



SPECIAL SPECIAL

Tie Me Up! Lock Me Down! is a group exhibition of jewelry and adornments at Special Special, curated by Banyi Huang and Kristen Lee. Set in a bedroom of an imagined character, it recounts stories of love, heartbreak, and reconciliation, inviting the audience to be engulfed in unhinged emotions and extreme fantasies, poised between indulgence and repression, explicit desires and hidden symbolism. The following is a conversation livestreamed on Special Special's Instagram account, between Banyi Huang (B) and Sydney Shen (S), one of the artists participating under the brand name of Gesualda. Original interview conducted in English, translated to Chinese by Banyi Huang.

B: I'm here with Sydney Shen, who is one of the artists in *Tie Me Up! Lock Me Down*, participating under the name Gesualda. And we are here to talk about that project, and how it fits within Sydney's larger artistic practice.



Tie Me Up! Lock Me Down! exhibition view

S: Gesualda is my jewelry experiment, a creative exercise for me to try things that are adjacent to my practice. I decided I wanted to make fine jewelry (sterling silver, and eventually gold). These are some pieces available at Special Special. They are various post and dangle earrings. I feel like I'm on QVC. Some of the forms include a twisted cherry stem that's cast from a real cherry stem; a thinner one; there's a few variations on the cool S, also known as the "Stüssy S" (optical S things that everyone drew on the margins of their middle school notebooks). In the future, the S will be even more extended, eventually into oblivion. There's also a treble clef.

Gesualda is a way for me to work through things that are not necessarily a part of my fine art practice. In that respect, it feels like I'm assuming the persona of Gesualda herself. The reason for the naming is that it's the feminine form of the Italian surname Gesualdo. Carlo Gesualdo is an early Renaissance composer, whose music I really like. He's known for being a visionary for making dissonant music. He also embodies the idea of the gendered myth of the male genius. He brutally murdered his wife, and her lover. It was said that he killed them while they were having sex, and there's rumors that afterwards he was seen wearing the tattered, bloodied dress of his wife, running through the streets, howling in agony. The whole story also fits within the scope of this show. He was an archetypal villain, but at the same time a total douchebag. I'm trying to reconcile those ideas, which in the context of today is important, as we grapple with the concept of art and the individual who made them.

I thought one way to approach it is to rename it as Gesualda, thinking, why can't women be evil geniuses too? That's how these motifs came about.

B: The myth of Gesualda, along with its gendered dimensions, reminds me of Elizabeth Báthory.

S: Totally, they are in the same canon of crazy aristocrats, which I'm very fascinated by.

B: Within those legends, there's so much room for the projection of torture and sexual fantasy. Elisabeth Báthory was a Hungarian noble woman who was rumored to have tortured hundreds of slave girls in her castle. Within that gendered space, there exists the idea of the monstrous feminine. There's a lot of fear projected onto that figure, once you have gender reversal.

S: Fear of?

B: Fear of this unquenchable blood lust and desire, of sexual fulfillment. Or at least how these myths build through time. Some people say that the whole idea of her killing all those people was a conspiracy to blacken her name.

S: I mean, she was rumored to have been the most prolific serial killer in all human history, which is pretty sick. She was also reputed to have bathed in the blood of virgins.

B: I wanted to ask where your interests in the morbid and the macabre stem from, and how you initially started to explore that.

S: For me, it feels so innate that it's almost hard to pinpoint. Making artwork is trying to understand those impulses. Horror is like contradictory states of fear and wonder, the sacred and the profane, pain and pleasure...etc. They are often themes that occur in genre fiction, horror in particular. They are attempts to imagine what lies beyond and transcend our state of being human. In the case of horror, the only way to experience transcendence is through the obliteration of self. Characters in horror fiction are compelled by unknown forces toward terrible discoveries.

B: It is a vacillation between attraction and repulsion. I think it's also interesting how in works that explore Western themes, like the bubonic plague in Medieval times, they are often paired with scientific terms. The fascination with the occult and witchcraft, when situated in a Western context, doesn't really have a parallel in East Asian traditions. Due to foundations of science, the Enlightenment, and classification practices, aspects of the occult and the morbid become so pronounced, and in turn hold so much appeal. I wonder if you notice those differences, and how that impacts your work, as you do research in both realms.

