

ART OVERLOOKED

Members of our community shine a light on the lesser-known narratives and contributions of female artists past and present.

Words: MADELAINE CLARK

In 1984 New York's Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) staged an exhibition of "the world's top artists". But there was one big problem: out of the 169 artists, only 13 were women. This rightly caused outrage among the city's female art community, who organised a demonstration on the opening night, which ultimately contributed to the formation of a group known as the Guerrilla Girls a year later. The all-female collective of anonymous art activists made it their mission to fight discrimination in the art world through public street art and posters calling out galleries and museums whose collections or exhibitions lacked women artists.

The Guerrilla Girls was founded 40 years ago, yet such frustration remains widespread. For centuries, female artists have faced barriers to study or gender stereotypes that discouraged a career in art.

But things are changing. One such example is art historian and podcaster Katy Hessel, who last year published *The Story of Art Without Men*, documenting the history of lesser-known female artists from the Renaissance to today. And as institutions and collectors seek to fill gaps in their collections, works by women, such as Lee Krasner and Joan Mitchell, are now achieving record prices at auction.

In this spirit of bridging gaps, we asked six Women of Power to relate the stories of lesser-known female artists such as Lanlan, whose career was overshadowed by her husband, to today's talents who work with unusual materials, who've yet to gain the international recognition they deserve.

MIZUKI TAKAHASHI

The executive director and chief curator of Hong Kong's CHAT, Mizuki Takahashi discusses the Japanese textile artist KYOKO KUMAI, who creates tapestries and sculptures from stainless-steel fibres. Despite being the first female Japanese artist to have a show at MOMA, her international reputation has yet to take hold.

Kyoko Kumai is a Japanese textile artist born in 1943. She graduated from the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts in 1966 and has since held exhibitions in Japan and abroad. Today she's based in Tokyo.

Kumai uses titanium and stainless steel to weave and knit artworks to immerse people in the space. The titanium and metal threads reflect lights and create spectacular scenery. Her complex knitted pieces realise three-dimensional form, which is solid yet retains sensitive beauty.

I first discovered her when I visited a textile exhibition in Japan and was mesmerised with the beauty of her work and her use of metal thread for textiles. I started to do more research on her and discovered she was the first Japanese female artist to have a solo exhibition at the MOMA in New York.

She was the first artist to weave metal wire, and her works are massive. They always echo the space that's beyond the category of conventional textile art. One of her works I'm especially interested in is *Air* (1991); it's a giant fabric sculpture made from thousands of feet of stainless-steel fibres.



Kyoko Kumai, Memory (2017)

Her metal textile works made in the 1970s and '80s don't look old-fashioned at all. The cosmic beauty of her titanium textiles demonstrates her unconventional use of materials, not to mention that metals aren't in general regarded as materials for female artists in the first place. But she's skilled at transforming these hard materials into supple tapestry or textile pieces.

Textile materials and techniques have been underrated until now – and perhaps still are. As Kumai made her debut as a fibre artist from Asia, I think fine-art curators and critics haven't been able to find the right vocabulary to discuss her works in their familiar fields. She's yet to be recognised and properly introduced to the international art scene, despite her strong works with a contemporary aesthetic.

YUKI TERASE

As the co-founder of the New York and Hong Kong-based Art Intelligence Global Yuki Terasa is a respected voice on contemporary art. She explains why the late Japanese avant-garde artist ATSUKO TANAKA, whom she discovered during her student days, was years ahead of her time.

I first discovered Atsuko Tanaka, as she was in the curriculum when I studied art history – already at the time I was impressed by how she was the only prominent female member of Gutai, the pioneering avant-garde group in post-war Japan. I investigated deeper and discovered that she was the first and only Gutai artist exhibited and acquired by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in the 1960s. This led to jealousy from other male members of the group, and she left Gutai. From the start she faced struggles to make it as a woman in the male-dominant art scene, but she persisted and fought the prejudice.

Tanaka's paintings of symphonies of circles are instantly recognisable, characterised by a captivating vocabulary of circles and lines. Originating from her pioneering performance pieces and installation works from the 1950s, Tanaka's paintings have this palpable, almost visceral energy.

