

Chun Hua Catherine Dong



VISUAL POETICS OF EMBODIED SHAME

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Constructing the Diaspora: To Visually Embody Shame and “Chineseness”

What does it mean to be Chinese? Furthermore, what does it mean to be Chinese and female in Canada?

In Chun Hua Catherine Dong’s solo exhibition, *Visual Poetics of Embodied Shame*, culture is used as visual shorthand to unpack what it means to be both Chinese and female in a white hegemony, carrying the burden of representation. Throughout, there is a sense of displacement and disorientation as culture is frozen in time and space. By presenting several symbols as part and parcel of “traditional” Chinese culture, Dong presents culture as a tool to work through her own emotional trauma and anxiety. The body, particularly the ethnic and gendered body, is inherently political, and the artist plays with this aspect to challenge both viewer and herself, refusing to place either at ease.

Although the artist is speaking towards to her own experience, the use and destruction of traditional symbols conflate personal experience with “Chineseness.” Dong’s racialized presence limits her cultural expression, and as a result, the work comes from a place of anxiety, highlighting a traumatic past and the restrictive channels through which she performs cultural memory. Dong’s work employs the visuals of her ethnic body and destroys flattened “Chineseness” of a plastic/ cinematic quality; ultimately constructing a narrative seeking closure through cultural expression.

The burden of representation is directly tied to the visual aspect of Dong as a Chinese woman, as her body becomes the canvas upon which the politics of race and gender intersect. The internal practice of culture and identity is further complicated by the politics of the body and the representation of self – women of colour occupy a space where they must navigate the intersections of being both female and of colour. Asian women in particular must deal with sexual fetishism as a result of a historically restrictive immigration policy.



Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *When I Was Born*, 2010. Installation view.

While Chinese culture is complicated and multifaceted, the diaspora tend to flatten their culture upon arrival to Canada. It is not a unique phenomenon; this is a way to elevate rituals, as the diaspora both preserve and construct new meaning in response to the host culture. Dong has come to treat symbols in this same way – to construct new meaning, but also to make static these symbols and flatten them as monolithically “Chinese.” Culture has long been a method to process the emotional trauma of upheaval, and Dong’s use of culture is no different. Within the performative installation in the gallery, familial traditions come to represent the self and the place of the self in society. The peanut is presented as the Chinese symbol of marriage and childbirth. For Dong, the invitation to the audience to shuck these peanuts is an iconoclasm of Chinese culture. To destroy the peanut is a cleansing act for the artist and a way to come to terms with the trauma of her dissolved marriage.



Left: Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *Visual Poetic of Embodied Shame*, 2014. Video still.

Front: Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *Absent Husband*, 2014. Ink jet print.

The iconoclast-as-artist here succeeds not in destroying these images of Chinese culture, but in building them up and constructing new meaning, as most audiences are only introduced to these symbols through the artist's invitation to destroy. The work asserts a symbolic meaning that is utterly foreign; therefore, this destruction invites the audience to assist in resolving Dong's troubled past, and should not be misconstrued as a critique of Chinese patriarchy, but rather as a clash of worlds and cultures.

In the work, *Visual Poetic of Embodied Shame*, Dong is aware of the dilemma of representation, as she wraps her face with Chinese silk. She writes, "While my collective identity becomes visible, my individuality as an individual disappears because the gesture of covering my face with fabric is a metaphor of self-effacing." By obscuring her face, literally, with "Chineseness," Dong begins to delve into the contradiction of employing a cultural repertoire to divulge her own personal history of shame. The visual ploy of collectivism at first glance holds up a mirror to the viewer upon further scrutiny, challenging pre-conceived notions of "Western" individuality and "Chinese" collectivism. Dong obscures conceptions of cultural, patriarchal and ethnic superiority by projecting her pervasive shame alongside subversive voyeuristic pleasures of herself as artist subjected to gendered humiliation.

Dong tackles history, culture, and representation within a third-world feminist framework that is critical of the tendency to see women of colour as needing to be rescued. She frequently portrays herself as both the male and female in sexual, almost voyeuristic, vignettes. Here, the artist is begging the audience to rescue her from the flattened image of her feminized and racialized self and the emotional scars of her past, rather than an imagined patriarchal figure. In presenting herself as the site where race and gender intersect, clash, and conflate, the artist looks to resolve her personal issues of representation and cultural anxiety. Dong performs for closure, to grapple with the trauma inflicted upon her body.

Victoria Sung

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Chun Hua Catherine Dong is a Chinese-born artist working with performance art, photography, and video. She received a B.F.A from Emily Carr University Art & Design and a M.F.A. from Concordia University. She has performed and exhibited her works in many national and international performance art festivals and venues. Among many other awards, she is the recipient of the Franklin Furnace Award for avant-garde art in New York in 2014.

Victoria Sung. The space of the in-between and the question of identity as constructed by gender, nationality, and ethnicity have always been topics of interest to Victoria Sung. Having previously lived in Hong Kong, Toronto, and New York, Victoria holds a Masters in Media, Culture, and Communications from New York University, where she wrote her thesis "Women in New York's Chinatown: The Global City in the Ethnic Enclave." Victoria currently lives and works in Shanghai.



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