. She thoroughly subverts traditional art history's male-centered perspective of the female body. Historically, the female body in art has been depicted from a male perspective to please the male eye, but Xiang Jing's work challenges and changes this perspective, she deconstructs the “gaze of others” and renders this gaze obscene (Jia, 2013).



Figure 13. Xiang, J. (2005). *Your Body* [Paint on fiberglass, 270×160×150CM].

Xiang Jing reflects on her artistic stance, noting her past reluctance to embrace a feminist label despite her work's engagement with gender themes. She recognizes that her worldview is inherently feminine, not as a political choice, but as an intrinsic part of her identity. This realization leads her to consciously create from her perspective as a woman. Xiang explains, "I use the female body first to remind people that I am a woman," emphasizing that her art stems from her lived experience rather than solely addressing gender politics (Xiang & Zhu, 2010).

This sentiment echoes Simone de Beauvoir's words in her feminist bible, *The Second Sex*: "A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man" (1949).

### **Western Female Artists: Challenging Tradition**

In Western art history, still-life painting has always been considered a niche art form, often associated with the domestic space of women. However, the tradition was broken by Frida Kahlo, with still-life being elevated to a position of importance that reflected her inner world. "I paint flowers so they will not die," explained Kahlo to her lover Josep Bartoli in 1946 (Grimberg, 2004). This quote reveals Kahlo's motivation for creating still-life paintings—to combat loneliness,

chronic pain due to earlier accidents, and the fear of death through art. Confined to her blue house, Casa Azul in Mexico City, and spending much of her time in bed, Kahlo's spirit remained unrestrained, like a bird soaring through the night, catching the light and burning like a flame. Her still-life paintings, much like her self-portraits, are full of personal physical pain, and inner struggle. Women's creativity flourishes in the confines of a room, and the flowers of life bloom even in the desert.

In *I Belong to My Owner*, concerns about loneliness, illness, and death are expressed by Kahlo through a vase and a rose. Issues of female identity and belonging are suggested by the words "I belong to my owner" on the vase, while death is symbolized by the marigolds above the vase. Together, these elements reflect Kahlo's thoughts on the end-of-life process.

Kahlo's still-life paintings are not only an expression of personal feelings but also a reconsideration of the nature of things. Traditional objects are personified by her, removed from everyday life, and made independent protagonists, representing separate emotional states, metaphysical outcomes, or social conditions. Kahlo conveys her perception of the impermanence of life and her reflection on her own existence through her still-life paintings (Grimberg, 2004).

### ***Things In The Room***

The *Things in the Room* series was created by me after *the Lying Down* series. I mainly use objects from everyday life as inspiration, employing a variety of colorful cardstock and mixed materials to make collages. This series records my observations and imagination of space when I am alone at home. The things we own, the objects on our table, and the furniture in our home tell us who we are, what we value, and stories about us. Creating a still-life is like creating a world full of hints, embedding clues from my life into the work as my visual vocabulary.

Making these collages required thinking carefully about how colors work together, how things are arranged, and how different parts interact. I collected papers with different colors and textures from various places and made my own drawings. Before finishing a piece, I would spend time arranging and rearranging things. This process is like how we organize our personal spaces, giving meaning to the things we choose to have around us.

This process resonates with the creative experience of New Zealand artist Robin White. In one of her projects, White invited a team from Te Papa to watch her creative process, and they witnessed how she gradually built up the image of a room with crayons. The room was

partly inspired by the living room where she created her work (Te Papa, n.d.).

When you create something the space in which you make it becomes very special. It's almost like the room remembers you. You go back into that room, and you feel at home again because it's a place of creativity, a place of laughter, a place of working together.

— Robin White, 2019

In my space, I hear, see, smell, feel the door, the bed, the light, the text, the paper, the still-life. I connect my story. Whether it is the object, the text, the image, or the body, they are the carriers of memory, holding stories and emotions that connect to my narrative. I embed them into my work, creating layers of my spaces.



Figure 14. White, R., & Cabeikanacea, T. (2019). *That Vase* [Bark cloth and ink, 3300 x 2100 mm]. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Wellington.



