

## Crisis as portal: Catalina Ouyang talks cosmic flesh, the concomitants of trauma & unravelling the myth safety & security

in the aftermath  
**Gabriel Cohen, 20 May 2020**  
 interviews

“They look like they’re praying,” says [Catalina Ouyang](#), over the phone from her Brooklyn studio. The artist is recalling an image of suburban school children lining a linoleum-tiled hallway: crouched on their knees, hands over their heads. “I guess this is what you do when there is no contingency plan, you just... prostrate yourself.” It is mid-March—just before California enacts a shelter in place order that effectively locks down the state—and Ouyang has just opened her *it has always been the perfect instrument* exhibition at the New York’s [Knockdown Center](#). It was scheduled to run February 19 to June 14 but is currently suspended, due to the chaos surrounding the global coronavirus crisis. Notions of contingency plans right now feel chillingly apt.

Ouyang works with a variety of approaches, including sculpture, installation, video, and participatory projects, exploring the interstices of subjugation, race, gender, and monstrosity. Searching through myth, oral history and literature, she attempts to interrupt normative processes of desire, identification and objectification. *Inmarrow* at Los Angeles’ [Make Room](#) late last year, she synthesized disparate fields of research to arrive at sculptural forms speaking of instability, self-recognition, and non-recognition, as well as trauma and its psychological ramifications. The experience of that exhibition was neither bombastic, nor laden with the sort of didactics or barriers for entry often found in work derived from research-based practices. *marrow* feels quiet and pensive. There is a brutality to the works, many of which demand being met on their own terms, resisting specific interpretation. The trauma is visible, but it is masked by an air of distance.

I had first met Ouyang one afternoon before *marrow*’s September 27 opening in Los Angeles. She was staying in a small corner studio in the Southern Californian city’s Chinatown district, filled with partially constructed sculptures, leaving little room to walk. Taking up most of the floor space was a pile of chairs, which had been hacked into pointed thrones. Perched on one of them was a carved head with a missing eye. There was a desk topped with hardened, resin-dipped undergarments in the center of the room. Below it, what looked like a human torso formed from chicken wire. A hand—carved from a fleshy pink stone and cut off at the wrist—lay on Ouyang’s worktable. There was a stack of printed photographs depicting school children participating in emergency drills next to it. In one photo, a young boy is crouched under a desk.

On seeing the *marrow* exhibition a few weeks later, I recognized, in one of the sculptures. The posture of the young boy from the photograph in Ouyang’s studio resonated in ‘risk assessment (but, but what made me do the bad thing?)’. The half-torso she had been working on had since been given a skin of shag carpet and moved into a corner of the gallery, facing the wall as if being punished with time-out. A hand encased in dried kombucha mothers clasps a security camera filled with moth balls. Underneath the desk sculpture at the entrance of the gallery lies another carpeted and amorphous figure, whose prone pose mimics that of the aforementioned image subject, but with an elongated arm slumped on the floor, forearm lifted and hand raising a middle finger.

A monitor mounted on the ceiling of a second room features two chimerical CGI avatars with blank expressions punctuating a stuttering script of flashing words with gasps. The text of ‘last laugh’ includes lines



Catalina Ouyang, *it has always been the perfect instrument* (2020). Exhibition view. Courtesy Knockdown Center, New York.

like, “what happened there at that point, where were you both...” and “how did you learn everything you ever wanted...”. They weave together pieces of language sourced from texts meant to diagnose, prosecute, and integrate trauma. Together with the rest of the work in *marrow* enacts a cynical animosity, something close to resentment that’s born from having to harbor and endure past traumas. They’re feelings that give rise to tensions that cut across all of Ouyang’s practice.

*\*\*What formal ideas were percolating throughout your process, and how does marrow fits into your practice, broadly? What research were you doing during pre-production?*

Catalina Ouyang: *marrow* was the first constellation of works I created after terminating both my MFA and a long-term love affair. These two endings were equally draining, and they left me without words for not the first time in my life. Emptiness is something I instinctively slide into when I feel broken. In being at a loss for words and thought, one thing I wanted to give myself permission to do was to return to the figure, without too many intellectual frills.

So, the first works that emerged were the inverted heads of ‘crisis management’. I was thinking—or perhaps feeling—through fear and transformation, particularly in myths of petrification, where a body is turned from flesh to stone out of terror, punishment, or extreme yearning. Throughout Asia, stories of ‘waiting stones’ tell of women who waited so long for the return of their husbands at sea or war that they turned into rocks. Yearning as the worst kind of patriarchal fantasy, this is also a kind of punishment. And the Gorgon Medusa, of course: her archetypal story of punishment (for disrespecting Athena by ‘allowing’ herself to be raped), retribution (a period of re-empowerment where she turned men to stone), then punishment again (murder by Perseus, for having dared self-preservation).

