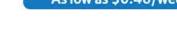
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OPINION



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OPINION

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

Her cover is an exquisitely coloured and patterned Chinese brocade, a symbol of the Chinese identity she struggles with, Regina Haggo writes. By Regina Haggo Hamilton Spectator

Dong's body of work is about her body and the act of covering it up.

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lying on the ground in famous places all over the world. An act like that takes guts. The artist initiates a public event that

Some of Chun Hua Catherine Dong's performances involve her

can sometimes take on a life of its own. "It is very therapeutic," she says.

Dong, an award-winning performance and installation artist, has

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

been exhibiting in Canada and around the world for about 15 years.

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.

Artists Inc., in 2015 and I have been in awe of her creativity ever

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."

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.

In "Skin Deep," each of the six photographs (which come to life with

Turkey, Canada and China. She took the photos herself or asked passers-by. In one photo, Dong lies on the sand of Rio de Janero's Ipanema

For "I Have Been There," a later series of 14 photographs, Dong

show Dong supine in several countries, including Brazil, Greece,

covered her body, but exposed her face and feet. The photographs

The sand is marked with many footprints, but she is alone — except for a dog.

beach. A green brocade blanket covers her. Her eyes are closed.

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

"I always attract dogs and cats when I do this in public spaces," Dong

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

"I feel so grounded, sometimes at a certain moment, I feel I can die

blanket. Tourists walk nearby.

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.

daughters. But Dong's performance here was deemed inappropriate

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

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

contemporary installation art, also celebrates women's handiwork.

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 Haggo, art historian, public speaker, curator, YouTube video

maker and former professor at the University of Canterbury in New

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