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[Ann Leda Shapiro, whose feminist art was once censored, holds Hong Kong exhibition](#)

By Charmaine Yu, November 22, 2025

American artist Ann Leda Shapiro was right in the thick of it when art, war, feminism and the Aids epidemic collided in the 20th century.

Born in 1946, she created gender-questioning art in the early 1970s that the Whitney Museum of American Art censored, protested for peace alongside renowned poet Allen Ginsberg, and volunteered at a traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) acupuncture clinic that treated AIDS patients.

A few years ago, Shapiro revealed that she was a member of the feminist artist collective Guerrilla Girls in the 1980s, and that she came up with the iconic gorilla masks that protected the anonymity of members after she once accidentally misspelt the group's name as "Gorilla".

Recently, the 79-year-old former beatnik and hippie was at Hong Kong's Axel Vervoordt Gallery for the opening of her first solo exhibition in Asia, featuring a new watercolour series titled "Body is Landscape".

"I grew up when we thought we could change the world, where people helped each other and kindness was

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natural,” she tells the Post, reflecting on the current political landscape.

This is why she continues to infuse her art with ideas from her TCM healing practice and her political beliefs.

Her watercolours weep for the tragedy of atomic warfare and the Fukushima nuclear accident, while incorporating the TCM dualities of brightness and darkness to reflect the dynamic nature of the world.

“I’m interested in the idea of ‘matter on the verge of becoming,’” she says. Her paintings, whether purely landscape or including human figures, aim to depict “something that’s living and dying at the same time”.

The forms in her watercolours, often outlined with pencil, are organic and dynamic – seemingly in a state of constant change.

Shapiro even treats her own works as living beings. For *Radiating Growth* (2022), she pasted a previously finished painting onto a larger piece of paper and reworked it into a bigger one because it “needed room to breathe”.

She was inspired by American painter Charles E. Burchfield, who similarly expanded pieces decades after their original creation. For Shapiro, this technique exposes

the process of creation and documents the artist’s natural growth and maturity.

Her life has been both extraordinary and ordinary, she says. Before her art was accepted by renowned art institutions like the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, Shapiro was just an eccentric kid from the Big Apple.

She grew up next door to the American Museum of Natural History and across the park from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, during a time when post-war art movements were exploding in New York.

Her parents were communists who raised her as a “red diaper baby”, and her mother would take her to weekend classes at MoMA as a child.

After saving enough money to study at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1965, Shapiro befriended Ginsberg, and they marched against the Vietnam war together.

“Allen peed for peace, too. He would stop and pee on every church,” she recalled, laughing.

Her boyfriend at the time was the drummer of American psychedelic rock band Big Brother and the Holding Company, which led her to live with legendary musicians, including rock singer-songwriter Janis Joplin.

Shapiro remembers her time at the University of California, Davis, where she worked towards a master’s degree in fine arts, with dejection. She burst into tears when her all-male graduate committee challenged her work, asking if she was “purposely trying to be primitive”.

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It is therefore unsurprising that Shapiro's art challenges gender stereotypes.

Shapiro later realised that her paintings, influenced by Mexican folk art at the time, also explore ideas consistent with the philosophies behind TCM – something she later learned in the 1980s from volunteering at an acupuncture clinic for Aids patients after a close friend contracted the disease. After receiving formal training, she ran her own practice from 1991 to 2020.

“The body is a landscape that is connected to both the female and male, yin and yang, which are in constant motion,” she explains. According to TCM, qi – the body's vital energy source – depends on harmony between the two energies to avoid sickness and disease.

This duality formed her radical paintings, such as *Two Sides of Self* (1971), which depict hermaphroditic mermaids, and *Woman Landing on Man in the Moon or One Needs a Cock to Get By* (1971), portraying an astronaut with visible breasts and a penis.

Initially ecstatic after meeting curators from the Whitney Museum of American Art to organise a solo show of her work, Shapiro was shocked when they censored those two paintings.

“I wasn't savvy enough to get a lawyer ... and then later I saw other [artists in censorship battles] sue and get major careers – they were men.”

She was eventually vindicated when the Seattle Art Museum acquired the two paintings 40 years later, but this upsetting incident shifted her focus elsewhere: academia.

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She taught visual arts at San Francisco State University, specialising in criticism with a feminist approach. Then, often the only woman in the art department, she spent the next couple of decades relocating from state to state while also taking part in overseas programmes from Africa to Fiji.

She now lives in a small island community off the coast of Washington state. Her visual motif of trees, particularly nurse logs – fallen trees that provide water and nutrients to seedlings or young trees growing on top of them – emphasises communal interdependence and mutual aid.

Painting is a “meditative experience” in what Shapiro describes as today’s “age of anxiety”. While many assume she dots the recurring white circles in her compositions in an acupuncture-like manner, she actually paints around the individual circles in a ritualistic manner.

The era of beatniks and hippies may have gone, but Shapiro continues to build on her legacy by painting from her island home, practising acupuncture within her community and sharing her work with international audiences.

For her first solo exhibition in Asia, she hopes that “people could come and appreciate the work, and maybe think about the world in a more expansive way”.

