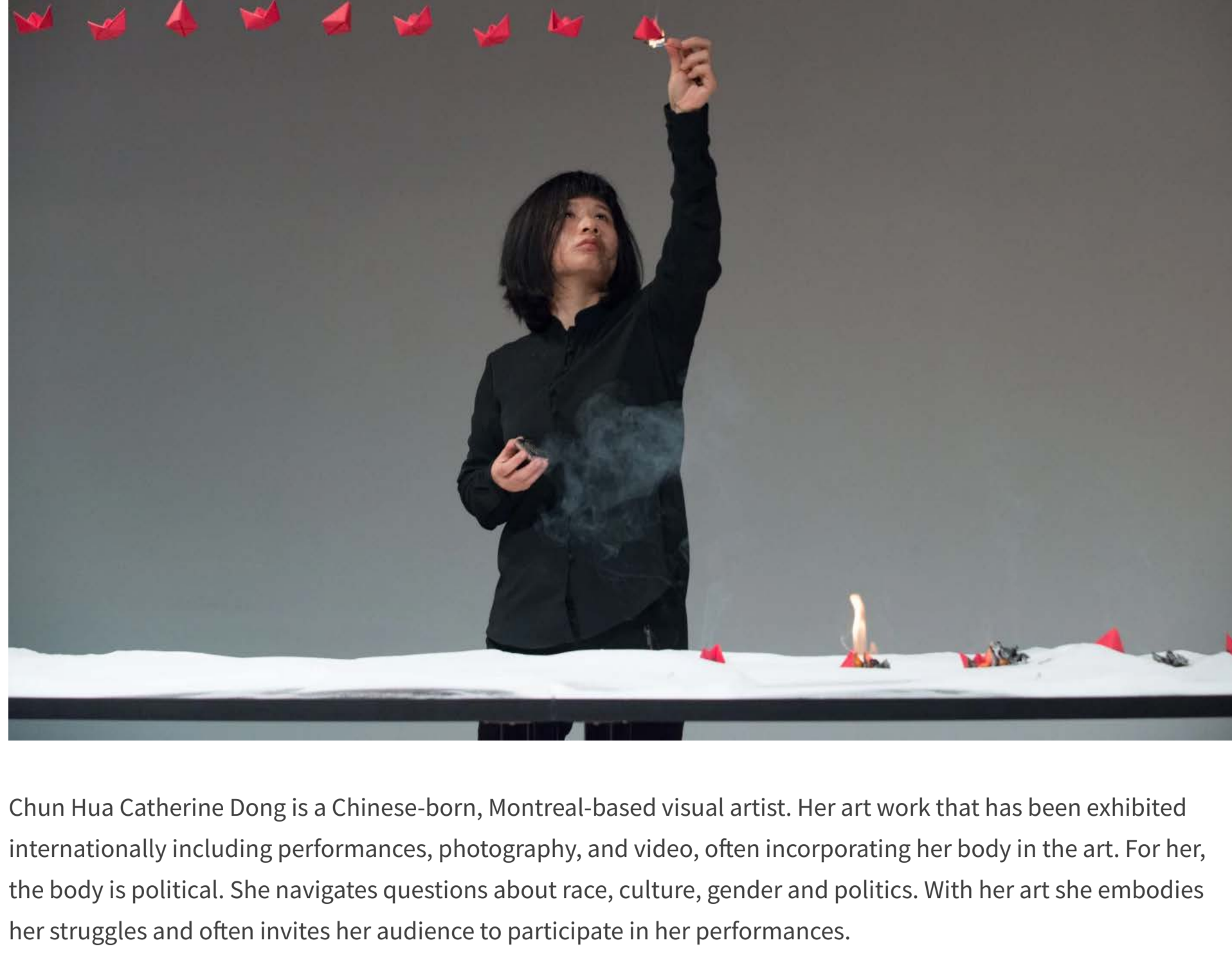


ONE WOMAN A WEEK.

MENU

CHUN HUA CATHERINE DONG

DÉCEMBRE 9, 2020 PAR CAMILLE NG



Chun Hua Catherine Dong is a Chinese-born, Montreal-based visual artist. Her art work that has been exhibited internationally including performances, photography, and video, often incorporating her body in the art. For her, the body is political. She navigates questions about race, culture, gender and politics. With her art she embodies her struggles and often invites her audience to participate in her performances.

