

Foundwork



Catalina Ouyang

Interview by Sophia Giovannitti

“My childlike sense of justice and ability to trust often put me in peril. But these are also my best qualities; they have allowed me to be an artist for this long,” says Catalina Ouyang in their Brooklyn studio, on the faith it takes to sustain large-scale sculpture and multi-disciplinary practice within an industry that is often hostile to both. If you go to their website, a tiny, cute and bloody knife cursor will guide you around.

Intimate, antagonistic, haunted, and obdurate, Ouyang’s conceptually and materially rigorous work spans familial revelation, art-historical and geographical citation, and excavations of violences and delights, both as endured by the self and as engendered within the larger world’s structures.

Sophia Giovannitti (SG): What are you working on now?

Catalina Ouyang (CO): I am making work for a show in May at Lyles & King. Beyond a vague idea of what I might title the show, which for superstitious reasons I will not disclose, I do not know what will be in it or what it will look like. But I feel astonishingly unworried.

I took 2023 “off” with aspirations of rest and relaxation. I was really burned out and ill. I thought, I would like to see what a daily practice looks like—a lifestyle, a routine. That mostly did not happen, but what the time off from exhibiting did allow was for a bunch of parts to accumulate in the studio. The formal logic undergirding most of my work is that of collage, whether it be objects or film or writing. My so-called research, in itself, is also a collage process because I mostly cite rather than interpret or analyze. So, with objects around to play with, I can indulge in an intuitive and embodied way of working, that goes something like three-dimensional Tetris.

My hope is that, over the years, I have created a context in which my process speaks for itself as an animate call and response. I don’t think I was ever willfully didactic in my work, but in the past I was more structured and specific in how I spoke, possibly because I did not believe in the things I was making. Now, I am giving myself permission to do things that are less articulable.

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SG: Do you feel freer or maybe more experimental without the same pressure to articulate what exactly you're doing, having already built up your practice's encyclopedia?

CO: I don't necessarily expect that this newfound freedom will translate to audiences who largely still expect a consistent framework of interpretation. Recently, I have been trying to think of artists who started off explaining themselves a lot, and then transitioned into not explaining themselves. And I can't think of many, or any. But that is the transformation I am hoping to instigate.

The one specific piece I can describe in my upcoming exhibition is a large-scale sculpture for the outdoor courtyard. It is a scaled-up replica of a scold's bridle.

SG: What is that?

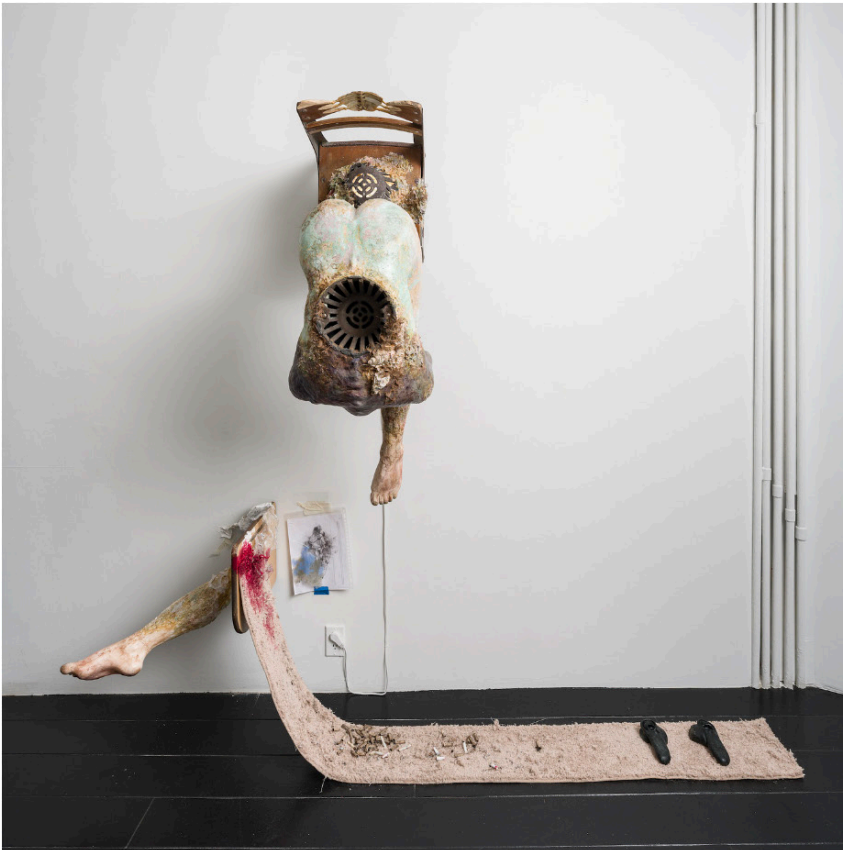
CO: A scold's bridle is a cage that was put over people's faces—predominantly women—to prevent them from speaking, as a public punishment for gossiping or speaking out of turn, whatever that meant. It was a tool used in Europe and colonial America, though I'm sure analogs exist elsewhere as well. My version of it is thirteen feet in diameter. I think of the architecturally-scaled interior—what would historically be occupied by a victim's silenced head—as a monument to transgression. So this will live outside, and inside the gallery, there will be other objects and situations.

