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Moving Beyond the Frame: the Expanded Practices of Chun Hua Catherine Dong & Sheida Soleimani

Cleaning Interior Scroll, Performance: 45 minutes at Yactac, Vancouver, Canada, 2011. © Chun Hua Catherine Dong, Photo credit: Janice Cheung and Bitshere
Courtesy of the artist

There is so much pressure as a contemporary artist to make work that has conceptual depth, is politically meaningful, and that pushes the boundaries of a medium; where form and content direct and inform one another. Art that is overtly political, socially engaged or feminist tends to be boxed into certain tropes: it's too narrative-driven or it's tragedy porn, or it's too far outside of a traditional studio practice. However, contemporary, engaging and socially relevant work that does not neatly fit these confines does exist. The oeuvres of Chun Hua Catherine Dong and Sheida Soleimani are the examples I will examine here. Both have seemingly managed to have attained the holy grail of artistic practice that is conceptually meaningful, aesthetically innovative, medium redefining, all the while addressing pressing political realities that are closely tied to their personal histories. And they manage to work in ways that are at turns playful, and inviting and nuanced.

The most obvious commonality between Soleimani and Dong's work is cultural hybridity: Soleimani is an Iranian-American artist born in the United States, and Dong a China-born artist who immigrated to Canada in the early 2000s, when she was 27. Beyond this surface similarity emerges a more significant common thread: a shared interest in contriving subtle and minute explorations of the patriarchal systems in each of their respective cultures. Both artists unearth their personal relationships to shared patriarchal burden through the use of masking, symbolism, bodies, art historical references and humor, while simultaneously connecting their observations to a wider global context. Their methodology and approaches also feel uncannily similar at times, and it is for this reason that I wanted to place their work into direct conversation. Analyzing Soleimani and Dong's art practices in relation to one another helps us gain a deeper understanding of each artist's work, as well as how their work fits into the contemporary art world and the male-dominated culture in which we live.

It's hard not to premise Sheida Soleimani's work without invoking her background: both of her parents are political refugees from Iran, having fled in 1979 after the over throw of the Shah. "As the daughter of two political refugees from Iran, and more specifically, a mother who was tortured by men at the hands of the patriarchal regime in power, patriarchal oppression is something I think about quite often," Soleimani wrote to me via email. "Whether it be in my daily interactions with men in my work place, or the research I am doing in regard to the violence created by patriarchal governments in the Middle East; it's really inescapable."

Taraneh (from Civil Liberties), 2016, © Sheida Soleimani, Archival pigment print, 40 × 27 inches. Courtesy of Edel Assanti and the artist.

Soleimani's perspective emerged from her experiences growing up as an Iranian-American in the United States, understanding Iran through her parents' experiences, and scrutinizing contemporary politics. Born and raised in America but never having visited Iran, Soleimani's lens is admittedly that of an outsider to the Middle East. But her subject position allows her a critique on the region's politics that is both nuanced and accessible to a larger, Western audience and avoids playing into common, sweeping tropes. Her projects approach larger political issues with a specificity that locates and names the exact impacts of religious totalitarianism on its citizens.

Soleimani's photographs are part object assemblage, 3-D collage, performance, and installation; the pieces of her deconstructed photographic worlds describe tangible products of unimaginably expansive systems of oppression in striking aesthetic realms. Her creative practice brings attention to the power imbalances of the Middle East, pointing at a range of issues from the plight of victims of Sharia law to the key agents responsible for warfare resulting from oil interest in OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) nations. Soleimani's process includes building elaborate sets made up of printed Internet-sourced images (of politicians, oil rigs, desert landscapes, camouflage and other patterns) at various resolutions and scale, as well as repetitive symbolic sculptural objects such as grapes, oil canisters, and taxidermy animals. She re-photographs these multi-layered dioramas with a medium format camera, or at times uses them as the stage for video performances, her photographic work being the most well-known of the two.

