



*While She Quivers* bridges the converging practices of visual artists Kanchana Gupta and Yanyun Chen, interrogating the socially and culturally defined frameworks of femininity in a quiet provocation of desire, power, intimacy, and personal agency. The exhibition presents rich and embodied extensions of their long-term explorations – Kanchana's *Production of Desire* and Yanyun's *Stories of a Woman and her Dowry*. Both works navigate the precarities of the cultural tropes and expectations of Asian women, in a palpable reclamation of tenderness and strength embedded in the feminine narrative and identity.

Quivering, as a gesture, denotes a restlessness, tension, and uncertainty that is also fuelled by emotive power and potency. It requires vulnerability in strength, resists subjugation, and demands a bold incitement of power. Kanchana and Yanyun's incisive installations transform the Objectifs Chapel Gallery into a space that is visceral and contemplative; employing symbolic gestures, rituals and objects in ways that are equally autonarrative and somatic to unpack the underlying performativity of being a woman.

Curatorial Notes

# WHILE SHE QUIVERS

Kimberly Shen

In quivering, she is overcome by emotion and indignance, fuelled by rage but equally captivated by possibilities and determined to have agency. The road ahead is fraught and uncertain; she resists predestined trajectories, she recognises the source of power within, she predicates her hopes and dreams, she rises with provocation. Like an arrow that springs forth from its quiver, it is this image of a woman – of whom is embodied and embraced – that manifests *While She Quivers*, an exhibition of Kanchana Gupta and Yanyun Chen's emotive, deeply intimate, personal and autonarrative works.

Before engaging with discourses on gender and feminism, we must firstly acknowledge that this is hinged on lived experiences which are heavily visceral, urgently felt, and often sensational and reactive. We ponder: why do I feel this way, why am I uncomfortable, why does this not sit right, why am I angry, who is making these demands? Yet, we are also mindful and acutely aware of the progress we have made as womxn, or as those who sit on the fringes of otherness. As Yanyun expressed in our interview for this publication, "You can still have an emotional crisis despite having agency". It reminds us that empowerment is not experienced without hesitation or in isolation. Influential feminist and activist Audre Lorde (1984) proclaimed, "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house"; to forge change, we need to acknowledge that feminism is both a dismantling project and a building project (Ahmed, 2017). We must ask ourselves: how do we shift regimes of power, how do we navigate around these precarities, how do we tend to differences, how do we dismantle a world that has already been assembled?

Both artists' works allude to patriarchy and its associated frameworks, and critically disrupt the male gaze without the necessity to be explicit nor overt. In *The Production of Desire*, Kanchana's exploration of moving image, the (male) voyeur observes silently for he exists behind the camera lens; his presence is languid and lingering. In critiquing the construct of femininity within Indian cinema, which has been built for and shaped by the viewer, the artist embodies this persona of desire and arousal, of suggestive gestures and furtive glances, of the translucency of chiffon deliberately and sensuously draped across her body. While there is an initial discomfort watching the artist perform this role within an elaborately staged and choreographed environment, she emerges triumphant through this filmic arc: the viewer is complicit in her first performance (red) where she imitates the overly-sexualised female body; her second performance (yellow) asserts a subversion of eroticism; and her final performance (blue) sees a reclamation of her personal power and narrative.

Within Yanyun's immersive installations, she draws upon the symbolic potency of objects – red lanterns, dainty red slippers, camphor chests – unpacking their significance and the meanings that transcend generations, inherited and embraced without fully understanding nor questioning their consequences. In the epilogue of *Stories of a woman and her dowry*, the solitary figure of a bride on her wedding night sits awaiting. It is a silence before the rupture: an immense grieving for the loss of who she was, an obliteration of her past, present and future. Unfolding through chapters of spatial autofiction, the artist has cast corporeal bodies that want to defy the subjugation of being a traditional Chinese woman: for she will continue to resist, she will not conform to these expectations. The act of rebellion also surfaces optimism; we can exist beyond assigned roles of wife, mother, daughter, virginal bride, seductress, femme fatale, tender heroine, damsel in distress – we can reckon with multifaceted extrapolations and recognitions of femininity.

To challenge the tropes of femininity and becoming womxn, to deny patriarchy and systemic power, to reject and redirect the gaze are all familiar narratives in feminist thought. It would be naive to expect the exhibition to reconcile these feelings of injustice, to bridge a resolution to this age-old discourse, or to emancipate the artists from their burden of being womxn. But what we can do is hold space for these stories; we can be vulnerable, we can prompt renewed perspectives, we can reclaim language and structures that have worked against us. For *she* will continue to carry her stories that will quiver with strength, courage, and potency.

