



# Catalina Ouyang: it has always been the perfect instrument

*Video: David Usui, Interview: Remy Holwick*

A virtual tour and interview with sculptor Catalina Ouyang. *it has always been the perfect instrument*, curated by Alexis Wilkinson, ran from February 29-October 23, 2020, at The Knockdown Center, Queens.

Ed. Note: *it has always been the perfect instrument* featured interactive sculptural elements along with audio content and video remixed from a series of “artists’ and writers’ appropriations and translations” of the title IX document declaring Ouyang’s rapist “not responsible”.

Covid-19 created a barrier between an entire season of art and audience. *it has always been the perfect instrument* closed this week after a run that unintentionally lasted nearly 8 months, but was open to viewers for only a small fraction of that. While there is no substitute for interacting with Ouyang’s work in person, we are pleased to have the opportunity to share extensive documentation of the experience.

Ouyang’s upcoming show, *cunt waifu*, runs October 31 – December 6, 2020 at Lyles and King, 21 Catherine Street, in Manhattan.

**I got to spend time with/in this work, and the two interrelated themes I keep coming back to (whether you intended them or not!) are womens' bodily autonomy, and taking up space– physically, the parts of a woman fill up the room, from the bits of hair to the many breasts. Would you like to elaborate on these topics?**

I am happy to invite all kinds of readings and ways of relating to my work; I see my role, if an artist has “a role,” as creating an environment in which emotional experiences may happen. This is why I usually try to be somewhat veiled in my research, and not let the work get too didactic or self-explanatory. That said, I have tried to move away from framing my practice around specific identities. Rather than inserting some kind of “equitable” substitute for “female” or “woman”—that the work is now about “womxn,” “womyn,” “non-cismen,” etc—I articulate my interests as lying along structures of desire, power, pain, and associated material culture. Autonomy and self-definition are parts of this. A deeply-rooted fear and hatred of the feminine—which I see as both a source of abundant energy and renewal separate from biological gender, and also something that in patriarchy is discursively gendered, consolidated, and reduced into something that can be abused and humiliated—is inherent in an examination of structures of power, across cultures. Hence some of the ostensibly “gendered” imagery in my work.

When I create a breast in a sculpture, it does not stand in for the body of a woman. In *bitch bench*, it is a citation of the Capitoline wolf from the founding myth of Rome; in that story I am interested in how the caregiving entity of the she-wolf was inscribed into this narrative about men eventually murdering each other to take supreme power in an empire that is still venerated, or at least unquestioned, by people today who are not even that far Right. I have never felt any particular affinity for or connection to the reproductive aspects of my body, but I move through the world coded and treated as a woman, and that has inflected my experience with particular brands of both pain and joy. So that also expresses itself visually at certain points.

**The ping-pong sound element is interesting, because it clearly reinforces the back and forth of the very adult language of the monitors, but there's a duality with ping pong being a very youthful, innocent thing in itself. Was this intentional? It's very effective.**

Ping pong is an interesting and lovely way to read it. They are actually recorded sounds of me slapping my own face. It is interesting how in the echoey gallery you lose the fleshy softness of that sound—like a more wet thud, you might imagine—and it starts sounding like two rigid surfaces colliding. The recordings are of twenty different slaps or so. Originally, I envisioned the video piece as an extended performance where I would film myself saying every single phrase while another person's hand would slap my face with every word. More like a Gary Hill video or something. It was going to be a lot of slaps, 40,000, so it is probably good I changed course. This concept—as a physical embodiment of punishment—came out of an earlier trial iteration of *[Conclusion and Findings]* from when I was in grad school, where I converted all the responses—80-something at the time—into hornbooks hanging on meat hooks from the ceiling. Hornbooks were these wooden paddles with the alphabet and Lord's prayer carved into them, that were used centuries ago to teach children to read and also to beat their asses. Imagine just imprinting the Lord's prayer onto a kid's ass. That is what reporting my rape felt like. Learning and punishment have always in some way gone together, and the learning experience I had with reporting was very punitive. At a certain point I wanted to move away from the literal paddle as an overly direct analogy but maintain the energy of the slap—and as the other works in the show developed, and became so figurative, it made sense to remove the figure from the video itself and let the materiality of the text, with the disembodied sound, do its own kind of work.