Tanaka was married to Akira Kanayama, a fellow first-generation Gutai artist and best friend of Kazuo Shiraga, another prominent male Gutai artist. It was Kanayama who invited his wife to join Gutai, but he left the group together with her when she couldn't handle the prejudice and discrimination within the group over her success. Kanayama was one of the first artists to use robots and machines for his paintings.

Tanaka's performance work of the 1950s was radical, highly conceptual, and utterly ahead of its time, leaving a lasting yet still under-appreciated

impact on art history. Her works raised issues relating to boundaries, self-identity and processes of change that involve the body and its relations with the world. She was also critically engaging with electricity and technology against the backdrop of a rapidly industrialising Japan.

Her best-known piece is *Electric Dress*. In a performance in 1956, five years before American minimalist Dan Flavin made his first fluorescent sculpture, Tanaka appeared on stage in an elaborate dress-contraption made of two hundred blinking and

flashing light bulbs held together by a mass of wires. As she twirled slowly on stage, she imprinted a pattern of colourful circles and lines on the audience's retinas. This piece captured continuous change into a single visual imprint, used the body as indexical to artistic creation, and engaged with ideas of boundaries and relations.

Tanaka's work and ideas were arguably the most radical among her peers. She was already recognised at the time but under-appreciated compared to male artists of her generation.



*Atsuko Tanaka,
Electric Dress
(1956)*



CATHERINE KWAI

The founder of Kwai Fung Hin Gallery, Catherine Kwai first encountered the work of Chinese artist LALAN in 2008 and remains fascinated by the artist's ability to infuse musical rhythm into her paintings. Despite Lalan's talent, she was often overshadowed by the fact she was Zao Wou-Ki's wife. Kwai tells how she was profoundly influenced by her discovery of the artist, which led her to establish the Lalan Archive in 2021.

Born Xie Jing-lan in 1921 in Guizhou,

Lalan was a Chinese-French painter, musician and dancer. In 1948, she moved to Paris with her then-husband, the renowned artist Zao Wou-Ki, and entered the avant-garde scene. It was only after their divorce in 1957 that she truly became an independent artist.

I first encountered Lalan's work in 2008, 13 years after her death, while compiling a monograph on Zao Wou Ki at his Paris home. Their only son, Zao Jialing, introduced me to Lalan's art, and through her estate executor, Jean-Michel Beurdeley, I saw her paintings for the first time. I was deeply moved by her talent and passion, and the lack of exhibitions after her death urged me to bring her work to wider recognition.

Lalan's artistic style was a seamless fusion of music, dance, lyrical abstraction, Chinese calligraphy and Eastern philosophy, embodying an

avant-garde vision. In the 1960s, her work featured bold brushstrokes, sombre tones and calligraphic elements. Influenced by art informel, she painted spontaneously, expressing deep emotions without sketches.

By the 1970s she embraced Daoist philosophy, particularly the concept of *qi* (life force), blending abstraction with landscapes inspired by Song Dynasty masters. Her fluid lines and use of negative space evoke a tranquil, meditative atmosphere.

In 1971, Lalan staged *Spectacle*, integrating music, dance and painting into multimedia performances around France. By the mid-1980s, her work evolved into pure abstraction, marked by vibrant colours and dynamic energy, reflecting her artistic maturity and exploration of life's transformations.

I'm captivated by Lalan's bold, innovative spirit and her unique ability to merge dance into her brushstrokes and infuse her paintings with musical rhythms. Although never formally trained in painting, her background as a soprano, composer and dancer made each stroke feel like conducting an orchestra, conveying deep emotion while maintaining harmony.

Despite her remarkable talents, Lalan was often seen merely as Zao Wou-Ki's wife and muse, which overshadowed her own

accomplishments. Like Lee Krasner with Jackson Pollock, both women lived at a time when female artists struggled for the recognition they deserved, despite their talent and hard work.

Lalan's multidisciplinary approach, integrating painting, music and dance, didn't fit neatly into established art movements, making it difficult for art historians, who often lacked expertise across all disciplines, to review her work comprehensively.

After the death of her second husband, Marcel van Thienen, in 1998, Lalan's works were poorly stored and neglected. The absence of an archive limited the understanding and analysis of her contributions. Through our collaboration with her estate, we established the Lalan Archive in 2021, presented in digital format, to ensure proper documentation, research and preservation of her legacy.