In her early works, she already questions the labels sticking to her as she's both Chinese and Canadian. Her work "Silent Participant" (2009) clearly describes the difficulties of breaking the walls of false ideas about her identity and of silent rejections minorities are victims to. Nine years later in "The Wall" (2018), she invites her audience to give their opinion about the walls separating cultures. She makes us realize that walls are not always physical but are very often conventional, and global migration is mainly established by laws and policies into which people are trying to fit.

To narrate her migrant journey and issues related to displacement and exile, she made a series of pieces using rice. In "Hourglass" (2010), she painted grains of white rice with black ink one by one. When the rice was painted, she transferred it from the bowl with white rice to another one where there were only black grains: "Too much power [being] concentrated on one side seems to be a main factor causing disharmony, confusion and dislocation, which embody the social turbulence that we see and feel in our daily lives." Her work quickly became politicized and she uses powerful symbols to express herself. In her early performance "Salute to the Game" (2010), she is dressed in a military uniform and stands at various sites of the Vancouver's 2010 Winter Olympics saluting. However, she salutes with her left hand (the "wrong" one), aiming to denounce the entire system revolving around the games. She has often worn a military uniform to denounce Chinese policies over the years. In "To Rebel is Justified" and "Being is a Crime" (both in 2013) she uses humiliation (she kneels without pants or she puts herself in humiliating positions) to accuse the Red Guard of the violence they caused during the Cultural Revolution but also tries to understand their commitment and devotion.

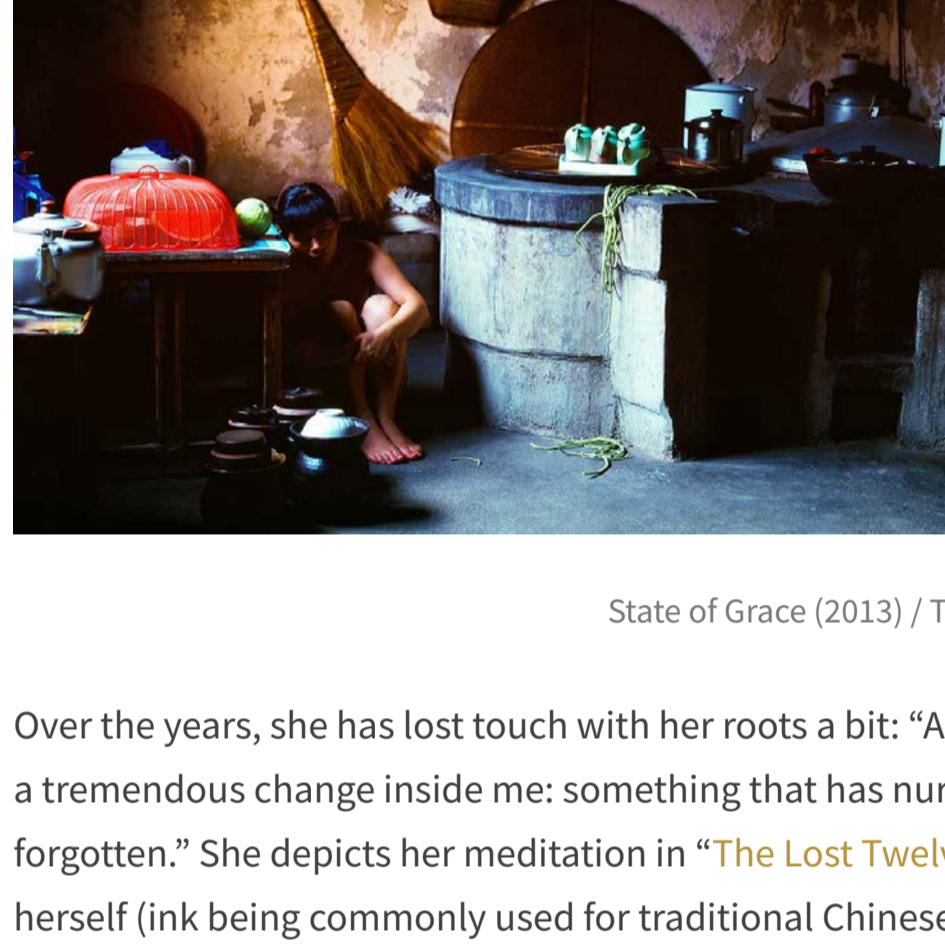


To Rebel is Justified (2013) / Husbands and I (2009-2011)

