

# LIVING CONTENT

## Catalina Ouyang

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DEATH DRIVE JOY RIDE, Installation views, photos courtesy the artist and Make Room, LA

**Brian Paul:** I want to start by asking you about growing up in different suburban contexts.

**Catalina Ouyang:** It's kind of complicated. For a long time, I thought my butthole-of-suburbia upbringing was fairly uninteresting. And if not totally deliberately, I edited that out of my work. That's possibly a reason that I am so interested in this wide span of history and mythology because I grew up 'without culture.' I'm trying to reach back for something. In the past couple of years, I've been trying to be more open about that, and let that sort of suburban, gauche, poor taste, bubble up in my work. In terms of materiality and color but also as a kind of tawdry material sensibility.

**BP:** What do you mean by tawdry?

**CO:** For example, in my most recent show, DEATH DRIVE JOY RIDE at Make Room in LA, I had a lot of motifs from that Teenage bedroom, mall-rat, Hot Topic, pink leather... Lots of shiny things, or little things with gems or heart-shaped vials or heart-shaped things. Motifs that relate to ideas of burgeoning desire in my suburban adolescence. I've been trying to let those kinds of aesthetics & objects sit comfortably with these more primal, ancient, mythical demonic hellscapes. (laughs)

**BP:** I love that contrast. There's a tone in your work that's like 'blunt nihilism' or 'candid apocalypse.' You talk about villains and monsters, and just mentioned demons. There's a blending of characters Romulus and Remus, the Chinese folk tale spirit of protection, Nezha. Are there any other characters floating around for you?

**CO:** Just to speak generally about the villains or demons for a minute... in my work I'm interested in an underdog character as it relates to revenge narratives as well as a kind of alternative community building. For me, relating to witches, or other kinds of marginalized villains, I see them occupying a space similar to, or adjacent to, internet subcultures.

In the body of work, I did recently for DEATH DRIVE JOY RIDE, I was colliding fox fairies/demons with my seminal years on DeviantArt and doing fan art. It all relates to this desire for



DEATH DRIVE JOY RIDE. Installation views, photos courtesy the artist and Make Room, LA

some kind of escape to a different community. Or a portal to some kind of communal understanding outside of an exclusionary hegemony.

**BP:** There's something about that... I remember wanting Pokemon to be real so badly.

**CO:** Yes!

**BP:** Something about how 'the rules' are clear maybe? You go off on your adventure with your friends and you just have to beat each gym. Is it that desire for something that kind of makes sense?

**CO:** I mean, there is a kind of order, or world-building, that leads to a sequence of events that are a little more equitable, or easier to make sense of. It's like going through the wardrobe of Narnia, you know? Or walking through some hidden space and finding yourself somewhere new where you can-not start over but-where you can be untethered from external expectations or pigeonholed by what is put on you IRL.

**BP:** It's like writing fanfic, you get to decide what the characters do.

**CO:** Yes, exactly.

**BP:** And so many people write themselves into their stories.

**CO:** A bad example, but that's basically 50 Shades of Grey. (laughter)

**BP:** Yes. So you mentioned belief in a couple of different ways, talking about believing in astrology, Western medicine or Chinese traditional healing. Then, you brought up ghosts... and you approached it with an attitude of leaving yourself open to a spiritual way. Letting that mythology be kind of real. Can you tell me more about your thoughts, about that openness, and specifically about ghosts?

**CO:** I would probably describe myself as a low-commitment spiritualist if there is such a thing. Agnosticism for superstition - that's probably where I'm at. I grew up in a household with

parents who grew up during the Chinese cultural revolution. I think my grandparents had been religious in some way, but faith was not something that was addressed or even present in my house.

I didn't have to go through the rejection, coming of age thing, that a lot of my friends who grew up religious did. It was later on in my life that my previously militaristic atheism mellowed out, and I started thinking more earnestly about things like astrology and planetary alignments in a way that went beyond trading Pokemon cards or doing joke tarot card readings. I haven't committed to the vast amount of research and practice that this kind of spiritual practice really involves but I'm totally open to the notion that ghosts exist, and that where Mars is currently moving is going to affect how people are feeling. I've never seen a ghost. Well, but maybe I have.

I consider ghosts in the context of histories and trauma and shared experiences. The idea of haunting as it relates to space and communities of people. A ghost haunts because it has unfinished business, but for me, a landscape that's been poisoned by chemical waste is also haunted. And there are angry ghosts in that landscape. All of the Americas are haunted by the blood and the ghosts of Indigenous people. Even open, empty spaces are crowded with these specters that we are displacing wherever we move.