Chun Hua Catherine Dong's practice is similarly multi-disciplined, and is based in performance, photography, and video. Performance feels like the true root of Dong's process; she engages in minimalist actions with symbolic objects, probing the audience's relationship to their own shame, sexuality, power dynamics, and various cultural tropes surrounding Asian women. Dong's own body is the central focus of most of her performances. Following in the tradition of many female performance artists — including Yoko Ono, who she names as an early influence — there is often an invitation for the audience to interact with Dong's body. In her 2011 performance *Cleaning Interior Scroll* (referring to Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll (1975)*, where the artist famously removes a scroll from her vagina), Dong covers herself with colorful polka dots, posing with her legs spread eagle, inviting audience members to clean her vagina with a plastic squirt gun. The artist makes her body vulnerable, opening herself up to variable audience participation ranging from tender and caring cleaning, to playful squirting, to potential violation. There is a tension and a risk inherent in the work by putting this choice in the audience's hands. With this invitation to interact with the artist in a very intimate and bodily way, the audience is being asked to consider the misogynist narrative that women's bodies and, specifically, their vaginas, are inherently dirty. Dong's aesthetics, including costuming evoking kink and BDSM culture, centralize unequal power dynamics, naming them outright as a primary subject in her practice.

Photography plays a heightened role in Dong's work; unlike many performance artists who use photographic documentation to translate ephemeral actions for a future audience, many of Dong's works are reformulated for the camera, staged and framed with specificity, standing alone as works of art separate from the performances themselves. This approach to photography and performance seems uniquely contemporary, drawing from the history of both mediums, similarly to Soleimani's process of staging and constructing sculptural still lives for the camera.

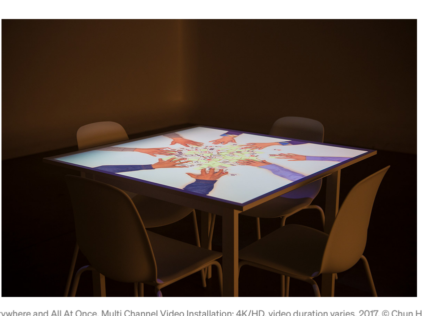
After emigrating to Canada in 2002, following her then-husband and his desire for a better life outside of rural China, Dong was confronted with a dramatic cultural shift, as well as many embodied stereotypes surrounding Western perceptions of Chinese culture. Finding herself an outsider, Dong's work comments on the embedded racism and sexism with which immigrant women are viewed, particularly the specific expectations for Asian women to be submissive. The archetypal dynamic between white men and Asian women is explored in her portrait series, *Husbands and I (2010)*, where she poses with strangers in public, donning the same traditional Chinese silk dress in each photograph, embodying cowering, demure body language and miming momentary intimacy. Dong's work also reflects on the patriarchal confines of her former life in China, drawing on the tension between her two worlds, where women are commonly sequestered as a societal other. Writing to me in an email exchange, Dong stated that in China, "I felt I didn't have much freedom to choose where I live and how I live. Actually, I even didn't know what freedom was. All I [knew to] do was to be a good woman who fits a patriarchal society's expectation."

Husbands and I (2009–2011), © Chun Hua Catherine Dong, Performance and Photography. Photo credit: Ruth Skinner, courtesy of the artist.

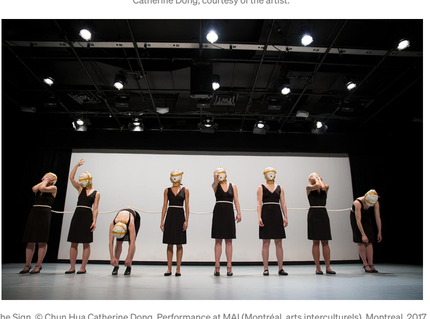
Husbands and I (2009–2011), © Chun Hua Catherine Dong, Performance and Photography. Photo credit: Ruth Skinner, courtesy of the artist.