Lalan's first studio was in a laundry room. While married to Zao Wou-ki, she was at the heart of the Parisian art scene and lived comfortably. Only after their divorce did she find her freedom and independence as an artist. At the start of her artistic career, she shared a studio with her second husband, the violinist Marcel van Thienen, in his parents' laundry room. She began painting with watercolours, a gift from Van Thienen. Lalan lived a humble yet creatively abundant life until her sudden death in 1995.

HENRIETTA TSUI-LEUNG

Ora Ora Gallery founder Henrietta Tsui-Leung discusses her fascination for Chinese artist ZHANG YANZI, whose works push the limits of art forms while examining human experiences. The focus on male artists during the 2000s Chinese contemporary art boom, however, has prevented her from receiving the full recognition she merits.

Zhang Yanzi is a Chinese artist based in Beijing. She's part of the contemporary art movement that's emerged in China, gaining prominence in the early 2000s, as many artists began reinterpreting traditional themes and practices through modern perspectives.

I met Zhang and discovered her work in early 2010, when I was exploring artists who were pushing the boundaries of artistic expression and engaging with themes of identity, wellness and the human condition. Her artistic style combines traditional Chinese ink techniques with mixed media. She often incorporates materials such as rice paper and mineral pigments into her work,

creating visually striking pieces.

Her ability to capture the multifaceted nature of happiness through intimate narratives deeply resonates with me. In her Prescription series, particularly pieces such as Prescription 69, invites viewers to consider their own coping mechanisms, highlighting the personal journey of self-regulation during challenging times.

Zhang's works have reinforced my belief in the importance of cultural narratives and the power of art to evoke empathy and understanding. Her commitment to exploring the human experience encourages me to support artists who challenge societal norms and push the boundaries of traditional art forms.

I'm particularly drawn to her recent series, Her 24 Solar Terms. This collection poignantly illustrates the phases of a woman's life, using fruit and vegetables as symbols of

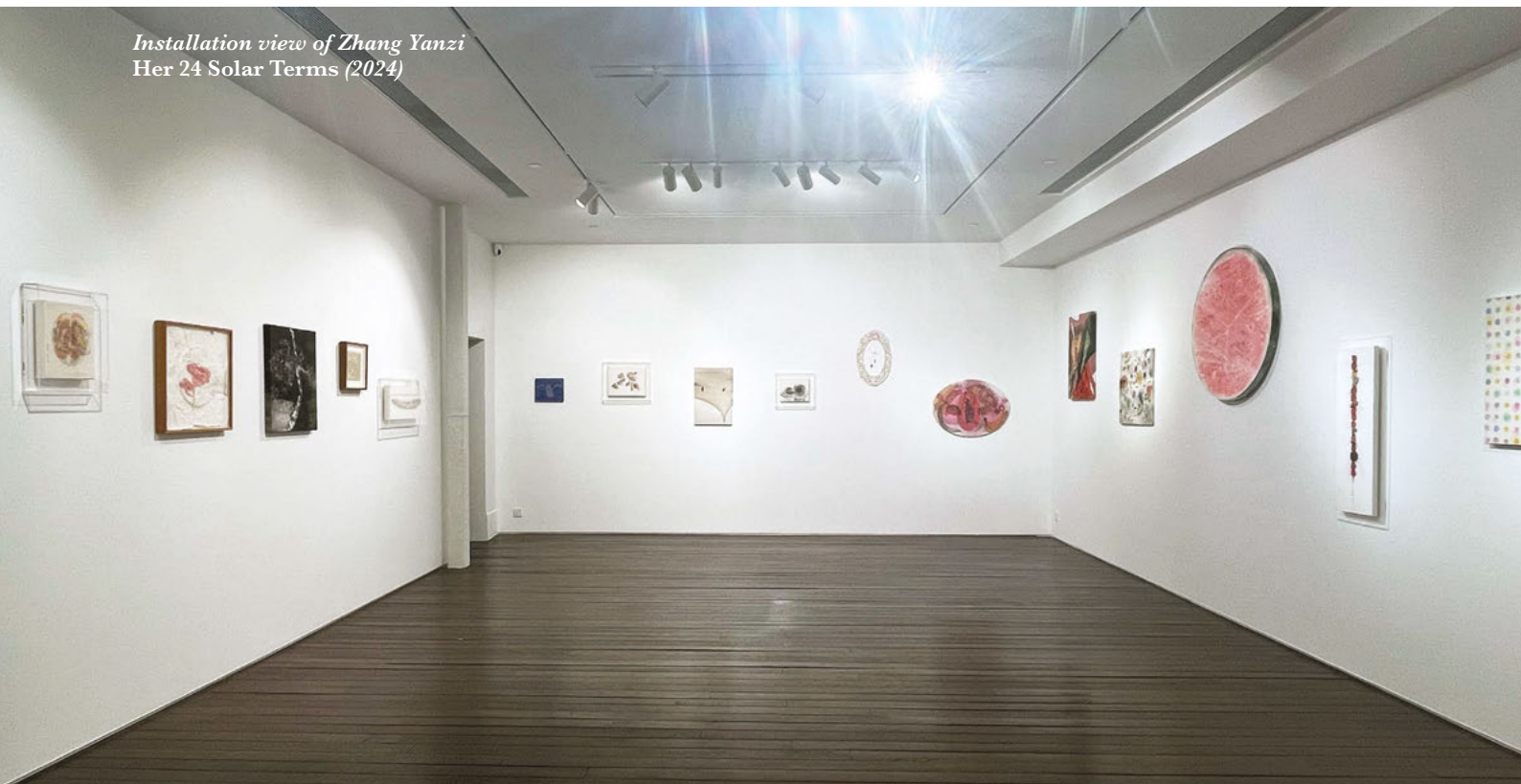
growth and transformation.

