

THE RIB

The Anatomy of War

AN INTERVIEW WITH CATALINA OUYANG BY MARY SKY



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St. Louis artist **Catalina Ouyang** explores her own cultural perspective as a Chinese American through various contemporary media. She discusses her recent work with myths, the fantasy lives of start-ups, and the new photo series featuring a paperback translation of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*.

TRANSCRIPTION

I make objects, and some videos, sometimes take photographs that end up in sculptures, etc. And I do some writing as well, which sometimes makes it way into videos and sometimes is totally separate as well. So I guess the term is multidisciplinary.

I've been looking a lot at different mythologies both from my Chinese Heritage-- I'm a second-generation Chinese American-- and as well as the western canon. I'm looking at different ways of fragmenting existing narratives, representing things, twisting them somehow, and they become something else. Mythology as a way to take agency and authorship over narratives especially for people maybe like don't historically have voice, it's the way to reclaim and carve out narratives.

In my most recent body of work, that was based on the legend of the White Snake, and that's about these two sister-demon-goddess-serpent-best-friends, the White Snake and Green Snake. Or Whitey and Greeny, and they hang out in their serpent form, they practice kung-fu for millions of years in this is sort-of queer utopia sort-of super powerful and then one day Whitey decides to fall in love with a human-man and wants to surrender her immortality and this throws everything into chaos. In this space of the story it seems very transparent that the White Snake is doing something, so stupid. She has a pretty good set-up, being immortal, all powerful- wants to give it all away for this heteronormative construct fantasy of true love.

I see the same sort of impulses or even wanting to be beholden to fantasies that inherently uphold patriarchy, invading what otherwise would be really strong, queer femme communities. In the very beginning, when the legend first came to be, it actually takes place in the city where my mother grew up, in the lake where she used to swim, which is what drew me to it in the first place. The White Snake was seen as this evil demon who you had to be vanquished. There's actually a jealous male monk, of both the White Snake's power as a goddess as well as her new-found happiness and love, so he is the one who instigates all of these battles because he wants to sabotage the love affair. At a certain point he manages to capture the White Snake, defeat her, and imprisons her underneath this famous pagoda by the lake. In the original Brothers Grimm-type, she dies and this is celebrated because demons are bad and women are evil.

Over time it was spun into this more romantic tale, everything ends happily because its a story about transcending difference in the name of love, which for me is still troubling because why does this have to be in the name of love for somebody that's lesser than you, or you know, being a human man, giving up your clear powerful sisterhood.

In that body of work, I was working on fragmenting that narrative, pulling out certain motifs. there's a lot of battles that happen in the story as a result of this human-demon love affair, what kind of desires are behind wanting to transform into something else and I was kind of thinking about that in the context of passing culturally or assimilation, these things that are confused about what they actually are and what they actually want to be. Sort of questioning something's ability to actually know, what it wants to be, is how I think about transformation or shifting forms, or even hybrid forms, and what it means to be in between. I and one of my best friends acted as the White Snake and the Green Snake. I had a sort of Aryan-looking-blonde-boy stand in as the human lover and he was reading two poems in a video by the Chinese famous queer poet Wu Zhao.



Catalina Ouyang, *Self-Portrait with Art of War 01*, 2017. Courtesy of Mary Sky.



Catalina Ouyang, *Self-Portrait with Art of War 02*, 2017. Courtesy of Mary Sky.

I can't read Chinese; whatever I'm reading about Journey to the West, legend of the White Snake is all translated and often by white people. So I'm sort of-- there's this cyclical-- to get closer to myself I have to go through white people. My experience growing up; first, Midwest America and in Jersey, has been a proverbial Journey to the West, negotiating my own identity, I was Chinese-American and then also my relationship with assimilation. Revisiting these things that could have been very close to me had I grown up in China accessing them through layers of filters. The synthetic is my real, or the mediated is my authentic.

I have been thinking about the ancient Chinese text The Art of War book that was translated by a white man named Thomas Cleary and it has just basic military strategy and the M.O. is if you can avoid fighting, do avoid bloodshed and if a battle can be won through negotiating go that way. In the last century, I guess, The Art of War has really been co-opted by entrepreneurs and businessmen and if that's the copy that I'm reading it literally says in Newsweek review: "you can throw out all those self-help books on business and just like read this one". The way that startup bros get really hyped up using a military text as to do with fetishization of battle and war and competition right. I mean the whole idea of capitalism, it comes down to human nature being competition, Sports and that industry and how the earliest games of sports were like simulations of war. It's all about fulfilling a certain aspect of like a very masculine ego to me the valorisation of the ideal athlete's figure being related to that of the the military or the warrior. How that all relates to these overlapping desires.

There's a whole chapter about one should take care not to fight an uphill battle, I guess the line is never fight an enemy that has its back to a hill. And as women and as a woman of color and as a woman of color who is a survivor of sexual assault, you cannot fight a battle that's not uphill, right? So how can I reconsider this text? Can it be valuable to me in some way? How can the text be used by people who are inherently underdogs? I will never quite have the advantage. So I've been talking with my two friends about picking up certain passages from the text and performing them in public or in different spaces, sort of gesture of protest, shouting these words into the ether.

I always go back and forth with me being present in the work and less so but of course, you know, I also think about the weaponization of a woman's body and how it is both fetishized and demonized. The naked female body is really charged and in those photos I want this specific text in there because it's this shitty paperback that has that stupid quote on the cover. You know, I wouldn't want to have it in the original Mandarin because that's not my experience of it. I am interested in dealing with new paradigms carving out new paths now that this history is behind us and that these sort of parameters already exist.

Because agriculture was invented so that we needed to own land.

You know, marriage was a thing because we needed to sell the baby makers. And then the myth of true love really complicates it even further.

You think about how the world is designed for couples to move through it with greater ease: financial, social, whatever ease, than not-couples.

I don't know what a world would look like without the nuclear family unit, people have tried and it's also become weird and culty because power gets so easily abused. That was a lot of my thinking behind The Art of War photographs.

That I try to land on a certain affect, I'm uncomfortable because it's too direct or it's like a little bit angry, really all you dudes looking at me, I would love to like, kill you. You know? But it's like you can't force people to read your work correctly. You know? The most they can do is look at it.