Petrification, as a state of arrested-ness, was compelling to me at the time as a generative response to trauma, specifically a ‘*The Body Keeps the Score*’ kind of trauma. Now, though, it feels so relevant to how the crisis of a pandemic has also ‘frozen’ entire cities and nations. In this context, I think of stillness or frozenness as a kind of long-due, enforced rest; as well as the revolutionary potential of stillness, sickness, and what would hegemonically be called ‘weakness’.

*\*\*I’m interested in the idea of a generative response to trauma in marrow. The ‘crisis management’ installation feels like more than a The Body Keeps the Score kind of trauma. The heads are decapitated, some are missing facial features, noses, eyes. Can you talk about how you arrived at these works?*

CO: The heads in ‘crisis management’ are a continuation of a thought from another sculpture installation I had made at the end of 2018, titled ‘one does not know it, one does not desire it’, after a quote from [Julia Kristeva](#). This piece involved a life-sized figure leaning over an oil drum, gazing at the carved-stone head of a pug resting on a candy dish. The figure’s face also had a carved alabaster facial insert, and it was also missing an eye. With that piece, I was thinking about wounded-ness and what is stolen from a traumatized body as it was situated in this site-specific encounter.

I was also thinking about the psychic underpinnings of diaspora and colonial dislocation. In ‘crisis management,’ I decapitated the heads because I wanted to turn them into vessels. I wanted these violated things, or persons, to be inverted into something that carries the potential for nurture—along with other connotations of the vessel, holding, carrying, an unheroic practice for creating histories. Beyond an essentialist notion of giving birth, it’s about collecting in anticipation of survival.

In ‘Evil,’ the pug also returns to gaze upon itself in the mirror, with a stone head that sits somehow separately from its reclining body. This pug-human



Catalina Ouyang, ‘risk assessment (but, but what made me do the bad thing?)’ (2019). Install view. Courtesy Make Room, Los Angeles.



creature is a kind of cipher, an entry point into a reading of hybridity and monstrosity. It's a domesticated bastardization of the wolf as symbol of sexuality and the forbidden, especially as activated in Angela Carter's and other feminist revisions of Little Red Riding Hood. But this wild wolf-woman who ultimately wins isn't something that I relate to. There's been too much...neutering. And distance.

With monstrosity, something else that I'm thinking about is toxicity, and how that relates—in a social sense—to what is considered “toxic” behavior, especially when it emerges from a traumatized subject position. This also relates to rage and revenge. It comes down to me trying to handle this toxicity in a way that is deeply empathetic: mournful and insistent, rather than platitudinously affirmational.

*\*\* I remember when I had visited your studio leading up to your show, you showed me reference images of children under school desks performing tornado drills. We talked about the methods by which the Western educational complex produces and reproduces fear and ideas of fear, and how that relates to intergenerational trauma and the continued effects of colonialism. Is that where your interest in this traumatic site of petrification comes from; thinking about these contorted bodies, the enduring legacy of the West's production of fear in the othered body?*

CO: While making ‘risk assessment’, my thinking about fear and transformation expanded into an assessment of the conditions that produce those responses. I was thinking very loosely about moments of crisis and emergency, and the very visceral ways that the body and psyche respond in those situations and their aftermaths; as well as the particular spaces of learning in which these responses occur, or are trained to occur.

As for the tornado drills... in a way, I am tickled by the notion that these kinds of emergencies can even be responded to at all. They *have to be*, symbolically, because institutions have liabilities; but beyond that, embedded deeper in the psyche is something very sad or sinister or both. You must be mired in some kind of cognitive dissonance to believe that crouching underneath a school desk will save you. It will make your body easier to find once the building collapses on you. But this belief, this kind of wilful delusion, is a necessary tool to be able to function in the fragile reality of one's day-to-day under capitalism.

You must know, or convince yourself that there is, in fact, a Plan B. The ‘good’ citizen is supposed to find comfort in the presence of, for example, security cameras, so that if something terrible happens, the ‘authorities’ will be able to refer back and see what occurred. Or, supposedly, the visibility of surveillance will prevent the bad thing from happening in the first place. These are all of the ‘stops’, these supposed measures of protection that are meant to keep things running smoothly, that is, profitably. But they all ultimately unravel, they don't work. The cognitive dissonance of psychically requiring that they do work, is a kind of rupture which then takes me back—perhaps elliptically—to thinking about the fractured or fragmented body. And how, especially with respect to our current situation in a pandemic, it is the fractured body (or a community of fractured bodies) that has already learned how to live when all the stops have failed.

