



GIVE IT A TWIST

Catalina Ouyang

NEW YORK

“guileless”/“bone”/“desire”/
“sinking.” These are among the
roughly 40,000 words that flash
on the black screens embedded
in twin decrepit chaises longues,

installed opposite one another at Catalina Ouyang’s exhibition “it has always been the perfect instrument” (2020) at the Knockdown Center in New York. The video installation rearranges the words from Ouyang’s project [*Conclusion and Findings*] (2017–), for which she invited writers to contribute “poetic translations” of the final section of her undergraduate university’s Title IX report exonerating her ex-partner of rape. “I was thinking about unravelling—of sense, narrative, groundedness—and failure: not the failure of each individual collaborator’s text, but of my own endeavor to illuminate or distill something from this source material,” Ouyang explained. By splintering the texts into a jumbled script—simmering with allusions to sex, hauntings, and bodily decay—the artist points to the fundamental duplicity of language, which can reveal as much as it occludes. “It made sense to me to handle words themselves texturally, rhythmically, visually, in a kind of refusal that blooms into something different, that brings all this data into another kind of erotic space.”

Ouyang’s practice is characterized by fragmentation and reconstitution. Her *font* sculptures (2016–), for instance, conjoin sharpened stakes and raw egg with small soapstone hollows inspired by church stoups. In *font V* (2020), the concavity is a human mouth, gagged by a shell-less egg. Tangles of horse hair, homophonous with “whore’s hair,” snake from the sculpture across the floor and up the gallery wall. Richly associative, *font V* appears both diminutive and expansive, abject yet threatening, reflecting the artist’s interest in “suturing together material in non-hierarchical and variegated—perhaps rhizomatic—ways.”

The subversive power of hybridity comes to the fore in Ouyang’s mythological retellings. *bitch bench* (2018) fashions a row of seats from a sculpture of the Capitoline Wolf lying on its side, with clawed human hands and feet. Turned toward the sitter at an unnatural 90-degree angle is the artist’s grinning, fanged visage. Here, the glorified symbol of Rome is grotesque and abased. Born out of the wreckage of ossified narratives, the artist’s heterogeneous figures embody the generative power of breakage.

OPHELIA LAI



Detailed installation view of CATALINA OUYANG’s *font V*, 2020, soapstone, horse hair, glue, abandoned wood, gifted honeycomb, raw egg, white vinegar, 25.4×15.2×25.4 cm, at “it has always been the perfect instrument,” Knockdown Center, New York, 2020. Photo by Alexander Perrelli. Courtesy Knockdown Center.