



A Panoply of Benthic Transgressions

Written by Uii Savage

Mulan is a virtual reality installation that coalesces elements of marine biology, virtual reality, and the heroine from the ancient Chinese folk legend, the Ballad of Mulan (木兰辞 Mùlán Cí) in which Mulan disguised herself as a man and inherited her father's role in the army. After having embarked on years of military campaign as a man, she returned to her hometown, declined gifts and high-ranking office positions from the emperor and revealed her assigned gender. Since the ballad, both legend and Mulan's character has evolved over the centuries, with multiple variations of the story retold and contextualized by the social, political and cultural milieu at different points in history. In the end, Mulan's transgression is steadily justified as a means to serve her country when she descends home after assailing foreign invaders, championed for her extraordinary dedication and tenacity.

In Dong's adaptation, Mulan is choreographed center-stage on an abyssal plain stabilizing themselves on a colossal and venomous nudibranch, framed by a throng of benthic creatures and apsychedelic sea-botanical garden. In the blue glow of this effervescent aquatic realm, the sylphic warrior is rigged to confront their kaleidoscopic double, mirroring unwavering self-determination. Dressed in a colourful Peking Opera costume, their expression is both convivial and impish. The proposed dualities are bodies existing apart yet tethered together in poised tension, reliant on the integrated balance of each other. Traditionally a principal form of Chinese music-drama and performance art, Peking Opera incorporates acting, martial arts, and narration of entertaining stories mapping the historical and socio-political origins of daily life. Recognized as the aesthetic ideal of Opera in Chinese society and widely regarded as an element of the country's cultural heritage, it remains to this day a male-dominated practice. Dong subverts this logic and authorizes the elusive heroine as the protagonist historically and wholly absent within this canon. Through positioning Mulan in Peking Opera style, Mulan challenges sexism and gender inequality in the theater tradition and simulates the pluralities and plasticity of this heroine.

The work emphasizes gender as a fluid and plastic designation, one that according to legend, Mulan altered in their devious stratagem for utility, combat, survival and as a means to assert power. In this virtual reality, we are pulled into the darkest depths of the ocean where Mulan is symbiotically allied with a nudibranch, a deep-sea hermaphroditic organism. Mulan and nudibranchs share much in common; their ambiguous gender identities, unique defence, extraordinary colours and striking forms. In this instance, the jelly-bodied nudibranch is a deadly and dynamic accomplice scaled and rendered into a humongous leviathan with the ability to adapt to its environment by physical transformation and camouflage as well as poison assailants. Mulan is reclaimed as an unwonted heroine who weaponized gender-bending and hybridized into an otherworldly, vivid warrior saturated in a circumambient fluorescent coralline realm. Through this feminist re-interpretation, binary representations of the historical figure are challenged and recomposed into a fantastical virtual reality part of the exhibition At the Edge of Two Worlds. Through negotiating new possibilities of social relations of support, regard for and reverence of other beings, Dong envisions playful gender non-conforming and fierce survival as we assimilate into a globalized digital world.

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Uii Savage is an emerging artist and writer who studied art at Coleg Sir Gar (Carmarthen) and received a BFA from the Alberta University of the Arts (2020) in Mohkinstsís/Calgary. They work in 3D animation and video to explore virtual influence in networked existence. They have recently shown digital work with Something Special Studios (NYC), Viviane Art Gallery, Arts Commons, #T7NFT for Contemporary Calgary. Their work has been supported through the Calgary Arts Development and Alberta Media Arts Alliance.