



Seeing double

W H A T

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by [Douglas Haggio](#)

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"When I was born, my father said I was just another mouth to feed."

This is how Chun Hua Catherine Dong begins her journey of self-discovery in "Visual Poetics of Embodied Shame," an installation at Hamilton Artists Inc.

The award-winning artist uses furniture, food, photographs, video and performance art to create a kind of multimedia self-portrait. She presents her objects in pairs, a striking way of conveying her ideas.

"The exhibition explores what it's like to be Chinese and female," Dong tells me.

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Another pairing? She was born in China and lives in Canada.

Dong tells us shame is something she sees rooted in Chinese society. Being another mouth to feed arouses feelings of shame, but this can lead to an empowering anger.

In "Visual Poetic of Embodied Shame," a pair of video stills, Dong's head and shoulders dominate. Her face is covered.

The origins of the word "shame" have been traced to an ancient verb meaning "hide" or "cover."

"In this work," Dong says, "I translate the word shame — to cover — to a cultural symbol by wrapping my face in Chinese silk brocade fabric. The notion of shame, or 'losing face,' is deeply ingrained in Chinese culture.

"Shame in this work is both social and personal, arising from the awareness of the consequences of my failure in maintaining my identity as a Chinese after living in the West for many years.

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In "Absent Husband," a series of big photographs in pairs, Dong presents her failed marriage, another source of shame for a Chinese woman.

One pair of photographs features a couple sitting facing each other at a table set with dishes. The dishes are broken. And one diner points a pair of chopsticks at the other, who recoils.

Splitting the scene down the middle draws attention to division and separation. And in fact, the husband is missing. Dong replaces him with an image of herself.

A similar relationship characterizes two photographs of the marriage bed. Each one depicts Dong sitting against a pillow in a double bed. The pillow next to hers is empty. By placing herself on the far side of each photo, she creates a big gap in the middle.

In the left-hand photograph, she holds a bowl of pear halves and offers one to herself, already holding a half pear, in the other photo.

Asking someone "to share a pear" in Chinese sounds like the word for "separation." And "pear" in English sounds like "pair."

The beds reappear as two real queen-size beds facing each other in the middle of the gallery. Empty of humans, they are covered in peanuts. One bed contains peanuts in their shells, the other, broken shells. A night table filled with peanuts stands by each bed.

Peanuts serve as symbols of marriage and fertility. Each shell holds a pair of nuts.

Dong shucks the peanuts as part of her performance piece

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"I also invite audiences to do it as well," she says.

Shucking peanuts is Dong's way of rejecting the Chinese tradition that a woman is expected to marry and produce children.

That expectation exists in all societies. Dong's installation is personal — and universal.

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