SG: The scale sounds terrifying! I can't wait to see it.

You spoke last year about being in debt to yourself, and the debt to the self being, unlike a lot of other debts, spiritually, and perhaps materially, repayable. Is that project of repayment succeeding, failing, neither?

CO: What I learned in the year that I supposedly paid back to myself is that I have only contempt for my own mortality and the materials of living: that is, maintenance. Mending and collecting are things that I do in my work, but in terms of their application to something like knowing where the grocery store is, I could not bring myself to it.

But in terms of recalibrating the relationship between my death drive and the work—I have been learning ways to metabolize the experiences and erotic suffering that I have already undergone without giving into the compulsion to "create new nonfiction." That is how I used to refer to these acts of hazing myself.



risk assessment (fugue state / : h volant touch.)**, 2021

School desk, iron drains, paper pulp, wood, turtle carapace, plaster, epoxy clay, acrylic paint, beeswax, horse hair, fabric, resin, gauze, carpet, light, graphite, digital print on paper, document sleeve wood, found chair, discarded security camera, paper pulp, plaster, oil paint, steel, oyster shells

SG: I relate to that a lot, the relationship between the resourcing—of all kinds—and the work: that relationship getting out of balance, or maybe too tied together.

CO: Inextricable from time, rest, and joy, is money. Money! I think often about Marguerite Duras’s take on it: “I hate everyone who doesn’t give me money.” I have been able to change my process in large part because I have accumulated some money and access. One reason that so many of my past projects were so specific—where I overworked myself to realize every minute detail of a proposal—was that these projects were contingent on a grant or an application or both. I felt this crushing pressure to prove myself. I was on my knees for the carrot, I had to deliver a thing that was promised.

SG: Yeah, it’s so funny, money reads like gender to me—it gets invisibilized within a practice as the unchanging ground, instead of this oppressive albeit fluid super-structure. Having money, from whom, given or lent, debted or paid, nearly always dictates the form of the work, right?

CO: You and I have talked about how every creative industry is basically floated by the proceeds of sex work. Elizabeth Provenelli asks about the practical effects of social commensuration; against what metric(s) do we measure our bodies? What is the cost of being an artist, and why do we get off on paying it? My erotic labor aside, since 2019 I have been trying to sell my eggs—in a largely unregulated and wildly eugenicist industry—and last year it was finally going to happen. It would have yielded almost a year’s income, which I hoped would buy me enough time to work on something substantial and un lucrative, like a film or performance. However, the hormones I had to take during this process triggered a pulmonary embolism, from which I experience side effects and for which I

take medication to this day. I had to terminate the egg sale and walked away with medical bills instead of my payout.

SG: I do think there's a real body horror quality to using sexual or reproductive labor to fund the production of one's work—which is also just a different kind of reproduction—and the heightened risks and rewards that go along with it.

Your candor about the material realities of your practice makes me think about another aspect of your work—how you're simultaneously antagonistic and inviting. You don't shy away from violence or aggression but your work feels to me in a lot of ways welcoming—like, I might never know exactly what's going on here, but you've offered me many different ways in.



otherwise, spite: 1. whores at the end of the world / 2. from every drop of his blood another demon arose (1829-1840), 2020
Various materials including papier mache, plaster, steel, cement, carved wood, horse skull, epoxy clay, artificial hair, carved soapstone, fabric, brick and mortar

CO: Viewing work must be a pleasurable experience. “Pleasurable” encompasses many registers; there's beauty in it, and sensuality, but there is also suffering and horror. To imbue an object with pathos, you have to be really generous and unguarded as an artist. I am not sure if I first wanted this from my work, and then this desire shaped the kind of uninhibited person I grew into; or, if I was always this way, and thus naturally gravitated toward artmaking as an outlet for compulsive oversharing.

My objective, my life or death project, is to have gone all the way. I'm a Taurus; I need to leave no stone unturned. I need to know that I really did it to my maximum capacity, to the brink of total ruin. Or rapture! It is ultimately self-serving, but my hope is that it is also reciprocal in terms of extending generosity through the work.

