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PRUNE NOURRY

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Terra-cotta Warriors Get a Sex Change

By AUSTIN RAMZY



Zachary Baker

Prune Nourry's Terracotta Daughters on display in Xi'an, China.

The terra-cotta warriors who stand subterranean watch at the tomb of China's first emperor have been called symbols of many things: military might, the longevity of Chinese culture and the organizational zeal and lust for power of the ruler who unified the country and had the statues buried with him. For Prune Nourry, a French artist whose work focuses on the subject of gender imbalances, the clay soldiers represent men, lots and lots of them.

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The iconic army offered Ms. Nourry an ideal means to raise questions about the harmful consequences of the desire for male offspring, problems faced by several Asian countries including China and India. "The terra-cotta warriors made sense," she said. "The fact that it's thousands and thousands of men, it's such a strong symbol when you're talking about birth preference."

Over the past year she has set about giving the terra-cotta warriors a sex change. The result is a new work called "[Terracotta Daughters](#)," a series of 116 sculptures that recasts the famous soldiers as young women. The statues' faces are modeled after eight girls Ms. Nourry met through [Children of Madaifu](#), a charity in central China set up by a former Doctors Without Borders official to aid orphans and children left behind by migrant worker parents.

Ms. Nourry brought the girls to Xi'an, where they visited the mausoleum of the emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi, with its excavated rows of terra-cotta warriors. Farmers uncovered the 2,200-year-old statues in 1974. More than 8,000 of the soldier statues were placed in pits surrounding the emperor's tomb, only a quarter of which have been excavated.

Today craftsmen in surrounding towns turn out replica soldiers for tourists. Ms. Nourry took the eight girls to one such factory and introduced them to the artisans who would sculpt their likenesses. The sale of the first eight statues will pay for three years of education for the girls through Children of Madaifu.



Ms. Nourry sculpting one of the Terracotta Daughters.

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Ms. Nourry is perhaps best known in the United States for her work "[The Spermbat](#)," a critique of sperm banks that featured a food stand where visitors could pick the traits of their future child, which were then matched with ingredients that were mixed and served as a "genetic cocktail."

"Terracotta Daughters" follows a similar effort in India, titled "Holy Daughters," in which Ms. Nourry created statues that blended the likenesses of a girl and a sacred cow. She later had local artisans make their own version of her creation, which was paraded as part of a religious festival in Kolkata.

The goal of all these works is to make people consider what happens when the traits of newborns are no longer left to nature, Ms. Nourry said. In Asia there is already a serious gender imbalance. In her 2011 book "Unnatural Selection," Mara Hvistendahl [noted](#) the research of the French demographer Christophe Guilmoto, who said in 2005 that if the continent's birth ratio were normal, it would have an additional 163 million women. Naturally about 105 boys are born for every 100 girls. From 2005 to 2010 that number reached 111 in India and 117 in China, according to a United Nations World Population Prospects [study](#).

"Today through scans, through ultrasounds, science give us a tool to select gender and abort a fetus if it is a girl," Ms. Nourry said. "This is a reality in Asia, especially in India and China, which together have one-third of the world's population. Such an imbalance in turn has consequences like child trafficking, trafficking of women, forced marriage. This is a search of the origins and the consequences of this issue."

Tweaking the images of a god in India or national symbols in China might seem like a way for a foreign artist to provoke anger rather than understanding. Ms. Nourry said she encountered no opposition to her work in India. And in China the head craftsman overcame his initial misgivings about the project, she said.

"In my projects, I don't want to be provocative," Ms. Nourry said. "For me, you touch people if you make something that makes sense to them. Provocation is something that you block out. Here progress is only possible if you have discussion."

The "Terracotta Daughters" are on display in Shanghai until Oct. 26 at the Magda Danysz Gallery, 188 Linqing Road.