*\*\* Right, this kind of Cold War-era propaganda has no sort of basis in reality but seeks to propagate a false sense of security, while also impressing an American exceptionalism by proposing incommensurately that one can definitely survive an atomic blast by performing this safety precaution devised for tornados. The characters that occupy that propaganda also speak to a kind of racial and political sameness—these white children crumpled under desks—which monopolized an American ideal at that moment in time. And then there is you, as a child, emulating this action and unavoidably entering into that narrative.*



Catalina Ouyang, *marrow* (2019). Exhibition view. Courtesy Make Room, Los Angeles.



Catalina Ouyang, 'risk assessment (by what love have I)' (2020). Install view. Courtesy Knockdown Center, New York.

CO: I have some vivid memories, from Illinois in the mid 90s, of participating in these safety drills with all the alarm bells ringing and everyone clambering underneath their desks together. It was one of the only situations in which I ever came close to feeling, not quite *part* of everyone else, but... imagine you and your brother are the only two Asian people in your public school, and ostracized accordingly. Then you are thrown into a situation, this drill, where you and your racist classmates and teachers and administrators are all together, reduced—literally lowered—to face the linoleum floor of your own prospective mortality.

I am not claiming that ‘death is the great equalizer’, because that is not at all true; but I *have* been thinking about [Kaja Silverman’s](#) proposal in *Flesh of My Flesh* that finitude—the immovable certainty of our eventual end—can push us toward a consideration of what is shared, as opposed to the post-Enlightenment (and capitalistic) fixation on uniqueness and difference. There is something about learning to be ‘prepared’ for crisis or emergency that is at once an erasure of the individual—somehow dehumanizing—but at the same time affirms your flesh as descended from the same cosmic flesh of everything around you.

In Illinois, we rode on the bus for half an hour across a wide cornfield to school; in the middle of our journey, we had to cross a railroad track. The bus would stop, and all the children on board were obliged to put our hands up in the ‘quiet sign’ (a peace sign, basically) on the backs of the bus seats as we waited to make sure that no train would crush us. That shared gesture that we all had to learn and perform became this odd fascist exercise of comfort and control; it brought our flesh into the same shape. That flesh shape eventually contorted and tumbled through my mind, decades later, to become the middle finger of one figure in ‘risk assessment’.

*\*\* The body, in a representational sense, is also an access point for a lot of viewers, whether they fall within or outside of an ‘art-educated’ community. It is a way by which you can enter into the work physically by projecting yourself into the object, or whatever the artwork may be. It’s interesting to hear you talk about the work through the realm of ideation because a lot of the imagery you are invoking appears quite literally in the sculptures that make up marrow: the security camera, the school desk with the figure beneath it, the school chairs that have been made into these strange pointed monoliths...*

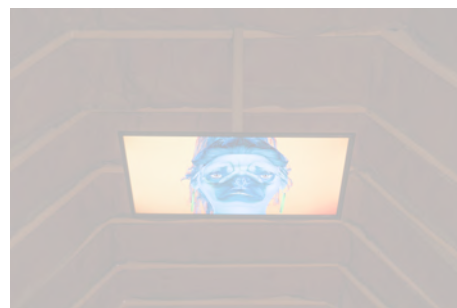
CO: Right. I had spoken with you previously about proprioception—how a body intuitively locates itself in space—and ways of queering and politicizing phenomenology, particularly with respect to [Sara Ahmed’s](#) work on phenomenology. The various relations and inversions that *marrow’s* various figures are involved in reflect the proprioceptive experience of an Othered body, which is perpetually ‘out of sorts’ and must navigate space in ways that are never neutral and never at ease, for it never enjoys a condition of belonging. With the installation ‘last laugh’, in mounting the video on the ceiling facing down, I sought to create a situation that would ask—not force, not require—but *ask* that, in order to spectate on the frenetic speech of these two avatars, the viewer contort their body in a way sympathetic to the predicament of the heads on the chairs.

*\*\* In the first space of Make Room, which is more of a standard white cube, you have figures contorting away from the viewer in states of shock. In order to engage with them, the viewer has to contort themselves as well. This is replicated in the second half of the exhibition—a side room modified to look like an attic in which ‘last laugh’ is installed. In both situations the contortion of the self in order to view the work becomes integral in its reading. Is that what you’re driving at, and the way this relates to the trauma these bodies are experiencing?*

CO: I am thinking of the language in ‘last laugh’, which is drawn partially from PTSD surveys, therapy sessions, self-help texts, police questioning,



Catalina Ouyang, *marrow* (2019). Exhibition view. Courtesy Make Room, Los Angeles.