It resonates with me because it encapsulates the essence of existence and the beauty found in life's transitions. Her ability to convey such profound themes through simple, relatable imagery is truly remarkable.

Along with that of many female artists, Zhang's work was overshadowed during the rapid rise of the contemporary art movement in China around 2000. The focus on male artists and more commercial forms of expression often sidelined voices like hers, which delve into the intimate and personal aspects of human experience.

A surprising fact about Zhang is her interdisciplinary approach, merging elements of traditional Chinese philosophy with modern artistic practices. This fusion not only enriches her work but also positions her as a bridge between cultures, inviting audiences to explore the interconnectedness of art and life.

*Installation view of Zhang Yanzi
Her 24 Solar Terms (2024)*





*Installation view A Thousand Layers of Stomach:
A Solo Exhibition by A.A. Murakami at Pearl Lam Gallery Hong Kong*

PEARL LAM

Gallerist, patron and now podcaster, Pearl Lam shines a light on emerging Japanese artist AZUSA MURAKAMI, whose creative use of unconventional materials has inspired Lam to strive for greater artistic expressions in her own exhibitions. Lam discusses the many layers of the emerging talent's work that mightn't be widely recognised.

Azusa Murakami is a contemporary Japanese artist known for her innovative collaborations with Alexander Groves under Studio Swine (Super Wide Interdisciplinary New Explorers) and AA Murakami. Their multidisciplinary work encompasses sculpture, film and immersive installations, focusing on themes of regional identity and sustainability in a globalised context.

My first encounter with Murakami's work was through her and Groves' exploration of human hair. Their curiosity was piqued by product labels stating, "100% human hair made in China", which led them to investigate the origins and processing methods of this material. They created *Hair Highway*, a work that combines human hair with bio-resin. My gallery team and I helped connect them with hair

factories in China that offered more flexible production options than their Western counterparts.

Murakami's artistic style is deeply rooted in an exploration of materials and their influence on our lives. They examine how these materials shape our urban landscapes, cultures, and value systems, striving to coexist with nature in sustainable ways. Their work often blurs the lines between dream and reality, merging material research with advanced technology and their diverse backgrounds in art and architecture. A noteworthy example is A.A. Murakami's recent exhibition, *Floating World*, at M+ Museum.

What impresses me most about her work is its seamless integration of sculpture, installation and digital art. This multidisciplinary approach crafts experiences that combine scientific inquiry with moments of wonder. In AA Murakami's *Ephemeral Tech* series, they dissolve the boundaries between digital advances and natural forces, creating sensory phenomena that engage viewers beyond visual perception. This series envisions a future in which technology harmonises with our environments, reshaping our interactions with both.

