



*Come Home* (detail), 2015, performance, four hours

All photos by Karen Asher.

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# Visual Poetics of Embodied Shame

**CHUN HUA  
CATHERINE DONG**



## Visual Poetics of Embodied Shame

A response by  
**Hannah Doucet**

**V**isual Poetics of Embodied Shame opens with a bright red gallery wall from the base of which emerges a line of small, silk bundles that extend in a winding path through the gallery space. Against the furthest wall rests a suitcase. The dotted line of red silk stretches towards it, but falls slightly short.

This poetic entry into the gallery is composed of the remnants of *Come Home* (Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *Come Home*, 2015, performance, 4 hrs), a four-hour long durational performance by Chun Hua Catherine Dong. The performance featured Dong gradually and deliberately moving through



the exhibition space while carrying a suitcase full of rice. As she walked, she removed a portion of the rice from the suitcase and placed it within a red silk napkin before tying the bundle closed. Each time a rice ball was completed the artist placed it on her forehead while yelling, in her mother tongue, “Chun Hua, come home! Chun Hua, come home! Chun Hua, come home!” She then placed the red silk bundle on the floor of the gallery and the process started again, slowly building a path of silk rice balls through the space.

The performance is inspired by the artist’s experience in a rural village in China. As a child, Dong was often ill. Her mother superstitiously believed her illness was caused by Dong’s constant wandering in the fields near their home, insisting she had lost her soul from journeying too far. At night her mother would fill a napkin with rice and go outside and chant in order to call her daughter’s spirit back home. Dong employs the same traditional ritual to reference a distant but poignant childhood memory and her confusion about cultural belonging she experienced as a young adult, leading to an abstracted sense of what defines home as a physical place. The artist’s inability to return home is metaphorically enacted as the rice runs out, forcing the performance to conclude before Dong can reach her destination. *Come Home* uses physical places inhabited by the artist (China and Canada) and the spatial concept of ‘home’ to address personal sentiments of displacement. The implications of the Chinese diaspora in relation to identity politics is questioned within an increasingly globalized world. The performance provides an entry point to the questions of personal and cultural identity woven throughout the rest of the exhibition.

If you follow the gently curving path of red bundles of rice through the gallery you will find yourself confronted by a looping video work entitled: *When I Was Born* (Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *When I Was Born*, 2010, video, 3.06 minutes). The video features the artist’s upper body in front of a white backdrop. She repeats the phrase, “When I was born, my father said I

was just another mouth to feed.” With each repetition her intonation shifts, varying from a shout to barely more than a whisper. At one point her mouth moves yet no voice emerges. These shifts connote different emotive states, moving between moments of anger, sadness and calm, implying an incredible resiliency. However, the artist’s distress is apparent as she performs. Shame, and the shaming of women, comes to the forefront of the work.

Both *Come Home* and *When I Was Born* evoke an early childhood experience involving a parental figure. In the performance her mother is romanticized as a loving and protective figure. In the video her father, the patriarch, is demonized. Her father imposed an implied gendered hierarchy: the man is more valuable than the women. As a result, to be a woman is shameful, a conscious mistake, a familial disappointment.

On another wall is a series entitled *State of Grace* (Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *State of Grace*, 2013, inkjet prints, 40”x 50”, inkjet prints), consisting





*State of Grace*, 2013, 40"x50", inkjet prints



of five large photographs. They feature the artist completely nude in different contexts within her birth village in China. Dong, a Chinese-Canadian artist, moved to Canada in 2002. The images were created in 2013 upon her first return visit to her village after eleven years of absence. The photographs were taken as Dong walked nude through the village for three days. The images are of different spaces within the village, the artist's body appearing subtly in shadowed corners of each space. Her figure simultaneously occupies both a position of powerful exhibitionism and shamed concealment. Dong has declared the work, "a feminist strategy of resistance".<sup>1</sup> Shame is often used as a tool to further subjugate the already disempowered, so how can this dynamic be shifted to form feminist resistance?



Another series of photographs, *Skin Deep* (Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *Skin Deep*, 2014, inkjet prints, 16"x20"), are the most visually striking artworks within the exhibition. Traditional Chinese silk clothes fully obscure the artist's face, set against a backdrop created with the same fabric, causing the covered face to recede into the background. The effect creates tension as the head fluctuates between presence and absence. The patterned fabric is disrupted by the bare flesh of the artist's shoulders—a revelation in contrast to the implied framework of stifling cultural modesty. The photographs are subtle, beautiful, and disconcerting. In a recent artist talk, Dong elaborated on the work, stating that western concepts of shame often rely on a desired individuality, whereas shame in eastern cultures is often connected to a

collective sentiment; a familial or societal shame.<sup>2</sup> By presenting thirteen portraits of her face obstructed with different coloured traditional Chinese silk scarves, the artist—an individual—is subsumed within a cultural identity so large it enacts anonymity on her. Dong strives to appease one cultural pressure while losing ground with other opposing societal anxieties.

From the first moments of her life Dong was made to feel inferior because of her biological sex. Shame is a painful, social emotion enabled by external cultural pressures. While shame may thus be an unavoidable burden, Dong is able to subvert the inherent negative feelings. Dong's work openly addresses the origins and nature of her personal and cultural shame. By presenting her embodiment of it, she is able to exorcise herself of it. The admission of shame is a denouncement against shame itself. When painful personal emotions are discussed so openly they are no longer a source of shame, but a source of power.

Recent feminist discourse speaks to the potential power and radical nature of embracing self care, exploring our emotional and physical vulnerability and allowing space in our lives to care for these fragilities. On her blog *feministkilljoys*, Sara Ahmed, former director of a new Centre for Feminist Research at Goldsmiths, asserts

Self-care: that can be an act of political warfare. ...We reassemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other. This is why when we have to insist, I matter, we matter, we are transforming what matters.<sup>3</sup>

Dong employs similar strategies in her work, by subverting her understanding of her own body as a site of shame, she is able to assert her worth. She reshapes her shame into vulnerability, enabling an empowering strength.

Sculpture, photography, and video exist as permanent art objects within the exhibition, but each work exists as a document of an earlier performed act by the artist, whether performed in a studio, gallery, or rural village. The exhibition is a record of how Dong has forced her body to perform painful acts to reveal a powerful sense of self and openness, a potent form of feminist resistance.

### Notes

- 1 "Visual Poetics of Embodied Shame - Solo Exhibition," accessed 30/11/16, <http://chunhuacatherinedong.com/portfolio/visual-poetics-of-shame-2/>
- 2 Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *aceartinc.*, *Visual Poetics of Embodied Shame Artist Talk Given at aceartinc.*, video, 16.41 minutes, 04/11/16, <http://www.aceart.org/category/exhibitions/artist-talks>.
- 3 "Selfcare as Warfare," *feministkilljoys*, accessed 30/11/16, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/08/25/selfcare-as-warfare/>.



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Critical Distance is a writing program of **aceartinc.** that encourages critical writing and dialogue about contemporary art. The program is an avenue for exploration by emerging and established artists and writers. Written for each exhibition mounted at **aceartinc.** these texts form the basis of our annual journal Paper Wait.

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**Hannah Doucet** is a photo-based artist and writer from Winnipeg. Often engaged with the body, Doucet's work explores the failures implicit within visual representation. Solo exhibitions of her work include *I Never Recognized Her Except In Fragments*, New Gallery, Calgary and *Present Absence*, C Space, Winnipeg. Doucet's work has been featured in many group exhibitions locally and nationally, recently including *Proof 23*, Gallery 44, Toronto and *Anticipating Distance*, Avenue Gallery, Vancouver.

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