

# Out-standing artifacts

## **The performance art of Chun Hua Catherine Dong**

by WANDA O'CONNOR

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If you've yet to hear of local performance artist Chun Hua Catherine (Cat) Dong, let me introduce you. Cat, originally from China, was schooled at Emily Carr and holds an MFA from Concordia. Her performances have spanned the globe—from Lithuania to Italy to Germany—and her work has been exhibited in North America, Europe and Asia. This award-winning artist claims that “life is a performance” through which she seeks to “raise visibility to those made invisible by dominant ideologies.” Her interest lies in what occurs when the body-as-object interrupts the notion of order.

According to the artist, the body becomes a “visual territory” from which we can examine the notion of our place in the world.

Cat devises to represent, vis-à-vis the tendencies and timbre inherent in an experience of “live art,” the body as both canvas and encounter. We stand and watch and are as archivists to the work—all together human—at once registering and redeeming, qualifying and inhabiting. Her work touches upon the human condition with its emphasis on movement and memory, questioning our claims to beauty, sexuality and the label of “other,” while disputing, and at times recovering, uncertain values of what lies within and without.

She seeks to establish interplays between sound and silence, and nowhere is this more present than in her provocative work entitled “The Double.” Slightly larger than a chorus of Greek maidens, “The Double” is a representation of 16 women lined up side-by-side and outfitted in updated toga garb (the bath towel). This outfit predicts an intimate portrayal, inviting the audience to step into the private space of strangers, of women who blend and blur into an entirely silent ritual. The aesthetic of the chorus betrays only in its inability to speak, as the 16 gesture in unison through 4 key poses, and all while wearing exaggerated prosthetic lips, that Cat explains offer the promise to improve facial appearance through a series of exercises.

As if in a trance, these bodies seem to reproach the very precision they seek to achieve. In not recognizing each other's presence, the prosthetic object seems to be not only denying each mouth's ability to speak, but also its wearer's capacity to recognize anything outside of the exercise. This blending of the false (exposed lips) and the natural (covered body) disrupts the space of the performance. I find myself questioning the openness of the mouth while dressed in the attachment and am disturbed by its inability to allow sound to escape. I can't turn my eyes from this production. I want to know what their words might be without the grotesque, interrupting device. I question and I rebel. I sympathize and I retreat. I want to know who would use these oversized cast lips, representing the opposite of enhancement. I want these women to be vulnerable, to rage against the demands of the other. I want them not to be me.

**"The Double" is being exhibited once more this Friday, Feb. 7, at 7 p.m., and is a free show at Place des Arts. For more information, visit [www.quartierdesspectacles.com](http://www.quartierdesspectacles.com). The author is a friend of the artist and remains gripped by her work.**

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*Wanda O'Connor, MA, is an award-winning writer and reviewer living in Montreal. Recent work includes the poem "how to enter a dress," which placed second for the Thomas Morton Poetry Prize, and the chapbook, damascene road passaggio, selections (above/ground press 2013).*