#### References

- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press.  
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# THE PRODUCTION OF DESIRE (2021)

Kanchana Gupta



Indian cinema of the 1980s and 1990s personified quivering sensuousness and created the iconic image of a sensuously gyrating, hips thrusting female body, clad in a rain-soaked clinging chiffon sari, which deliberately incited sexual pleasure in the male protagonist through song and dance sequences. A formulaic creation propagated by the infrastructures of cinema, this trope has captured the collective gaze and captivated the imagination of the Indian movie goer. My current series of video works dissects the construct of this overtly sexualised presentation of the female body and probes the agency and empowerment of cinema. Deconstructing cinematic paradigms of femininity, I investigate the deployment of the female body as a signifier of both cultural identity and as spectacle. This is a deeply personal series of works, as I assessed my own desirability, especially in my vulnerable teenage years, against these exemplars of the feminine.

My performance-based video works aim to challenge these assumptions propagated by Indian cinema about the visual codes of desirability. I focus on specific songs from the 1980s and 1990s in which the female characters performed solely to sell fantasies and arouse desire, elevating certain base misconceptions of femininity. Both performer and viewer were complicit in this relationship, but the power clearly lay with the viewer as the performer is perceived as an object. My intention is to shift the power to the performer. By presenting my body in an exaggeratedly fetishised mode, constructed by employing artifices and visual codes of Indian cinema: for example, costume, rain, make up, jewellery, suggestive gestures, camera angles underscoring a focus on specific body parts, I attempt to decode what it means to confront, subvert and finally reclaim the constructed image, while simultaneously questioning socially defined frameworks of femininity.



Reclaiming the image meant knowingly taking away the potency of the male gaze, channelling it instead through my own gaze and ensuring that the power to construct the image lies with me - the performer. The act of reclaiming included being very familiar with the camera gaze and commonly deployed tropes and using them to manipulate the seduction from an active position of knowing.

This series of works is also a reflection on the female gaze and how it is shaped by male gaze. Female gaze is not expressed as the direct opposite of the male gaze; rather, it is an affirmation of the way women are presented for the male. My work is an attempt to underscore how it feels to be the object of the male gaze while being in the position of confidently returning the gaze and reclaiming the power of the camera for myself, even as I acknowledge its influence.

While the core concept remains the societal construct of the image of a woman, it is underscored through culturally specific cinema. This project is an ongoing exploration and each work in the series will continue to move into different areas and focus on specific aspects, so that newly- formed questions lead the way for next works.





# STORIES OF A WOMAN AND HER DOWRY THE EPILOGUE: THREE DAYS 三天

Yanyun Chen

The story begins with a question, “How do I live with these inherited dowry objects?”

The texture of *living-with*—littered around the house are dining chairs, a handmade table, a large camphor chest, all dowry objects from the women in my family—is tinged with mundanity and oblivious, uncomfortable acceptance. Here I sit on the well-worn rattan seat, posture askew against the stiff back of teak. This is my grandmother’s dowry. I could never sit, or fit, properly. Traditions in Chinese weddings demand that a female child is to be married off young, virginity gifted away, name forsaken, purpose taken, and these objects signify the value of bridal children who inevitably led up to me. I lean back, one foot hiked up on the seat, like a *pai kia* (gangster) full of contempt, picking a fight.

I am picking a fight.

The first time I learnt of patriarchy as a discriminatory force was through my paternal grandmother. My paternal grandfather, ahead of his time, was a feminist, who reminded her of my existence. From her, I was presented with a relentless set of questions: *why are you not married, why are you still studying, why are you living off your dad, where is your partner, why am I not a great-grandmother?* Perhaps it was watching Zhang Yimou’s seminal cinematic work *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) too young, that taught me to see an externalised framework of the brutality and suppressiveness behind traditions, values, and rituals. For a generation that sought a better life through marriage, an educated woman ran counter to how she knew life to be, for the politics of the *oikos* and domesticisation as control meant that the economics of marital arrangements triumphed over human capital, both of which hinged on aspirations of value proposition, growth and productivity.





I don't know which is worse as a measuring stick for human existence. Zhang left little room for his protagonist Songlian, as she descended into sorrow and insanity.

*A woman is a robe to be worn and discarded.*

What is worse than a discarded woman is a leftover woman, *Sheng nu*: unmarried and over 27. I don't think my grandmother ever forgiven me for that. These leftovers shaped themselves into a chapters of a spatial auto-fiction, one that sought to meander through the intergenerational conflicts between women, through the *Girl, Bride, Wife, Mother*, "weighing the consequences of these expectations and staging a refusal" as Grey Project's Jason Wee aptly observed.<sup>1</sup>

A wrestle with questions rarely leaves one unscathed, and my damage came in the form of a realisation: my inability to imagine the ceaseless, dominating, anxious silence that comes from enforced obedience to unbecome one's self. Three days is the time taken to shed the daughter, the virgin, and the name. Three days to say goodbye. It is a heavy sort of waiting. A wait, which I would like to think my grandmother had to endure. A wait, which many, though not all, in my generation has had the privilege of opting out from. What ruptures at the site where fear and rage coincide is perhaps a gentle empathy for our choices, and in her case, the lack thereof.

