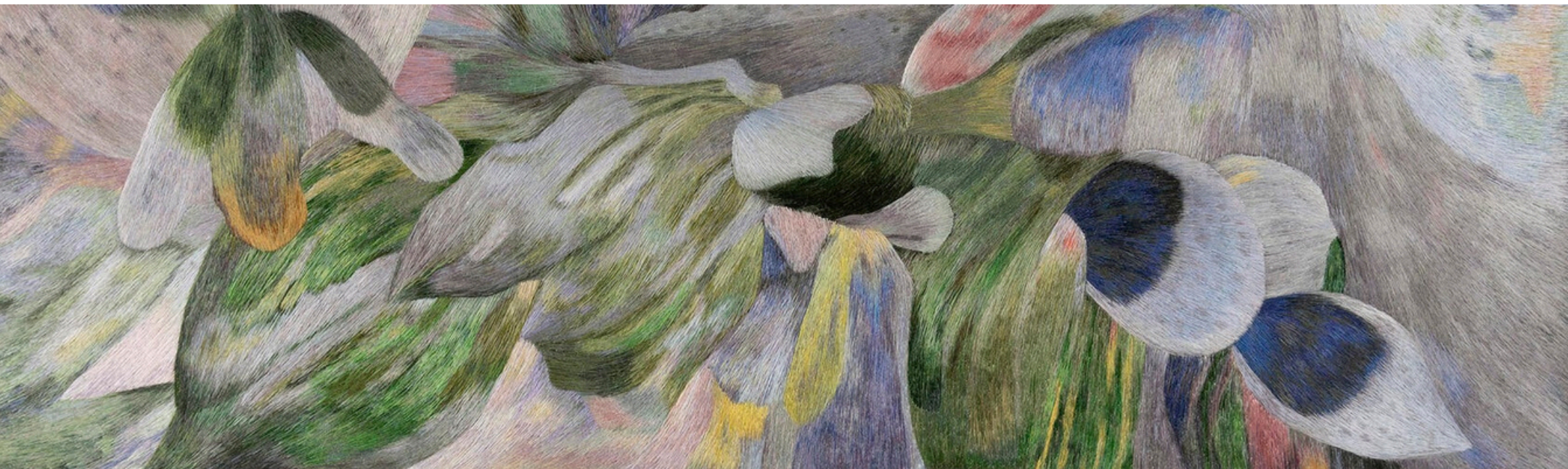


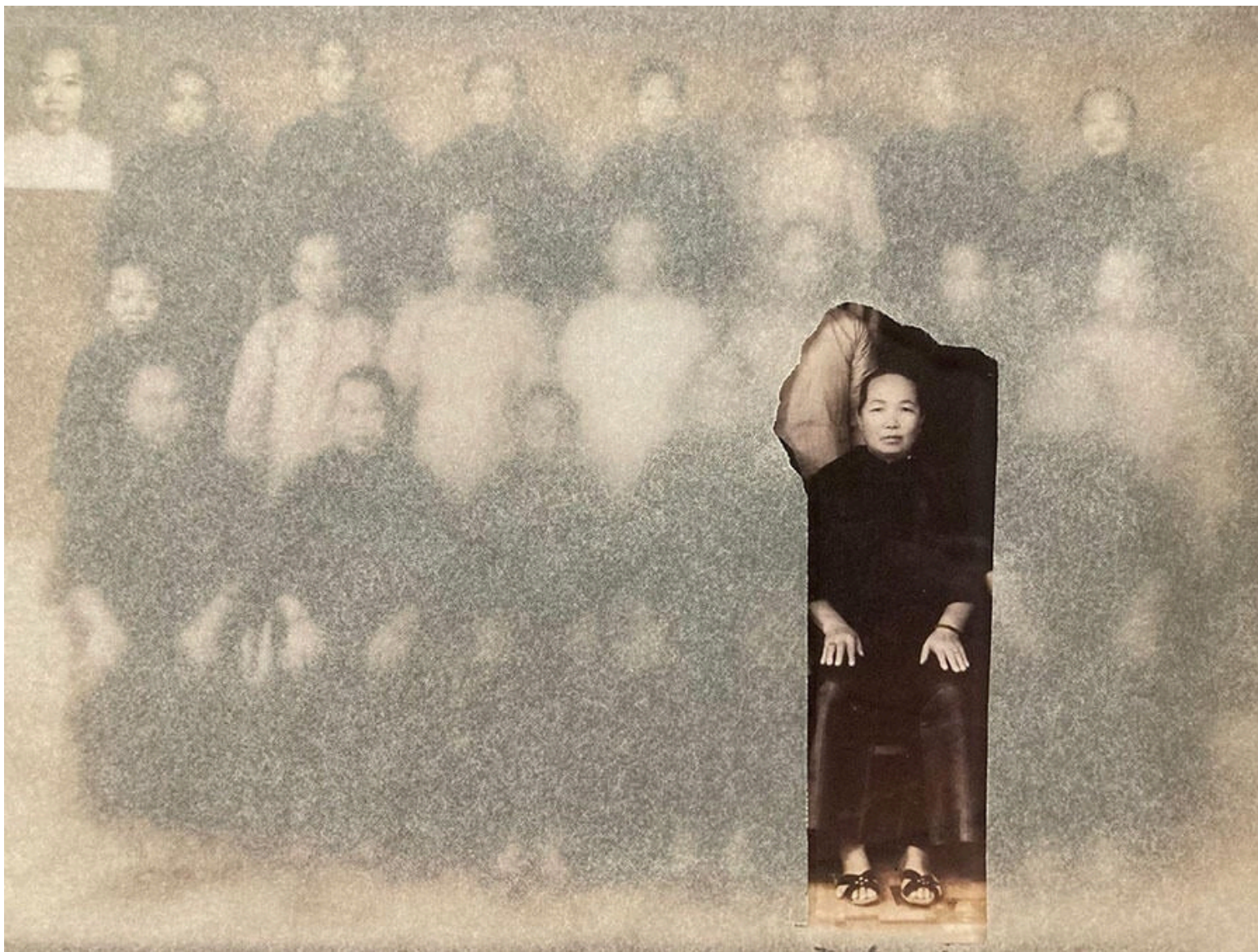
‘Threads of Kinship’ Foregrounds Women’s Autonomy