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SG: Do you ever make things just for you?

CO: Almost never. Left to my own devices, I would just lie in bed and eat snacks and make love and spend money. Making art is a generative act of mostly painful self-extraction. But I love doing it, because I fundamentally believe in the act of sharing and the potential of connecting. As a kid, I was so starved for it that I submitted my drawings and paintings to any online call that I could find. If you Google me, you'll still find a slime trail of all that work. My sweet little heart! It's not about a community, and it's not a question of, Who is my specific audience? Who do I want to teach? Who do I want to help? I don't think that art, at least the art I like, should presume to address people in that utilitarian way. But it has a divine capacity for a transformation of the heart.

SG: What has it been like to work with your mom? She figures into your work in such a visible way.

CO: I think this recurring impulse comes out of my fixation on antagonism and contradiction. At a certain point, my psyche developed violent engines that need to be exhausted somewhere. You are the environment you grow up in; a lot of my neuroses and destructive proclivities stemmed—and I mean this without blame—from my upbringing and my relationship with my mother, who primarily raised me, and in my dismayed observations of her marriage with my father. The touching faces of tenderness and harm, love and abuse, need and neglect, are what drives me to make work. You spend your whole life trying so hard not to be one of your parents that it becomes your sun.

I first worked with my mother on a performance when she moved to LA at the same time that I started working with my first commercial gallery there. This felt somehow fated. Before that, I had been making and writing a lot about my childhood and my family and, as far as I know, they had not seen any of it. But with my mother suddenly being part of my audience, my defensive strategy was to implicate her fully in the work. If she is part of the project, kept busy or distracted, perhaps she will be less suspicious of it. I will tell you—in early high school, I published a prose poem in my school's literary journal that mourned the rift between the speaker and an abstract "Mother." I was thinking about generational difference, and wrote about this separation as a kind of spiritual death. Well, my father found the journal, and behind my back he showed it to my mother; she went ballistic, accusing

“wishing death” upon her, and did not talk to me for weeks even as we lived under the same roof. This is one specific instance. So, you know, the stakes of sharing my work with her felt very high.

My relationship with my mother, while not easy, has stabilized a lot as we have both grown and un-learned and forgiven. I am grateful and proud to call her a participant in my work. Involving her is also my way of trying to honor knowledge systems outside of the conventions that erase her intelligence. I often feel frustrated with her reactivity, but then something will happen that will remind me of all her wisdom and survival skills that cannot be indexed because they are muscle, heart, and blood.



pronoun of love, 2021

Puppy skulls, epoxy clay, polymer clay, paper pulp, shellac, pigment, beeswax, copper, wooden mirror, engraved plastic, text from Wide Sargasso Sea (Jean Rhys, 1966)



pronoun of love, 2021 (detail)

puppy skulls, epoxy clay, polymer clay, paper pulp, shellac, pigment, beeswax, copper, wooden mirror, engraved plastic, text from *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Jean Rhys, 1966)

SG: I think it is—not always, but it can be—such an act of love to implicate people in your work, the people that you love in your work.

CO: Even to hate something, to resent something—you've got to really care. And then you must handle it with gentleness, which in Anne Dufourmantelle's words "exists within trouble, within ambiguity, within what is born."

SG: I wanted to ask about *Strange Attractor*, your film that was recently acquired by the Brooklyn Museum. You speak in it about the "predicament of looking," in the context of your own looking at the Balthus painting of Thérèse, having stepped over the stanchion put out to block it by the museum, as encouraged by your companion whom you seem to have a hostile relationship to, and being kind of immobilized by your own non-spontaneous reaction to the work, except to note that Balthus's interpretation of Thérèse is obviously inaccurate, all while forcing your viewer to look at your naked body in a moving car. I'm wondering how you experienced the predicament of looking, both in terms of your making of the film, and in making your body and visage a part of the work?

CO: I first heard of Balthus when I read a novel in middle school titled *The Girl Who Played Go*. It was about a girl's sexual awakening in Japanese-occupied Manchuria in the 1930s. I was very taken with the book; it had this laconic yet sensual quality to it that just felt...right. Like, this is what first love feels like against the backdrop of war, right? Because love is twisted, and intimacy is a warzone. The author's bio was concise: Shan Sa is a writer who studied with Balthus in Paris. She looked like a model. I envied her, I wanted to be able to write like her. My friend Kyung Me suggested to me the other day that envy is the fundamental driving force for every good artist. I think that holds up

At the time, I thought Balthus's paintings looked overworked, stiff, and ugly. And I didn't think about him again, was never taught him in school, until I moved to the East Coast in 2017 and the protests erupted at his show at the Met. When I looked that time, at the height of my #metoo-coded feminist zeal, I saw his paintings as literally evil. Then, years later still, I was talking with my lover—the hostile relation in the film, my own erotic warzone—about evil painters who made great work. I looked again at Balthus and I saw the paintings with mixed apprehension and adoration.

