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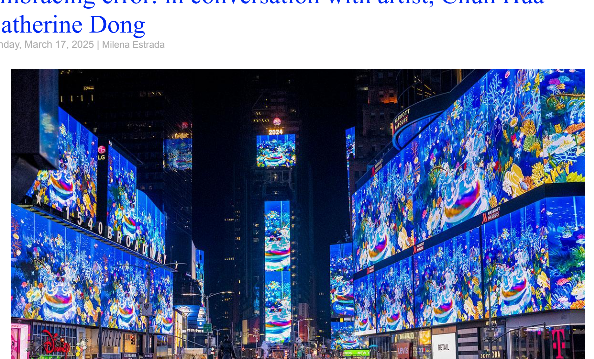
Embracing error: in conversation with artist, Chun Hua Catherine Dong

Monday, March 17, 2025 | Milena Estrada



Mulan, 2024, 95 large digital billboards from 41 to 49 street, Times Square, New York, August 1 -31, 2024, presented by Times Square Arts and Galerie Charlot.

I was aimlessly scrolling through my Instagram feed when my screen was engulfed by a blue light. I was taken aback by a video of an underwater Times Square; along with the images, the sound of a submarine ecosystem soothed me, making me stop and take a few minutes to fully grasp what I was seeing.

Before me was *Mulan*, a video by Montreal-based artist––from Chinese descent––Chun Hua Catherine Dong, projected on 95 digital billboards. The first time I watched the video was in a virtual reality headset but the effect was similar as I was transported into an aquatic environment full of color and marine creatures cohabiting with human figures dressed with the traditional Chinese opera attire. What compelled me was the work's innovative symbiosis between "natural life" and "human culture", between life above and below the surface as well as the hybridization of digital design and drawing techniques. The artist defines it as an exploration of Chinese folktales, gender and our "right to complexity and to range".

Originally a performer, Dong is a cross-disciplinary artist working with a vast array of mediums such as photography, 3D printing, virtual reality and artificial intelligence. Their artistic practice focuses on themes related to memory, migration, identity and gender. Performing mostly in front of audiences and in direct contact with the public, she turned to the digital arena during the pandemic. What began as a hobby soon transformed into a new phase in their work causing them to blend performative and digital practices. Dong's artwork is manifold, it doesn't fall into one but many categories making it difficult to define. It contains multitudes, and as such, acknowledges the complexity of living in a fragmented world often at the brink of collapse. Colorful and enticing, their environments cast us into fictitious uncanny futures where technology seamlessly mingles with the natural world. Over the last years their artworks have been exhibited across the world, in France, USA, Mexico, Finland, India and China to cite a few.

From our conversations and written exchanges, we became aware of our shared experiences as foreigners in the West, our hybrid identities and the constant exoticization of our bodies. This unveiled our common interest in the dichotomy between the body and the mind, the body as a political battleground and our belief of embracing error as a means to challenge the latter's enslavement to preconceived ideas of identity. To top it all off, our discussion led us to discover the deep imprint left by Legacy Russel's book *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*.

While my initial questions leaned towards the role of digital technologies and their impact on Dong's practice, their portrayal of Chinese folklore, their connection to homeland as well as the significance of gender changed my perspective, and revealed an artistic practice questioning the role of institutions in our everyday life and their enduring power over the construction of selfhood.

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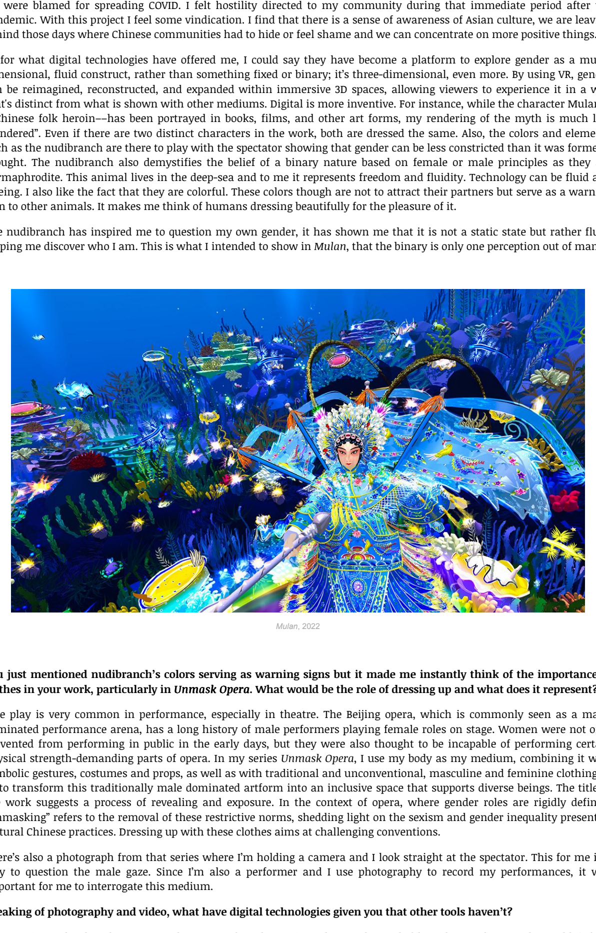
Milena Estrada: I want to open the conversation by asking about your experience exhibiting in a platform as big and impactful as Times Square where so many people pass by. What are the first impressions you can gather from such exposure and how have digital technologies permitted you to expand on the concept of gender? How does this manifest in *Mulan*?

