

ETC



Two Fictional Letters

Mary Sui Yee Wong, *She Takes His Bed*, Gallery 101, Ottawa.
April 10th - May 9th, 1997

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Number 40, December 1997, January–February 1998

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/406ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

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Cite this review

Wai Jim, A. M. (1997). Review of [Two Fictional Letters / Mary Sui Yee Wong, *She Takes His Bed*, Gallery 101, Ottawa. April 10th - May 9th, 1997]. *ETC*, (40), 46–47.

OTTAWA TWO FICTIONAL LETTERS

Mary Sui Yee Wong, *She Takes His Bed*, Gallery 101, Ottawa. April 10th - May 9th, 1997

Most of us want and need some kind of respect. In her recent installation *She Takes His Bed*, Montreal artist Mary Sui Yee Wong searches for the meaning of respect through an exploration of her relationship with her father.

The third and final instalment of *Subject to Representation*, a curatorial project by Kevin Gibbs of Gallery 101, *She Takes His Bed* is perhaps the most autobiographical and introspective of Wong's works to date. Comprised of a blowup of an archival photograph, a video projection showing a continuous loop and two fictional letters stencilled onto adjacent walls in the far corner of the gallery space, the multi-media installation takes its viewers deep into the artist's imaginary to disclose the anxiety and ambiguity associated with the father-daughter relationship. At first glance, the only connection between the photograph, text and video seems to be the white fabric flowers and brilliant red patches of spilt pigment that litter the gallery's hardwood floor. Yet on second reading, the installation's seemingly disparate elements begin to acquire another common factor: they each represent a role the father has played and continues to play in the social and cultural development of the daughter.

The faded black-and-white photograph, nestled in a curvy wooden frame vaguely resembling window dressing, documents the performance of a risky Kung fu stunt involving three Asian men. In the act depicted, one of them is about to bring down a large mallet onto a giant human sandwich complete with ceramic jugs and a thick slab of cement. Wong's father, now a well-known Cantonese opera musician and teacher in Hong Kong and Canada, is the figure right under the mallet who will bear the greatest brunt of the blow. For the artist, the feat recorded by this treasured family photo represents a kind of double standard defined by a male-dominated society with which the father claims his role as patriarch and to which she herself is later subjugated as her father's daughter.

While the photograph represents the practice of patriarchal values, the video element of *She Takes His Bed* refers to the teachings that inform it, and, by extension, to the role of the father as teacher. Projected from the ceiling onto the largest of the red pigment patches — themselves references to the cosmetics of the father's operatic world — the video shows the posterior view of a nude Asian woman with long black hair. On her back has been calligraphed excerpts from the "Three Character Scripture: Confucius's Teaching on Filial Piety and Morality," a seminal text



Mary Sui Yee Wong, *She Takes His Bed*, 1997. Multi-media installation.

that in its simplicity and directness of language makes itself accessible even to the poor underclass in China. Focusing in on the Chinese writing, the image then pulls back to depict the woman's body convulsing uncontrollably from the lashings of a whip as if to suggest that the inscription on the body circumscribes more than just the surface of the skin.

Like the photograph, the video draws on analogous relationships between mind/body and male/female dichotomies through its focus on text and the imminent infliction of bodily harm. The pride associated with ability of the male bodies in the photograph to endure physical pain through mental control contrasts with the sense of shame surrounding the submissive female body being punished in the video because of its inability to comply with the phallogocentric precepts upheld by Confucius. In effect, the familiar signifiers of Third World discourse such as the subordinating circumstances of women's lives, the photograph's rural setting and the choice Confucian scripture, all suggest a very troubling interpretation for the positionality of the woman portrayed in *She Takes His Bed*. Writing about minority discourses, Rey Chow suggests

that if the Chinese woman is perceived to have no voice, it is because "it has always been assumed by others in the name of the people, the oppressed classes and the nation"¹. Locked in the position of "a kind of minor of the minor", the Chinese woman thus has to constantly struggle to speak as a way of resisting hegemonic practices in which she, otherwise considered voiceless, would be spoken for².

Of the three visual components in *She Takes His Bed*, the pair of fictional letters from daughter to father are the most cryptic. However, in their clear articulation of a feminine voice, the letters suggest that the artist has succeeded in overcoming this struggle to speak, not only about her relationship with her father but also for herself. Initially, the letters, read in conjunction with the ambiguous title of the installation, seem to imply an unspoken sexual dimension in the father-daughter relationship. They further challenge social mores of respectability in their suggestion that a mock funeral for the artist's father is being staged in the context of a gallery.

Dear father,

*Where have you gone ! Some nights I awaken from
fright but no one is there to console me.*

*His touch breaks my body and he is without remorse.
Moment by moment, I am smothered by his silence.*

Why do you not come to rescue me ?

faithfully your daughter.

On second reading though, the letters — both interrupted by frightening episodes in which women are being assaulted by male perpetrators — seem also to refer to the role of the father as parent-protector, one which he can no longer fulfil now that his daughter is all grown-up. Read in this way, the letters can be seen as mnemonic traces of the daughter's entry into womanhood in which female sexuality, and by extension, female identity, was gained only at the loss of the father. While the first letter expresses the initial shock of parental abandonment, the second letter seems to suggest that the daughter has come out of her post-partum depression to a realization that the symbolic separation of girl-child from father was a necessary part of her self-development as a woman.

Dear father,

*It has been months since your departure. Forgive my
weakness, but I miss you.*

*Last night, I heard a woman screaming outside my
window. A man had just robbed her. She sounded helpless
and scared. I wondered what happened.*

Your humble daughter.

The different elements in *She Takes His Bed* suggest that respect within the artist's relationship with her father seems to have been largely defined within a male-



PHOTO: TIM WICKENS

Mary Sui Yee Wong, *She Takes His Bed*, 1997. Multi-media installation.

dominated society where women's sense of self-worth, or self-respect, have either been undermined or negated altogether. Thus while the multiple roles of the father as patriarch, teacher, and parent might have commanded unconditional respect from the daughter in the past, this respect was not necessarily reciprocated within the relationship. As such, *She Takes His Bed* can be seen as an attempt by the artist to re-negotiate a sense of self-respect on her own terms through self-understanding, rather than on those defined by a patriarchal culture³. In this way, Wong's installation goes beyond being a mere reconsideration of the father-daughter relationship to taking a serious look at the huge impact the concept of respect has on definitions of self-identity. To quote turn-of-the-century psychologist William James, "[t]he deepest principle of human nature is a longing to be appreciated". But *She Takes His Bed* asks: "On whose terms?"

ALICE MING WAI JIM

NOTES

¹ Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 110-112.

² *Ibid.*, p. 112.

³ Robin S. Dillon, *Dignity, Character and Self-Respect* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 303.