Why do I seek out antagonism? Freud would call it repetition compulsion. Something remains unresolved that I keep returning to. Bad relationships, subjugation, flawed role models. My childhood model of relation was inherited from generations of reluctant and disgruntled mothers. But I'm also thinking about creative inheritance. What does it mean to learn from someone like Balthus, who was so extractive? And, alternately, what does it mean to learn—which essentially means to steal—from Edmonia Lewis, a forebear who was Black and Indigenous, making art during the Civil War? What kind of offering can address the unevenness of that exchange?

With no satisfactory hypotheses, I embarked on this mission of going to DC and wildly chasing the loose ends of the project: sitting with it, and creating a context where I'm trapped in the car with my patron for a night as we're driving around Lewis's work in this obsessive orbit. I couldn't finance the film in a way that did not involve this patron, so I integrated the mechanism of producing the film—really a concession born of deprivation—into its subject. I supplanted the subject of Balthus's painting *La Victime* with my own body, as I was literally “trafficked” in the back seat of my patron's car.

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SG: And why DC specifically?

CO: That's where *The Death of Cleopatra* lives. The sculpture was Lewis's long-lost magnum opus. She had made it for the World's Fair in Philadelphia, and it was lost to a storage facility in Chicago afterward. The sculpture was not recovered, identified, and restored for a century. So there are the questions of the archive, and whom does history protect? That the piece ended up at the Smithsonian in the National Mall also afforded the context to interrogate the liberal pathology of democratic justice, which assumes “forward” movement toward a nonviolent shared horizon. Within this supposed strange attractor, we drive instead in circles.

In terms of the gaze, and implicating either myself or the viewer—I never want to lord something over the viewer. I detest work that smugly points the finger. I think that's why I insist on hovering in the unfixed space of negative capability. My mode of having a light touch is having a touch with many, many fingers.

SG: That's so well said. Like an octopus.

This could be a projection, but I wonder if it's easier for people to become interested in or invested in your work that's directly representational of you, or provocative in some way—just, the things that draw people in more easily—and I wonder if there's any specific pieces, or even threads of thought, that you'd want to talk about or be asked about, but that go more unnoticed?

CO: Yes. But they're specifically the things that I struggle to talk about. I have always looked at a lot of minimalist sculpture and conceptual work. I honestly think we could have stopped at Arte Povera, you know? I love artists like Marisa Merz, Brancusi, Noguchi, Lutz Bacher, Gedi Sibony, even someone like Robert Grosvenor. There's an economy of expression and a use of material that is self-explanatory. Often, you hear those artists' works described as “universal,” “cryptic,” or “elusive.” Those are lazy reads. The strength of that work is specifically that it arises from the stuff of the artist's life, yet remains so guileless.

Sometimes I get into trouble with people over the question of whether a work has it. The *je ne sais quois*. Benjamin's old argument about aura. It takes a perfect confluence of considerations: is it adequately made, in form, materiality, and hand, for what it's trying to do? Does it have something at stake? I don't have to identify exactly what the stakes are, and honestly most often I don't care what they are, but I have to sense that they are there. Meaning: does the work have a soul? Does it have a sincere relationship to God? I feel like these questions were once foregrounded, in the history of the world, and then all the things happened—primitive accumulation, Rationalism, modernism—and now, in a sea of language ruled by fear and self consciousness, they're maligned.

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Recourse, 2021

Fiberglass, steel, school bus emergency hatch, 1000 arrows

SG: Have people ever responded to your work in a way that really surprised you either in a delightful or not delightful way?

CO: When I receive a cold email from someone who writes sincerely about their experience of my work, that's really encouraging for me. I think I am basically an empathetic person, but that's not what I broadcast. My prevailing interior state is not one of compassion or nurture. So when the libidinal overflow in my artwork yields a meaningful emotional engagement, it is a welcome revelation.

There is always this push and pull: to be an artist, you must have an ego. You have to be narcissistic enough to think that your voice is the appropriate channel. Yet you also have to be sensitive to the sufferings of the world and other people. In order to be present in making the art, you have to compromise both your own best interest and your care for the people who love you most, in service of the work. It makes you monstrous; or, you make art because you are monstrous. This is maybe an antiquated dichotomy, but I stand by it.