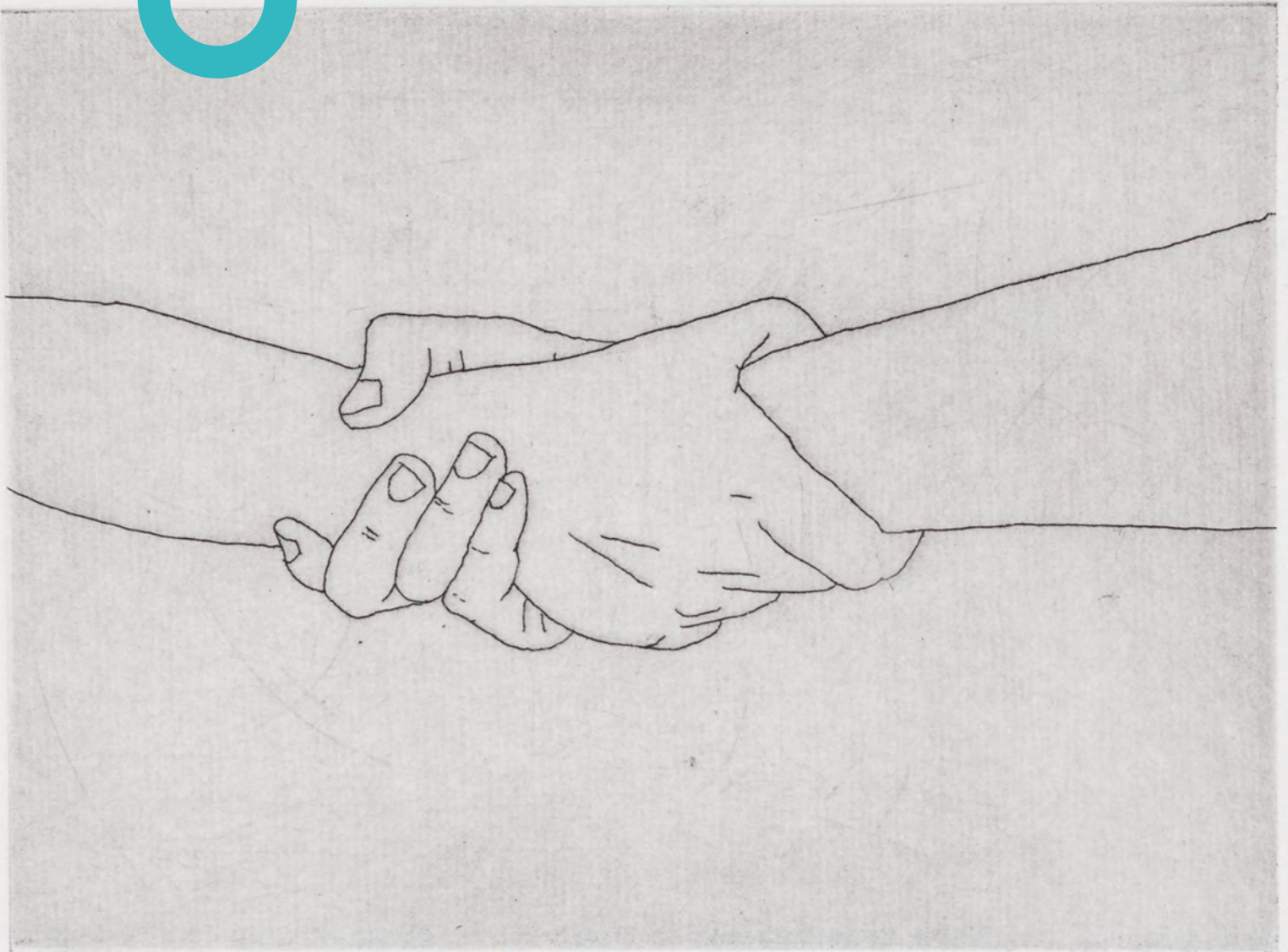
Catalina Ouyang, ‘last laugh’ (2019). Install view. Courtesy Make Room, Los Angeles.

things meant to 'help' by maintaining or restoring order—are there points at which it is valuable to embrace or use these measures at face value? One line in the video is quoted directly from my sexual assault counselor, the first therapist I ever found the courage or humility to see: 'That's not a feeling, I need you to name your feeling.' At the time, I *could not* name a feeling without qualifying it somehow. Because I needed to be better than my feeling, I needed to be a master of it.

We live in an ableist society that glorifies functionality and mastery so that we can continue to be productive contributors. This is something to resist, but perhaps the apparatus of 'being well' can be repurposed. How does a person live, find joy? What other tools do we have, what tools have we inherited, and how ought they be used or misused?\*

Catalina Ouyang's *it has always been the perfect instrument* solo exhibition at New York's Knockdown Center was scheduled to run February 29 to June 14. It is currently suspended due to circumstances.