The recognition of these societal expectations forms the most dominant thread found throughout Dong's art practice, which she names as "the visual poetics of shame." The seed of this idea comes from her experience growing up as a girl in China and the feeling of being a burden, with both her parents and China's One-Child Policy engendering the belief that a male child is more valuable than a female child. In one video performance, Dong repeats the phrase "When I was born, my father said I was just another mouth to feed." Gaining independence and self-reliance after coming to Canada, Dong's journey to educate herself became a feminist awakening through which she developed strategies of resistance to a lifetime of guilt and shame impressed on her for birth gender. In many Asian countries, shame is used as a tool of social control and harmony, as a way to prevent citizens — but especially women — from acting in ways that might disrupt the status quo. Naming shame as a tool to further subjugate the already disempowered, Dong's practice is an act of drawing back the curtain and pointing to these deeply embedded feelings that can cause women to hold back and stay silent, to be kept in their place. By putting shame front and center, her work extinguishes the power of this intense emotion. Shame often makes us vulnerable, and revealing this vulnerability takes strength. Dong does not only reflect on her personal shame, but also comments on the cultural differences of shame that she has observed between the western and eastern countries. In *Skin Deep (2014)*, she succinctly articulates the dynamic between these two realms in striking performative self-portraits. The photographs depict the artist's face fully covered in beautiful, vibrantly colored silk, decorated with patterns traditionally read as Chinese, against a background of the same fabric, effectively masking and camouflaging her face. The boldness of the color contrasts directly with the stifling, silencing disappearance of her obscured face, commenting on a lack of individuality and the anonymity that comes with being completely absorbed into a cultural identity, as well as underscoring the culturally dominant norm of modesty in China.

Skin Deep (2014), © Chun Hua Catherine Dong, Photography and Performance Video. Photo Credit: Danya Danger, courtesy of the artist.



Everywhere and All At Once, Multi Channel Video Installation: 4K/HD, video duration varies, 2017. © Chun Hua Catherine Dong, courtesy of the artist.



The Sign, © Chun Hua Catherine Dong, Performance at MAI (Montréal, arts interculturels), Montreal, 2017. Performed by Alida Esmail, Lucy Fandel, Emma Lee Iversen, Alex MacLean, Kim L Rouchdy, Eryn Tempest, Emilie van der Waals, and Mary Williamson

The word shame comes from an Old Germanic word *scamen* meaning "to cover," as the response to feeling shamed is often to hide and to cover oneself. In Dong's photographs, the act of masking becomes a performance of submission to the powerful effects of shame in which she obliterates her own identity and individuality; the visual effect is striking. These images also describe both the quality of only being seen for her Chinese background as an immigrant in Canada, and the subsequent lack of acknowledgement of her full personhood when in China. Covering the face and obscuring her identity is a recurring theme throughout her projects, and is one of the tools that helps translate Dong's incredibly specific, personally symbolic performances into experiences that are understood to be universal and relatable.

(from l — r): **Maryam**, from the series **Civil Liberties**, 2016, archival pigment print, and **Delara (2)**, from the series **Civil Liberties**, 2015, archival pigment print. Courtesy of Edel Assanti and the artist.