This epilogue is dedicated to those who had no choice but to wait.

<sup>1</sup> *Stories of a Woman and Her Dowry* was first presented at Grey Projects, Singapore in 2019. The wife chapter was later presented at the Art Science Museum, Singapore in 2020.



# INTERVIEW

Kimberly Shen (KS) in conversation  
with Kanchana Gupta (KG)  
and Yanyun Chen (YY)

KS:

This exhibition *While She Quivers* came out of an extended conversation between both of you, Yanyun and Kanchana. Could you share how this came about, and what were the points of resonance that sparked this conversation?

YY:

If I recall correctly, it was very casual. I did my *Stories of a woman and her dowry* show in early 2019 at Grey Projects, and Kanchana came by. We had a conversation there about the similarities and differences between wedding traditions. Was that the point you started working on your videos?

KG:

I was already dipping my toe in the videos – I started the concept in mid-2019. After your show, I remember having a conversation with Jason Wee where I mentioned that I was interested in exploring snippets from cinema, perhaps as a collage, and he said, no, you have to make it authentic and use your body. Initially I was hesitant, because I'm not a performance artist. But the more I mulled over it, it made sense. I filmed a teaser and sent it for Objectifs Artist-in-Residence programme, which sparked the key discussion. So the key discussions sparked, I think, in March 2020, Yanyun came over during my screening at Objectifs of the first full-fledged production that I did. After that, we had a nice hearty lunch at Fortune Centre, and that's where the idea was born. There were lots of threads that

were cutting across, and we realised that the influence of patriarchy, even though the manifestation can be different, is common across Asian cultures.

YY:

I also remember we discussed movies and cinema, and when I first started conceptualising *Stories of a woman and her dowry* in late 2017, I recalled Zhang Yimou's film *Raise the Red Lantern* which I watched when I was way too young. We discussed the lack of male protagonists in the film and the presence of the male gaze. So with *Raise the Red Lantern*, you don't actually see the husband, and he rarely appears in the movie. We thought it was very interesting how much the sense of a patriarchy is just hanging in the air, that it doesn't need to be present for you to feel it especially in the context of that story, which I then adopted for *Stories of a woman and her dowry*.

KG:

During my screening, one of the viewers questioned where the man was in my film. And I responded that while the presence of the male gaze suspends heavily, you won't see the man – the man is actually a voyeur who is peeping while the female body is performing. She's performing for the consumption of every man or every male gaze watching out there. When I was asked, "Where's the lover in your video, Kanchana?", I said, "The camera is the lover". You look at that when you perform, because you're selling that fantasy to everybody watching. So yes, in such films

or songs in Indian cinema, without even showing the physical body of a man, the entire construct is geared towards him. And that's what I think both of us felt when we started diving deep into that – we felt that there were so many common threads, and we wanted to bring it together and explore it from an intercultural point of view.



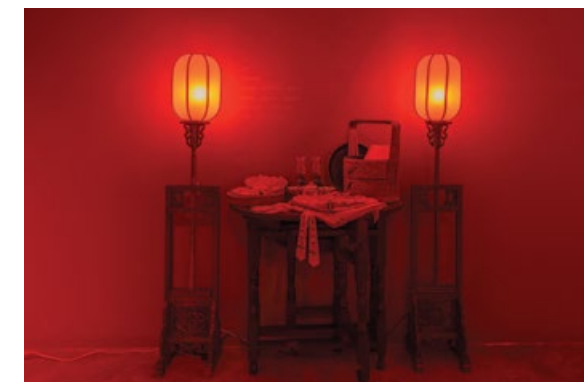
KS:

These new chapters are richer and more embodied extensions of longer term bodies of works. Could you speak about the research processes and forms they have taken, and what can we expect to see in *While She Quivers*?

YY:

I'll start with mine, just because I think it's nice that mine is an ending, and Kanchana's is a beginning. So *Stories of a woman and her dowry* in the first iteration had four chapters. The starting point was the tension I have with my grandmother about her views on womanhood, following which there are four auto-fictional chapters of my family using real dowry objects. I asked myself what it meant for me to own these objects –

for example, I was using my grandmother's dowry chairs as my dining chairs, my dining table was built by my grandfather, and my mom's wedding chest was sitting in my storage. So there are all these objects around the house that are very significant, but I treated them in a very mundane way. But they symbolise something about women in my family. So it was my sort of, slightly uncomfortable reaction to this.



