



OPINION

Artist Chun Hua Catherine Dong explores culture and identity with new AGH installation

Dong's body of work is about her body and the act of covering it up. Her cover is an exquisitely coloured and patterned Chinese brocade, a symbol of the Chinese identity she struggles with, Regina Haggio writes.

By [Regina Haggio](#) Hamilton Spectator
Saturday, October 16, 2021

Some of [Chun Hua Catherine Dong's](#) performances involve her lying on the ground in famous places all over the world.

An act like that takes guts. The artist initiates a public event that can sometimes take on a life of its own.

"It is very therapeutic," she says.

Dong, an award-winning performance and installation artist, has been exhibiting in Canada and around the world for about 15 years. A native of China, she now lives in Montreal.

Her recent installation at the [Art Gallery of Hamilton](#) is her second solo exhibition in Hamilton. I reviewed the first one, [at Hamilton Artists Inc., in 2015](#) and I have been in awe of her creativity ever since.

Dong's body of work is about her body and the act of covering it up. Her cover is an exquisitely coloured and patterned Chinese brocade, a symbol of the Chinese identity she struggles with.

The exhibition comprises two series of photographs and two sculptural pieces. The photographs, she says, "are about culture and identity using my own body as material."

In "Skin Deep," each of the six photographs (which come to life with an app) features Dong's face, completely concealed with fabric, posed against a background of the same fabric. Traditionally, covering and hiding the face signified female modesty, or shame.

For "I Have Been There," a later series of 14 photographs, Dong covered her body, but exposed her face and feet. The photographs show Dong supine in several countries, including Brazil, Greece, Turkey, Canada and China. She took the photos herself or asked passers-by.

In one photo, Dong lies on the sand of Rio de Janeiro's Ipanema beach. A green brocade blanket covers her. Her eyes are closed. The sand is marked with many footprints, but she is alone — except for a dog.



"I always attract dogs and cats when I do this in public spaces," Dong says. "They often come to me when I am lying there. I guess it is because when a person is lying down, it is not threatening to them."

She assumes the same pose on the Great Wall of China, a more complex, architectural setting. She lies under a gold patterned blanket. Tourists walk nearby.

"I feel so grounded, sometimes at a certain moment, I feel I can die just like that," she says.

Lying under a blanket with eyes closed recalls the Chinese tradition of a similar cover made for, and gifted to, a deceased person by daughters. But Dong's performance here was deemed inappropriate by the Chinese authorities. They detained her for a few hours. The therapeutic act morphed into one of political resistance.

Dong sews the blankets from fabric made in China.

"The fabric is Chinese brocade," she says. "I am not 100 per cent sure they are all true silk, maybe some are, but many of them are mixed. The fabric is not old, although the pattern and motif are very traditional."

She's made 100 blankets. This kind of repetitive act, typical of contemporary installation art, also celebrates women's handiwork.

Sixty-four of these blankets constitute the sculptural component. They are surrounded by the photographs of Dong lying flat. The blankets are neatly folded in the same way — another repetitive act — and arranged in circles. One group contains yellow, orange and red blankets, the other, blue and green. Unlike the public nature of Dong lying outdoors, sewing and folding are associated with domestic and private life.

Coincidentally, Dong says, this exhibition appears at a time when "tang ping" (lying flat) is growing in China. Dong's photographs predate this movement, which only began this year. Tang ping represents a protest by young people against pressure to work hard and succeed. It has been described as a resistance movement.

Regina Haggio, art historian, public speaker, curator, YouTube video maker and former professor at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand, teaches at the Dundas Valley School of Art.