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Chun Hua Catherine Dong: *Caring for An Other*

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Who are deemed empathetic relations? During the COVID-19 pandemic, this question is central to the violences directed on a global scale toward populations targeted as scapegoats for the virus, from those who exhibited signs of being ill to those who “look Asian”.

At the start of the pandemic, Montreal-based artist Chun Hua Catherine Dong created an “interactive skin” for Facebook, allowing her Facebook “friends” to try on virtual masks that mimic the elaborate and colorful Chinese brocade patterns of the artist’s ongoing series *Skin Deep* (2014, fig. 1). *Skin Deep* provokes both the idea of living in another’s skin and a phrase often uttered to imply something trivial—things that are “skin deep” can perhaps be easily brushed off. However, the underlying theme of the work—of race and racial relations—is anything but easily set aside. What does it mean for those who are not Asian to don the brocade mask on social media? What does wearing this garment, imbued with the idea of Asianness, mean when anti-Asian violence is increasingly visible? The parallel image of the N-95 mask and the idea of markers of othering and scapegoating remain deeply present. This particular series is part of Dong’s larger body of work that has included several series investigating the artist’s Chinese-born Asian Canadian body and its presence.

Dong’s investigation of our humanity also extends to the idea of our interrelations with the other, pushed to the limit in terms of our relationship to the robot. Similar to artists such as Nam June Paik, the artist investigates our positionality and relationship with technology in our current technology-driven



FIGURE 1 Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *Skin Deep*, 2019, photograph with augmented reality, 32" x 40".

IMAGE PROVIDED BY THE ARTIST.

world and asks us to think about technology and ourselves as the new Prometheus. Her work presses us to interrogate how we are tied and responsible to technology—with the technology as other—asking us to question our relationship to “an other” and thus “another.” Do we forgive technology as other and appreciate both its faults as well as usefulness? The work further underlines the robot, its connections to ideas about the soulless automaton and



FIGURE 2 Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *Alone Together*, 2018, photograph, 32" x 40".
IMAGE PROVIDED BY THE ARTIST.

Western stereotypes about Asians being robotic. Even as recently as August 5, 2021, a report by Andrew Dampf for the *Associated Press* likened diver and Olympic Gold medalist Quan Hongchan representing China to computer programming, classifying her accomplishment as something other than human: "It could have been confused for a lesson in computer coding on the scoreboard: 10, 10, 10, 10, 10, 10, 10. And in some ways, it was. China's divers are programmed from an early age to strive for perfection."¹

In her photographic series *Alone Together* (2018), the artist portrays herself in what mirrors an intimate relationship with a robot, pictured on excursions and during moments of confrontation, quarrels, and making up (figs. 2–4). At one point within the series, Dong brings forth the narrative of the robot as being injured, which transitions their dynamic into one involving caretaking. While the series appears humorous, the storyline suggests that the relationship between robot and human is in fact one that crosses beyond simply human

1 Andrew Dampf, "Perfect 10s: China's Quan dominates for Olympic diving gold," *Associated Press*, 5 August 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/2020-tokyo-olympics-diving-sports-china-australia-olympic-team-d9a79af21f085bd587e56be64df58aa>.



FIGURE 3 Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *Alone Together*, 2018, photograph, 32" x 40".
IMAGE PROVIDED BY THE ARTIST.

and object to one intermeshed and dependent, involving the emotional work of caring for another or the other.

In Dong's performance series *I Have Been There* (ongoing from 2015), the artist dresses in black and lays barefoot with eyes closed and hands clasped at her torso. As the artist explains:

This project is inspired by a funeral tradition in my hometown in China. When an elder person dies, daughters of this elder make shrouds with silk fabrics to cover their deceased parent's body. If this elder has six daughters, this elder's body will be covered by six different shrouds, layer by layer. For me, as a person living abroad alone without family and children, the question of who will bury me after I die sometimes bothers me. Therefore, I make my own shrouds and bury myself publicly and repeatedly wherever I travel to simultaneously celebrate death and my own existence.²

² Chun Hua Catherine Dong, artist's website, www.chunhuacatherinedong.com. Accessed 5 August 2021, <https://chunhuacatherinedong.com/portfolio/i-have-been-there-beijing/>.