The story was divided into four chapters – the girl, the bride, the wife and the mother – four different stages or expectations of a woman going through a Chinese marriage. And after this iteration, I always felt that there's one more piece to make. This work needs an epilogue to wrap it up. One of the things that was very powerful in the first iteration was the silence. Even though it's my voice written, but the objects themselves are very quiet, and there was this sense of waiting and tension in the silence that I wanted to explore. And it took me, I guess, a year and a half of many conversations with Kanchana and reflecting on my own to realise what the epilogue is about. And the epilogue truly is about this feeling of waiting, imagining what a girl would feel like when she's waiting to see



the person that she's been made to marry. There's one particular scene in Zhang Yimou's film where the girl is sitting on the bed, dressed up in her wedding gown (the Chinese *kua*). And nothing really happens in the scene. I think this image always stayed with me because I cannot imagine what would be going on in someone's head in that moment. And I thought that was the tension I would like this story to end on.

KG:

As Yanyun rightly said, my work has just begun, I don't even have an end in sight where it will go. So when I started researching more than two years back, the first thing I realised was that there is a very clear construct in Indian cinema – how the body is presented and the choice of elements. I broke down the videos of songs into certain frames and you can see that the frames are applied very clearly. The first step was to understand the construct itself and to understand how it has been created for the male gaze. In the first film, I stepped into the construct and presented myself in the red sari. The artistic strategy there was imitation – attempting to imitate and copy what the actresses were performing. In particular, actresses were asked to keep their gaze low, because obviously you can't confront the male, you have to surrender yourself to patriarchy and that's what makes you more desirable. But as I moved on to the next chapter, I realised that while imitation and surrender were good enough to understand the construct, next I have to move into challenging that construct and subverting it. That's where the yellow sari

came in and by then, I was in a life stage of having my head shaved. In this phase, my main strategy was keeping the gaze very straight at the camera. Changing from the downcast eyes to challenging the patriarchy with my shaved head and looking directly at the camera.



And in the third phase, which I'm right now into, is about reclaiming it, and in a way, manipulating what the camera is asking you to do. My intention was to get the power completely into the hands of the performer and say, hey, I understand your trope. And I am now more clear of what I am challenging. So that's how I see the phases. I don't know what the next phase will be. I think I have to see how it is evolving. But one thing I would like to do is to revisit this along with my life journey and stages – perhaps one day when I'm a grandmother, I would still like to do a red chiffon seductive act.

KS:

That would definitely be something we can look forward to. Both your works are so personal and grounded within your cultural histories and backgrounds. Could you share

how your personal lived experiences have shaped the development of these works, and how you think these perhaps culturally specific references comment on larger societal constructs of femininity?

KG:

Actually, cinema was not the creator of that image of a female form in clinging chiffon sari in rain. It was created more than 100 years back by the famous Indian painter Raja Ravi Varma. In his paintings, he created this extremely sensuous female form with the downcast gaze and the sari falling off the shoulder. That was also the first advent of the printing press, and Ravi Varma started this trend of converting the paintings into mass-printed calendars, and people would hang them in their homes, almost like soft porn of that era. When Indian cinema came out of the silent era and they were looking for a desirable female image to borrow, they had a readymade image in the form of Ravi Varma's paintings which were already hugely popular. He painted what they call, the "seductress" – a character trope in Indian mythology who is known to have broken the chastity of saints. And all this became the symbol of seduction, which cinema happily borrowed. And obviously in film, you can't look at an image for more than a couple of seconds, so what cinema did is to make it stronger by weaving it with song and dance. Indian cinema of 80's and 90's saw the emergence of the macho male star. And slowly the role of the actress became relegated to a lover or a seductress. In those 20 years, almost every actress stepped into that role. During the

time I was growing up, that image was very, very powerful.



YY:

My work stems from my personal navigation of the objects I have, and the cultural research came after. As I mentioned, I watched *Raise the Red Lantern* when I was very, very young, and you don't really understand what's happening as a kid. The discourse of feminism and the feminist movement didn't really come to Singapore until at a much later time. And so by the time I even encountered the word feminism and the ideas behind it, it was much later in life. I remember saying out loud that the most overt and obvious discrimination that I had encountered is actually from my grandma, who had very strong views about what a woman should be. While she never really expressed her views, it came out as comments or criticisms like, "Why are you not married? Why are you still studying? Why are you not earning money?" It always comes in the form of a question, and through the question, you start to understand this person's worldview. So as a child, this is your world and you never really question it, but it's only later on that I started to realise why I felt so angry every time these questions were thrown at me. It was through this work that

I navigated the intergenerational differences and the symbolic potency of objects. Each of the objects in a Chinese wedding represents something, whether it's fortune, prosperity, virginity, expectations of motherhood or children, and that the value of a boy is way, way more valuable than a girl, because the girl's name will change and she will be "gifted" to the family that she marries into. And these take on visuals in the form of the objects that you find, like these little red slippers she has to slip out from the "evils" that she's discarding. The camphor chest in Hainanese wedding culture is a dowry gift because the girl would pack all her belongings in this chest and this is the only thing she takes out of the house when she gets married.



