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*Chun Hua Catherine Dong:
An Instrument Of Empathy*

Sandra Fraser responds to three projects
in Chun Hua Catherine Dong's *The Surface*

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Montreal based performance artist Chun Hua Catherine Dong presented two bodies of work in *The Surface*, articulating her interest in the body– her body– as a site of racial and gender politics. I want to situate the exhibition and my experience of it in theoretical territory, but I can't. My attempts to ground it leave me disengaged. The work has a particular speculative quality and it gets under my skin. Dong allows for such vulnerability in this exhibition and throughout her practice. Is it a utopian trust or a rush of adrenaline that drives the artist? Is it empathy? I want to keep it personal. I know it is political.

The exhibition is anchored by Dong's ongoing performance series, *Husbands and I*. Dozens of photographs hang in a grid, each the scale of 11" x 14", suggesting a wall of familial portraits. I imagine the conversation that the artist would have to entice each of these men– all selected based on their white skin– to pose for a photograph, acting as her husband. After all, it's just a photo, a lark; it doesn't require any commitment from the participant. Dong is persuasive, enacting a certain role, predicting what is expected of her. What promise is suggested by her posing the question? The accumulation of photographs signals success– that one is desirable enough even for simulated husbands. Is that what the men think too? Desire? Their serial accumulation reads as an addiction, a quest for novelty, a display of trophies, a desire that cannot be satiated. Or perhaps it signals failure: a series of futile relationships. Hopeless.

This performance is a ritual enactment of Dong's attempt to assimilate into Canadian culture: too Chinese or not Chinese enough? The artist wears a fitted red cheongsam, targeting the stereotypes embodied in the embroidered silk dress with its specific history and connotations in 20th century China. Not only has it come to signify authentic Chinese identity, it is used as a costume to suggest such an identity. Although more complex in meaning, the dress is shorthand for sexy, bourgeois, liberated women– symbolizing a cultural exoticism that is both docile and bon vivant. Is it this contradiction that encourages men to pose as a "five-minute" husband? The dress is a caricature of Dong's position as Other, used as a mask that simultaneously separates her from her true self and brings her closer to it.

Taking this irreconcilable venture to the next level, Dong put advertisements in various Vancouver media over the course of a year, offering herself as an "exotic, compliant and artistic Asian girl looking for a white husband who would take me to his home and live with him for a day as his mail-order bride." The resulting 15 minute video, also entitled *Husbands and I*, is a montage of several men and one woman, documenting conversations, sharing food and various moments of intimacy. Like reality television where everyone performs his or her banality for the camera, the invasiveness is unsettling nonetheless. In her motivation to explore her role as an Asian fetish, Dong remains the protagonist, while the

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motivation of the “husbands” remain unclear. The video is installed with a bed beneath it— an empty stage for the performance of coupling where marriage is a brief exchange. Despite her explicit vulnerability in this scenario, the artist cultivates a space of generosity and sensitivity in the portrayal of her subjects, which suggests a shared longing to belong.

The grid of playful and charming couples in *Husbands and I* is confronted by four large scale and grotesque family portraits in *The Red Baby*. Here the artist is an oversized toddler, perversely posing bare-chested in a white diaper. Positioned alongside same sized parents, she alternately disrupts their activities or is nurtured by them, suggesting a complex set of relationships between mother, father, and the one child allowed under Chinese law. Dong is a product of this restriction, however the white father is not autobiographical, pointing instead to the present. The lurid red body of the toddler and of the sets refers to communist China and creates a visceral, hallucinatory tension to the scenes. The red baby wears a mouthpiece that refers to the child being “just another mouth to feed” while at the same time suggesting a blow-up doll (although it is technically a Japanese tool for reducing wrinkles). We see a nightmare of women’s conflicting roles in families: mother, partner, role model, sex toy, forever youthful. This work exposes Dong’s feelings of shame and uselessness of being born a girl in China, an experience she now negotiates as a Canadian woman.

For the artist, the body is a site of control and an instrument for acting out that control. It can be the only thing an individual controls, yet it is the thing most controlled by society through laws and norms. Dong’s work takes her between private and public spaces where her body manifests an internal dialogue that is both individual and social in nature. As I leave the exhibition, I see the billboard that first greeted me: a giant red toddler lying at her parents feet peering out at me as if at the end of a temper tantrum. “Love me,” she seems to say, “Please.”

Images

1. Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *Red Baby*. Installation view, PAVED Arts main gallery space, 2015.
2. Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *The Surface*. Installation view and artist talk at PAVED Arts. November 6, 2015.
3. Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *Husbands and I*. Video still image, 2010-2011.
4. Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *Red Baby*. Photo credit: Dayna Danger, large format digital print, 44x59 inches, 2013.
5. Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *The Surface*. Billboard Project, 2015. (Pages 34-35)
6. Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *Husbands and I*. Photograph, 12x8 inches, 2009-2010.