

HUSBANDS & WIVES

Text by Rhonda Meier

There are only two things I care about in life mostly—those two things are art and love... art is something that no matter what you do, it will always be with you, but love, love is the hardest...¹

Between Reality and Transcendence is Chun Hua Catherine Dong's profoundly felt lament on relationships lost. Stemming from her performance-driven practice, this exhibition consists of 12 large-scale photographs (the *Absent Husband* series) and an *in situ* performance.



Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *Absent Husband* (detail), 2012. Photo: Hua Jin

The photographs are composed as pairs which echo one another. This mirroring alludes to the ways husbands and wives reflect and reinforce their identities through their domestic lives; it also references the myriad ways their identities are conflated in the public sphere. Yet this division also physically enacts the separation of the couple. Determinedly, Dong undertakes both the role of the wife, on the left, and the missing husband, on the right. Poignantly and paradoxically, her presence in his clothing, his spaces, only accentuates her husband's absence.

1 Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *The Husbands and I*, 2010-2011.

2 In Chinese tradition, peanuts symbolize marriage and fecundity; older generations hide them under a newly-wed couple's bed sheets to wish them happiness and fertility.

Hence, the story the artist embodies is an unhappy one. Seated in a pristine bed, a woman holds a split pear towards the empty chasm on her left. Her other hand clutches a glass bowl full of pears similarly halved. On the right sits Dong as the husband—long hair pulled back, and gazing desolately at yet another pear-half in her hands. Because in China, the word for sharing a pear, 'fen li,' is pronounced the same as the word for 'separation,' the superstitious never share a pear. Dong offers the husband separation, and its accompanying sorrow.

The tension that winds and is pulled taut between the photos has its greatest expression in two of the diptychs. At a dinner table of broken white dishes, Dong stares intently at her partner while breaking social convention by aggressively pointing her chopsticks towards him. The husband reacts strongly—leaning back with an expression of shock and surprise. In the second pair, Dong lies on her back on a bed of red sheets and shelled peanuts,² legs open, arms and head thrown back with an ambiguous expression—of pleasure or pain? As the absent husband, Dong kneels facing the empty bed of shells, with head thrown back and fingers curled, a similarly indecipherable expression on her face. Like the toilet diptych, another in the series, the intimate moment is shocking—laid before us without shadow or shade, clear bright colours ringing out against the cold white background with the clarity of truth.

One pair may provide a key to unlocking the reading of these images: wearing a satin dress, Dong is splayed in an open suitcase, holding a Chinese marriage certificate. Both her very body—and the legal fact of marriage—have become baggage. In contrast to the quotidian, mundane dress of other images, here her husband is nattily dressed for the public sphere. Bent over a pool cue poised on the suitcase that contained his wife's body, he concentrates coolly over the phallically pointed stick. Here Dong lays bare the power dynamics of gender, sexuality, and race at play in a global economy of migration embodying the loneliness inherent in the resultant struggles for power.

Chun Hua Catherine Dong is a Chinese-born performance artist living in Canada. She has been invited to perform internationally, notably at the 9th Kaunas Biennial in Lithuania, Infr'Action International Performance Art Festival in Italy, the 4th International Festival and Conference for Live Art and Performance Studies in Finland, and The International Multimedia Art Festival in Burma. Her performance is listed amongst the "top nine amazing political art projects of 2010" by Art and Threat Magazine. Her current research, "Performance Ethnography: a Method of Inquiry in Research of Visualization," is supported by Canada Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Concordia University Faculty of Fine Arts and British Columbia Arts Council.

Rhonda Meier is an independent curator, writer, and editor. Beginning with her M.A. (Art History) at Concordia University, much of her practice has focused on anti-oppression, decolonization, and contemporary First Nations art production. She has worked as an educator at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, and published writing in *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, and *Changing Hands* (Museum of Arts and Design, New York).