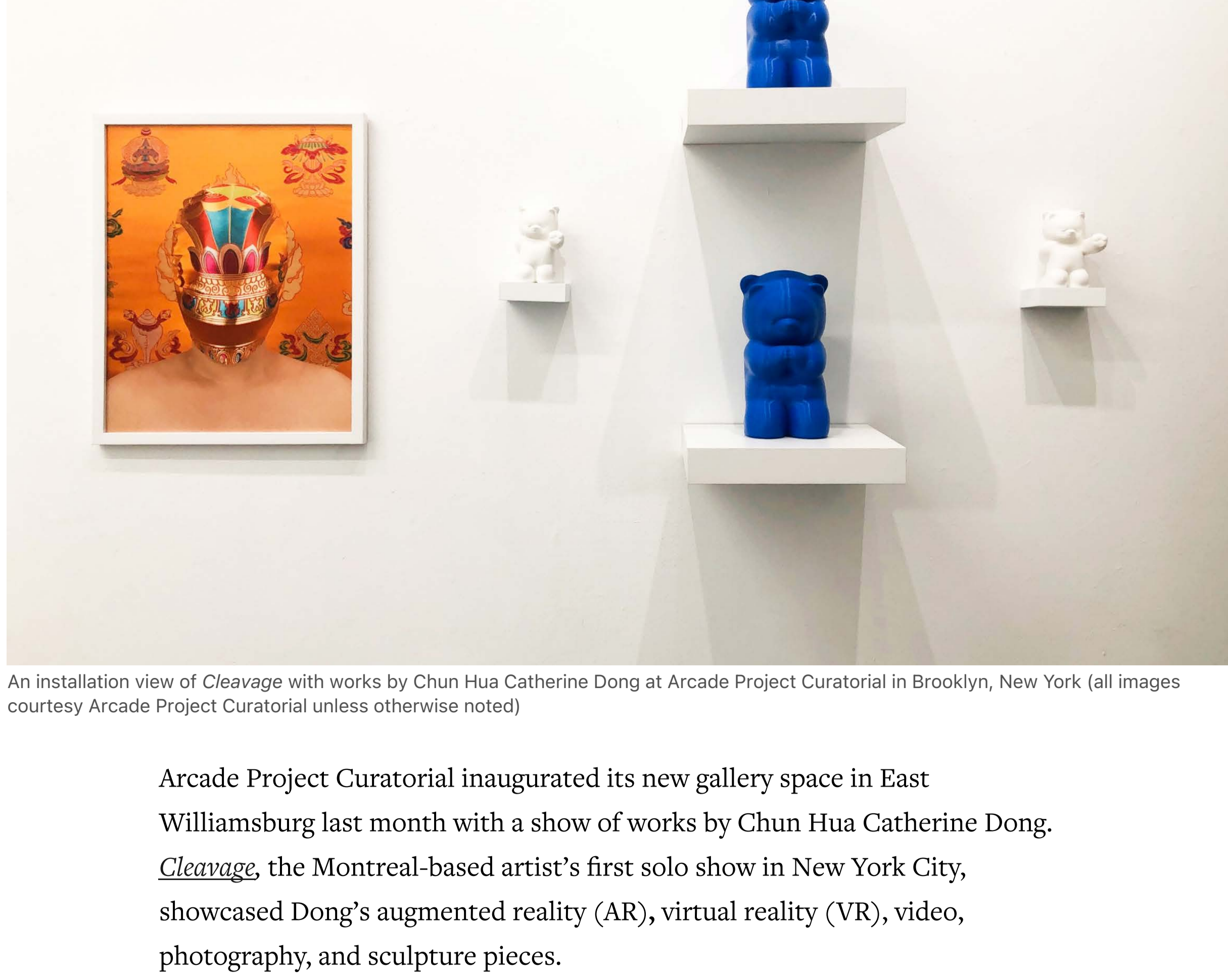


Fragmented Identity Through the Eyes of Chun Hua Catherine Dong

Cleavage at Arcade Project Curatorial, the artist's first solo show, pondered how one can hold an identity alongside a shifting sense of home.

