Shame: Thinking with Chun Hua Catherine Dong – Lily Cho

Who / Qui : Lily Cho &
Chun Hua Catherine Dong
When / Quand : mai-jun
What / Quoi :
Comments Closed

On a bright and cool day in March, I travelled from Toronto to Montreal to interview Chun Hua Catherine Dong. Although I knew her work, I had never before spoken to, or been in the same room with, her. She invited me to her studio. I had prepared a number of questions and had an idea of how our interview would unfold. I was wrong. I did ask questions. And Catherine very graciously answered them. But those hours that we spent talking in a sunny and plant-filled corner of her studio was not an interview. Or, it was not quite an interview in the usual sense. I did ask questions. And she did answer them. But there was a lot more too. It was a profoundly enlivening act of stranger intimacy, or intimacy between two strangers, where we experienced the strange joy of finding oneself through a perfect stranger.

In what follows, Catherine and I seek to expand on the idea of the interview as a form. There are no questions and answers. There are no interview subjects and no one is being subjected to an interview. Instead, we stumbled into an act of collaboration, a mode of thinking together, and a dialogue about recognition. Recognition, of seeing ourselves being seen, emerged powerfully for us. The interview truly became an *interview* – a form of being mutually seen, of being together in seeing, and of finding ways of seeing that are between and among the lines of difference. And so, we want to offer here the interview as an essai, an attempt and testing out of what it might be like to think with each other.

In this attempt, we allowed ourselves to inhabit the depths of Catherine's current project, *Skin Deep* (2018). Doing so meant tracing the pain and vulnerability of shame. *Skin Deep* plays, seriously and luminously, with losing face. Although the idea of losing face has become idiomatic shame, *Skin Deep* returns us to the faces of shame, and the need for cover in the face of shame. Thinking with Catherine, let us enter three scenes of shame.

Scene 1: Losing face at the grocery store

Catherine: "When I see someone who looks like me doing something embarrassing at the grocery store, I feel tremendous shame. My partner asks, 'Why are you so upset? It's not you.'"

But it is me.

Shame leaves us as helpless in the face of the bad behavior of others. What is more, shame is relational. Maybe we feel shame because of something we have done. But, for us in this moment of seeing ourselves being seen, we realize that it is much more often that we feel shame because of something that someone else has done. We are defenselessly bound to people whose names we will never know only because we have somehow ident fied ourselves as one of them, at one with them, and the pain of it never ceases.

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Scene 2: Still losing face at the grocery store, or, not finding ourselves in Freud

We keep coming back to being in the grocery store, the shame of it, of seeing someone who looks like us doing something that fills us with shame. Catherine tells me about trying to read Freud when she started t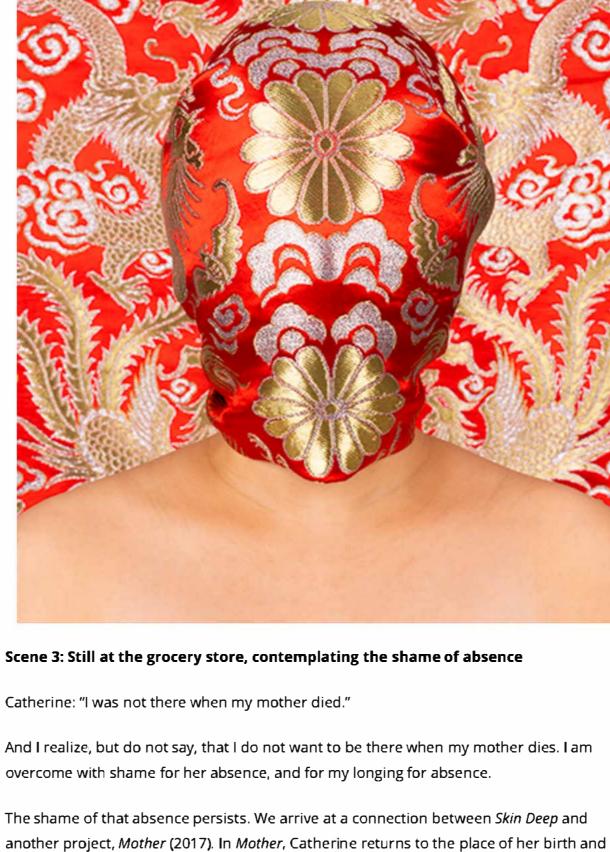he preliminary work for *Skin Deep*, and how hard it was to find herself in it. How hard it is, we realize, to find our deepest, most secret selves, when we are also aware of our alienation from the world around us.

Was there something about Asian shame? How could the child and all this talk of sex in psychoanalysis get anywhere close to the scene of spectatorship at the grocery store? Maybe there is something in that connection after all. There are ways of seeing, and then there is the pain of seeing some things that obliterate anything other than overwhelming shame. And then we are shamed for our shame.

Why do we feel like that when we have done nothing, when it is not us?

Because it is also always us.

Shame is both universal and painfully specific. It drills down. Its relationality implicates us, ties us, to people we want to keep close and to lose at the same time: our mothers.

Scene 3: Still at the grocery store, contemplating the shame of absence

Catherine: "I was not there when my mother died."

And I realize, but do not say, that I do not want to be there when my mother dies. I am overcome with shame for her absence, and for my longing for absence.

The shame of that absence persists. We arrive at a connection between *Skin Deep* and another project, *Mother* (2017). In *Mother*, Catherine returns to the place of her birth and finds fourteen women who were friends of her mother's. She gives each woman a pair of embroidered shoes because her mother loved them. She dons each woman's clothes and photographs herself next to them. It is a project of inhabitation and presence. It is also a project that looks into the face of shame, and keeps looking.

Mother lies in pointed juxtaposition to *Skin Deep*. In *Skin Deep*, the faces of shame do not look back. Taking the idiom of losing one's face, *Skin Deep* covers over each face, and obscures its presence by allowing each one to fall away into the backdrop. In the folds of each elaborately embroidered piece of silk, there is an excess of tactile and textile Asianness. Cloaked and shrouded, the faces of shame remain inferred.

But in the face of shame, *Mother* is a thread, small and bright, unfurling towards a way to see and be seen, a way to live with loss in the face of loss.

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*Chun Hua Catherine Dong is a Montreal based artist working with performance, photography, and video. She received a BFA from Emily Carr University Art & Design and a MFA from Concordia University. She has performed and exhibited her works in multiple international festivals and venues, such as Quebec City Biennial, The Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne, Canadian Museum of Immigration, Museum of University of Toronto, The Aine Art Museum, Raunas Biennial, Museo De La Ciudad de Queretaro, Surrey Art Gallery, Rapid Pulse International Performance Art Festival in Chicago, 7a*11d International Festival of Performance Art in Toronto, Place des Arts in Montreal, Dublin Live Art Festival and so on. She was the recipient of the Franklin Furnace Award for contemporary avant-garde art in New York in 2014 and listed "10 Artists Who Are Reinventing History" by Canadian Art Magazine in 2017.*