**Part of the experience of this show is the act of sitting on a woman with many breasts, almost like a nursing animal. As a woman, it's an unnerving**

**thing to do, and I was very conscious of what I was doing as I sat. Can you talk about this element?**

Ostensibly, the *bitch bench* is a gossip chair. In part, I was thinking about gossip as a popularly derided, but actually valuable form of knowledge production and circulation. I needed the *bitch bench* to serve as seating for the video theatre, which I felt okay entreating her to do because she is me. It is, I imagine/hope, unnerving for most folks to sit on a prone human, yet this act is inextricably embedded in our history and material culture. Capitalism and whatever came before it has always purchased comfort for some with the pain and blood of others. This suffering is then, through stunning mindfuckery, venerated as “selfless,” or simply not regarded at all. I was thinking about who, historically, has been expected to bear the weight and perform the unheroic and unseen labor that allows life to continue amidst “history-making” violence. Veena Das, whose writing I’ve been spending time with during quarantine, talks of how in the aftermath of violence—and I will quote from Stanley Cavell’s introduction to her book—“the role of women is to attend, in a torn world, to the details of everyday life that allow a household to function, collecting supplies, cooking, washing and straightening up, seeing to children, and so on, that allow life to knit itself back into some viable rhythm, pair by pair. Part of her task is to make us ponder how it is that such evidently small things (whose bravery within tumultuous circumstances is, however, not small) are a match for the consequences of unspeakable horror, for which other necessities are not substitutes.” It is not so much the work itself, but the unquestioned expectation that these tasks go on without a hitch, that feels to me like being sat on. This goes for women as well as all the “unseen” laborers who keep food, garbage, shit, and semen in circulation, who in every way keep the most basic things running.

**Would you like to comment on how this work has evolved from your earlier works? Or, more broadly, how did you get to this point?**

I grew up as a self-taught photorealist. My parents are somewhat self-made immigrants, they worked in whatever paid the mortgage and the occasional vacation, they were/are philistines. My artistic “education” came from the feedback or number of likes I got on deviantArt and videogame forums. My knowledge of art history came from tumblr reposts. When I was applying to undergraduate programs I had an interview with these two white women from University of the Arts (a school in London—I was, embarrassingly, an Anglophile at the time, thanks to E4) and when I named Gustav Klimt as one of my favorite artists, I didn’t understand why they scoffed at me. Anyway. I was very good at drawing and spent all my time doing it but I honestly took little pleasure in it. It was mostly a

kind of party trick I deployed so as not to feel invisible at school, on the internet, and in the world. But drawing was the thing that got me a full ride to art school, which got me out of the suburbs, and there I came to understand the other work that art could do, the other forms it could take. At the time I was looking at and learning from a range of artists like Mona Hatoum, Orlan, Francis Alys, Silvia Kolbowski, Anna Mendieta, Louise Bourgeois of course, and many many others. My undergraduate university also had very good writing professors and I started writing again, short fiction and lyric essay. I felt excited by how interdisciplinary practice could create a home for my object-making, writing, and relational practice together.

**I know it's impossible for our cultural background and heritage not to influence our work, consciously or by default– would you be open to talking a little about yours, and whether you consciously draw on it? If so, are there any specific inspirations or points of reference you'd like to bring up?**

By nature of my name and what I look like, the context of my work cannot be divorced from my background. I try to find a space where I am neither exploiting my identity/oppression, nor trying to whitewash it. I see both extremes performed by artists.

I am a second-generation immigrant, my parents grew up in Cultural Revolution China and in their twenties moved to Chicago. I grew up in meaningless suburbs in various states and regions of the US. When I first began, in earnest, my lifelong journey of unlearning white supremacy–belatedly, in my early twenties–it felt very important to lean into my Chinese-ness, then my Asian American-ness. I went through a number of motions that it seems every Asian American art student pedals through: food art, family photo art, “I lost my mother tongue” art, “Why can't I stop having sex with white people” art, etc. When I started activating mythology and folk narratives in my work, I felt limited to drawing on Chinese sources because I didn't want to touch anything white, and I also didn't want to touch any stories that I didn't have a direct blood relationship to. That was around 2013-2016, and cultural appropriation was all over Buzzfeed in a very polemical and superficial way. These days, also taking into account the other nasty question of ethnonationalism, I try to take a more expansive and complicated approach.

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