by Elaine Velle
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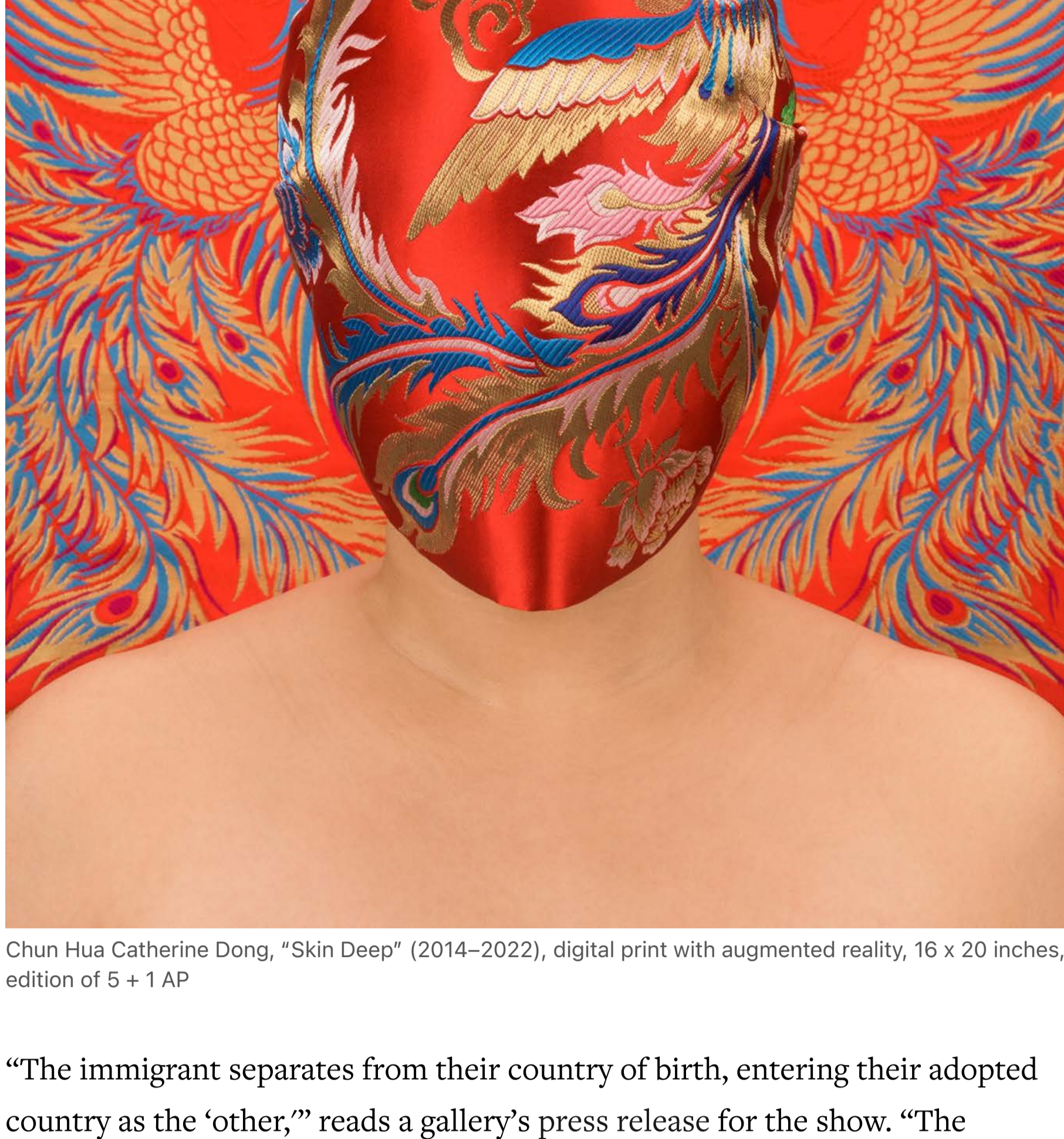
An installation view of *Cleavage* with works by Chun Hua Catherine Dong at Arcade Project Curatorial in Brooklyn, New York (all images courtesy Arcade Project Curatorial unless otherwise noted)

Arcade Project Curatorial inaugurated its new gallery space in East Williamsburg last month with a show of works by Chun Hua Catherine Dong.

