



16 Rising Artists of the Asian Diaspora in the United States

Even as artists of color begin to gain a foothold in the upper echelons of the art world, naming widely celebrated Asian diasporic artists with cemented legacies in the art historical canon remains challenging. Oftentimes, it feels as though we're constantly excavating long overlooked or ignored artistic practices. However, thanks to decades of activism and advocacy from BIPOC artists and art workers, greater attention is being given to contemporary artists of color during their lifetime. Here, we focus on rising artists of the Asian diaspora currently based in the United States. Many of these artists have been experiencing substantial career momentum in recent months, exhibiting in art institutions or international biennials one after the other. Some have honed their craft and bypassed educational barriers, exhibiting in solo shows at leading galleries without an MFA, and sometimes even without a BFA.

My conversations with these artists and close readings of their works reveal an engagement with similar ideas through varied approaches and media, suggesting a collective consciousness created through shared experiences within the diaspora. Multimedia artist Catalina Ouyang and figurative painters Oscar yi Hou and Timothy Lai spoke about losing the Chinese language or never having a firm grasp of it to begin with. Informed by theorists Gilles Deleuze and Isabelle Stengers's writings on how stuttering acts like a glitch, Ouyang pushes the English language to points of deterioration. Yi Hou, on the other hand, visually obscures the English texts in his paintings and drawings, relegating them to the space of inscrutability often reserved for Chinese characters. Meanwhile, painters like Lai, Bambou Gili, Sasha Gordon, and Dominique Fung expand on the color palettes used to render Asian skin—not only with shades of yellow and brown, but also hues of red, blue, and purple.

The artists featured also pay tribute to those who came before them, acknowledging the continuum of the diasporic experience. Gili includes the late Matthew Wong's spotlighted door from *5:00 PM* (2019) in *Blue Summer (An Ode to Matthew Wong)* (2020). Ouyang's "*Lift me to the window to the picture image unleash the ropes tied to weights of stones first the ropes then its scraping on wood to break stillness as the bells fall peal follow the sound of ropes holding weight scraping on wood to break stillness bells fall a peal to sky*" (2020) borrows its title from the last line of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's 1982 publication *Dictée*, and features a portrait of the artist as the late poet. Multimedia artist Kang Seung Lee's labor-intensive reproductions of photos of painter Martin Wong and photographer Tseng Kwong Chi illustrate both the precarity of these artists's lives during the AIDS epidemic and their diminished presence in art history. While charting careers of their own, these rising artists bring their predecessors with them.

Catalina Ouyang



Catalina Ouyang, installation view of "cunt waifu" at Lyles & King, 2020. Photo by Charles Benton. Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King.

In Catalina Ouyang's multimedia practice, trauma is made painfully visible. The sculpture *otherwise, spite: 1. whores at the end of the world / 2. from every drop of his blood another demon arose (1829–40)* (2020), for example, shows a gruesome murder, and quite possibly a rape. A two-faced yellow figure holds a long-haired woman by the throat with one hand, the other wields a pair of scissors stabbing the woman in her left eye. Her stomach is split open to reveal her pink intestines; her decapitated legs spread apart.

Through paralleled structure, the sculpture's title is a direct reference to Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés: 1° La chute d'eau, 2° Le gaz d'éclairage* (*Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas*) (1946–66). Widely accepted as depicting the aftermath of rape, murder, and mutilation, Duchamp's final major artwork (and, by extension, Ouyang's sculpture) visually quotes *Gustave Courbet's L'Origine du monde* (1866) in order to explore the theme of birth and rebirth. Ouyang's sculpture also references a 19th-century drawing of the Thuggee Cult of India stabbing three strangled travelers in the eye before throwing their bodies down a well. Many contemporary historians contest the existence of such "Thugs" or organized groups of serial robbers and murderers in colonial India, claiming they are in fact inventions by Orientalist fears.



Catalina Ouyang, installation view in "THE SIREN" at Real Art Ways, 2021. Photo by John Groo. Courtesy of the artist and Real Art Ways.