

Chun Hua Catherine Dong

Written By Michelle Lacombe

The Arrival



PHOTO by Henry Chan

A row of red origami boats float above a long table covered in a bank of salt and more carefully lined up paper boats. The set up is simple, beautiful and calls for activation. However, before we see the artist, a recording of diverse voices repeating the same question fills the room.

“Where are you from?”

When Chun Hua Catherine Dong enters the space, she centres herself behind the table and begins to execute a series of arm movements. As they are repeated, it becomes increasingly obvious that these are abstractions of the gestures commonly executed by border service agents. Her increasing embodiment of these authoritative figures of national security culminates in her using a whistle and her repertoire of arm gestures to solicit the participation of audience members. Someone comes up and, without using words, she orders them to remove their shirt and shoes, and proceeds to frisk them. She is hostile, the person is visibly nervous and the audience laughs. I find this part uncomfortable but it ends rather quickly because soliciting other participation is difficult. She has effectively made us

Back at her position behind the table, Dong repeats her initial series of arm movements that, this time, lead into a frantic windmill motion of her arms. The movement punctually stops with a sharp blow of the whistle to display the words “ENTRY” “NO” written on the palms of her hands. Having secured her space with us, she is now speaking to the little red boats delicately resting on the salt. With a deep breath, she blows onto them, spraying salt into the air and sending boats tumbling off the bank, into each other, and off the table. She continues until they are all scattered on the floor, stopping only to taste the salt that they have left behind. Salt, like gold and other wealth, is for the dominant.

“Where are you from?”

The series of arm gestures is again repeated and now she uses her head to brush the salt across the table until the surface is covered. During this time I watch her feet carefully step around the paper boats on the floor. Her territory is the tabletop. No longer lining up at her border, she shows no hostility towards them. Those who have been pushed away are simply ignored.

“Where are you from?”

The arm movements are repeated one final time. Dong pulls a matchbox from her pocket and proceeds to patiently light the suspended boats on fire, one by one. This portion of the performance slows down the action and the pacing is excellent. Threads of smoke caress the folded red paper until flickering fires free the boats, which fall to the table at unpredictable intervals. It is tense and dramatic in the subtlest of ways. When the last boat is set ablaze, she walks away and we are left to watch the final destructive action unfold on her tabletop territory.

“Where are you from?”