The lanterns you see in Teochew culture are meant for celebrations and rituals, but they're also used interchangeably for funerals. I was also trying to understand the use of the lantern in Zhang Yimou's film. When I watched it again when I was

older, I realised that it signified the man's arrival. The women of his house wait to see who he will visit at night, and the only way they know he's coming is that the lanterns outside their personal courts will be lit. And if one of his wives dies, the lantern gets wrapped in black fabric in mourning. So I was very fascinated by this object, that it signified both arrival and departure. I drew it into the work as another kind of dialogue with the different dialect groups which stand together to give an atmosphere of the cultural milieu of Chinese weddings. It was also a dive of discovery into dialects and history – I don't really speak any of the dialects because I grew up during a time when Singapore was emphasising Mandarin and discarding the different dialects. And of course, my tension with my grandma didn't help. So I refused to pick up the language, and even though I actually understand Cantonese, I can't speak it. So there's this kind of resistance that I thought was quite interesting, and I realised I was not the only one – it's quite common for Chinese women my age who refuse to get married.

KS:

This nicely dovetails into our next question. There is an underlying sense of defiance and resistance to the traditions of womanhood, and within your personal capacities as artists and women. How do your works allow you to reclaim this narrative and this identity for yourself?

YY:

I like to say, and I like to think it's true, that my art practice is fueled by rage. It's all the

stuff that I'm angry about that I can't put into words. Sometimes, something that intrigues me will help me discover what I was trying to unpack about myself in the past. So I guess the textures of rage, anger, defiance and resistance have always motivated the work that I do. I really like this question, because it ties into how and why I work, and the fact that rage is endless. Your fuel will never run out. And it helps you discover facets of things that you might not be aware you're uncomfortable with, but you need to deal with along the way. On how the work signifies a reclamation of the narrative – for me, I don't think of my artwork as therapy or as reconciliation. It might come out by accident, but that was never the goal.

The reclamation, for me, perhaps came in my realisation that my grandma probably went through this whole process that I'm expressing in this fictional story, and it cannot have been easy for her. This came up by accident, and it certainly drew the narrative that I was constructing closer to my imagination of her narrative. She was alive when the work was first shown, but she didn't visit it. She passed away last year in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. And you know, I'm okay with her never knowing that I actually made a whole work about her stuff. I imagine her as a young woman or even a young girl when she got married. It could not have been easy. But she didn't really have a choice. She couldn't choose. This was it.

KS:

I like that there is, you know, that bit of empathy that's surfacing when you realise

that it's not just anger directed at her, but realising it wasn't easy for her too. How do we break out of this intergenerational trauma? Kanchana, how about yourself?

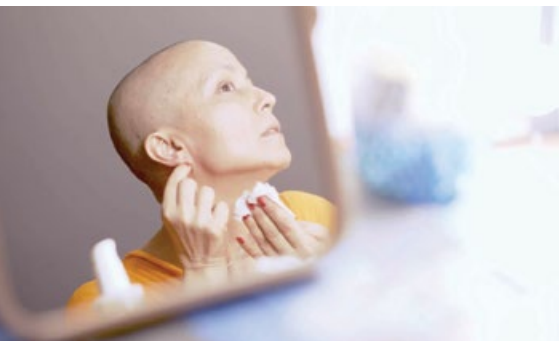
KG:

This is a deeply personal and intimate work, not just because I use my body. Of course, when we use our body, it becomes hugely personal because it's where our perception of and relationship with our body starts. I grew up in a small town in India in a fairly conservative society, where the rules for women were very clearly crafted. And, as Yanyun was saying, it's very clear that you are the inferior gender – a son is more preferred. For example, my mother had to go for five daughters to get a son. So I clearly come from that kind of society where it was a quest to get married and produce a son to take the family legacy forward. I was not considered the most compliant of the women, and when I was growing up, I was taunted that no one would marry me. On the other hand, there was this image of the beautiful demure girl with long hair and being very subservient, which was what every man wanted. I was quite different from that, I was always being referred to as that girl with the boycott hair, and clearly, I was not considered very desirable by those standards. I had to go through the whole arranged marriage system of my photo being taken and shared with many prospective men, and I was rejected by most of them, which created a love-hate relationship with that image. On one hand, to me, it was an image of patriarchy from which I wanted to rebel from – not every woman should be



expected to be somebody's object of desire for the rest of their life. But on the other hand, I also felt deeply inadequate about myself, which I hid in my academic pursuit, to study hard and be independent. But I felt that I always carried a burden of that image inside me, by chance that my first child is a son.