She uses relationships generally to question her daily life as an Asian woman in North America and the expectations society has of her. In "Husbands and I" (2009-2011), she meets strangers and asks them to be her husband. Strangers she met on the street were asked if they would be her husband for a minute while posing for a photograph; strangers who answered advertisements that she posted for herself as a mail-order bride were asked to be her husband for a day while the relationship was recorded on video. She uses these connections as metaphors for her own marriage to Canada, a land she didn't know before arriving. It's also meant to play with Western representations of Asian women: "In fact, the experiences of Asian women are still viewed as enmeshed, to different degrees, with pre-existing Orientalist visual representations." She dismantles that misconception with "Silent Participant is not Silent" (2010) in which the audience points a microphone over her body and heavy sounds can be heard. She uses this noise as a metaphorical message: minorities, especially Chinese living in the West, are often seen as silent people without opinions, but it is only prejudice.

Transforming the burden of the past

As a migrant she comes with a past, and she investigates it in autobiographical works. The figure of the father with its cultural injunctions is brought up in "When I was Born" (2010). After telling a story about her birth, a woman's voice starts to repeat the statement "When I was born, my father said I was just another mouth to feed," reminding us of the hardship of being born female in East-Asian society. She tries to reverse the feelings of shame she was asked to be born with, and she reconciles with her past in "State of Grace" (2013). In this performance-based series of photographs, she hides in the shadows of places in the village where she was born. In "Mother" (2018), she meets with 14 close friends and relatives of her mother and poses with them. It's a means to connect with her late mother and create memories while imagining potential events of her mother's life.



State of Grace (2013) / The Lost Twelve Years (2015)

Over the years, she has lost touch with her roots a bit: "After living abroad as a Chinese for 12 years, I noticed there is a tremendous change inside me: something that has nurtured and cultivated me has gradually faded and [been] forgotten." She depicts her meditation in "The Lost Twelve Years" (2015) by using black ink as a weapon against herself (ink being commonly used for traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy). As she ritually pours it on her back, she tries to hold back her Chinese essence before losing it.

She faces new challenges like language, and she expresses the difficulties she encountered in a significant yet sometimes humorous way. In 2012 she performed "Seven Idiomatic Pieces" by investigating English idioms that don't make sense to non-native speakers. With another performer, she explores the relationship between words and emotions and they literally smash chips on each other's shoulder in "Chips on Shoulder"—in which their standing still in front of each other reminds me of "Imponderabilia" (1977) of Marina Abramović and Ulay. We understand her view even more in "The Other Words" (2016) where she prechews rice (where rice represents language) before feeding it to the contributor in front of her. She clearly demonstrates the communication issue between what's meant and what's understood: the quality has declined.



Seven Idiomatic Pieces (II) (Chun Hua Catherine Dong) / Imponderabilia (Marina Abramović & Ulay)