I'm particularly drawn to her work *Hair Highway*, which reimagines human hair beyond its conventional role in the beauty industry. As the global population expands, hair emerges as a renewable resource, a sustainable alternative to depleting materials like tortoiseshell and tropical wood. The piece draws inspiration from the ancient Silk Road, exploring cultural exchanges between East and West through objects influenced by the Qing dynasty and 1920s Shanghai Deco, revealing the rich narratives within materials.

Her innovative use of materials, such as neon, mycelium, waste and fog, captures the complexities of contemporary life. By addressing the disconnection from rapid technological advances, she skilfully blends the artificial with the natural. As a gallery owner, her work inspires me to think outside the box and explore new artistic expressions. It encourages me to curate exhibitions that push boundaries and invite viewers to engage with art in fresh and thought-provoking ways, ultimately enriching the cultural landscape of our community.

She's an emerging talent gaining recognition in the art world. Her youth and rapid rise contribute to her evolving presence. I've had the privilege as one of the gallerists to support her career, including hosting her (A.A. Murakami's) solo exhibition *A Thousand Layers of Stomach* in Hong Kong in 2021.

A surprising aspect of Murakami's practice is her genuine passion for history, science, materials and geography. She approaches each project from multiple perspectives, emphasising the importance of visiting locations related to her work. This hands-on exploration enriches her understanding and informs her creative process, allowing her to produce deeply resonant pieces that connect with audiences on multiple levels.

DAISY WANG

The deputy director of The Hong Kong Palace Museum, Daisy Wang, admires Mexican artist FRIDA KAHLO's independent spirit. While Kahlo is a well-known figure for many today, during her lifetime, she was often eclipsed by her famous husband, Diego Rivera, and suffered numerous health issues, meaning she only produced a small body of work. Details of her life, such as her own encounters with Chinese art and silk, still remain unknown.

Born and raised in Mexico, Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) celebrated beauty and Mexican indigenous culture through her art and her unique personal style. In her lifetime she gained worldwide recognition for her role in reclaiming female agency and creativity, and is probably best known for her visceral and often dreamlike depiction of intense pain and trauma in life. You'd easily recognise Kahlo from a photo or a self-portrait, with her signature eyebrows, riveting dark brown eyes and her braided hair adorned with colourful ribbons and flowers.

Her artistic style can be described as candid, bold, breathtaking and brightly hued. Each work is a bittersweet symphony of what life gives us: joy and sorrow, pain and pleasure, life and death, strength and fragility.

I had a chance to see one of her early works this year at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The work shows a very sweet, demure, youthful Kahlo in her early twenties eager to explore what life would offer. In the picture she wears a dark green traditional Mexican skirt with a bright red shawl. The necklaces were likely made of ancient green jade beads. Her attire and the use of red and green in the picture symbolise her search for her own identity and the soul of her country. In this wedding portrait, she depicts herself next to Rivera, whom she'd married two years earlier.

Her work makes me think a lot about the personal and professional life of a woman, a wife and an artist in the first half of the 20th-century. I admire her courage to be different and independent and stay true to herself. I also empathise with her fragility and fear, which she depicts candidly in her paintings. Toward the end of her life, she reconciled with her husband, with whom she had an intense and turbulent relationship. They were married, divorced and then remarried. Kahlo put forward her own conditions for remarriage: she'd provide for herself financially from the proceeds of her own work, and her husband would pay half of their household expenses – nothing more.

She lived a brief and intense life traumatised by a near-lethal accident as a teenager. Over the years she had several abortions and many serious medical procedures, including the amputation of her leg, making her stay in bed and in pain for long periods

of time. Despite all that, she still managed to create a relatively small body of work.

Like many talented women in history, early in her life Kahlo was overshadowed by her husband. She was often introduced in public as the wife of the great artist. She later gained greater recognition in the art world and became the first woman to have a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, quite an accomplishment in the male-dominated art world then.

Although she never travelled to China, Kahlo discovered Chinese art and silk in Chinatown in San Francisco, which she visited in 1930 on her first trip outside of Mexico. She even owned a vintage Chinese skirt made of red silk with pleats and exquisite embroidery. As a Chinese art and textile specialist, I'm dying to research her encounters with Chinese art and culture. I hope one day we'll have an exhibition or a book about this. 📖

Frida Kahlo, Frida and Diego Rivera (1931)



BEN BLACKWELL