Cleavage, the Montreal-based artist's first solo show in New York City, showcased Dong's augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), video, photography, and sculpture pieces.

The show explored the experience of being an immigrant: "Cleavage" refers to a biological process in which a cell is divided into smaller cells, and throughout the show, Dong focuses on the idea of fragmenting herself, splitting the self into different parts.

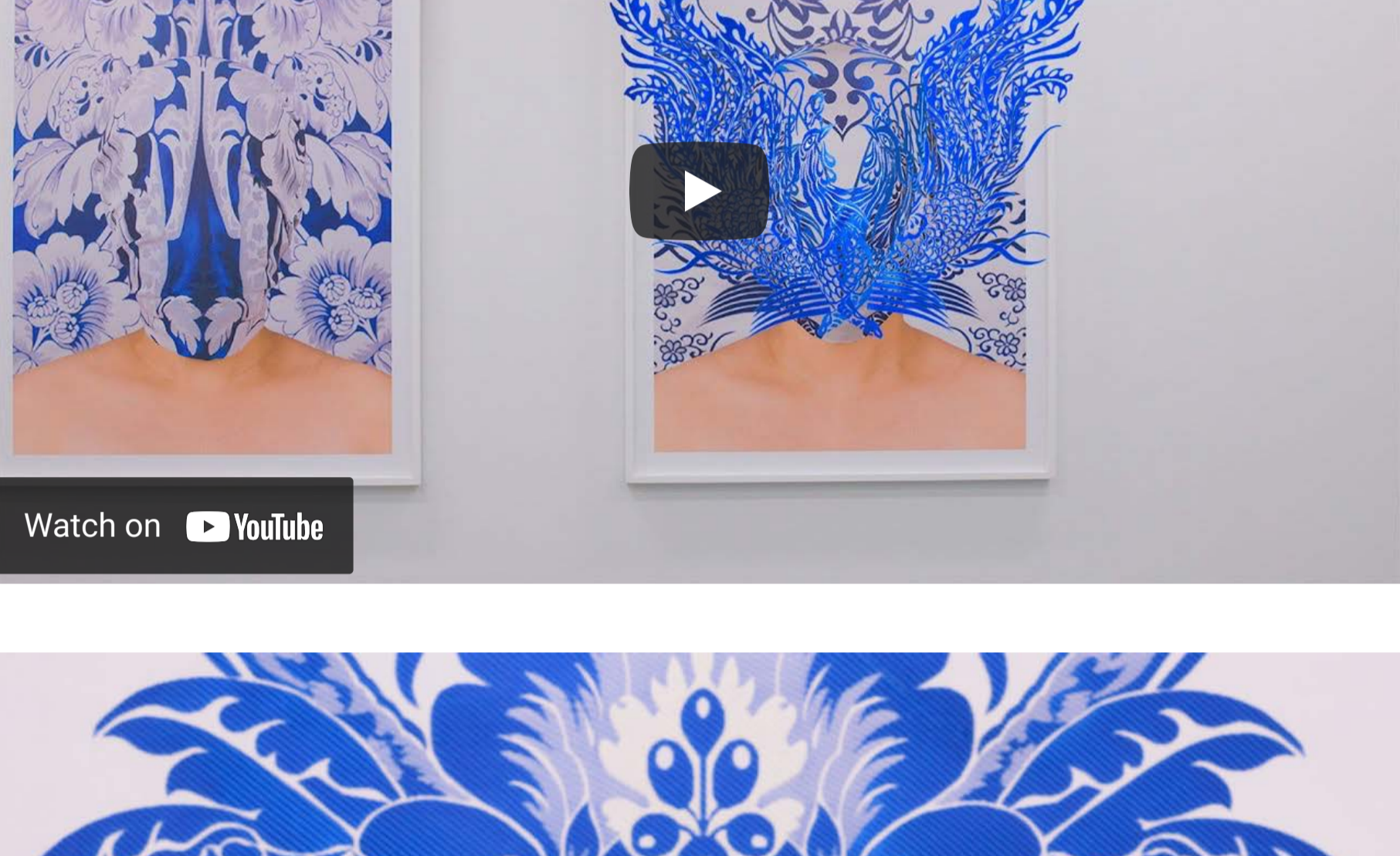
Dong's work also grapples with the intricacies surrounding individual identity, addressing the difficulty of both conceiving and maintaining one, and ponders how one can hold an identity alongside a shifting sense of "home."



