

Art **Reviews**

Envisioning a World Where White Men Are Pedestals for Sculptures

For the opening performance of her exhibition at St. Louis's Millitzer Gallery, Catalina Ouyang had five young white male performers serving as human pedestals for her sculptures.



by Danielle Wu

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Catalina Ouyang, *an elegy for Marco* installation view during opening night performance at Millitzer Gallery, St. Louis, Missouri (all photos courtesy the artist)

ST. LOUIS — **Catalina Ouyang** is saying a long goodbye to a lifetime of Eurocentric, patriarchal culture in her latest exhibition, *an elegy for Marco*, on view now at Millitzer Gallery. The exhibition addresses “Marco” as one might use a distasteful pseudonym for an ex-lover, while also specifically referring to Marco Polo, one of the earliest European travelers to explore China, India, and Japan, and an emblem of white supremacy as it relates to East Asian identity.

Whether one feels amusement or unease in the environment Ouyang creates might be contingent upon each viewer's own identity. Ouyang subverts the longstanding tradition of women as preferred servers and entertainers. To enter Ouyang's alternate universe, where East Asian women are worshiped and revered by their opponents, is to forcibly reexamine our current state of normative gender roles and racial stereotypes.



Catalina Ouyang, "font II" (2016), raw egg, white vinegar, soapstone, beeswax

During the opening reception, five tall, white men, wearing only blush pink shorts, stood as representations of Marco Polo's ego and legacy. (A [video of the performance](#) will play on a loop for the remaining duration of the show.). They stood at Ouyang's command, serving as human pedestals for the artist's fetish objects: small white marble sculptures and fictional scripture. The sculpture "font II" (2016) features a raw egg soaked in vinegar for days, yielding a semi-translucent, yellowy orb, which sits in a soapstone cradle. The naturally white outer shell, which dissolved over time to reveal a golden center, is symbolic of Ouyang's search for an identity separate from whiteness.

Ouyang empathizes with the visceral eroticism derived from visual representations of power. The positioning of immobile, mostly-nude bodies alluded to practices from [forniphilia](#) and BDSM, where bondage produces pleasure. Though often mischaracterized as delinquent behavior, the prospect of role play within BDSM offers a safe space for individuals to restructure power relationships for mutual pleasure. Not only is every act and role consensual, but consent can hypothetically be withdrawn at a moment's notice. The direction of power transference is obvious, and infliction of pain can be predicted.



Catalina Ouyang, "font" (2016), full text of *Invisible Cities*, cement, bleach

Ouyang envisions the installation's balance of virility, vulnerability, and consent as what a more equitable sharing of power might look like. Ouyang avoids pure objectification of the white male body, sanctifying the performers' purpose and expanding the perceivable male role. The installation's fictionalized environment bolsters her own sense of authority while encouraging white males to experiment with submissiveness, surrender, and servitude — characteristics typically discouraged in a society governed by the notion that man's nature is to conquer and control. The male performers held quasi-relics that are unabashedly yonic in form; two are specifically modeled on peaches, which are ubiquitous symbols for longevity in Chinese tradition. These matriarchal symbols envision a world where the qualities of Chinese womanhood are envied and respected.

The majority of popular feminist rhetoric in North America tends to ignore women of color and particularly the cultural values of Asian women. Ouyang's work calls for an awakening of **intersectional feminism** at a time when its necessity is often doubted in both China and America.



Catalina Ouyang, "Peaches of Immortality of the Queen Mother of the West on Pedestal I" (2016, left), hand-carved Portuguese marble, beeswax, polyester, dye; "Peaches of Immortality of the Queen Mother of the West on Pedestal II" (2016, right), hand-carved Portuguese marble, beeswax, polyester, dye

It is a pertinent time to reexamine the effectiveness of cultural activism. To seamlessly upset current power dynamics, while rejecting the violent strategies that put them into place, is a tactic that perhaps can only exist in a utopia like the one Ouyang creates within the privileged safety of an art gallery. To translate this beyond the gallery walls, the challenge will be to develop and practice new power dynamics within the wider world. Real action often begins with a thought, which is then translated into a sketch, and then perhaps tested within a safe space, before venturing into the "real world." Art provides a sanctuary by offering ways to imagine alternatives to a "real world" rife with perpetrators of oppression and pain. Ouyang's pocket kingdom offers empowerment, however fleeting.



Catalina Ouyang, *an elegy for Marco* installation view at Millitzer Gallery, St. Louis, Missouri

Catalina Ouyang's an elegy for Marco is on view at **Millitzer Gallery** (3103 Pestalozzi Street, St. Louis, Missouri) through December 30.