# GIVE IT A TWIST

## Catalina Ouyang

NEW YORK

“guileless”/“bone”/“desire”/  
“sinking.” These are among the  
roughly 40,000 words that flash  
on the black screens embedded  
in twin decrepit chaises longues,

installed opposite one another at Catalina Ouyang’s exhibition “it has always been the perfect instrument” (2020) at the Knockdown Center in New York. The video installation rearranges the words from Ouyang’s project [*Conclusion and Findings*] (2017– ), for which she invited writers to contribute “poetic translations” of the final section of her undergraduate university’s Title IX report exonerating her ex-partner of rape. “I was thinking about unravelling—of sense, narrative, groundedness—and failure: not the failure of each individual collaborator’s text, but of my own endeavor to illuminate or distill something from this source material,” Ouyang explained. By splintering the texts into a jumbled script—simmering with allusions to sex, hauntings, and bodily decay—the artist points to the fundamental duplicity of language, which can reveal as much as it occludes. “It made sense to me to handle words themselves texturally, rhythmically, visually, in a kind of refusal that blooms into something different, that brings all this data into another kind of erotic space.”

Ouyang’s practice is characterized by fragmentation and reconstitution. Her *font* sculptures (2016– ), for instance, conjoin sharpened stakes and raw egg with small soapstone hollows inspired by church stoups. In *font V* (2020), the concavity is a human mouth, gagged by a shell-less egg. Tangles of horse hair, homophonous with “whore’s hair,” snake from the sculpture across the floor and up the gallery wall. Richly associative, *font V* appears both diminutive and expansive, abject yet threatening, reflecting the artist’s interest in “suturing together material in non-hierarchical and variegated—perhaps rhizomatic—ways.”

The subversive power of hybridity comes to the fore in Ouyang’s mythological retellings. *bitch bench* (2018) fashions a row of seats from a sculpture of the Capitoline Wolf lying on its side, with clawed human hands and feet. Turned toward the sitter at an unnatural 90-degree angle is the artist’s grinning, fanged visage. Here, the glorified symbol of Rome is grotesque and abased. Born out of the wreckage of ossified narratives, the artist’s heterogeneous figures embody the generative power of breakage.

OPHELIA LAI



Detailed installation view of CATALINA OUYANG’s *font V*, 2020, soapstone, horse hair, glue, abandoned wood, gifted honeycomb, raw egg, white vinegar, 25.4×15.2×25.4 cm, at “it has always been the perfect instrument,” Knockdown Center, New York, 2020. Photo by Alexander Perrelli. Courtesy Knockdown Center.

DECEMBER 17, 2019

# MAKE ROOM GALLERY | MARROW

BY MORGAN VICKERY (/CONTENT?AUTHOR=5CDDAD4FC0198A00017ABED8)



Photo courtesy Catalina Ouyang.

Emilia Yin, art dealer, and gallerist of [Make Room gallery](https://makeroom.la/) in Los Angeles, recently featured the latest works of [Catalina Ouyang](https://catalinaouyang.com/CV). In her confrontation of language, space, and the power relations embedded within them, she created the exhibition "marrow." Flaunt spoke with both gallerist and artist, decoding the stunning complexity of these works.

