

BY YSABELLE CHEUNG

Provoking the Master

SYDNEY SHEN



Portrait of SYDNEY SHEN. Courtesy the artist.

Installation view of SYDNEY SHEN's "Onion Master," at New Museum, New York, 2019. Photo by Charles Benton. Courtesy the artist and New Museum.

Ghost-faced, temples crusted with blood, Michelle Pfeiffer rips around her chintzy little flat, hungering for a new identity: she rams her soft toys into the whirring incinerator; defaces her cloyingly pink walls with black spray paint; smashes her collection of porcelain dolls and birds; and then, finally, comes across a slick, black vinyl raincoat in her closet. Minutes later, she emerges from a possessed episode at the sewing machine wearing a second skin: a catsuit pieced together by jagged, exposed white thread. "I think of that [scene] as being what 'a good day in the studio' looks and feels like," said Sydney Shen of the pivotal sequence in *Batman Returns* (1992), when Selina is reborn as Catwoman.

Shen makes found-object assemblages, video games, sculptural forms, perfumes, zines, and installations, all of which revolve around disparate interests in the abject, the mechanical, paraphilia, contortion, horror fiction, coprophilia, torture, and existentialism. Looking at her body of work, it's almost impossible to discern the referents that led to their creation, although there are symbolic hints: we see a red doormat, reminiscent of ones that line Chinese restaurant doorways, stamped with the meme phrase "bone apple tea" (a bastardization of the common French saying "bon appétit"); a chainmaille sculpture that evokes a medical privacy screen or an oversize body harness, popular in BDSM culture; and a photograph of flipflops, die-cut with the musical terms *adagio* and *sostenuto* and half-submerged in a puddle of rancid lake water, evoking a modernized tale of Shakespeare's Ophelia. In these works one finds a similarity with the incongruous and untraceable rhizomic layers of post-internet culture and aesthetics; thus Shen's research and tessellating interests—and the physical objects that she assembles from these concerns—can be seen as metaphors for the ways we consume, transform, and regurgitate popular media today.

Born and raised in 1989 in a WASPish suburb of New Jersey, Shen sought out her own cultural touchstones, such as listening to harsh noise and renting *Batman Returns* and *Dead Ringers* (1988)—a deprived flick about twin gynecologists—from her local library. Her first interaction with art was with John Everett Millais's Pre-Raphaelite masterpiece *Ophelia* (1851–52), which she saw as a poster at the local mall: "I think it had a strong effect on what I find beautiful. Or perhaps it stirred in me a sense of beauty that I think is latent, beyond construct,

probably a bit perverse." Later, at Cooper Union in New York, she studied film under critic J. Hoberman and visual arts with Walid Raad, Lucy Raven, and Pam Lins. After graduation, she pursued commercial photography (which is still a source of income for her) and then turned to her current studio practice.

In Shen's works, there is heavy emphasis on what she calls the "materially seductive," a fetishization of surfaces and tactile interplay, and the carnivalesque, or "camp-adjacent." Just as Selina and the gynecologist-serial-killers heighten their emotive states through specific objects—a shiny pleather catsuit, chromic instruments for operating on mutant women—she utilizes unconventional materials to create tension between the "really pleasing and really repulsive." For example, in *Here Comes the Last of the Great Romantics* (2016), the bowels of an antique baby grand piano are filled with yellowed, decomposing fronds of fungus and sheets of music inked with the artist's own blood fused with that of a pig, and pulped with ground human bone, cellulose, and other organic materials. The piano is beautiful and soft-looking in its aged blacks, reds, and parchment shades, yet also contains funereal and molding elements. Shen explained: "Contradiction is interesting. Contradiction is where meaning lies. Contradiction is that which is despite every reason for it not to be. And I suppose it's impossible to attempt to hold onto contradictory feelings without going insane, so I have to make art about it instead."

In her most recent works, Shen remarked that she was trying to "manifest less chaos" and focus more on tuning into underlying connections as opposed to diving into new projects uninhibited. For *Onion Master* (2019), recently installed at New York's New Museum, she references two niche events—county fairs, which often hold contests for prize vegetables such as onions; and hearse shows, where custom-made hearses and antique ambulances are featured—and marries them to highlight the contradictions and absurdity of emotion. In the institution's windows, she installed a claw machine that grabs typical carnival toys and plastic onions—she describes the vegetable as an "evocative, tragicomic" clown, which forces one to cry when sliced open—from the floor. The decal on the windows feature a traditional hearse design and lyrics from John Dowland's 16th-century melancholic ayre "Flow, My Tears," which ponders on different types of tears: sad, old, or true. The "master" of the title

is a recurrent term in Shen's vocabulary, and instantly recalls its counter, the slave. Rather than being straightforwardly sadomasochistic, Shen explores instead the dynamics of power in various relationships, which carry their own contradicting emotions of humility, dominance, pain, and relief. For example, in *Onion Master*, the onion holds sway over our tears; the giant chainmaille sculpture in *[DATA EXPUNGED]* (2018) recalls the clinical and often-invasive client-patient relationship as well as intimate and consensual powerplay in BDSM culture; and in *Master's Chambers* (2016), a horror-survival video game in which one fumbles around dark catacombs, one explores the "supremely abject and utter repulsion" hidden in these shadowed areas as a metaphor for our own conflicted relationships embedded within the id, ego, and superego. We are the masters of our deepest, darkest desires, Shen seems to be saying, but we are also the slaves.

Shen's latest work in progress—which earned her the 2020 fellowship at Queens Museum/Jerome Foundation Fellowship for Emerging Artists, culminating in an exhibition at the museum next year—brings her back to ideas of contemporary image consumption and sharing. The unnamed project is centered around the dissemination of images of *lingchi*, an ancient Chinese torture method in which portions of the body would be consecutively sliced off. There are hundreds of these lurid and sensationalized photographs of bodies mutilated by "a thousand cuts," mostly taken out of context and used as political propaganda to spread hysteria or Orientalist myths in the West, and later as studies for writers and intellectuals such as George Bataille and Susan Sontag, who wrote on the aesthetics of pain. The focus of this project, Shen explained, is how these images and their legacy "epitomize the unreliability of the photograph as a document of proof," and, more generally, how photography can be a vessel for fictions created by the artist and the viewer, as well as how we as viewers might be unconsciously influenced by those fictions. Shen mentioned that she was excited by this project, as she finally had figured out how to streamline her disparate interests and distill their essences. In an age where our screens, landscapes, and lives are bloated with image production and reproduction, her final words make ever more sense: "My mind is increasingly chaotic—and art is a framework for me to quell that chaos."