Figure 15. Feng, Yumeng. (2024). *Things in the Room* [Mixed media collage, series of works each 21 cm x 29.7 cm].

## East Vs. West: Different Views On Women's Rights

Historically, China has lacked a homegrown feminist movement. The feminist efforts during the May Fourth Movement, which began in 1919, were primarily driven by women who studied abroad and advocated for equal employment rights. However, this 'equality' was granted within a patriarchal system, offering limited progress and often reinforcing existing gender norms (Wang, 1999).

In contemporary China, women enjoy conditions or opportunities that others have fought for, but the values that everyone agrees with, still discriminate against women. Many women also internalize these discriminatory values, believing that family sacrifice equates to greater self-worth. It is an ingrained education system that reinforces this perception. Consequently, most Chinese women often face a complex internal conflict between social expectations and self-worth and with family. One's womanhood remains a big challenge for a person (Yang, 2020).

In contrast, Western feminist thought has undergone several changes since Hubertine Auclert introduced feminism in late 19th-century France. Improved women's status enabled their voices in art (Qiu, 2022). This led to radical expressions of feminist art in the latter 20th century, for example, in 1975, Carolee Schneemann first

performed her work *Interior Scroll* in East Hampton, New York (Blumberg, 2024). This provocative performance piece challenged cultural taboos and highlighted the political and cultural significance of the female body (Jones, 1998), illustrating how far feminist art had progressed since its early beginnings.

For more than 100 years, it seems that the world has been forcing women to make a choice: Are you going to be a person or a woman? It appears that the more one lives as a human being, the less socially accepted one is as a woman. During the second wave of feminism, Betty Friedan, in her book *The Feminine Mystique*, exposed the fallibility of women's fulfillment in their roles as wives and mothers. Her interviews revealed that these affluent middle-class women experienced inner emptiness and misery, and even suffered from mental illness (Friedan, 1963). Thus, these traditional roles were limiting women's personality development and depriving them of the pleasure of their creative labor.

Today, most women in China have some degree of freedom, are educated, and have been influenced by the feminist trends and advances of previous periods. Therefore, the current female consciousness may not be primarily concerned with equality but with a sense of freedom, where a woman, as a person, can live more actively, vibrantly, and purposefully.

## Chapter Four: Space And Freedom In Female Art

## Public Vs. Private

Female artists often combine private and public spaces to explore the interactions and contradictions between the two. By expressing themselves in public spaces, women gain a new understanding of their roles and influence, forming a substantial presence. For example, UK artist Tracey Emin moved her bed and belongings from her room into a public gallery space (Takac, 2019). In *My Bed*, there were scattered sheets, vodka, cigarettes, condoms, and menstrual-stained underwear next to the bed. Emin explained, “I don't mean to shock people, I just want to have a dialogue with people” (Li, 2022). This represents a successful attempt by women to speak out profamily in a public space.

American scholar Jean Bethke Elshtain proposed the concept of ‘public man, private woman’ (Elshtain, 2020). Male and female, public and private, are recurring keywords in women's art. This gender division of space affects the role and status of women in society. Historically, public spaces have been associated with male-dominated activities, while private spaces have been relegated to the domestic sphere—the domain of women.

Art historian Griselda Pollock points out that the space of modernity is not merely an objective or neutral place where history takes place,

but is gendered, giving men and women different values and opportunities (Pollock, 2003). Pollock asserts that in 19th century Paris, different spaces meant different things for men and women, especially because men enjoyed public freedoms that women did not have (Jones, 2020). By bringing their private experiences into the public eye, women artists allow their voices and ideas to be fully expressed and recognized.