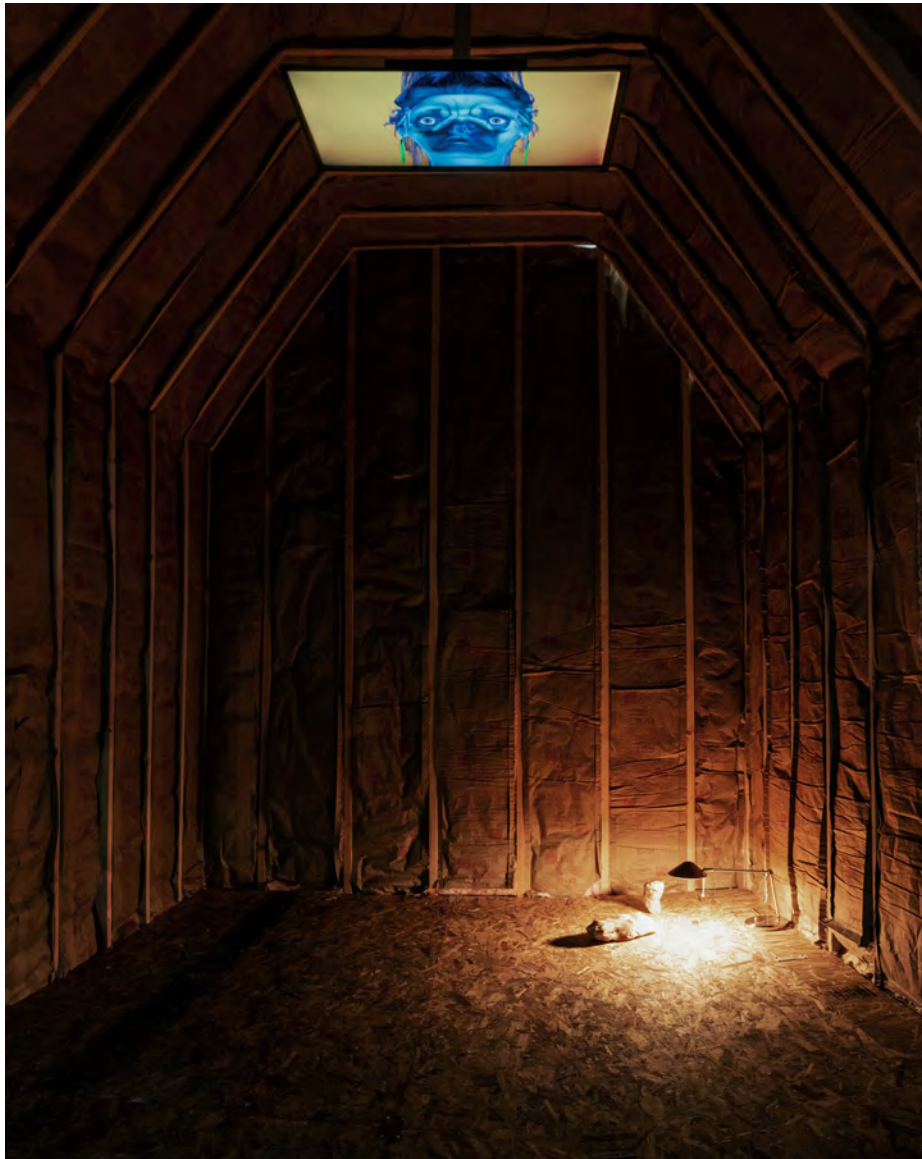
## How did the collaboration of 'Marrow' at Make Room gallery transpire?

**Emilia Yin:** Catalina and I have been working together since the establishment of Make Room. As a millennial myself, I was naturally drawn to the conversations in her practice that reflects our time. Her work discusses the undercurrent of the society we are living in, and constantly poses new questions for one to consider, both visually and conceptually. This is the second solo exhibition that we have worked on together, and it has been a fantastic journey to witness the transformation of Catalina's practice over the past couple of years.

After she graduated from the Yale MFA in May earlier this year, she participated in the Shandaken residency program in New York and the Wilhardt & Naud Residency in LA, where I visited and spoke with her about developing the show together. It was a process where I was able to deepen my understanding of where she stood in her practice and concept behind this show, as well as the stage of life she's in that inspires her to create such a body of work.

As a gallerist myself, I believe that the best I can do is to support her wholeheartedly and provide any emotional support when needed. We worked with the artist and architect Adrian Abela to design and construct a structure of an attic room within one of the gallery spaces, according to Catalina's vision. It was a challenging production, but it turned out really well and brought viewers into another dimension and away from the conventional white cube space.





Catalina Ouyang. *last laugh*. (2019).

***'Revisionist Storytelling'* has been used to describe your work. How would you explain this framework?**

**Catalina Ouyang:** I use the term "revisionist" because "reclamation" carries what feels like a false promise, and "feminist" feels fraught and inadequate at this point. That said, I am committed to questions of how to critique—with all of that term's loaded implications—and how to reframe. Storytelling, myth, and folklore are these lush and haunted materials full of potential to be remixed, so as to carry something of a different end from the often violent, patriarchal, and nationalistic forms in which we've inherited them. Sometimes when I think about myths, fairy tales, and stories that have been passed down through generations of oral tradition, I get full-body chills; even though many versions of these narratives have come into being, they each carry the sense that they had to play out the way they did, and there is this sense of timeless doom, the beginning has always been the end. I am not so much interested in beginnings and endings, but in how a story can become a floating, material structure, which you can physically pull from, pollute, fracture, and graft onto other things. A story is a way to introduce constraints, and my project is to explore their inevitability. I prefer to work reductively with a given set of parameters: carving, using found objects weighted with their own histories, drawing from existing stories, and references... I like having something to push against. Working additively freaks me out, it feels too much like playing god — kind of like writing fiction. There's too much you can do.