Like Dong, Soleimani uses the face (or lack thereof) as a potent symbol in her work, conversely unmasking specific faces to bring light to the persecution of women in Iran. In her project *Civil Liberties*, the artist reveals the identities of women tortured under the Iranian regime; women that are rendered anonymous, voiceless, and unidentifiable by the government. Soleimani's research on the deep web brought her in contact with the photographs of these victims, and in some cases, with the victims' families. In unearthing their images from the internet, she has unearthed their stories, her photographs an act of unmasking and unveiling, making their identities visible, while simultaneously describing their invisibility. The use of already-available imagery found on the web, whether it be from the deep web, mainstream news outlets or YouTube footage, is the centerpiece of Soleimani's practice. Her photographs are luscious and colorful, yet in moments grotesque. There is a consistent pull between 2 and 3 dimensions, with the web-sourced photographs having visible pixilation, as can be seen with the enlarged eye in the foreground of *Sakineh (2015)*. In each composition, the face of one woman becomes a repeated motif, beckoning viewers to invest in each of them, their identities ricocheting across the photograph, pulling the eye frantically from one place to another. In an interview with Refinery 29 UK, Soleimani refers to the digital remnants of her photographs as records of the way these women "who were meant to disappear, might permeate and be replicated online." Considering this, each composition, chaotic and fragmented infinity mirrors of these women, symbolizes a memorialization of their stories. The repetition can act almost as a camouflage, challenging audiences to search for more, to question what, or who else, might be missing from this story. Similar to the tension between absence and presence in Dong's scarf self-portraits, Soleimani plays with both revealing and concealing, abstracting and simultaneously making the lives of these women real and tangible to the viewer.

In the images, Soleimani describes her subjects' faces with both collaged photographic prints on paper and stuffed fabric figures, using flatness as a disorienting tension. In *Delara (1) (2015)*, the repeated figure is distorted by the pull of fabric and stuffing, sometimes eyes cut out of paper, orange flowers cutting across their heads throughout. The stuffed fabric figures are not quite human, and make reference to Bobo dolls, used in psychological experiments to prove the impact on children of witnessing violence. These studies found that children who see adults hit the Bobo doll were more likely to hit the doll as well: a comparison to the ways in which the Iranian government treats women and the impact of this treatment on the national culture. A subtle but salient symbol, the defining feature of a Bobo doll is that it always returns upright after being hit, making resilience and resistance innate qualities embedded into each photograph. Within the context of the photographs, these sewn creations confront traditional rules of the medium, playing with surface and appropriated imagery; but as solitary objects in the gallery, they take on a life of their own.

installation view of **Civil Liberties**, © Sheida Soleimani, courtesy of the Boyfriends Gallery, Chicago, IL.

Soleimani's layered process takes the stage, as the dolls act as an access point into the photographs and the subject matter. Just as you can watch her process of building and breaking apart her sets on social media, Soleimani's dolls let audiences peer into the construction of her images. The strength in Soleimani's work is in its ability to create a narrative between who is impacted by the tools and products of oppressive power structures, and who is responsible for implementing them. While *Civil Liberties* primarily points at the direct impact on women in Iran, her newest body of work, *Medium of Exchange*, flips the script and represents the all-male OPEC Oil Ministers and western government officials that engage in warfare as a result of their oil interests. As the artist notes in a statement, "these conflicts often result in drastic global turmoil, frequently at the expense of civilians from the OPEC countries." In this work, faces continue to be a dominant visual cue, tying usually abstractly large political economies to tangible, specific human forms. Soleimani uses surface as a narrative tool: She cuts and rearranges pieces of photographs, lining up the details so the audience can see just how perversely intertwined the tools and products of oppressive power structures can be. In *Inauguration, United States & Iraq (2016)* a woman masked with a distorted photograph of General David Petraeus, who led the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2004, puckers up to an outstretched, oil-slicked hand in front of a backdrop collaged with oil rigs, commenting on the United States' political

Imaginaction, United Bodies & Friog, from the series **Medium of Exchange**, 2018, © Dinaida Solomiani, Archival Pigment Print, Courtesy of Bank Gallery and the artists

Detail of **Medium of Exchange**, from the series **Medium of Exchange**, 2018, © Dinaida Solomiani, Archival Pigment Print, Courtesy of Bank Gallery and the artists