Body is political, art is activism

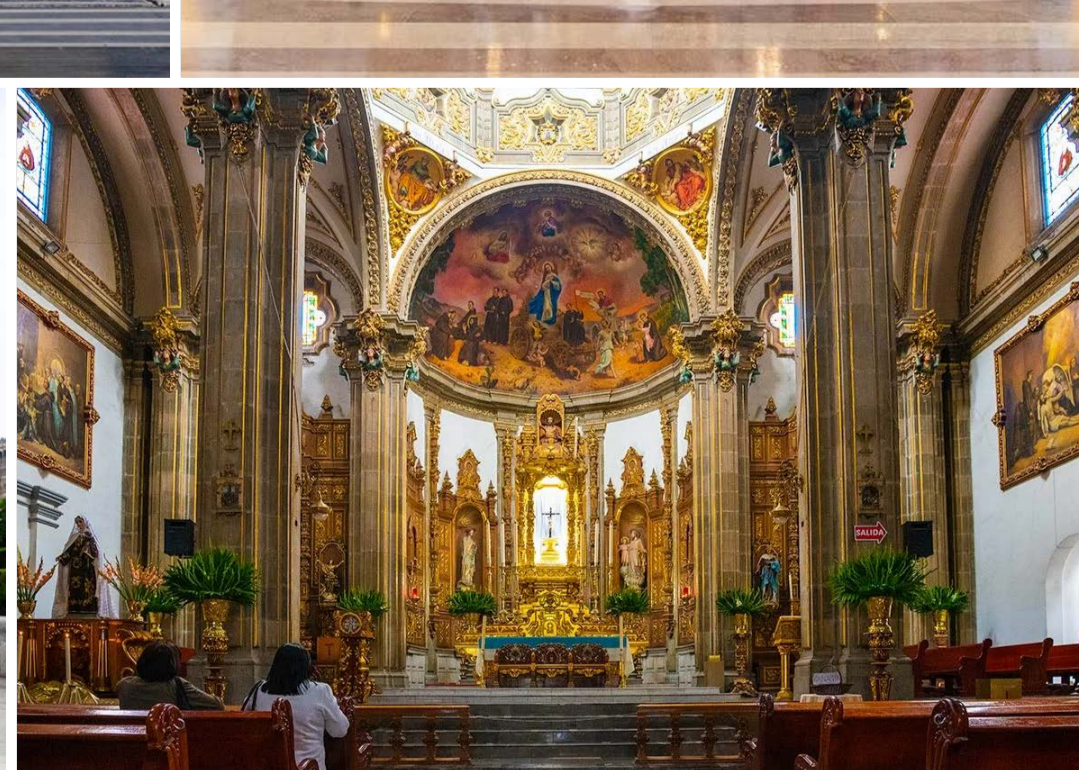
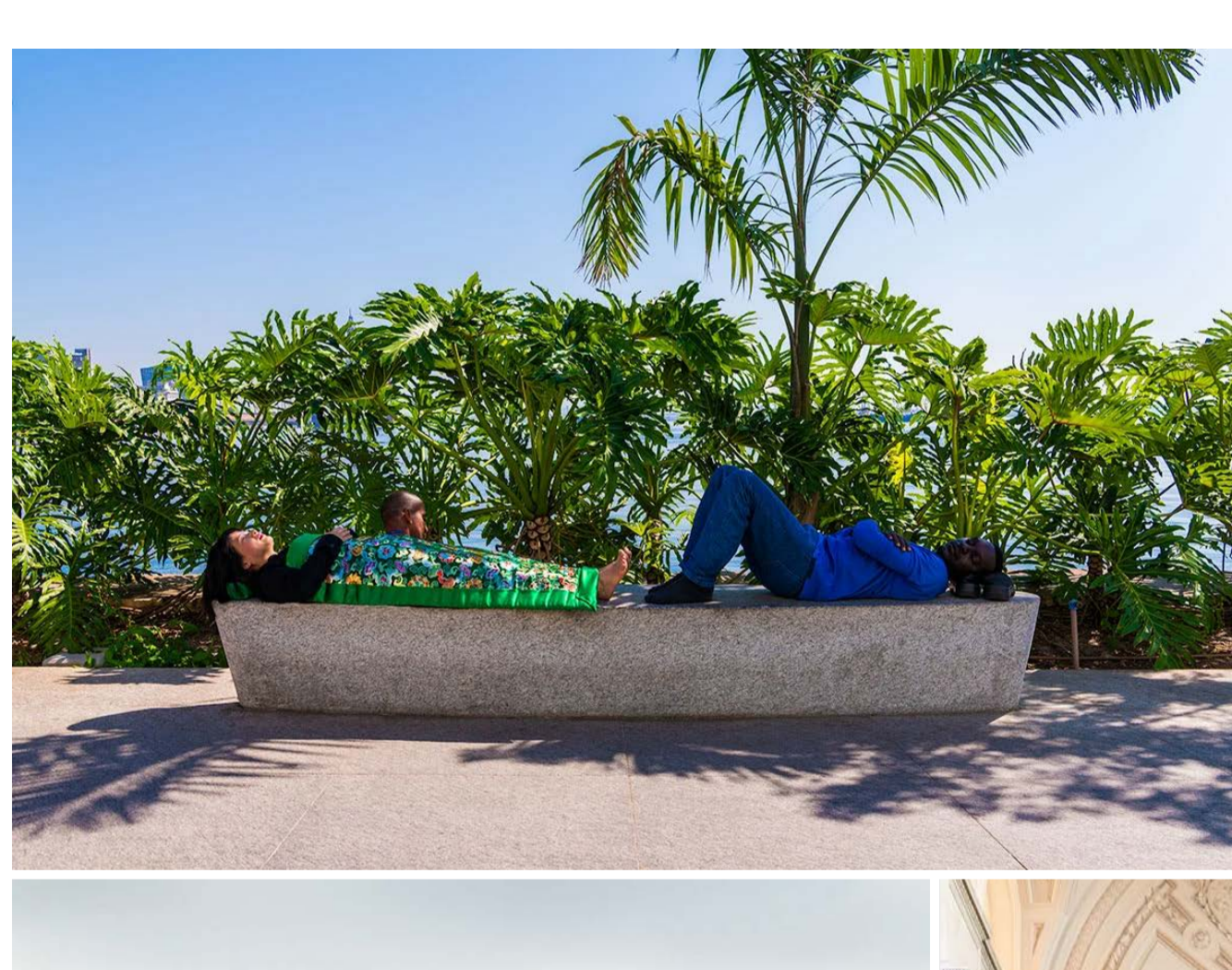
Her main working tool for her art is her body. Being a woman is an issue in this world. With "They" (2018) she uses gender-neutral pronouns to refer to "women as unique individuals who are plural, but whose bodies have been marked as the other." She uses virtual narratives to make audiences travel within the lives of four women with all the rituals and struggles that implies. From the images projected on screens, we try to comprehend how the body is shown, used, and biased in today's digital era. Dong also explores the human body in relation to the futuristic nature of this world in 2018 with the solo exhibition "In Transition." She identifies dualities by opposing the human body to the machine: "how to challenge boundaries of self/other, culture/nature, and human/machine."