Chun Hua Catherine Dong, "Skin Deep" (2014–2022), digital print with augmented reality, 16 x 20 inches, edition of 5 + 1 AP

"The immigrant separates from their country of birth, entering their adopted country as the 'other,'" reads a gallery's [press release](#) for the show. "The immigrant becomes a person of two lands, not fully fitting in with either. When the immigrant returns to the land of their birth, they are not at home — they are visitors, tourists. The 'home' that they hold as a memory is idealized in their mind. It doesn't exist in the physical realm."

A series of photographs included in the show, titled *Skin Deep* (2014–2020), encompasses a set of self-portraits in which Dong's face is covered by a traditional Chinese brocade silk fabric that matches the background of the image. In these works, Dong plumbs the possibility of having an individual identity while fitting into a broader culture. The photographs were accompanied by an AR component: Viewers could hold an iPad up to each work to see overlaid digital artworks that replicate the homogenous fabric patterns. Visitors could also access the AR component through a [mobile app](#).



Watch on [YouTube](#)



Chun Hua Catherine Dong, "Skin Deep" (2014–2022), digital print with augmented reality, 16 x 20 inches, edition of 5 + 1 AP

"Chinese shame is rooted on the concept of face. Shame is used as a tool of social control and harmony, as a way to prevent citizens — especially women — from acting in ways that might disrupt the status quo," Dong said in an [artist's statement](#) about the series.

"The act of masking is a performance of submission to the powerful effects of shame in which I obliterate my own individuality while being completely absorbed into a cultural identity," Dong continued. "It refers both the quality of only being seen for my Chinese background as an immigrant in Canada, and the subsequent lack of acknowledgement of my full personhood as a girl when in China."



The AR component of *Skin Deep* (photo Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)

In another group of works, *When I Was Born, My Father Said I Was Just Another Mouth to Feed* (2010–2021), Dong delved further into the concept of identity, this time in relation to family. Two sets of 3D-printed sculptures portray childlike bears in positions of submission. They have two pairs of ears, as though they were still experiencing the world through the ears of their parents. The four bears are positioned across from a 2010 video work by the same name. In the video, Dong addresses her childhood until she arrives at the phrase "when I was born, my father told me I was just another mouth to feed," repeating it over and over again.



Chun Hua Catherine Dong, "When I Was Born My Father Said I Was Just Another Mouth to Feed" (2022), 3D print, 5 x 4.5 x 3.5 inches, edition of 25 + 2 AP