At He Art Museum, Foshan, the group show draws on the feminist legacies of Guangdong’s Self-Comb Sisters

BY CLAIRE SHIYING LI IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 30 JUN 26



The He Art Museum’s ‘Threads of Kinship’ – the second iteration of an international dialogue on textiles co-organized with KADIST, Paris – proposes a shared spirit of care among practices rooted in similar material traditions. The exhibition’s central narrative draws on the lesser-known history of the Self-Comb Sisters, a local tradition in Guangdong in which women rejected conventional marriage arrangements and supported themselves through the burgeoning silk industry, claiming autonomy, mobility and chosen forms of kinship.



Chen Jialu & Self-Comb Sisters, *Sisterhood House's Collective Photo*, 2024, Penang, Malaysia, photo provided by Salma Khoo. Courtesy: the artist

Two editions in Paris and Guangdong evoke different sentiments despite sharing a theme. In the exhibition's first iteration in Paris last year, the Self-Comb Sisters appeared as an unexpectedly radical model of empowerment emerging from the margins; also featuring works by artists such as Tarik Kiswanson and Xyza Cruz Bacani, the show foregrounded a shared experience of precarity across global diasporic communities. The Guangdong edition added artists from more diverse geographical backgrounds as well as historically significant artists from the region, allowing for more complexity in the show's investigations of female subjectivity and agency in relation to textile labour.

The group exhibition in Guangdong includes internationally recognized figures ranging from the late Filipino American artist Pacita Abad, known for her confident use of exuberant colours and relentless quilting (exemplified by her mixed-media work *Faces*, 1983), to Nigerian Belgian artist Otobong Nkanga, who reimagines womanhood through critical ecological perspectives, such as in her large-scale tapestry *Unearthed – Midnight* (2021). Here, textiles become a site of dense and multivalent inscription, where each thread adds another layer of hybridity or movement.



Bayrol Jiménez, *Sombras de los Valles (Shadows of the Valleys)*, 2018, wool and natural pigments.
Courtesy: the artist and KADIST

The exhibition also features work by artists who take on an entrepreneurial role in textile production, moving deftly between art world economies and mass market supply chains. Among them is Chinese artist Hu Yinping. Hu's *Potatoes Grow on Trees* (2025) is a set of crocheted potato plants that resemble stuffed toys for sale; using a pseudonymous online company, Hu Xiaofang, the artist employs her mother and her fellow textile workers to produce knitted items to be reintroduced into museum contexts later as artworks, transforming poorly compensated domestic labour into celebrated creativity on the international stage.

Other works show women acquiring more agency through the modernization of the textile industry. Han Mengyun's single-channel video *Dhikr* (2025) depicts Uzbek women with independent incomes as they split their time between caregiving and carpet-making. I would argue Chen Jialu's *Gupouk* (2020–ongoing), which traces the biographies of individual Self-Comb Sisters, can be interpreted similarly. The archival photos show their distinctly elegant dressing style and surroundings, hinting that they had reached higher social positions. Together, these works contextualize women's autonomy within the recent histories of modernization, with the industrialization of silk and textile production enabling women in patriarchal societies to forge new forms of female subjectivity, albeit ones inflected by neoliberal aspirations.



Hu Yinping, *Potatoes Grow on Trees*, 2025, mohair, cotton thread, iron wire, dimensions variable, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and KADIST; photograph: Vinciane Lebrun

A selection of 20th-century Chinese modernist paintings depicting female figures is also included in the show; in folk-style paintings by Lin Fengmian, idealized figures memorialize the tragedy the artist's mother suffered, due to her pursuit of a relationship outside the bounds of social convention, which resulted in her ostracization and permanent separation from her children. Those works pique curiosity about what forms women's freedom took prior to modernization.

The exhibition becomes incredibly complex – tangled, even – as these disparate narratives expose and dissipate one another's theses, mirroring the gap between the Paris and Guangdong iterations with their different sensibilities around what confers agency for women. I left the exhibition thinking that this gap might be part of a conscious effort to indicate wedges of geographical difference, inviting us to question the assumption of a global contemporaneity.

'Threads of Kinship' is on view at He Art Museum, Foshan, until 30 June

*Main image: Wang Ye, Elective Affinities 亲和力 (detail), 2025, handmade silk embroidery, 25 × 33 cm.
Courtesy: the artist and YveYANG Gallery*