Chun Hua Catherine Dong: First of all, my work is often shown in gallery or museum spaces so I can say this has enabled me to reach people that normally don't visit these places. Also, after the pandemic the Asian community faced backlash because we were blamed for spreading COVID. I felt hostility directed to my community during that immediate period after the pandemic. With this project I feel some vindication. I find that there is a sense of awareness of Asian culture, we are leaving behind those days where Chinese communities had to hide or feel shame and we can concentrate on more positive things.

As for what digital technologies have offered me, I could say they have become a platform to explore gender as a multi-dimensional, fluid construct, rather than something fixed or binary; it's three-dimensional, even more. By using VR, gender can be reimagined, reconstructed, and expanded within immersive 3D spaces, allowing viewers to experience it in a way that's distinct from what is shown with other mediums. Digital is more inventive. For instance, while the character Mulan—a Chinese folk heroin––has been portrayed in books, films, and other art forms, my rendering of the myth is much less "gendered". Even if there are two distinct characters in the work, both are dressed the same. Also, the colors and elements such as the nudibranch are there to play with the spectator showing that gender can be less constricted than it was formerly thought. The nudibranch also demystifies the belief of a binary nature based on female or male principles as they are hermaphrodite. This animal lives in the deep-sea and to me it represents freedom and fluidity. Technology can be fluid and freeing. I also like the fact that they are colorful. These colors though are not to attract their partners but serve as a warning sign to other animals. It makes me think of humans dressing beautifully for the pleasure of it.

The nudibranch has inspired me to question my own gender, it has shown me that it is not a static state but rather fluid, helping me discover who I am. This is what I intended to show in *Mulan*, that the binary is only one perception out of many.



Mulan, 2022

You just mentioned nudibranch's colors serving as warning signs but it made me instantly think of the importance of clothes in your work, particularly in *Unmask Opera*. What would be the role of dressing up and what does it represent?

Role play is very common in performance, especially in theatre. The Beijing opera, which is commonly seen as a male-dominated performance arena, has a long history of male performers playing female roles on stage. Women were not only prevented from performing in public in the early days, but they were also thought to be incapable of performing certain physical strength-demanding parts of opera. In my series *Unmask Opera*, I use my body as my medium, combining it with symbolic gestures, costumes and props, as well as with traditional and unconventional, masculine and feminine clothing so as to transform this traditionally male dominated artform into an inclusive space that supports diverse beings. The title of the work suggests a process of revealing and exposure. In the context of opera, where gender roles are rigidly defined, "unmasking" refers to the removal of these restrictive norms, shedding light on the sexism and gender inequality present in cultural Chinese practices. Dressing up with these clothes aims at challenging conventions.

There's also a photograph from that series where I'm holding a camera and I look straight at the spectator. This for me is a way to question the male gaze. Since I'm also a performer and I use photography to record my performances, it was important for me to interrogate this medium.

Speaking of photography and video, what have digital technologies given you that other tools haven't?

As an artist, technology has permitted me to explore dimensions that analog tools like video or photography couldn't fully capture. While video and photography are valuable in documenting and representing physical actions or performances, they often limit the viewer, making them passive. In contrast, technology like VR–*virtual reality*––and AR––*augmented reality*––offer immersive, interactive environments where viewers can engage with the work in real-time and space. For instance, in my photographic series *Skin Deep* I added an AR component. By applying virtual layers on top of a photograph, the latter becomes a live and spatial experience, blurring the boundaries between still and moving images, between the virtual and actual (reality). Because the audience often moves around and views the AR from different angles, their interaction becomes performative.

This in turn questions the role of audiences. With VR and AR, they use their bodies and this gives them more control over the artwork. This also permits them to zoom in, put the artwork in another context, in the public space, in a mug, everywhere!

So you are saying these technologies allow you to interact more with your audience?

Yes.

That's a good point. With digital art you are creating a connection and this is––I believe––where performance and digital meet.