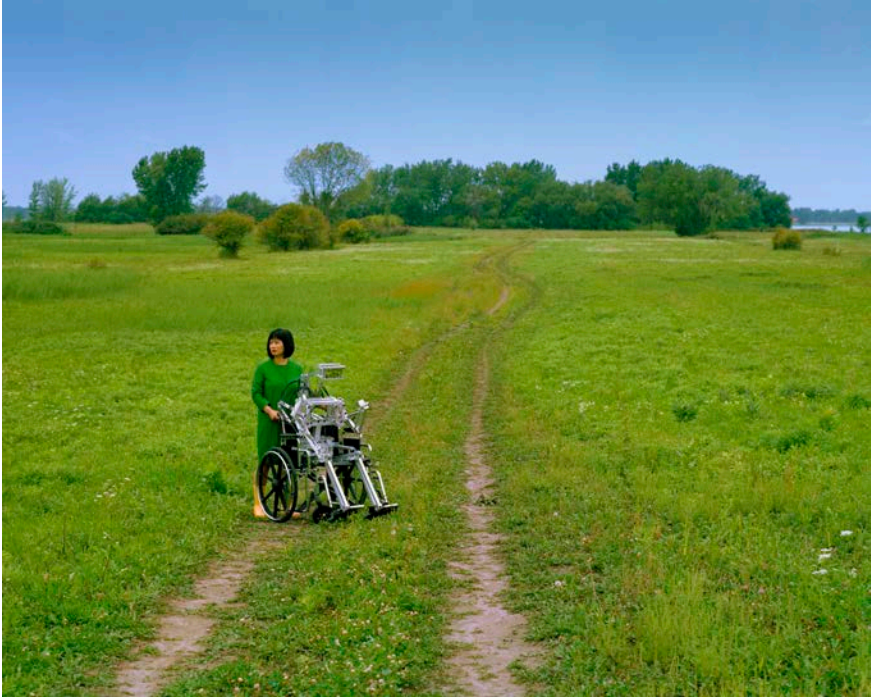


FIGURE 4 Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *Alone Together*, 2018, photograph, 32" x 40".
IMAGE PROVIDED BY THE ARTIST.

Covering her body in rich silk brocade blankets—resembling a Chinese funeral blanket—she poses herself in front of renowned sites around the world. Her work underlines her diasporic body, one living alone and away from her family.

Created during the ongoing global migrant crisis, the work asks which bodies are welcome and which are not, questioning this relationship with an “other” or rather, another, within the performance as well as jettisoning this question back to the viewer. Throughout this series Dong performed in front of monuments with historical or state significance, placing her body at sites that are often policed with high security. For example, while performing at the Forbidden City in Beijing, she was arrested for eight hours. Weary yet persistent, she continued with her performance series by placing her body at The Great Wall, laying on the largest manmade object viewable from space created expressly to separate an “us” from an “other.” For other performances in the series, the artist is photographed before the Acropolis in Greece (the place of the creation of the myth of the West and thus in a way defining its other, the East) (fig. 5), in the middle of a climate protest in Montreal (fig. 6), and in front of the giant metallic and monumental work *Cloud Gate* (2006) by Anish Kapoor (fig. 7). Here, Dong’s reflection is tiny yet remains as her own



FIGURE 5 Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *I Have Been There*, 2018, performance, Athens.
IMAGE PROVIDED BY THE ARTIST.

monument tucked beneath her duvet, surrounded by a small gathering of tourists. Her own Asian diasporic body is reflected in the work by the knighted British-born South Asian diasporic artist in a space dominated by the projected narrative of the city's Millennium Park.

Following the ongoing series of *I Have Been There* as well as *Skin Deep*, Dong's *The Misfits* (2021) further utilizes the Chinese brocade textile while questioning traditional Chinese symbols of the dragon and the phoenix. She notes on her website:

The two are often used together as a representation of auspiciousness and blissful relations between husband and wife and happy marriage. The phoenix and the dragon were two powerful creatures. In early Chinese myth, the phoenix was a union of male and female called Feng Huang, Feng was male bird, and Huang was female bird. However, as the dragon became associated with ancient Chinese emperors as an imperial symbol, (in fact, emperors themselves claimed to be the incarnation of a divine dragon), the phoenix was made into representing a female-only identity to pair with the dragon.³

3 Chun Hua Catherine Dong, artist's website, www.chunhuacatherinedong.com. Accessed 5 August 2021, <https://chunhuacatherinedong.com/portfolio/the-misfits/>.



FIGURE 6 Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *I Have Been There*, 2019, performance, Montreal. IMAGE PROVIDED BY THE ARTIST.



FIGURE 7 Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *I Have Been There*, 2015, performance, Chicago.
PHOTO BY STEVEN VEILLEUX. IMAGE PROVIDED BY THE ARTIST.

Within this series, Dong pairs the phoenix with itself instead of a dragon and places it above a rainbow sea and mountain (fig. 8), freeing it from its subordination to the dragon. This gesture reimagines gender fluid ideas imbued within the original meaning of these symbolic forms. Created with an augmented reality component, the artist invites viewers to interact with the piece, breaking down the boundaries between the work and its relationship with the viewer as a static object.

While Dong continues her works in these series, she also has been working with 3D printing sculptures, thinking through the medium and considering the so-called “mistakes” in the printing process as a collaboration with the technology. She establishes a relationship to and a recognition of the other in the machine or as “an other”—in its agency and freewill and determination—and, perhaps suggests that we consider the same.



FIGURE 8 Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *The Misfits*, 2021, photograph with augmented reality, 100" x 150".

IMAGE PROVIDED BY THE ARTIST.

Notes on Contributors

Chun Hua Catherine Dong

is a Chinese-born Montreal-based artist working with performance, photography, video, and AR and VR. Dong received an MFA from Concordia University and BFA from Emily Carr University Art & Design. Dong's work has been exhibited in many national and international venues, such as the Quebec City Biennial, MOMENTA | Biennale de l'image, MAC VAL in France, Museo de la Cancillería in Mexico City, and the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris among others. Dong was the recipient of the Franklin Furnace Award for contemporary avant-garde art in New York in 2014 and listed as one of the "10 Artists Who Are Reinventing History" by *Canadian Art* magazine in 2017. Dong was awarded with Cultural Diversity in Visual Arts by the Conseil des arts de Montréal in 2021 and was named a finalist for the Prix en art actuel du MNBAQ in 2020.

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