But the burden of that image remained with me. And I think when I moved into my 40s, that's when I realised that it was time for me to unpack that complex relationship that I grew up with. I felt that I still carried some part of it, and I still felt that I am not a desirable woman. And I realised that a kind of deep scar still remains, and I needed to confront that scar and reclaim it in my way, as a mother, as a wife and as a woman in my mid-40s. By when typically Indian cinema does not consider a woman desirable by any standards. So it's a very deeply personal work, something that I never thought I would do. But I'm also realising that the more I'm doing it, the more it's helping me to reclaim some part of myself that I felt I had suppressed. It comes from that burden of trying to fit, but also not wanting to fit because, you know, I felt that was not something that intelligent, smart women should do anyway.



YY:

What did your husband, son and daughter say of the work when you decided to embark on it?

KG:

When I first told my son and husband that I was going to do this project, my husband turned to me and said, "Kanchana, you don't have to ask us." And then I realised that I am also carrying this burden of conditioning so much that when I decided to take up a project which uses my body, I'm seeking their permission as a mother and wife. And both of them looked at me and my son said, "Mama, don't worry, I'll tell everyone. She's an artist, let her live her life." I realised that even though I feel that I've freed myself, I still carry that burden of patriarchy so much that somewhere I was feeling that I would embarrass them. My daughter is quite young and she sits in all the shoots behind the director's monitor. When the time comes, I will talk to her about how we should strive to free ourselves from the burden of these images that have been created for women across different eras and generations. In my time, it was cinema, in her generation, it is Instagram or other images of a woman's body and desirability. What I've realised is that the medium may change, but every generation has these images and will continue to do so. It just morphs its shape and form, but it does not go away, isn't it?

It's also the burden of fitting in for every generation and the need for validation. Yanyun, your grandma's generation had

a different expectation of fitting in, and I realised that my mother had a different pressure. Even though I feel I have been liberated, I'm still carrying that as a wife and a mother, to fit into that image. My daughter will have her own generational burden of fitting in. The unconscious pressure of this will always be there on a woman.

KS:

It was so deeply personal and so necessary to hear this from you, because we can go on and read all these theories about feminism, but it's only through your lived experience that there's an authenticity and embodiment of this. I think we also carry a certain kind of shame that comes from different generations of confronting these prejudices. This is also a nice way to look at the next question, which really is about rituals, gestures, objects, things that have been passed down to us that we sometimes don't even question and we take on. Many of these are employed in your works for the show – could you unpack some of these elements and how they direct our gaze towards these sometimes very conflicting paradigms of femininity?

YY:

For the most part, my work really stems from the objects in the show. I do think of *Stories of a woman and her dowry* as a theatre or cinematic set with its atmosphere and lighting. The objects are symbols or vessels which contain or carry something. I also paired the idea of a woman leaving her home with an analogy of a ship leaving a space. In the bride chapter, there's a

disembodied body inside three camphor which slowly close and point their way out the window, and it's laid on red reflective vinyl to mimic a seascape. In Hainanese culture, as Hainan was an island port, they historically used camphor chests to ship spices and luxurious fabrics because insects don't like the strong smell of camphor. It was made as a strong container to preserve the objects inside, which got adopted into the dowry culture. In the Grey Projects space, some people saw the red light in the evenings and thought it was a brothel, which also made sense – it is the value of a body being traded. And the lack of presence, with all the portrayed bodies not having a head or a face – there was no identity even though the voice and objects were very personal.



KG:

When I was looking at these images, they were constructed with a combination of gestures, rituals, and objects which come together to depict the female body as a spectacle. From the chiffon that caresses the skin and drapes the body, the half-clad body in a sari, to the hanging jewellery and

bangles, they all come together to become tools of arousal. Rain is also an important element, to depict the wet sari clinging to her body. The set is also usually a domestic or intimate space, to portray the private moments between two people, but also participates in the whole act of seduction and for the wider consumption of the voyeur.

KS:

Perhaps we can also just take a look at your practices at large, because both of you are known for very specific things – Kanchana, you have a painting practice that's situated within materiality and Yanyun, you are known for your charcoal drawings and animation practice. Could you share how these insights have informed the way you approach these projects?

KG:

The colour palette, as well as the gestural and painterly qualities of the set, is very important to me. A lot of emphasis is placed on the aesthetic aspects, for example how the colour of the sari is related to the backdrop, the use of fire, wind, and rain, all are used to create an atmosphere and setting as a conduit to the production of desire. As art director of my films, I look at each frame as a painter to see how colour is paired with light and objects to achieve the atmosphere of sensuousness. As I was trained as a painter, I would use loose watercolour in life drawing and depictions of the body. And often when I step into this, those images invariably come to my mind, those watercolour half-body and half-silhouette forms.