This is something that interests me. I began my artistic career as a performance artist, using body, mainly my own, as a visual territory, my main material. While I have always been interested in technology, my travel schedule and performative projects left me little time to deeply explore it. Then the pandemic hit, and suddenly, I couldn't travel anymore. In 2020, I created my first VR and AR artwork. I used 3D printing, 3D scanning and animations. It was intimidating to step into a new field that felt unfamiliar, but I'm grateful I did.

Furthermore, in my work, *Meet me halfway*––a four channel digital video––I merged my performative art with VR for the first time. I created a new world because during the pandemic I thought life was too harsh, I wanted a space that I could visit from time to time to escape from reality. There is no body per se but you follow something. This is my movement which I recorded and then transformed into a dance. My body is not there but you see me "virtually". In my work I always feel I am at the edge of two worlds. I like to have the freedom of going either one way or the other, or even to stay in between.

When you use the VR headset, your body is in a physical space but your eyes are seeing something else. This is where performance and technology meet.

I feel that you always want to leave an imprint in your work. For example, in *Meet me halfway*, the movement is the imprint.

I started as a performer and did this for 12 years. Performance has a link with documentation, it's so ephemeral that you need a way of keeping it alive. I want evidence of what happened.

I didn't expect your work could join so much performance and technology. I envisioned them as being opposites but now I'm not sure if they are as separate as I thought.

Performance to me is also immaterial like VR. When you wear the VR headset there's an illusion of something happening and while you live the performance, it's so fleeting that it feels illusory. They are not distinct to me, maybe they are like the sides of the same coin.

I Have Been There, Performance & Photograph, New York, 2021

What about your work, *I Have Been There*? It is also an imprint and a record of the places you have visited. To me it also speaks about the body politic, could you expand on that?

I Have Been There is an on-going public intervention performance that explores the concept of belonging, diaspora and people's existence in public spaces. Each time I travel to a new place, I make a new duvet with Chinese traditional embroidered silk fabric. Covered by the duvet, I lie on the ground of historical sites, landmarks, tourist attractions and other significant places or events as a sign of negotiating and/or engaging with the cultural spaces I visit.

The body is political, and my body is my monument. Although this project was inspired by Chinese funeral traditions, the major trigger to make it was the global migrant crisis, the increasing border control and anti-immigrant policies in the West that started around 2015. As a person who is part of this community but has the privilege to enter most countries freely, I feel deeply responsible to address this issue. By occupying public spaces in this manner, the performance turns those spaces into a stage for unsanctioned artworks and political interventions. It offers an alternative perspective on performative action and creative cultural activism, challenging how public spaces are used and experienced.

The concept of the body politic is central to my work because it allows me to explore how power, identity, and social norms are inscribed onto individual bodies, especially those of women and marginalized communities. Living in the West as a woman of color, I often find myself at once visible and invisible. In fact, Legacy Russell analyses this in her manifesto. On the one hand, we are frequently objectified, stereotyped, and exoticized, making our bodies and identities hypervisible. On the other hand, our voices and narratives are often marginalized, ignored, and utterly dismissed. It's an experience of being seen but not truly recognized, acknowledged yet never fully understood.

Now that you mentioned Russell's manifesto, could you tell me what are your thoughts on the concept of glitch and how are you incorporating it into your work?

"Glitch," as a concept in relation to gender, is a form of refusal, it means declining to be assigned to one of the binary categories. It is embedded in much of my work because gender is something I deal with in my artistic practice. In my work *Mulan* I used 3D and VR tools to build an underwater world. Mulan was represented wearing a Beijing opera costume on a rainbow stage inspired by nudibranchs. The glitch here manifests in the way Mulan subverts historical narratives and high art forms that have long been male dominated.

While glitches are typically seen as digital errors, glitch feminists embrace the unexpected outcomes and imperfections that arise in digital spaces, allowing these "glitches" to reveal new narratives. I also embrace this "glitch" in my 3D printed sculptures. Traditionally, 3D printing has been used to make molds or prototypes for more elaborated works, they are the first stages of objects that will become more outlined. However, I accept their rawness. I use 3D printing as the raw material for my finished artwork, with no additional touches such as sanding or painting. The unpolished raw nature of 3D printing fascinates me because it captures the essence of the technological and digital process, demystifying how artworks are made. That's why in my sculpture *Golden Girl*, you see the printing; the lines are the digital evidence of the work. For those affiliated with traditional sculpture, these are not to be considered as such but I accept their imperfections, their "glitchness".

The book also delves in being fragile and vulnerable, in belonging to the category of otherness. How do you think your "double" background has shaped your practice and how have digital technologies changed your perspective on the concept of homeland?