At the same time, I am not a research-based artist, and my work is not meant to deliver information or enlighten the viewer. I am trying to offer something hazier around the edges. Maybe what I mean is that I deconstruct and fragment stories and that deconstruction entails refusal of the grand narrative. I see that refusal as proposing a kind of righting—and hence becomes a kind of "revision." I don't re-write narratives as a restorative endeavor; there is some kind of power and value to that, certainly, but that's someone else's project. I am interested in colliding signposts to create unstable planes of meaning, thereby gesturing to spaces outside of Universal Reason and scientific knowing. I think about how strategies that have been deployed violently, to patriarchal, imperialist, and capitalist ends—such as extraction, fragmentation, and displacement—can be practiced toward an opposing sensibility. How to wrestle with this stuff until it comes out of a differently-shaped hole? I think—as a secular person raised with no religion—it has to do with faith. And love. Can you love a wretched thing, through sustained touch, into becoming something that carries immanence? Maybe not. But the attempt has to come from the heart.



Catalina Ouyang. *Evil*. (2019).

**In what way does this exhibition confront language, space, and power?**

**CO:** We cannot help using the words that we've inherited, but speaking at all often feels like stumbling through a minefield. This analogy, in itself, is obviously militaristic and violent. We inherit these capitalistic and militaristic structures for perceiving and describing the world—we're "invested" in something we care about, we "deploy" methods or skills, we "execute" strategies, we literally "capitalize" on advantageous circumstances, etc. All this language is mired in violence. I sanctioned that sentence in the press release—that my work "confronts" these things—because one must settle for an approximate tool sometimes, but in fact, I really want my work not to "confront" anything. I try to make things in earnest, using available tools that often feel violent, violating, and wrong. English—grammar, at all—is a tool optimized to fortify structures of death, displacement, and suffering. It is also the tool of communication I have at my disposal. Almost everything we touch and use has been created under conditions of violent exploitation. As artists, we muddy our hands by refashioning these things with, for some of us, starry-eyed hopes of overcoming the bloodshed in which they were born. Part of my laughably inadequate response to this is making everything "wrong," in decidedly non-virtuosic and non-archival ways—with cardboard, Styrofoam, plaster, papier-mache, found stuff, food, and garbage. I do carve stone, but I carve it wrong and at the wrong scale, too small and obscured. Much of my work has a precarious relationship to gravity. Often when I start a new piece, I feel as if I am making an object for the first time. By keeping the fabrication strange, unreliable, and in a way unpracticed, I am trying to refuse mastery, and I am trying to keep my tools at a suspicious arm's length.

I've said this a lot, but I used to write, with great ease and alacrity. I was enthusiastic and uncritical about language. For the past several years, I have talked about "when I lost language"—this happened in 2015 after I was raped by a lover, though my rape was ultimately not the sole cause—but in fact, I did not lose language itself, I lost the ease of using language. I lost the abandon. And in hindsight, I am glad to have lost that, because I think it is dangerous to be reckless with language, to feel entitled to it, to feel entitled enough not to question it. The sculptures in marrow feel very much weighed down (or perhaps held up?) by silence. While the video installation last laugh is 22 minutes of incessant language, it is a language that frantically undoes itself. So, there is something about the way that language is either withheld or falls apart completely, in marrow that also feels like a refusal of the tool.



Catalina Ouyang. *crisis management*. (2019).

**What feelings surround the 'crisis management' works?**

*CO:* Basically, the four pieces in crisis management came out of a period of pain, confusion, and really spectacular heartbreak that dredged up some old traumas. So, I was hung up on some feelings about being speechless, frozen, without agency, and wanted to process this by thinking very simply about stone, which I had been working with for some time and could never fully make sense of why. How bodies get stoned as punishment (often for sexual or gendered "crimes"), how mythic bodies get turned to stone out of fear or in punishment. Medusa, that old feminist icon, has been a recurring presence in my work, and because of her, I am always coming back to retribution and decapitation.

The pieces are individually titled as follows:

(filling the space with syllables waiting for something to pass)

(invocation of losses counted, suckers had)

([Perseus] came for the holes)

(sometimes all it needs is to be convinced)



Catalina Ouyang. *crisis management*, (2019).

These titles are meant to allude to some of the narratives I'm drawing from, as well as evoke a sense of time, waiting, and yearning. I was thinking about spaces where we learn how to yearn (and in turn, how to fear and to hate), like the home and the school. Furniture is orientating tools, commensal tools, and disciplinary tools. With the chairs as staging devices, the gesture was quite direct: I knew the chairs must be destroyed and reconstituted, and I wanted them to be quite stark and naked. They had to look really beat up because I wanted the speed and rage of their creation to remain evident.