Like many artists, Dong places the global art institution into perspective. Back in 2010, the British Columbia government cut funding in the arts, and that forced many galleries to close. With "[Absence]Presence" she took the galleries into the streets by pushing a gallery wall through Brantville Island painted with two statements: "I FEEL HOMELESS IN YOUR PRESENCE" on one side and "I WILL BE AT HOME IN YOUR ABSENCE" on the other. Her silent protest asks: Do artists need to be surrounded by those galleries walls? She also questions the price of art in "Art must be Expensive, Shame Shame Shame" (2015) by selling her clothes and even her body after spraying herself with expensive perfumes.

I have been There

I think her work "I Have Been There" is a crossroads of a lot of her previous searches. She started this on-going public intervention in 2015 and has performed in more than 25 cities. She lies in places that may be important due to their cultural, touristic or political functions with a duvet she has sewn from traditional Chinese silk, sewing a new one each time. In her hometown in China, each of the daughters of a deceased person makes a silken shroud to cover their parent's body. She worries about her own burial away from home (and away from this tradition), and these performances are a way to exorcise her worries by "simultaneously celebrat[ing] death and my own existence."

The project was triggered by the global migrant crisis. By using traditions she knows, she becomes a peaceful activist. She lies in public spaces knowing her privilege to do it, though she had sometimes been arrested. The arrest in itself transforms her act into a political matter and raises the questions of freedom of expression and democracy in those public spaces. Dong takes her art outside the galleries to peacefully protest against a system revealing its own wickedness through the actions it takes.



Art in pandemic times

I discovered Catherine when I was living in Paris in early September. I went to the Canadian Cultural Centre to see the exhibition "Image envoyée... Image sent". Artists pictured in the exhibition (French and Canadian) were asked to send three images representing their current world's vision in COVID-times. I really liked the powerful message the artist send with her image and the real issues she brings up to us from personal experience.



« This image is a response to racial attacks against East-Asian Canadians due to Covid-19. During the pandemic, I rarely go out, but when I have to go out, I always wear a mask, big sunglasses, and a big hat to hide my Chinese physical characteristics to avoid being targeted. I am not afraid of physical attacks, but more verbal attacks because sometimes words hurt more than swords. I want to address this issue with humor because humor helps me process my fear and pain. I do hope all Canadians stand together in condemning racist acts and build a truly multicultural society that is grounded in inclusiveness and respect for diversity and human dignity we all deserve. »

Portrait of a Chinese Canadian in 2020, June 2020

Art is a part of her life, maintaining her curiosity at a spike and helping her to « keep going. » She is now working with technologies and explores augmented reality. Her aim is to « blur the boundaries of still/moving images, 2D/3D and virtual/actual. » This new vision explores the possibilities offered by technologies in our reality.

If you want to discover more: visit [her website](#) / [her instagram](#).