The visual reversal of particular power dynamics helps to deflate the power of both real and symbolic nude figures. Some signs refer overtly to a wide range of number of her projects. In The Other Words (2011), the artist sits across the table from a unclothed man, and over the course of several sessions, he turns her after line of rice that she has chewed. While the main theme of the piece is meant to symbolically enact the act of — and deflate of — translation, there are many undertones of power, degradation, and humiliation. The nude participant is degraded, almost helpless, while Dong, who clearly dressed to be presented as material, holds all of the power. In another performance, After Olympia (2011), she performs a cleansing ritual, sterilizing an older nude man's body (and his alcohol before meticulously licking his entire body as he lays nearly asleep on a white table. Again, the artist uses her own mouth and saliva as a way to assert dominance over a (other) male figure. As the title indicates, the piece refers to Edouard Manet's Olympia (1863), infamous for the shockingly confrontational gaze of the nude female figure, but also for the disparity between the bodily aspects of both the white nude subject and her black servant. In Bye Olympia, Dong has inverted the racial dynamics of Olympia, and fully holds agency over her own body as well as the reclining man's. Male bodies are rarely revealed and depicted as vulnerable within art history, as well as in larger visual culture, and the audience of this reality shows in the complete power Dong gives Claudel in a white coat, Dong is at an very intentional, professional, established, and authoritative, giving even more structure and stiffness to this intensely intimate and bodily exchange.

The Other Words, 2 Chun Fuan Gallerie Hong, Performance at the Kaohsiung Contemporary as part of Transition and Dialogue Festival, Tainan City, 2011, Photo Credit: Robert Shaw, Photo credit: Lehanna Ellis, Courtesy of the artist

After Olympia, 2 Chun Fuan Gallerie Hong, Performance at Hi-Fly Art Center, University, Vancouver, Canada, 2011, Photo credit: Kaya Ali, courtesy of the artist

Each artist places herself in an art historical lineage while commenting on how the canon is implicated in patriarchal oppression. Dinos references nude art found throughout Solomiani's body of work, also drawing on and re-appropriating the ways women have been represented. Solomiani's most direct and unique in check reference can be seen in *Mission of Petroleum*, Jerusalem (2016), where the subject stands in a lifted mask from Shell Petroleum Company logo at the base of another yellow and red shell imitating Botticelli's Venus (1486). Her face is covered and her expression is hidden, but her nude emerging from the sea, Solomiani's figure is masked with the compelled gaze face of the Venezuelan Ministree of Petroleum, in front of a blue ocean prepared with oil rigs. The feminine body form, nudity, and pose are striking and humorous in the context of the project, as Solomiani manipulates the viewer's expectations, using commonly understood imagery to derail and undermine the power of the political figure.

This playful and humorous tone is found throughout Solomiani's photographs, even when handling grave subject matter, and it is especially present in her latest project. Via email, she described to me her use of humor as a Trojan horse: "I want it to seduce the viewer through raising across an light hearted, while communicating the atrocities created by patriarchal systems." Her photographs and videos are not just making this scenario of corruption more memorable, but also highlighting the political melodrama and crown "a new way of viewing these codependent political leaders." When Solomiani documents her studio practice and process online, she allows her audience a glimpse at the lighthearted attitude taken while making her photographs and videos. She reveals the true playfulness of her models and actors on set, with bombastic music playing in the background and fake money thrown wantonly through the air.

Gatekeeper, from the series **Gatekeeper**, 2016, © Dinaida Solomiani, Archival Pigment Print, Courtesy of Bank Gallery and the artists

This levity translates in her models' body language, but it does not detract from the power or seriousness of the message. Solomiani actuses in on the ridiculousness of power, using humor to point out and exaggerate troubling realities. Gatekeeper has her nude in a similar way, attracting attention with vibrant saturated color schemes, making bad aesthetic statements with each composition. Solomiani Solomon's calling out the spectacle of power, or other times, she is aestheticizing Sidesus truths to demand acknowledgement from her audiences.