Thinking about petrification, deep fear, took me to think about trauma and emergency. I don't think of the stone inserts in the faces so much as prosthetics for some kind of lack, as they are a material interruption that brings the heads into a state of transformation. With trauma, there is a breach of such severity that existing mechanisms no longer work—so one is compelled to birth new mechanisms of dealing. The word "emergency" comes from the Latin root *emergere*, which means to come into being. To be born. In a crisis, there is also genesis. Crisis management, a capitalist term, is the process by which an organization (often a business) responds to a situation that would negatively affect its stakeholders, profitability, reputation, or ability to operate. It's a cynical term. I suppose in using it; I wanted to upend it. While these heads are decapitated and silenced, they are also not without agency; and their necks, at the point of severance, open up into vessels, which are spaces full of potential and nourishment.

To perhaps expand on my answer to your previous question, I was reading an older interview with Paul Preciado where he talks briefly about how sexual subjectivity in the nineteenth century was produced by individuals' movement through a series of institutions such as the family, the factory, the school, the hospital, etc. I began to think about this kind of formative movement through disciplinary space in relation to how Sara Ahmed writes on queer phenomenology, where proprioception is never neutral but deeply impacted by race, gender, sexuality, nationality, etc. And she also takes up the sexual orientation of orientation, the Orientalism of orientation. So, I was thinking about disrupting or inverting a very basic relation a body might have to a social architecture, such as an ass on a chair. These decapitated heads, in their inverted and precarious position, are out-of-sorts, as Ahmed might describe, disorientated. Their woundedness is doubly defeat and insurrection.



Catalina Ouyang, *yoke of thyself*, (2019).

**Tell us about the creation of *'yoke of thyself.'***

**CO:** That piece began with a white ribbed tank top—colloquially called a wifebeater, as you probably know. It was the only thing I kept of my ex-lover's, I had thrown away or burned everything else. Honestly, I felt it could be a useful studio garment, and I was working that August in a studio in downtown LA with no AC. So I wore the wifebeater for much of the month and a half that I was making the work for marrow. Maybe a part of me was trying to sweat away the nasty specter of its previous occupant—to drown it out. At a certain point, during that month, I got a tattoo in the center of my back—I tend to get tattoos in times of crisis, sadness, or pain—and the tattoo bled out from its bandage and stained the wifebeater, which I was wearing. It was a small mark, just a purplish-black dot, almost like a freckle on a stretch of the skin, but I was drawn to that as an event of mark-making. I knew after that that I wanted to use this wifebeater in a work somehow, to give it its own death. The wifebeater evokes labor, class, gender, and a specifically fraught domestic space—I kept returning to Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire*—which ties back into ideas around the home and school as conflict zones of punitive learning.

I also recognized, at some point in the making, that I had subliminally been thinking of Jean Rhys' doomed, spectral heroines. *Voyage in the Dark* and *The Wide Sargasso Sea* were formative books in my teens. The elliptical quality of her storytelling—all its dissociated, drug-induced gaps in logic and time—was a kind of mirror to ways that negative space and omission operate in my work. *The Wide Sargasso Sea*, of course, offers the "postcolonial" origin story of Antoinette Cosway—known as Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*—whose legacy lives on in flames. The installation last laugh is a nod to her and the Victorian trope of the Madwoman in the Attic. So I really wanted to approach, with a necessary level of abstraction, the pain of the harmed and self-harming body, the pain of inheriting a body irreconcilably marked by and complicit in the violent occupation, the pain of a stripped, flayed, burned skin, hanging from the rafters.

A recurring motif in the show is, of course, that of a head separated from its body, or vice versa. *Yoke of thyself* is another permutation of that. Once I cut open the garment into this flayed skin, the empty head-hole of the wifebeater suddenly transformed into a belly-hole, and it felt like an orifice full of potential. I thought back to Ursula K. Le Guin's essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," in which—speaking of tools, previously—she proposes prehistoric women's work of gathering as an alternative storytelling framework to the phallogocentric hero's journey of hunting and killing with sharp objects. In positing the receiving vessel as the first tool, Le Guin makes a case for the unheroic story. I owe the title to a Natalie Diaz poem where she uses the phrase, "yoke of myself," in recounting a moment of coming into self-love—where you learn the value of carrying your own weight and all your traumatic baggage. I liked the idea of the head/belly-hole on this flayed body being purposed into a carrier bag holding significant weight—a pile of stones, which felt appropriately Biblical. I wanted that sack to be visibly straining as if it might not hold up. Honestly, I wasn't sure if it would.





Images courtesy of Make Room Los Angeles and the artist, photographed by Yubo Dong and Make Room Los Angeles.