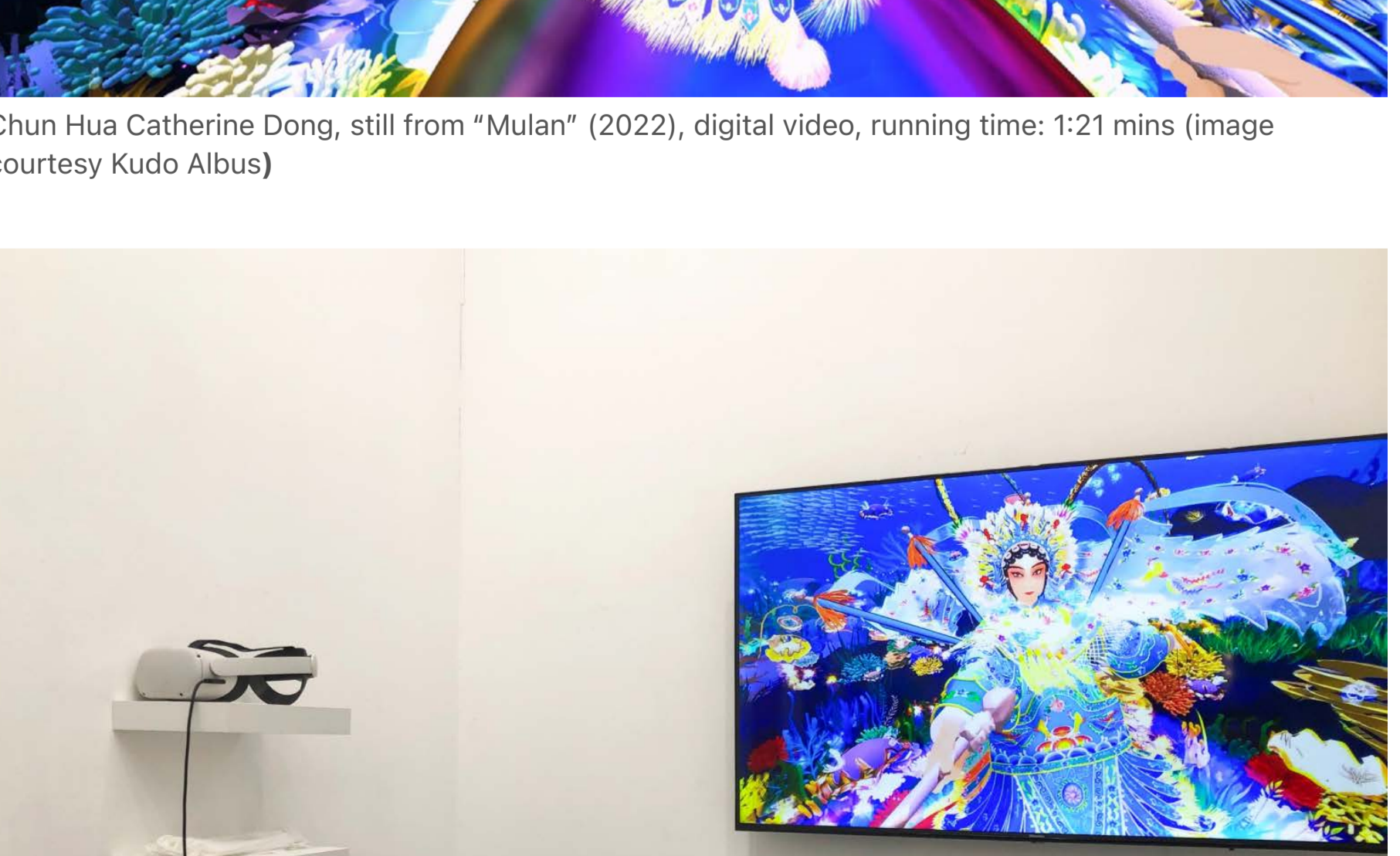
Chun Hua Catherine Dong, "When I Was Born My Father Said I Was Just Another Mouth to Feed" (2022), 3D print, 5 x 4.5 x 3.5 inches, edition of 50 + 2 AP

Cleavage also included a VR element. A work titled "Mulan" (2022) evoked the imagery of the Beijing opera and featured two dueling versions of the Chinese heroine, again reflecting on holding multiple identities simultaneously: one visible on the monitor, and another one through VR glasses.