S: That's a good question. For me, maybe I am trying to process it. I was really interested in reading Liao Zhai, the tales by this 16th century Chinese scholar Pu Songling, whose stories are ubiquitous and popular in China. They are short stories told in a casual vernacular, of weird and freaky stuff that happens to people. For example, it would illustrate the following: a friend of a cousin told me that a friend sneezed, and a little person came out of its nose. These goofy narratives are contrasted with supernatural tales, demons, fox spirits, people convening with the dead or falling in love with them. I'm interested in that it's not only horror, but also the idea of the weird. Currently, there's a lot of interest in a movement called the New Weird, but I feel like a lot of it has already been a subject of study in 16th Century China. When I read Liao Zhai, it makes me think of the Twilight Zone, or Tales from the Crypt.

B: That's awesome! I've been reading it too. I find it so astounding that the author was writing in such a matter of fact way, it's like detailing a grocery list, whether chronicling people coming back from the dead, or a woman engaging in bestiality with her dog when her husband's away. It was first translated by Herbert Giles, the British sinologist who helped establish the Wade-Giles Chinese romanization system. In that version, he basically omitted everything. As someone with Victorian morality, he just couldn't bring himself to include sexually-deviant narratives. It goes back to a point in history when the East and the West had different attitudes toward the body, sex, and horror.

S: That's really interesting. Right now, I'm working toward an exhibition for next year. It is based on a lot of research. I'm thinking for it to be taking the form of a slightly falsified archive. It has certain overlaps with what you were talking about. Georges Bataille had all these photographs of people being executed in China, known as death by a thousand cuts.

He was instrumental in circulating them around the West, and also for their misinterpretation. Actually, the people who were being executed had already been dead, so their corpses were mutilated postmortem. It refutes the perceptions about a certain of cruelty that's associated with these photos, and certain ideas about Chinese society at the time. For Bataille, the reason he liked them so much is that the people appeared to be in a state of rapture occurring simultaneously as a state of suffering. Something martyr-like or Christ like. These photos repudiate the idea of photography as an accurate documentation of the truth, but rather that it is clearly a mediated form of authorship, in that both producer and consumer embellish it. It will be framed in conjunction with lurid, sordid imagery that circulates on the Internet now.

B: I also wanted ask about your interest in BDSM, for example punitive boots, binding chains, and various forms of torture devices.

S: It comes back to this desire of wanting to exceed the limits of the body, simultaneously being very limited by it. How can you push the body to the extent where it transcends? I feel like BDSM practice is a part of it. There's a built-in existential question to that. Why do we want to know what it's like to be something else? I'm so fascinated by the idea of transcendence. There's a fine line between having control and not having any control. Even up until now, the way I was approaching my art practice felt very punitive. But I'm slow realizing it doesn't have to be that way.

B: Maybe returning back to Gesualda, is there a particular direction you are hoping to take?

S: I've always wanted to be better at metal work, so I thought that jewelry-making would be manageable on a micro level. Through that, I'm starting to understand the hobby of miniature-making, because you are literally creating your own world, and just thinking about the shift in scale. It allows you to be hyper-detailed about something. Jewelry-making is a good place to continue that. I also want to make other types of wearable objects, like chainmail.

B: Do you feel like part of this is about constructing a myth? You could be going back and making up myths where they should have existed, perhaps due to gaps in history.

S: That's definitely a part of it, of filling in the blanks. So much of history is fiction, and there's a lot of room for elaboration and even embellishment. Jewelry is the perfect format for that, because it's all about ornament and surface. As a visual artist, there's a certain idea about taste, rigor, content and form, that makes something like steampunk considered to be such a vulgar aesthetic. But for me, because I am drawn to the attraction/repulsion duality, I am attracted to things that are hyper-ornamented. Even though if I can't embody the idea of hyper-ornamentation, maybe Gesualda could, and point out how ornament is quite important to visual discourse.



Sydney Shen, *Midnight Game*, 2017

B: Do you feel like you are trying to undo some of the externally or internally imposed hierarchies in the visual art realm?

S: Absolutely. It's also an experiment in allowing myself to not follow what things are supposed to be. I realize that a lot of rules are arbitrary and self-imposed. Maybe being an artist is about developing an internal logic and questioning it.

B: I'm really looking forward to your next project, and whatever that comes out of Gesualda. Is there a platform that you are hoping to release new content or products on?

S: I really need to relaunch the website, which will feature new jewelry items, and other types of wearables. Another thing I'm working on under Gesualda is my collaboration with Gregory Kalliche, who runs the project 57 Cell. It is a rendered art space that you can't visit, and only exists in the form of a catalogue. I see my project with him as the opportunity to make a look book for Gesualda. It will be a physical book. But the space allows for an impossible exhibition, because it's all digitally rendered in a hyperreal style. I anticipate a lot of giant women, alien characters, and centaurs modeling the pieces.