**BP:** Yes... I am thinking about the write-up that went along with your show Blood in D-Minor at Selena Gallery in Brooklyn. There was this language of 'a contract with the body,' and a question about letting go of the past. That show also conveyed that elementality that you touched on-cycles like life and death, that very 'Macro' sort of exchange. So I'm curious about that, I'm thinking specifically about the thread of healing in your work.

**CO:** I have a split consciousness or split opinion on this. I have a basic functioning level that is very blunt or nihilistic. But I'm a nihilistic, aspirational healer. I have very earnest desires for liberation in many senses, and the shedding of many things and ideas about how solidarity and communal resistance can perform group self-preservation, and... let's say 'retribution.' But at the same time, time moves in this kind of spiral through space, where it's like linearly advancing but always returning to the past in some way.

For instance, when I invoke Romulus and Remus, and the founding of Rome, I'm thinking about how institutions that operate on this basis of silencing and racial and sexist oppression have this foundational aspiration to be akin to the all-consuming, patriarchal empire: Rome. All of these things from the ancient past are always bubbling up into our contemporary moment. It's sort of this inevitable circle or sin-wave of trauma then recourse, then trauma again or failure again. All the while still holding out hope for the ghost to appear.

**BP:** Or to be finally released.

**CO:** True. Well, depending on whether you think about ghosts as benevolent beings or not.

**BP:** You also spoke somewhere in my reading about that idea of constant expansion. The idea that if humans can't get it together, we don't deserve another planet to colonize. There's something in that about language not being useful. Or the conversation hasn't developed to a place where humanity can actually talk about making Earth sustainable for everyone. Simultaneously, there are all of these people that just want Elon Musk to fly them to the Moon and to stop thinking about it, to sweep equitability under the rug. I want to focus that thought about equitability on your collected, collaborative poetry project. Is the working title still Conclusions and Findings for that project? or is it another document. info?

**CO:** It's still ongoing and I haven't totally titled it. It's an action that exists. I think most of the participants think of it as Conclusions and Findings, and then the website itself is titled as another document.

**BP:** There is an image documenting a version of the project that you installed in a gallery space. The poems are inscribed onto wooden paddles and suspended in the space above another sculptural component. That was a lot of work.

**CO:** (sigh) Yeah.

**BP:** Do you find yourself putting that time and energy into this project because it uniquely needs that energy? I'm asking because also a lot of your materials elsewhere are things like to-go containers. Things that are more readily available or that involve less of your hand.

**CO:** Right. So I come from this background of really fussy, labored fabrication. I grew up making photorealistic drawings for DeviantArt. When I started making objects, the amount of time and manual labor that I put into things that could only be made by me, was maybe a way to assuage my insecurity about the sort of conceptual foundation of whatever I was doing. At this point, I try to create a healthy synthesis of both ways of working; the laborious and the found. I think of it as using artifacts from the world.

For example, for DEATH DRIVE JOY RIDE, I crafted the fox fairy medusa heads by hand, and then had them in the space sitting on things like a found stool, or on tupperware containers. It was a way to bridge those two methods, of making and assemblage. To think about the different ways that time moves, with slow fabrication or quick assemblage. It collides them. It makes sense among these other ways that I'm thinking about time, the present, and historical returns.

**BP:** I'm curious about that. I've never heard the folk tale of the androgynous spirit of protection, Nezha. To return to my question about the characters before, are there other narratives you latch onto?

**CO:** Different deities and entities predominantly East Asian and Chinese mythology-have always come back in my work. That goes back to a few years ago. I made a decision that I wanted to make work with something for my mother to appreciate. I used to think a lot about Pop art Eurocentric, Warholian work that appropriates things from what we understand as pop culture and it's supposed to be understood as universal symbols that everyone can relate to. In the same way pop songs are used in art practice. I think they're supposed to evoke this visceral, nostalgic response to something. I didn't grow up with any of those kinds of signs; my house was a Beethoven, Mozart house. No radio. The equivalent of Pop culture for me was watching Chinese cartoons that are basically propagandist animations of ancient mythologies. 'Journey to the West.'

And Nezha has a very famous animated film adaptation.

Later, these figures were embodied in video games that were set in historical Chinese or Japanese time periods. So these are the kinds of motifs that are recognizable to my parents or my grandparents and this legacy that I'm coming out of. I want to be in conversation with my ancestors more. I want to refuse this Western expectation that we're all coming from the same place and we should know the same references. I try to present my own references. It's also complicated because I'm learning more about all this in translation on the internet. As an adult, I'm trying to understand the origins of, for example, the Monkey King. Those existing

mythological narratives operate as these found structures, which I then sample and am able to draw very irreverent or bastardized analogies to.

