

# FRIEZE

## Catalina Ouyang Questions White Male Allyship

In a series of sculptures and installation works, the artist unpacks the self-destructive consequences of their faith in the solidarity of cisgender white men

S BY SIMON WU IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS, US REVIEWS | 08 OCT 21



There is a shape that appears several times in Catalina Ouyang's show, 'White Male Ally', at Lyles & King, New York. It resembles a 'P' that curls inward, puncturing itself through its stem. In *let my wail heal* (2021), it appears as a small carved soapstone. It looks like a kidney embedded within a torso in *reliquary corpus (lash of hope)* (2021). In *force of will (dog self)* (2021), it becomes even more sinister as Ouyang bends the human figure into this curlicue, to look as if the subject were committing *seppuku* – an act of suicide considered honourable by the feudal Japanese samurai class. Traditionally, the deed consists of stabbing oneself in the abdomen with a short sword to ensure a slow and painful death; here, the figure folds into itself in an exaggerated prostration, causing its own body to act as a weapon – a state of worship turned into self-destruction.



Catalina Ouyang, *let my wail heal*, 2021 carved soapstone, thermal paper, notebook paper, ballpoint pen; stone: 13 × 14 × 6 cm; paper: 25 × 8 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Lyles & King, New York; photography: Charles Benton

This is a dynamic explored in the raw, unsettling centerpiece of Ouyang's show, an installation titled *Devotion* (2016–21), which records the artist's troubled relationship with an abusive ex-lover. The work features seven, hand-drawn re-creations of selfies that Ouyang's partner sent the artist after he raped them, as the caption for the piece discloses. In front of these drawings is a small, child-like effigy of the artist seated at a school desk, stabbing a picture of an ultrasound with a knife. Ouyang's exhibition title enjoins us to read social and political significance into their personal experience. The artist is Chinese American and their assailant is white. *Devotion* chronicles this encounter between the weaponized white male gaze and the artist's own dignity and selfhood – the psychological ramifications of which are dire. Ouyang's work suggests white male allyship is an illusion that conjures a self-destructive faith. But the piece is not prescriptive and, instead, focuses on rendering the contours of this psychological space in as much raw, emotional detail as possible – letting the viewer pick up the pieces.



Catalina Ouyang, *Devotion*, 2016–21, school desk, various materials, deconstructed 风油精 box, graphite drawings on Bristol board (2 1/6) of selfies the artist received from their ex-lover after being raped by him, maple frames, playing card, glassine, nylon net dimensions variable; each frame 38 x 3 cm, figure 14 x 79 x 51 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Lyles & King, New York; photography: Charles Benton

Victimhood is a painful, complex psychology and Ouyang has ordered this pain into a series of rooms at Lyles & King. The installation *ego death* (2021) re-creates the common public toilet found throughout China, with each of the stalls acting as a stage for a small sculptural vignette. In *exorcism vessels (MY FIDELITY)* (2021), for instance, Ouyang questions their devotion: a figure bows with its hands over its head in front of a graphite drawing; a sign on the figure's head reads 'MY FIDELITY IS MY OWN DISASTER'. In *font VIII* (2021), a few stalls down, they display their particularly inventive use of material: dried lotus roots linked with binder rings into chainmail, a raw egg preserved in vinegar, a burned nightgown, and collect marble from 17th-century church. This specificity of materials makes the sculptures diaristic, as if each stage documents a particular psychological phase. Across from the stalls is a series of eight sculptures of puppy foetuses ('Pronoun of Love', 2021) reminiscent of Francis Bacon paintings. Their bodies contort as they peer into mirrors.

In Ouyang's outdoor installation, *Recourse* (2021), a baby blue centauride pulls herself out of a school bus escape hatch. She looks exhausted, having expelled all her energy getting only partly through the aperture. Behind, an array of arrows, perhaps shot by the centauride on her way out, convey the aftermath of an unseen struggle. Ouyang's strength is in material metaphors and *Recourse* is a particularly moving one: it suggests that escape will come at the cost of self-transfiguration, one that will render you unrecognizable.

*Catalina Ouyang's 'White Male Ally' is on view at Lyles & King, New York, until 16 October.*

*Main image: Catalina Ouyang, Recourse, 2021, fiberglass, steel, school bus emergency hatch, arrows dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist and Lyles & King, New York; photography: Charles Benton*

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