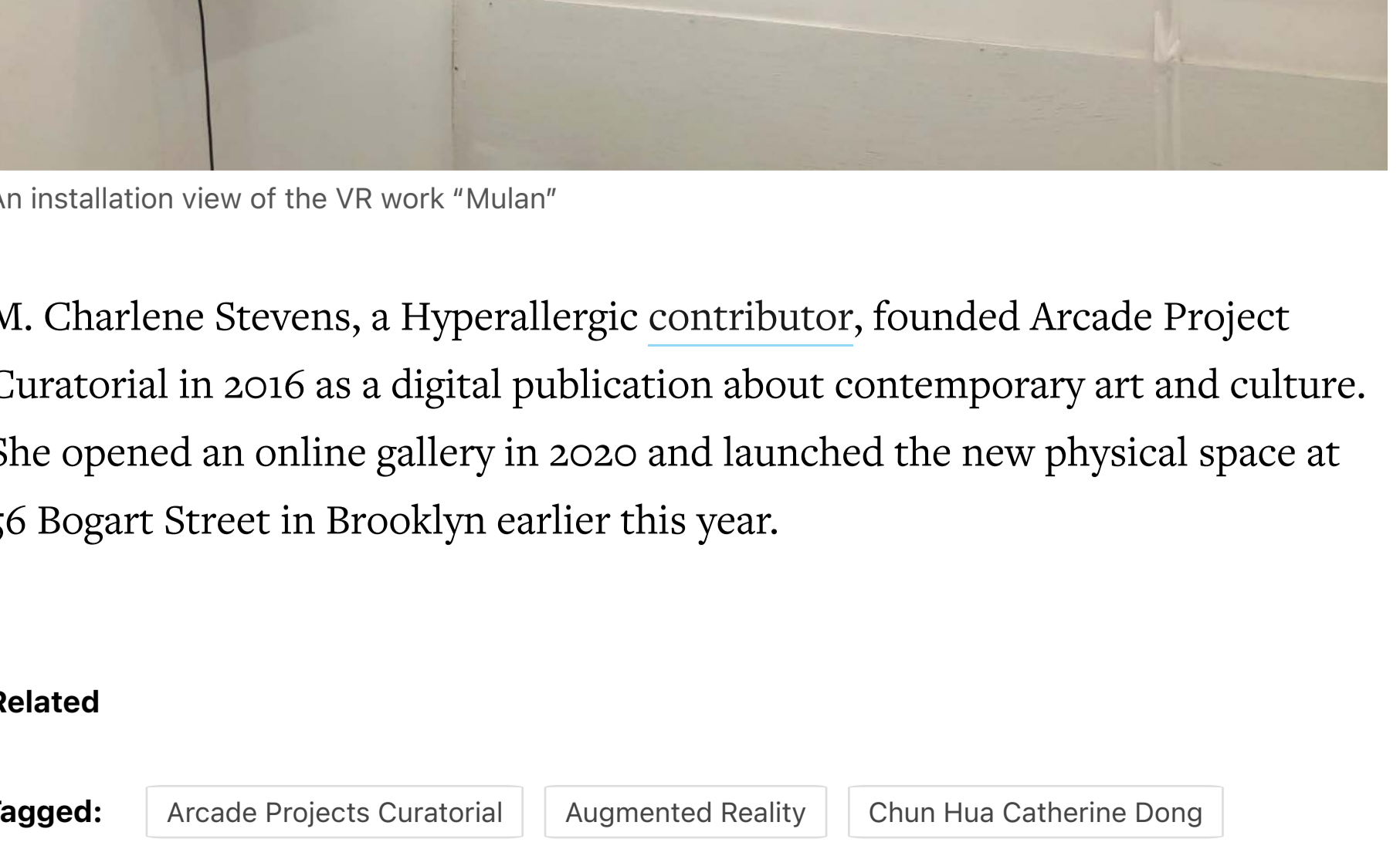
The underwater scene displays nudibranchs, a type of sea slug. While the creatures appear biologically as hermaphrodites, they need each other to reproduce, perhaps a reflection on the ways in which individuals lean on each other even when they appear to be completely self-sufficient.

"I'm intrigued by nudibranchs and their extraordinary colors, striking forms, unique defense, and ambiguous gender identities; they have become a new inspiration for my ongoing research on feminism," Dong wrote in a [statement](#).

"This work also raises questions about the binary system, about how to merge the boundaries of self/other, culture/nature, and human/animal, creating a new social relation that supports different ways of living and diverse beings in order to sustain and survive."



Chun Hua Catherine Dong, still from "Mulan" (2022), digital video, running time: 1:21 mins (image courtesy Kudo Albus)



An installation view of the VR work "Mulan"

M. Charlene Stevens, a [Hyperallergic](#) contributor, founded Arcade Project Curatorial in 2016 as a digital publication about contemporary art and culture. She opened an online gallery in 2020 and launched the new physical space at 56 Bogart Street in Brooklyn earlier this year.

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Elaine Velle is a writer from New Hampshire living in Brooklyn. She studied Art History and Russian at Middlebury College and is interested in art's role in history, culture, and politics. [More by Elaine Velle](#)