Digital technologies, particularly VR and 3D scanning, have changed my understanding of the concept of home and homeland, making them more accessible. By creating virtual spaces that represent or reinterpret these physical locations, I no longer see homeland as just a fixed geographic space, but as something that can be reconstructed, revisited, and reimagined across time and place. Through VR, I can build a virtual homeland—a digital environment that reflects the emotional and cultural significance of a place without being limited by physical boundaries. I can also use 3D scanning to capture my home or a location that is important to me. I can visit it whenever I want, regardless of where I am in the world, which is particularly meaningful to me or every person belonging to any diaspora.

Reconnection, 2021, Performance Photograph.

Diasporic memory and virtual reality are present in your work *Reconnection*. How does this work allude to the experience of migration and belonging to a diaspora?

Reconnection was performed beside the Saint Lawrence River in Quebec during the pandemic in 2021. In this series, I wore a Beijing opera costume and a VR headset. I performed a series of gestures and movements while virtually seeing the Great Wall of China. The Wall in this context symbolizes more than just a border—it represents separation and restrictions. While performing, I stood on Canadian soil and I was able to touch, smell, and sense the landscape of my adopted home. Yet, visually I was surrounded by the iconic Chinese landscape of the Great Wall. This duality captured the complex emotions of being connected to a homeland I could not physically access.

I feel that at one point I connected with the Canadian landscape, I felt immersed in what I was seeing and feeling, I couldn't help but feel emotional. With the headset I did some gestures and movements, it was very spontaneous, I didn't rehearse because I never do that. Everything came naturally.

VR creates an illusion of presence immersing you in a space that feels real even though you are physically elsewhere. This mirrors the migrant experience, where you are constantly navigating between two worlds—present in one, but emotionally tied to another.

To me this echoes the experience of migration, diaspora, and the emotional barriers migrants often face, something I particularly felt during the pandemic. It speaks about being in two worlds, feeling at once present and distant from both.

We haven't discussed the role of mass surveillance in your work, is there a political message behind series like *Skin Deep*?

Skin Deep is a series of photographs made with augmented reality investigating conventionalisms. It is rooted in the face, this is why they are "performing" self-portraits. The work is tied to what I call the "Asian shame culture". Chinese shame is ingrained in the concept of "face"––showing yourself in public—which is used as a tool of social control to defend so-called social harmony preventing citizens—especially women—from acting in ways that might disrupt the status quo. In *Skin Deep*, I transform the concept of shame into a cultural symbol, creating a series of ID card-style photographs were my face is concealed beneath Chinese silk fabrics. This act of masking becomes a performance in which I submit to the powerful forces of shame, erasing my individuality and dissolving me into a collective cultural identity. It reflects both the experience of being seen solely for my Chinese background as an immigrant in Canada and the erasure of my personhood as a woman in Chinese society. *Skin Deep* is an act of drawing back the curtain and pointing to the deeply embedded feelings of shame that can cause women to hold back and stay silent, it transforms the performative gestures into incidents that are understood to be universal and relatable.

For You I Will Be an Island Photograph with AI – generated component, 2023

I see that your work revolves around your identity, who you are. In *For you I would be an island*,—a photographic series staging your experience living on the banks of the Yangtze river and its cyclical flooding—for the first time, you use artificial intelligence to create a fictitious landscape of your hometown. Why did you choose to work with AI?

I am fascinated by the possibilities offered by artificial intelligence. What it can do and how it challenges our creativity, I've always wanted to use it in my work. However, I understand people and people's concerns and the threat it poses for cultural workers and us artists. But in my work AI is at the service of greater things. I view this work as a call to action for a better future, it is used to stir dialogues about our collective responsibility towards nature. Since I often use technology, I wanted to try artificial intelligence to show what it has to offer instead of demonizing it. To me, technology is not inherently bad; what matters is how we use it.

Another reason I chose to use it is plainly economic. As an artist with limited resources and very little financial assistance, AI helps me save time and money when creating artworks. In this series, I generated 23 large-scale graphics, each measuring 2.5 by 2.5 meters. Creating that many pieces through traditional methods, like painting or photography, would have been nearly impossible, not to mention the financial costs and the time such a piece would have required. AI gave me the ability to bring this vision to life quickly and effectively. While I prefer to collaborate with other creatives when I have the budget, AI offers an accessible alternative when resources are limited.

To conclude with and coming back to the glitch, Legacy Russell defines the internet as a space of resistance and survival, do you adhere to this?

Yes, I agree that the internet and the digital arena can serve as spaces of resistance and survival. For instance, in my last project, I created an avatar, a hybrid being that exists beyond traditional male-female binary conceptions. This entity embodies a spectrum of identities that not only deconstructs rigid gender norms but also opens new possibilities for alternative ways of living and diverse forms of existence.

The internet is a laboratory, and like my piece, it reimagines identities, opening new paths.

The above conversation was conducted by Milena Estrada an independent curator working between Mexico and France.

Editorial support by Alana Traficante

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