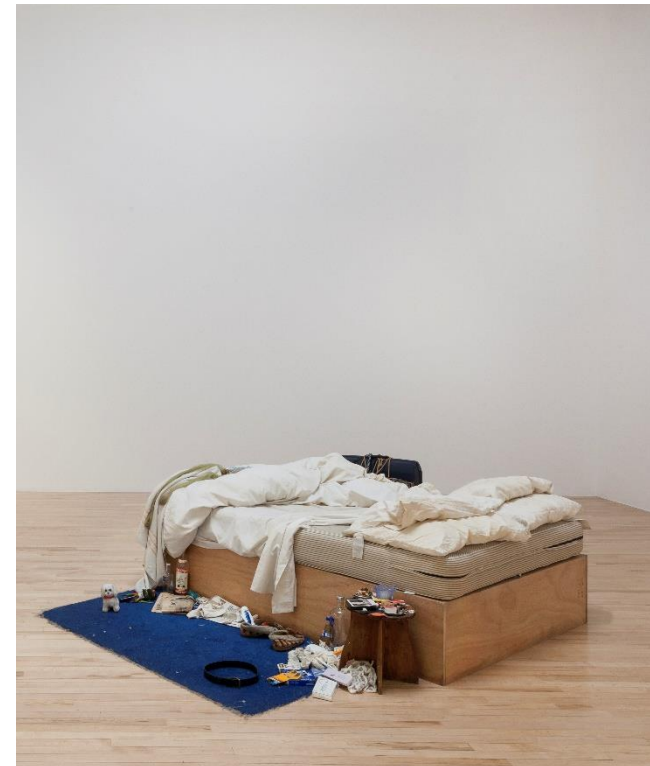


Figure 16. Emin, T. (2016). *My bed* [Installation: Box frame, mattress, linens, pillows and various objects]. Tate Britain, London.

It's important to note that while works like Tracey Emin's *My Bed* are discussed here, they serve to illustrate the broader struggles and expressions in feminist art rather than directly echoing my own artistic approach. My work, while addressing similar themes of female identity and personal space, takes a more subtle and introspective approach. This introspection, however, does not preclude universality. By delving deeply into personal experiences and reflections, my art aims to uncover and express the universal aspects of women's experiences in navigating private and public spheres.

### **The Liberation Of Women's Space**

By redefining and transforming space, female artists pursue freedom and liberation. Martha Rosler's work *Semiotics of the Kitchen* challenges the role and status of women in the domestic space by reshaping objects and behaviors there (Goodman, 2023). In this piece, Rosler mimics the characters of the perfect housewife and cook on television. Instead of encouraging her audience to cook, she uses her work to critique the relationship between cooking and women. In the art world, countless female artists began to raise awareness and employ other feminist tactics in their practice. Their work focused on various forms of gender inequality, from the most obvious exclusion of women from the art world to this more subtle

assumption that cooking is a gift for all women, rather than a skill to be learned and mastered (Goodman, 2023).

Lefebvre (1991) proposed in *The Production of Space* that space is not only a physical existence but also a social and cultural product. Through the redefinition of space, female artists not only challenge long-held thoughts around the division of gender space but also demonstrate their pursuit of freedom and self-expression.

While artists like Martha Rosler use provocative performances to challenge gender roles, my work takes a different approach. Instead of direct confrontation, I use the intimacy of textile work and collage to explore these themes in a more personal, introspective manner. This process elevates the often-overlooked aspects of women's daily lives, challenging viewers to reconsider the value and meaning of these spaces. These different approaches highlight the diversity of feminist artistic expression, ranging from the bold and public to the intimate and private.

## Conclusion

As I reflect on the journey documented in this exegesis, I see that each chapter contributes to the overarching theme of exploring personal space and female identity. My work expands from the intimate confines of my space to broader conversations about personal memory, female identity, and the female experience. The *She in the Room* series allowed me to confront and reframe notions of the male gaze, while the *Lying Down* and *Things in the Room* series expanded these reflections into more tangible, everyday spaces. Each chapter is a step toward understanding what it means to be a female individual, what personal space means both literally and metaphorically, and how it resonates with the broader female experience.

This journey has been deeply influenced by my experiences as an international student. The contrast between Eastern and Western perspectives on feminism and women's rights has been an undercurrent in my work. In China, the women's movement has taken a different path from the West, with women often struggling against internalized discriminatory values and pressure to sacrifice for family. My work reflects this complexity, striving to find a balance between traditional expectations and personal aspirations.

Western feminist art movements, characterized by bold and often confrontational approaches from artists like Carolee Schneemann and Tracey Emin, stand in contrast to my own more introspective and subtle style. While these artists paved the way for frank discussions about women's bodies and experiences in public spaces, my work brings these conversations into the intimate realm of personal spaces and everyday objects.