YY:

*Stories of a woman and her dowry* came shortly after my exhibition *The Scars That Write Us* at Singapore Art Museum, where I was contemplating how to fill up the space with my charcoal drawings. I thought I could pace a viewer's journey based on how far objects are spaced apart, just like how you would design the speed of movement in animation frame by frame. So the walking affects the pace of the story. For the show at Grey Projects, I wanted it to feel like I was stepping into a set. Part of my animation practice which I rarely talk about is set building for stopmotion animation. These are modular and rigged miniature sets catered to fit puppets and cameras. And so I treated the space as a puppet set of sorts and paced them in chapters, to construct an atmosphere in their mind of this universe, and visitors can create a narrative based on how they path their way through the space. So I would adopt my familiarity with sequential art in animation and storytelling to solving problems in my work.

KS:

Kanchana, it'll be nice to hear some personal anecdotes from you, because you had to embody a persona and a film cliché. Could you share with us some of the process and what you had to do to prepare for filming?

KG:

Sure, there were many moments. Again, I wrestled with my own preconceived notions of my body, and the most challenging part

was to break that narrative for myself. In the initial shoots, I was very conscious. My director would say, "Your hips are not moving enough, you're not sensuous". And I'm like, "But that's not me." And then they said, "Remember, you are critiquing an image. So stop looking at who Kanchana is, stop bringing in the reference of Kanchana". Secondly, I cannot dance to save my life. I'm a terrible, terrible dancer. I engaged a choreographer, Sneha, and to her the idea that an Indian woman cannot dance is unfathomable. To her, we grew up on Bollywood, and all of us should be able to dance like this. How can you not dance? I said no, I cannot. I rehearsed for many hours, and break down the dance so I can memorise each step. Believe me, when I am preparing for a shoot, I am very, very anxious. And I also realised how clinically these images are created, you know, actually, there is no fun, you don't feel sensuous while shooting. The whole process is methodically broken, stripping off any feeling of sensuality while performing.

KS:

Yeah, absolutely. And it's also about this idea of power structures, who holds that power, and do we have the agency to break out of it? With yours, Kanchana, obviously it's with the director, the choreographer, the burden of the image, your family and so on. And with Yanyun so much of that is intergenerational, with your grandmother. For you, to prepare for this epilogue, you had to wear the Chinese wedding dress (*kua*) that belongs to your mum for this shoot. I understand it's the first time that it's been worn by someone else, and that

your mum has also been quite involved in the process of your work. It'd be wonderful, as a way to wrap up this conversation, for you to share with us how the idea of intergenerational relationships between women informs and shapes the trajectory of your work.

YY:

First of all, I have to say I'm very lucky, because my parents have always been pretty supportive of my work. When I started on this project, I was already having conversations with my mom and asking her questions. I was also fascinated by the etymology of Chinese characters, and digging into the words around Chinese weddings. My mom is very good at Mandarin and is an amateur calligrapher, so she had a lot of insights that I could tap into, not just regarding the symbols behind weddings but also her own experiences. She prepared her own wedding herself, and whilst she acknowledged the traditions and abided by them, she was also quite a modern woman and decided she would do the minimal amount to make everyone happy. Whilst for me, I just refuse to do it. So we have three different levels of engagement with tradition or the way we confront, challenge or work with cultural inheritance and traditions. In the *Stories of a woman and her dowry*, she was the one who wrote the words on all my lanterns. She was also fascinated that there were two words that we use when you talk about marrying a wife. It's either "take" or "gift", right? And it felt like the woman had no say in this.



My mom had a lot of say, in terms of her marriage, but even though she had known my dad by that point for more than a decade, she had anxieties about the whole process. Even if you have made a decision, you can still be very anxious about it, you know, you can still worry, panic and have these emotional crises, despite having agency. And I wanted to capture that as well in the work, especially in the epilogue, that even if you choose this, it doesn't mean that you don't feel scared. And it's such a big deal, I guess, in a woman's life, for the ones who do want to get married, that it does create a sense of anticipation, expectation, uncertainty, and anxiety.

So with my mum's *kua*, no one has worn it since she did 40 years ago. It's still in perfect condition. I wanted to use it for the epilogue work, so I got her and my brother to come and help me do the reference photo shoot so that I could use the reference to draw from. And so she literally dressed me in the *kua* and became the camera woman for my shoot, while my brother carried the lights, and my dad was having his coffee downstairs. I feel like it's been such a bonding process, even though it's actually quite a critical take

on intergenerational expectations and responsibility in my work. But personally, within the family, we've had quite a lot of fun moments trying to unpack our own histories and trying to find the right words and symbols. I think they've always been the ones that I trust when it comes to looking at my work. It takes a lot of courage to be very honest about ourselves, and also to confront it not alone as artists but with our family members who embrace us and be the support pillars for the work that we do.

To tie to the beginning of our conversation about this idea of intergenerational trauma, it's also an intergenerational gift. It's the gift of independence, the gift of courage, the gift of being able to express when they can't express or they didn't have the opportunity or the choice to.

