

Artist Catalina Ouyang explores Chinese-American immigrant experience in new exhibit

St. Louis Public Radio
Published December 1, 2016 at 10:59 PM CST



Provided by the Catalina Ouyang /

An uncooked egg sits in stone, the shell turned translucent by white vinegar.

Catalina Ouyang's sculptures are an amalgam of unexpected materials: a raw egg soaked in white vinegar, marble, fake bones, a printed copy of Italo Calvino's book "Invisible Cities" and basketball shorts.

Ouyang uses the objects to examine her Chinese-American identity and challenge social pressures placed on immigrants to conform to North American norms. She specifically aims to provoke questions about how society asks immigrants to assimilate into white culture.

She wants people to consider what for her is a consistent dilemma: "How to contend with what I call the aspirational fantasy of whiteness in what I think persists as an imperialist and colonialist power structure."

Ouyang's show "Elegy for Marco" will open today at The Millitzer Studio and Gallery in the Tower Grove neighborhood. The show will run through the end of the year. Its title is a nod to Marco Polo, the Venetian explorer often attributed with bringing together European and Chinese cultures. According to the artist, each work touches on the relationship between Ouyang's Chinese heritage and her experience growing up in the United States. She explores similar themes in traditional Chinese folklore and Western canon. Ouyang sees the immigrant experience as defined by the pressure to conform to U.S. culture and leave behind traditions associate with a person's country of origin. For her,

creating artwork that addresses such influences is a way to speak up for her heritage and the heritage of others.



Credit Provided by Catalina Ouyang /

These faux marble bones reference a demon from Chinese mythology "The White Bone Demon."

"That's my way of pulling things from the past and reconnecting with parts of me I feel I've lost in terms of accessing my Chinese heritage," she said, "and then confronting parts of me that I feel ambivalent about in my westernization and sort of colliding them together as sort of mud pies."

Chinese voices often aren't represented in the St. Louis art community.

"It is interesting working as a Chinese American woman artist in St. Louis because that demographic is pretty underrepresented ... maybe nonexistent," she said.

The show fits The Millitzer Studio and Gallery's recent series of exhibits that focus on providing space for women artists and artists of color to show work or curate specific projects.

Gallery Coordinator Adrian Cox said it's a mission that emerged at the alternative arts space this past year.

"In St. Louis, it seems like the longer an alternative art space is around the more important people feel it to be," Cox said. "So I saw this gap in the St. Louis art scene that our gallery space was filling and it felt like an opportunity to offer a platform to artists and tailor our exhibition programming to what I feel would benefit the city most."

For Ouyang, that vision is being realized this weekend. The exhibit opens Friday with a one-time-only, secret performance that will be filmed and displayed later on a flat screen TV as part of the show.



Credit Provided by Catalina Ouyang /

A printed copy of Italo Calvino's novella "Invisible Cities" soaks in clear liquid.