Dong operates under similar principles as Solomiani, using both color and humor to blatantly punctuate her performances and photographs. Although her aesthetics are generally more minimal, Dong utilizes color pointedly and intentionally to highlight particular actions and gestures. The artist often selects red in particular as a symbol of sex and passion, love and violence, as well as in reference to her homeland Chinese. In Bloodwash and I, Dong dons a red silk chemiposen, dramatically contrasting her various bloodwash stains (usual and menses), typically denim and cotton outfits. Dong constructs intimate portraits with what she calls "non-mimesis" and "non-day bodiesnd", categories she has approached in public and nonmasked via Craigslist to be her bodiesnd. Contrasting her own experiences in chard of a similar bride, Dong approaches the Vancouver exhibition process with a performative approach, inviting the Chinese bride to participate and use personalized photographs in service of resistance. In "Second" Western clothing of her bride subjects and the Canadian principles in which they are displayed form a backdrop to examine the entertainment of Dong's body. Red also pers one outfit the artist's white doctor's coat in Bitter Orange, symbolically calling attention to itself, outlining her Chinese heritage and personalizing an otherwise stark, institutional environment. Color is a tool to make her more inviting, to catch the viewer's attention and engage them with the illusion of a light-hearted and playful subject matter, but pierce their flesh (again, OMG!). Dong paints the entirety of an art gallery Pepto-Bismol pink, the only break in the color is a sign stating "MY VAGINA IS A PINK GALLERY. IT NEEDS TO BE SEXUALLY WHITE." Upon entering the room, the audience is invited to paint the walls white, resulting in a pink room with patchy areas of white paint made up of words and drawings by the visitors. The pink room is very alluring, literally drawing people in to experience the work. Upon first glance, the color may seem to be a purely aesthetic choice, but Dong's decision is much more intentional. The whitewashing of the pink wall is political, referring to the Western world's attempt to cover up the experiences of people (especially women) of color.

Left Image: 2 **Portage Lent**, 2016, © Chun Fuan Gallerie Hong, Performance and installation at Emily Carr University, Photo credit: Denise Gaudreault, courtesy of the artist.

Cleaning Interior Scale, 2016, © Chun Fuan Gallerie Hong, Performance at Nanaimo, Vancouver, Canada, Photo credit: Jonas Cheung and Kaya Ali, courtesy of the artist

In her vagina-cleansing performance, what could be a traumatic violation of Dong's body is made light with her use of brightly colored polka dots, gaudy-eyed glasses, and tears. Here, as with many of her pieces, color is tightly intertwined with humor. Dong's performances rely on humor, not only to engage and entertain the audience, but also as a tool of coping with the injustices she has suffered as a woman born and raised in China and now as a Chinese woman living in Canada. Laughing is a reprieve from the heaviness of daily life, and Dong translates experiences of hardship with humor, pointing out truths that might be overlooked, often putting into uncomfortable territory. Her artwork sits away from making work that might cause viewers to laugh, in fear of losing the message that they are working so hard to convey. But Dong and Solomiani both incorporate humor into their work to delicate and innovative ways that don't take away from the message, but, rather, enhance it.

Dong and Solomiani have developed artful and experimental tactics for coping with impact of complex patriarchal forces on their lives. The reach of these projects should not be underestimated. Solomiani's work with Civil Collective brought countless internet clicks, some from members of the Bank; the Iranian neighborhood online, solidifying the danger for her to over-visit Iran. There is real tangible risk taken with this work, and Dong's as well, as she continuously uses her own bodiesnd in performance, and Solomiani's photographs make her body vulnerable to her audiences. Often, it is those who have been historically and disproportionately silenced who speak the loudest against injustices. At this historical moment, it is especially important to listen to those voices, particularly when they take the biggest risk in speaking out against dominant patriarchal power structures. When Dong and Solomiani call on us to look, we should, and closely.

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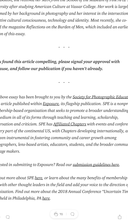

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