KG:

Yeah, and that's where it becomes a responsibility too, like my mother or your grandmother, they gave us what they didn't have. For me, I give that gift to my daughter, I give her what I didn't have, and every generation has its own challenge. When I look at my daughter, I think if I can give her the gift of totally freeing herself from the guilt and conditioning of the images of women – which I know it's almost an impossible task, because, you know, generation after generation we carry it – but that will be my desire. When people ask me and I say, this is my most meaningful project as an artist, because here I see, after a few years, having that conversation with my daughter.

KS:

Thank you. I think this is such a perfect way to end the conversation, that with every rupture, there will be new beginnings. I think it's so nice that we ended on this positive note that we're not just sitting here making work, feeling self-indulgent and dealing with something so deeply personal. But we're also trying in a way to share this agency or to encourage autonomy in the things that we do. This was a timely reminder to ourselves why the show is happening and why the works are being brought together.

# Artists

Originally from India, **Kanchana Gupta** currently lives and works in Singapore. Her painting practice has been described as a process-driven exploration of and response to urban environments. Her current series of personal and intimate video-based explorations investigate the framework of femininity and the narrative of sexualized presentations of the female body with specific reference to song sequences visualised in commercial Indian cinema of the 1980s and 90s. In this series of works titled, *The Production of Desire*, she deconstructs cinematic paradigms of femininity as portrayed and fetishized in the Indian cinema and investigates the deployment of the female body as a signifier of both cultural identity and spectacle.

Kanchana received an MA in Fine Arts from LASALLE College of Arts, Singapore where she was the recipient of the Dr Winston Oh Travel Research Award. Since then, her works have featured in numerous group exhibitions, both in Singapore and internationally, in addition to three solo shows in Singapore. Her works are in institutional and private collections in Singapore, and in private collections in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, Japan, Hong Kong and USA.

**Dr Yanyun Chen** is a visual artist, and runs a drawing, animation and installation practice. Her works delve into the aesthetic, cultural and technological inheritances on one's body, unravelling fictional and philosophical notions of embodiment. She researches cultural wounds, dowry traditions, hereditary scars, philosophies of nudities, and etymology.

She received the prestigious National Arts Council Young Artist Award (2020), Singapore's highest award for young arts practitioners, aged 35 and below. Her works were also awarded the Prague International Indie Film Festival Q3 Best Animation Award (2020), ArtOutreach IMPART Visual Artist Award (2019), National Youth Film Awards Best Art Direction Award (2019), Singapore Art Museum President's Young Talents People's Choice Award (2018), Japan Media Arts Festival (2012) and Lee Kuan Yew Gold Medal Award (2009). Dr Chen is the Arts Practice Coordinator for the Division of Humanities at Yale-NUS College in Singapore, the founder of illustration and animation studio Piplatchka, and a partner of publishing house Delere Press LLP. Outside of Singapore, her works have been exhibited internationally, including Buenos Aires, South Korea, Canada, United States, Belarus, The Netherlands and Czech Republic.

# Curator

**Kimberly Shen** is a curator, arts practitioner and educator based in Singapore. Her artistic practice is multifaceted in approach, situated at the intersection of text, image and performance. She is drawn towards gendered gestures and vocabularies, in mediation of pluralism and feminine subjectivities. Over the past decade, she has worked with leading and emerging artists, writers and researchers, and has presented her curatorial projects at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, Objectifs - Centre for Photography and Film, OH! Open House, and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA). A recipient of the National Arts Council Arts Scholarship (Postgraduate), she graduated with a Master of Research in Art: Theory and Philosophy from Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, United Kingdom. She is the winner of the IMPART Awards (Curator Category) (2019), Curator-in-Residence for The Art Incubator (2015), and member of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA), Singapore Section. Currently the Programme Leader (Fine Art) at NAFA, she previously headed the communications portfolio at the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore where she developed the Centre's considerable communications and outreach efforts.

# Creative Producer

**Seet Yun Teng** works between curating, writing, producing and making. Her current interests revolve around alternative formats of exhibition-making and transdisciplinary collaborations; materiality, affect and embodied processes; weaving entanglements and textile histories. She has worked curatorially with a range of platforms, galleries and institutions, including Appetite (Curator, 2022), Feelers (Documentation Lead, 2021), Arts-Business x Business-Arts Residencies (Co-Curator, 2021-22), NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore (Curatorial Assistant, Residencies, 2019-2021), Objectifs Centre for Photography and Film (Curator, 2020); Supernormal (Co-Curator, 2019); Constance Howard Gallery and Goldsmiths Textile Collection, London (Co-Curator 2018). She received an Honourable Mention (Curator), IMPART Awards in 2021.

## **While She Quivers**

**Chapel Gallery, Objectifs Centre for Photography and Film**

**10 February - 13 March 2022**

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### **Kanchana Gupta, *Production of Desire***

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### **Yanyun Chen: *Stories of a woman and her dowry***

Photographs by Joseph Nair

Previously presented at Grey Projects (2019) and Art Science Museum Singapore (2020)

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