**BP:** Your show at Make Room involved sculptures that reference a fabled fox spirit. When I met you in Brooklyn, you mentioned that your experience working with the gallery has been really positive. Going back to what you were saying about the imperative to employ universal symbols, how do you feel about your reception by your mother, or a Chinese audience broadly?

**CO:** That gallery is Chinese-owned and a lot of their collector base is Chinese. The gallerists were saying that my work is interesting and exciting to these Chinese buyers, but, for instance, one conflict that came up was superstition.

The racialized experiences that Chinese vs. Chinese-American artists have are totally separate. I think that really shows in the work that's made by Chinese vs. Chinese-American artists, or anywhere in the diaspora.

I had made sculptures of shoes and Chinese buyers didn't want to buy the shoes because the Mandarin word for shoe, which is "li (Xie)," sounds also like crooked, "(xie)" and that's bad luck. It also has other homonyms that relate to unlucky things that make it harder to generate interest. And then the fox fairy heads... those were hybrid things I was making, where some of them have human faces and others have a snout. Again, the gallery's Chinese collectors were afraid of the ones with the snout because they're like monsters. They're monstrous. It was definitely an interesting, new consideration, that I hadn't really thought about before. And, you know, the sellability of something based on superstition is obviously something that I will not let affect what I make, but it's just a consideration that I've never had before. More generally speaking, this idea of the new Chinese art market seems totally tied to this idea of Chinese geopolitics, which I don't feel totally qualified to speak about. But it speaks to this burgeoning neocolonial impulse in China. They're building the train across the continent to connect to Europe and are performing all kinds of colonial ventures in African countries. That's all tied together, and it's intense because that feels so removed from my life experience and heritage, but I feel like I now have to contend with it in some way.

**BP:** It's awesome that you got to have that experience with-and get feedback from-a Chinese audience in that way. I did also want to ask specifically about your mom, it seems that she's an important presence, or broadly motherhood itself?



*DEATH DRIVE JOY RIDE, Installation views, photos courtesy the artist and Make Room, LA*

**CO:** Hah, I mean I think a lot of people make their work about at least one of their parents. (laughter)

**BP:** Yes, but you were talking about this one Ocean Vuong short story and going from this place of wanting to be both.

**CO:** Basically the sentiment in the essay is that a mother, a sheltering mother, can be a monster. I want my work to be both the mother and the monster. It's not even a contradiction. I want my work to be able to hold that complexity.

In most of my work, I don't think that I'm speaking directly to these experiences of having an immigrant mother or immigrant parents who've undergone trauma, although I think that informs a lot of first and second generation artists in the U.S. or in the West. I'm interested in revenge narratives because I'm a vengeful person. And I'm a vengeful person because I grew up in a household of punishment, and that punishment has a certain cultural basis, experiential basis. There's trauma and suffering that my mother holds but doesn't speak about or elucidate. That energy....

**BP:** It's a ghost. **CO:** Exactly! And you know it's interesting because even as I had already started to make this work for several years, where it would have something for my mother, I was not sharing it with my mother. It was more of a conceptual guideline. It was only this past Summer, again with the show in LA, at Make Room, that my mother was suddenly part of my audience. When I was living in St Louis, my mom was living in Florida, or she was living in Jersey, she never once came to a single show of mine and I liked it that way. When I used to write, even though I was publishing things, and some of it had to do with my family, it was just easier to not have to contend with my parents knowing or reading about it. There's a split. And so with this show, suddenly I had to think about how not to totally self-censor for my mother's benefit. She had moved to LA about a year ago and I had this show there. She was suddenly very gung-ho about going to the gallery and speaking to the gallerist, visiting every week. (laughter)

I ended up inviting her to do this event during the opening, where we made a witch's brew out of an updated recipe for medicinal jello that she used to make when I was a kid. It's a recipe that was handed down from her father's side. In the region called Shandong, they use donkey-hide gelatin to make a women's cure-all. It was a very simple gesture, inviting her to be a part of that work. We made this elixir and then the elixir was used to complete part of the sculptures in the space. It was an exciting, different way of working, and coming into conversation with my ancestors.

**BP:** You mentioned your past as a writer and your past digital selves, DeviantArt and elsewhere. I've learned a lot reading your interviews. In one, you spoke about dodging buzzwords and mentioned thinking that language is treacherous. So I just wanted to ask you about that. How do you feel your work is being processed and contextualized?