This quieter, more introspective approach does not preclude universality. By delving deeply into personal experiences and reflections within domestic settings, my art aims to uncover and express the universal aspects of women's experiences. The focus on everyday objects and private spaces allows for a nuanced exploration of female identity that, paradoxically, can resonate widely. It's through this careful examination of the personal that the universal often emerges, offering viewers a point of connection with their own experiences.

I am very grateful to the MFA program for helping me gradually open up throughout this process. Initially, I was reluctant to share the story of this room because it felt deeply personal and precious to me. It was a significant driving force for my creative practice and life. But as I looked inward, I realized that if I kept it to myself, it would remain just a room. Yet if I opened the folds of this room outward, connecting

the emotions and stories that everyone shared, it would become an endless moment, a cascade of memories. A room of one's own can connect all of us women, no matter where we come from or what our stories are. Emotions are universal. Through this process, I've come to realize that there is great power in the personal space I was initially hesitant to share.

Looking back on all my works, I see they are not perfect. The fabrics and seams may have loose threads, and some material choices could be improved, but these 'flaws' are now reminders of what I have accomplished and explored. They record a harvest of ideas and practices expanded upon over the last two years. I explore personal space and female identity from a woman's perspective. My collages metaphorize from small-scale artworks into large-scale installations, highlighting my personal and domestic spheres. They allow the viewers to look deep within themselves, to evoke an inner response.

Overall, this journey through the MFA program has been one of profound personal and artistic growth. During the creation process, new ideas always emerge, and I constantly want to try new things. I believe the end of the MFA program does not signify the end of my creative journey. Instead, it feels like the start button. I love painting, embroidery, and crafting—they are a real, beautiful, and enjoyable part of my life. As I move forward, I will continue to explore and step

outside of my comfort zone.



Figure 17. Feng, Yumeng. (2024). *Things in the Room* [Mixed media collage, series of works each 21 cm x 29.7 cm].

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Figure 5. Valadon, S. (1928). *Reclining Nude* [Oil on canvas, 60 cm x 80.5 cm]. New York, United States.

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Figure 9. Feng, Yumeng. (2024). *Lying Down* [Fabric mixed materials collage, series of works each 12 cm x 12 cm].

Figure 10. Feng, Yumeng. (2024). *Lying Down* [Fabric mixed materials collage, series of works each 12 cm x 12 cm].

Figure 11. Lin, T. (1997). *Bound and Unbound* [Installation: White cotton thread, 800 household objects, video, sound, 4m(W) x 3m(H) screen made out of white cotton thread]. Gallery of Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, China. URL: <https://digital.kenyon.quota/week/6>

Figure 12. Lin, T. (1997). *Bound and Unbound* (detail) [Installation: White cotton thread, 800 household objects, video, sound, 4m(W) x 3m(H) screen made out of white cotton thread]. Gallery of Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, China. URL: <https://digital.kenyon.edu/zhou/6/>

Figure 13. Xiang, J. (2005). *Your Body* [Paint on fiberglass, 270×160×150CM]. © 2005-2024 XIANG JING. URL: [https://www.xiangjingart.com/index.php?g=portal&m=article&a=work\\_image&id=174](https://www.xiangjingart.com/index.php?g=portal&m=article&a=work_image&id=174)

Figure 14. White, R., & Cabeikanacea, T. (2019). *That Vase* [Bark cloth and ink, 3300 x 2100 mm]. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Wellington (2020-0026-1). Gift of Chris and Kathy Parkin, 2022. URL: <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/object/1887935>

Figure 15. Feng, Yumeng. (2024). *Things in the Room* [Mixed media collage, series of works each 21 cm x 29.7 cm].

Figure 16. Emin, T. (2016). *My bed* [Installation: Box frame, mattress, linens, pillows and various objects]. Overall display dimensions variable. Tate, London. © Tracey Emin / Photo © Tate 2016. Accession no. L03562. URL: <https://www.tateimages.com/preview.asp?image=M03590>

Figure 17. Feng, Yumeng. (2024). *Things in the Room* [Mixed media collage, series of works each 21 cm x 29.7 cm]

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