**CO:** I agonize about this all the time. My general stance is that art historians and curators are the enemies to art. Fighting words! (laughter) The curator's or the art historian's job is to impose a narrative or to historicize. To be able to assign a certain role to an artist, enough that it can support their thesis or vision. I think that's hard or impossible, and often leads to some kind of reduction in an artist's work. You're dealing with complex people with complex thoughts, whose work is doing many things at many levels. When I was younger, I used to really hit the buzz-word word-bank hard. Maybe as a way to shield my work, or prop it up. I had a realization that that's obnoxious, on many levels. I am... a young person coming from my own pretty limited subject position and set of experiences, and to say, "My work is about

colonialism and it does this!" Well, it doesn't! It does something maybe semi related but is at once deeply inadequate and more complicated and exciting.

The word "personal" is something that writers like to assign to my work. I say that I don't think anything's personal because people don't have unique experiences.

This idea of the 'personal' is an annoying thing that is often assigned to any maker who is-I don't like the word 'marginalized', but I'm going to use it: marginalized in some way. Or whose experience is seen as specific because it is not white, not male. Returning to this idea of what is universal. So I find that frustrating and hard to get away from.

Even with POC writers, there is this desire to build community or make connections by using those identity markers. Saying, "This work is about the experience of diaspora. It's very personal." Saying, "Oh, this work is about how ~she's caught between two worlds~, ooooh the East and the West~~" (laughter).

And I think that's just a thing that artists have to contend with. Try to regain control over their own narrative by doing things like interviews, or writing.

**BP:** Will you talk about your process a little bit? Especially being in school, doing shows at the same time.

**CO:** It's often hard for me to talk about process because it's not a romantic or mythical thing. I work very episodically. I say, "Okay I have a deadline, and now I have to come up with a thing to make or fill this particular space with a particular set of parameters."

I stopped writing a couple of years ago. But a lot of the work used to come out of writing. It still comes out of a lot of reading - I had been reading a lot of poetry for the translation project. Scouting for collaborators.

I spend WAY too much time refreshing my social media feeds. I think that a lot of the click baity stuff goes somewhere generative sometimes, and the articulate, poetic posts that are written by writer or artist friends of mine - they serve as a different kind of education. And that all goes somewhere. All these kinds of organic ways of intaking information and recalibrating it. I'm always doing small material research that almost feels aimless. I used to make everything out of styrofoam coated in fiberglass and joint compound. I was interested in using non-canonical, non precious materials, and the idea of materials passing as other materials-a transformative desire-and in how that plays out as social analogy. So I'm always working from the hand and from the materiality of certain objects. Parallel to that, whatever mythology or character or motif I'm currently interested in or thinking about. I used to write my way through it and now I just throw it together physically.

**BP:** What are you reading right now or what's inspiring you right now?

**CO:** Well I just ordered two books by Cathy Park Hong. She is embarrassingly a person who I talk about as if I've read her writing comprehensively, but I haven't... The other week she was here at Yale, giving a talk with the novelist John Keene. The talk was titled "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde" after an essay she wrote. So yes, I'm reading her collections; "Dance Dance Revolution" and "Engine Empire." She's really amazing.

Someone I always go back to is Ann Carson. Her novel-poem "Autobiography of Red" really opened a door for me in terms of how myth can be inhabited in this anachronistic and irreverent way. That was really exciting to me.

**LC:** What are you looking forward to? You're in your last year at Yale?

**CO:** My second and last year, yes. Well, I suppose I have my critique... I am making these masks. They're these howling bunnies, they look like "The Scream." And that was born out of learning about how #metoo was circulating through China.

Bloggers were writing about their experiences and exposing people, but all of those posts were quickly censored by the firewall. So they started using "Rice Bunny," the rice bowl emoji and the bunny emoji because phonetically, in Mandarin 'rice bunny' is pronounced Mi tu." It's a really brilliant way to skirt these structures of silencing. I really am trying not to be the rape artist, though I question to some extent what kind of White Man's impulse that is, what makes me feel like that is a reductive thing. I'm more interested though in the tactic, or #MeToo as a strategy, rather than grounding my work in a certain topic.

I'm making the masks, and more of my lotus chain mail. And I have these security cameras that I've been emptying out. I don't know if you saw some of those pieces that were terrariums? I'm going to turn the cameras into mini diorama-terrariums.



*blood in D minor*, 2018, Video-stills, 2 channel video 11:10 min